Novelist equals illusionist, so it makes a certain sense that Mameve Medwed, author of five novels, soon to be six, would be attracted to faux food. The urge to collect anything, of course, defies rationality. Mameve, I feel sure, would never ask herself: do I really need a faux roast chicken, when so many can’t afford a real one? Nor, I tell her, would it be productive for me to ask her how many pieces of faux food she has. But I ask anyway. “Yes, I have no idea,” says Mameve.

Upon entering her multistoried Victorian duplex on a street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, not far from Harvard Square, I get an initial impression merely of quirky artworks and antiques of no particular period or style. Among other things, I see a child’s painted pony pull-toy, a dwarf grandfather clock, faux books, miniature furniture, oriental rugs, and portrait paintings. But then, very shortly, I notice on the dining-room table, just as it has been described to me by a previous visitor, the first indications of her love for ersatz edibles. There, on plates, sometimes attached to the plates, are deviled eggs, sauced asparagus, oysters on the half shell, and a crunchy-looking length of celery—all in ceramic. There is also a pyramid of clay pears in a bowl. On the walls, still-life paintings of other foods carry the theme. So does a smaller-than-life figure of a woman standing alongside the table; she is wearing an artificial layer cake as a kind of hat. “It’s meant for a garden—I think she’s a birdbath. I stuck the cake on top of her head,” says Mameve. So, in a sense, the sculpture is her own creation, which, again, makes sense, since I view collecting as a creative act, just like any other art that requires an eye for selection and composition.

But, then, I haven’t seen the kitchen yet. Once through that door, I am faced with artificial victuals literally everywhere. My informant hadn’t sufficiently prepared me for...
None of these items was particularly expensive. While Mameve is an admirer of nineteenth-century majolica lobsters and the like, she considers them too costly. Instead, she shops at craft stores, gift shops, flea markets, and big outdoor antiques shows like the one held three times a year in the open fields of Brimfield, Massachusetts. “I have a great tolerance for any kind of kitsch,” says Mameve. But even collectors of kitsch sometimes refine their tastes. “I used to buy everything I saw; now I’ve become more discriminating,” she says. “There are always so many glasses of beer or champagne. And I already have an ice cream sundae, so I don’t need another.” Need? “I’m less interested in dessert in general.” Because? “Well, I already have quite a number of desserts.” Cookies, pies, and cakes iced with buttercream (made of spackle) are in fact the most common item one is apt to find on the Internet sites that sell faux food. “I prefer meats,” says Mameve. Of her folky, painted-wood watermelon half that wouldn’t fool anyone, for example, Mameve admits, “I’m not crazy about it.” Her idea of sublime? The accurately rendered taco she hands me, which makes me start to feel a little hungry.

It’s been more than twenty years since the collection began with a gift from a friend: those splayed cold cuts on the counter. “They’re actually drink coasters, and I just fell in love with them,” says Mameve. “I immediately put them on display and adored them.”

Next came her sighting of a stack of fake pancakes, complete with a persuasive film of maple syrup and pat of butter.
melting butter. They were part of a food-themed exhibit at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York—and not for sale, but the museum told Mameve where she could buy some of her own. Called Jeremy’s Place, this outfit is run by a former children’s-birthday-party magician and his fabricator-associate; their “factory” is in a residential neighborhood on the Upper East Side. Mameve has ended up being one of their best customers.

If she needed one more exposure to the world of faux food to ensure her devotion, it occurred on a trip to Japan, where one of her two sons was spending a year. When she and her husband, Howard, went for a visit, they toured the food district and found, to Mameve’s delight, a whole area devoted to the marketing of faux-food mockups for Asian restaurant-window displays. “And oh, boy, I fell in love with all of that, right from the source.”

Considering that faux food is often used as stage props, it’s understandable that Mameve’s and Howard’s residence, where they have lived since 1971, has a theatrical feel, as if at any minute actors will arrive for their audition, one will pick up a fake glass of wine, and start gesticulating with it while speaking his lines. As for the glass gumdrops on an end table in the living room; the peanuts of an indeterminate material near the bottles of wine in the library; and the wooden peapods on the way into Mameve’s study upstairs—these objects also create another unmistakable impression, that this place is inhabited by people who know one of life’s most important rules: do not take thyself too seriously.

Faux foods from Mameve Medwed’s collection. Above: Brownie with ice cream and chocolate sauce. Left: Grilled cheese and water. Photographs by Stephanie Foley/Gourmet/Condé Nast Archive; © Condé Nast 2009.

Not surprisingly, then, Mameve is a comic novelist. Her books are satirical romps through intellectual foppery and snobbery of all kinds, four out of the five so far set in Cambridge and environs. The heroine of Mail, published in 1997, is a writer divorced from a Harvard professor and in love with the Italian-American mailman who delivers her rejection slips. “There’s always an element of class in my books,” says Mameve, “because that’s one of those words we’re not supposed to say in our supposedly classless society.”

The books also contain quite a lot of food, for isn’t that cultural arena one of the primary places where class differences show up? Most elaborately food-themed is her latest, Of Men and Their Mothers, which tells the story of another divorcée, whose ex-husband’s family happens to be in the potpie business.

Some people, Mameve included, believe collectors are born, not made. Her father’s father was an antiques dealer in Bangor, Maine, where Mameve grew up, and her uncle continued the business. “My mother and father both collected a lot,” says Mameve (pronounced may-meeve), a name that conflates her grandmothers’ names, Mamie and Eva. “But my mother was the true collector. She went to every flea market and auction.”

If a gene is responsible for collecting activity, not everybody gets one. Once, Mameve’s sons had “huge” collections
also all the little restaurants and cafeterias in Rockefeller Center.” Her uncle’s father—Mameve’s maternal grandfather—was in another branch of the food business. He supplied men who worked in the lumber camps of Maine. He also supplied food to men assigned to Texas Towers, those offshore structures, resembling oil rigs, that were built as lookouts along the Eastern seaboard from Maine to North Carolina during the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. “We used to go as kids to a Texas Tower way up in Maine every couple of weeks on a Sunday,” recalls Mameve. “We always had corned beef and cabbage.”

Just like artists, some collectors and collections are more original than others. Certainly there aren’t a lot of faux food collectors in the world, but there are at least two who are celebrities. Mameve could name one: John Waters. Pictured with some of his collection on the cover of Tom Atwood’s *Kings in Their Castles: Photographs of Queer Men at Home*, the filmmaker reportedly likes to exhibit it in unlikely places—for example, a plate of fake brownies on a toilet tank. Writer and comedian Amy Sedaris is the other celebrity collector of faux food. Indeed, the *Washington Post* has referred to her as “a pioneer in the recognition of the decorative value of fake meat.”

That may be, but Mameve, for her part, is moving beyond the kitsch of collectors like Waters and Sedaris, whether she realizes it or not. In 2008, the year that *Of Men*...
and Their Mothers was published, she requested from her sister a special birthday gift. In Mameve’s recounting, her sister asked, “Would you like some fake food or would you like a great necklace or scarf?” To which Mameve unhesitatingly replied, “Oh, please, please, I want fake food.” She requested, in fact, something very specific. “An hommage to my novel,” in the form of a fake chicken potpie. Mameve’s sister asked, What size? Mameve, who obviously has moved beyond realism, too, said, Huge. “I didn’t want it to look normal. I wanted it to be outlandish.”

And so it is, with its eighteen-inch diameter and four-inch height, with a large slice missing from its middle, revealing its filling. But it is also Mameve’s favorite piece in her collection, and to my mind, the most artful.

The potpie was made by Julie Sandy, assistant props manager for the Manhattan Theater Club at City Center in New York. Besides the waxpaper onions and wood-painted cubes of red-skinned potatoes, carrots, and, of course, white-meat chicken, there are tiny copies of Mameve’s blue-jacketed Of Men and Their Mothers spilling out of it.

The tiny books aside, it is an object that was clearly designed by someone who knows what she is doing in the kitchen. Correct? I asked Julie in a phone call. Yes, she said, she does like to cook, adding that she put into the fake potpie what she puts into her real ones, minus, of course, the tiny books, which were a special request of Mameve’s.

What other faux foods has Julie been called on to make in her line of work? A few seasons ago, for a production of Paul Rudnick’s Regrets Only, a fancy cake was needed. She made it out of cardboard, with wood shavings for its chocolate curls. On another occasion, she made a fruitcake using Styrofoam beads and sawdust; sanded joint compound simulated frosting. Three or four summers ago, she recalled, she also made “a really good leg of lamb” out of natural sponge that was coated with hot glue, then painted.

For Mameve’s potpie crust Julie used an air-drying clay, which she rolled out just as she would a real crust. She draped it over the filling, fluted the edge, and left it to harden, resulting in a wonderfully authentic-looking, bumpy surface, which she glazed with glossy paint.

Like a true artist, Julie is already thinking how she might have done the pie differently—using, for example, a material other than wood for the potatoes. “They look a bit rigid,” she said. “Next time I’d use something that would look a little softer.” On the other hand, she is satisfied with the color of the white sauce she created, which is a shade of creamy yellow that contrasts perfectly with the pie’s bright green peas.

Julie, who when we spoke had just turned thirty, is herself a collector. As a child, she collected rocks, shells, stamps, and business cards. Today, because of her profession, she tends to keep all kinds of things that others might throw away. “Especially doing props, I tend to hang onto stuff.” It’s a gathering of materials as much as inspiration, she said.

Julie is too young, perhaps, to have contemplated the question that every collector must: what happens to the “stuff” after they are gone? It is not a question I summoned to harden, resulting in a wonderfully authentic-looking, Mameve. Nor did I ask what she did with her parents’ collections.

Collecting is viewed differently now than it was back in the 1930s and 1940s, when Mameve’s parents were young. In those days it was considered a cure for mental ills, dogs, depressions. These days it is more often than not considered a symptom of the same, unless of course the collection turns out to be worth a fortune. Then it can either be cashed in or donated to a museum. People often imagine that museums will take anything they are offered, but they usually don’t want unproven items any more than relatives do. Be that as it may, I can picture Mameve’s collection in a museum devoted to food history and culture. It wouldn’t exactly answer questions about what has driven our civilization to create replicas of food, but it would help us to ponder them. I can also see the collection as a case study for scholars in the still-developing discipline devoted to the history of collecting.

Mameve, as I discovered, doesn’t try to analyze her collecting habits; she simply enjoys their fruits, so to speak. But one of her novels, How Elizabeth Barrett Browning Saved My Life, does speak directly to the subject. Published in 2006, the book has at its center yet another divorcée, Abigail Randolph, who, besides being a Harvard dropout and all-around underachiever, works part-time as a collectibles dealer. No faux foods pass through Abigail’s hands, but she does acquire an old chamber pot that turns out to have once belonged to the poet of the novel’s title—and is, not incidentally, worth seventy-five thousand dollars. That Antiques Roadshow–derived appraisal leads to a tug of war between those who claim the chamber pot’s ownership. What happens in the end? I won’t spoil the book, except to say that its dollar value is revealed to be nothing compared to that of Abigail’s recognition of an object’s true worth—its ability “to connote so many things, the inanimate made animate by memory, feeling, history,” including the always mysterious personal histories of us all.