To the Editor

Cuisine, Architecture, and Racism?

As a resident of Fremantle (Western Australia) in Perth’s coastal hinterland, I read with great interest Kevin Canfield’s report on the Manhattan branch of Radhika Oswal’s Otarian restaurant (“Low-Carbon Eating,” Spring 2011). Actually, I was somewhat astonished to discover that the restaurateur, until only recently living in Perth and (along with her fertilizer baron husband) locally notorious, had managed to attract Gastronomica’s attention a hemisphere away. Especially resonant for me was Canfield’s reference to militant vegetarian Oswal’s controversial ban upon the consumption of “ham sandwiches and meat pies” at the building site of the couple’s “mega-mansion”—known in Perth as the “Taj Mahal-on-the-Swan [River].” Readers may be interested to know that Oswal’s edict had an architectural implication, albeit an unanticipated one. According to one (sub)urban myth circulating locally, disgruntled workers retaliated by lacing the concrete work with meat pies. Quite possibly, this act did not simply register a dispute between a vegetarian and an omnivorous building crew. To appreciate the gravitas of this symbolic gesture, one must remember that, for Australians, the meat pie is a national icon. To this end, my partner Annette Condello (herself a scholar on the associations between architecture and cuisine) directed my attention to Janet Clarkson’s Pie: A Global History (Reaktion Books, 2009). Underscoring the meat pie’s iconic status, Clarkson relates that when Australia’s Parliament opened in the then-new capital city of Canberra in 1927, “the general public was underwhelmed by the whole event, forcing caterers to bury a massive amount of food—including 10,000 [meat] pies—in the local rubbish tip.”

One wonders whether or not the workers’ selection of meat pies (rather than, for instance, hams) as a concrete additive for the Indian couple’s mansion was calculated and not without racist underpinning. Those seeking more on this episode and its local context might like to consult my commentary at www.australiandesignreview.com/response/23272-Racism-An-Architectural-Litmus-Test.

—Christopher Vernon, The University of Western Australia

Food Science

The article “In Defense of Food Science” (Gastronomica, Summer 2011) was very disappointing. It fell far below the standards of scholarship that I’ve come to expect and value in Gastronomica.

The article was rife with undocumented assertions and historical
misinterpretations. The article asserted that expansion of food processing technology freed women from the drudgery of cooking. Feminist scholars refuted this march of technology perspective thirty years ago, showing that women’s household labor was simply moved from one area to another.

The article states that “the low acquisition power of the median to low income family is frequently blamed for poor food choice.” This conveniently ignores the fact that food as a percentage of Americans’ household budget is at a historic low. Americans also spend less on food than citizens of other countries. There certainly are households that cannot afford good food, but that is not the problem of the majority in the American food system.

The article glides over the historic causation of many food problems. For example, it says that “The higher cost per calorie between healthy (broccoli) and less healthy food (hamburger) is considered a determinant in the poor diet choices that these families make.” But this differential did not descend from the sky. It occurs in major part as a result of the millions and millions of dollars that food companies spent to develop and market cheap sweeteners. One of the authors works for Mars. It might be enlightening to know how much Mars spends per year promoting high-sugar, high-fat food.

The article is conceptually sloppy. It says that food has long been processed—conflating the brewing of beer using water and hops with the injection of high-fructose corn syrup and the coating of foods with multiple preservatives. These processes are different and have different effects.

The article attacks Pollan and other locavores as “elitist,” a standard trope. But what’s more elitist than assuming that low-income Americans (who are not poor in global terms) can’t possibly eat healthy food? And what’s more elitist than the article’s wide-eyed treatment of the ultra-high-end restaurateurs who dabble in chemical manipulations of their dishes?

There are many other problems within the article. Its notion of virtuous, small processed-food companies (not one is named) is farcical in a world dominated by global behemoths like Mars and McDonald’s.

From nine to noon you’ll be deciding what to have for lunch. From two to five you’ll be thinking about what to have for dinner.
I don’t hew to Michael Pollan’s orthodoxy or anyone else’s. I realize that organic is a complex and evolving term. I have packaged cereals and frozen foods in my kitchen. I worry about what methods will feed the world—though I also know that organic is the word that most closely resembles what was just “farming” fifty years ago. I’d like to see more attention paid, not less, to getting healthy food to poor people. But if this is the best case that “food science” can make for itself, its intellectual foundations are not good.

— Nathan Landau, Berkeley, CA

The authors respond:

The main purpose of our article was to provide an alternative perspective to a debate that has so far been dominated by those who believe that mass production and distribution of foods is inherently bad, and that applying the scientific method to the improvement of food is wrong. In particular, we hoped to emphasize that science and technology must play a critical role in ensuring that the global population has an abundant supply of high quality, healthy, affordable, and convenient foods. The denigration of science and technology by many food activists is robbing society of important tools to address critical national and global problems. The emotions and polarizations around this debate hinder a much-needed, open-minded discussion.

One of the key arguments of our article is that consumers must take personal responsibility for the food they eat, regardless of their socio-economic status—a point with which Mr. Landau seems to agree. He indicates that most people in America spend a lower percentage of their income on food now than they did in the past, while problems such as obesity have increased (although many other diet-related diseases have decreased, and overall life expectancy has increased). This is largely due to the success of the modern food industry in making available large quantities of high-quality foods at relatively low cost (as well as great progress in various fields of medicine). Most people now have to consider what kind of food to eat rather than whether they will get a meal or not—this surely is a good thing. However, as we acknowledged in our article, there are still many problems with the current food system that urgently need addressing.

We agree with Mr. Landau that the cost of many processed foods is influenced by government policies, such as subsidies and tax breaks that sway ingredient and transportation costs and favor one kind of product over another. We also agree that the government should create policies that foster the development of a healthy, sustainable food supply. All these tasks are easier said than done and require the commitment, not only the involvement, of all parties, which includes industry as much as activists.

We are also criticized for admiring the approach by which certain chefs use scientific principles and new technologies in their kitchens to create novel dishes (e.g., Grant Achatz in the United States, Ferran Adrià in Spain, and Heston Blumenthal in the United Kingdom). While it is clear that the creations of these chefs are not for everyone (be it for reasons of taste, values, or affordability), they do trigger a series of reactions that make the diner reflect on the meaning of food, cooking, and eating. Similarly, it is myopic to ignore the tremendous impact that the work of these chefs has had on home cooking (if only through books and television shows). This is indeed an interesting social phenomenon where science, art, and culture meet for the progress of homemade food.

Mr. Landau’s comments clearly highlight some of the problems associated with the use of the terms processed and additives when applied to foods. What constitutes processing? Is there good and bad processing? What criteria should be used to judge this? Are all additives bad? Should all additives be removed? Food manufacturers typically incorporate additives into foods to enhance their safety, extend their shelf lives, and improve their quality. Nevertheless, many additives (whether synthetic “chemicals” or natural components) may be harmful to humans, and so their use should always be carefully evaluated and objectively reviewed. Indeed, replacing some synthetic chemicals that have been extensively tested and deemed “safe” with untested “natural” alternatives doesn’t guarantee the absence of potential, usually long-term, health risks. However, it must be noted that even when a natural alternative to a particular additive or preservative exists, a consistent and sustainable supply is also part of the equation.

As food scientists, our perspectives and concerns are perhaps different from those of typical contributors in this area. At present, we seem to be guilty of making “undocumented assertions and historical misinterpretations,” largely because there is insufficient quantitative data available on many of the important issues involved, and because much of the data that is available is open to interpretation in a number of different ways. As scientists, we encourage further research in this area, so that more data can be generated, analyzed, and discussed; and more important, so that successful public policies can be developed to ensure a sustainable and healthy diet for this and future generations.
Matter of Food

M M PACK

A food-focused art show sited in an urban food desert? It made perfect sense at Project Row Houses in Houston, where last spring community concerns evolved into art, art inspired action, and the continuing conversation generated by an exhibit called Matter of Food served as a catalyst for change.

Fostering neighborhood engagement and creating change through the power of art are what Project Row Houses (PRH) has been about since its founding in 1993. Influenced both by African American muralist John Biggers, who painted row houses as a symbol of community strength and cohesion, and by German sculptor Joseph Beuys, who advocated “the enlarged conception of Art” and the inherent creativity of daily living, painter/activist Rick Lowe and six artists acquired a derelict two-block stretch of twenty-two “shotgun” houses in Houston’s Third Ward, turning them into an art space and neighborhood center. Northern Third Ward was one of the city’s earliest, most vibrant black communities, but it has suffered simultaneously from decades-long decline and a creeping gentrification that’s pricing out longtime residents.

In response to community needs, PRH has expanded and shaped itself over time—it includes youth education programs, a young mothers’ residential program, a park, and an architecturally relevant building program of affordable housing. But art remains fundamental to the mission, and seven row houses have been repurposed into artist project spaces that offer opportunities to create site-specific work and honor their original roles as modest family homes.

Except for the glittering Oz that is downtown Houston, this semitropical city is slung low to the ground. In older neighborhoods, dwellings take cover under shady oaks and are oriented to catch the slightest Gulf breeze. The identical row houses are no exception; they provide a glimpse into how families lived in the pre-air-conditioned past.

The fact that PRH galleries are inside these houses makes them especially appropriate for showing art about food, the preparation and consumption of which is the most essential of traditional domestic activities.

Curated by PRH Public Art Manager Ashley Clemmer Hoffman and Executive Director Linda Shearer, Matter of Food explored complex ways that food affects our lives. Each of the seven spaces contained a separate installation by a different artist. Some of the projects celebrated food traditions creating connections and preserving history; others addressed...
sustainable urban gardening, the accessibility of food, or social justice related to food production. All made clear that producing and preparing food is at its best a creative endeavor worthy of our close attention—art integral in daily life, as envisioned by Joseph Beuys and the founders of Project Row Houses.

One installation that directly honored the cultural and artistic value of preparing food was the Hearth House project by Toni Tipton-Martin and Luanne Stovall of Austin. Transparent scrims hung throughout the little house; ethereal photos of nineteenth-century African American cooks floated in the breeze. These gentle gray apparitions, in conjunction with ancient kitchen implements and vibrant walls painted the colors of sorghum, sunflower, and sweet potato, reminded visitors who were the keepers of culture, who kept the hearth fires burning. A quote from Franklin Delano Roosevelt advisor and educator Mary McLeod Bethune adorned a chalkboard wall: “Cease to be a drudge, seek to be an artist.”

From a very different perspective, New York artist Michael Pribich’s installation, Sugar Land, addressed labor practices and living conditions associated with Caribbean sugarcane harvesting, both past and present. The most powerful piece in his house was a rack made from cane-cutting machetes bearing bags of refined white Imperial Sugar (of Sugar Land, Texas, just outside Houston), attesting to the physical human cost of an everyday foodstuff.

In Gente de Maiz, Jorge Rojas of Salt Lake City explored the relationship of early Southwest peoples with corn, as sustenance and as deity linked to plenty, fertility, and protection. In S.O.S. (Sustainable Organic Stewardship) Tatffo Tan of New York espoused responsible, committed gardening as an antidote to urban decay, and art as a tool for green awareness via the media of compost, worms, seeds, and weeds.

Through the catalyst of Matter of Food, did Northern Third Ward get a grocery store? Not yet. But there are certainly indications of progress toward more available fresh food. Participating artist Tarsha M. Gary is president of ecotone (Ecological Atonement), a garden/teaching endeavor a block from PRH. A year earlier residents and artists formed the Greenhouse Collective and created an organic garden on the PRH campus. The Green Seed vegan food truck recently set up shop in the neighborhood. And the dialogue about a community grocery continues. The cycle of art, action, and change is alive and well at Project Row Houses.

The Dragon’s Pharmaceopia
DAWN STARIN

At food markets in Hanoi I was mesmerized by a fruit in shades of strawberry pink and lime green that looked as if it had been sculpted by an artist specializing in surreal forms. Laid out in overlapping piles next to readily identifiable oranges, pomelos, lemons, apples, and pineapples, it looked so out of place, so not of this world, that I couldn’t help asking everyone I met what this weird and wonderful fruit might be. I soon learned that thanh long, known as dragon fruit in English, comes from a jasmine-scented, climbing cactus of the genus Hylocereus. Pollinated by bats and moths, this cactus blooms at night. Although it originated in Central and South America (where it is called pitahaya), dragon fruit is now also found in the West Indies, Israel, and throughout much of Southeast Asia.

Today, the export of dragon fruit from Vietnam is an important and rapidly growing industry. Easily propagated through both seeds and stem cuttings, the fruits are harvested thirty to fifty days after flowering and can sometimes be harvested up to six times a year. Some growers believe that the plant has the potential for annual production of thirty tons of fruit per hectare.

The Vietnam Center of Industrial and Commercial Information reports that dragon fruit accounted for 34 percent of the total fruit export value of 320 million dollars in the first nine months of 2009. While the majority of the country’s dragon-fruit export goes to China, a recent Business Week article stated that 865 tons of the fruit were imported into the United States from Vietnam in 2010 (eight times more than in 2009), and exporters believe that number will reach 1,500 tons in 2011. Chile and South Korea recently opened their markets to Vietnamese dragon fruit, subject to irradiation or heat treatment of the fruit and registration of orchards. Dragon-fruit waters and juices are also proliferating around the globe as a cure for aging—the latest in a long list of superfruits that promise to keep us young and healthy forever. Wherever I went in Vietnam, I was told that dragon fruit is loaded with health-giving properties. People use the fruits as antimicrobials, antifungals, antibiotics, antithrombotics, and fat-busters. Dragon fruit is said to devour bad cholesterol and cure diabetes, hormonal imbalances, constipation, colic, high blood pressure, bad teeth, skin, bones, poor memory, and cancer. It seems there was no limit to what this fruit can do.

The Vietnamese are not the only people to believe in the power and the magic of dragon fruit. According to the Sri Lankan Department of Agriculture this fruit “increases the
digested by the foods and... has ability to control cancer, diabetics, high cholesterol as well as blood pressure." Teddy F. Tepora, the program leader of dragon-fruit research and development at Cavite State University in the Philippines, maintains that the inherent properties of dragon fruit can do wonders: prevent the formation of cancer, enhance the metabolism, improve digestion and reduce fat, improve memory, maintain the health of the eyes, strengthen bones and teeth, promote tissue development, moisturize the skin, decrease bad cholesterol, and promote the healing of cuts and bruises, to name only some of its beneficial effects.

Quite apart from its alleged health-giving properties, dragon fruit has become a sensation thanks to a legend created by ingenious marketers. As the story goes, dragon fruit was created by fire-breathing dragons whose final breath produced a wondrous fruit. After a dragon was slain the fruit was collected and presented to the Emperor as proof of victory. The fruit was coveted because anyone who ate it was said to become as strong and ferocious as a dragon.

With this legend in mind, I had to try the miracle fruit. I am sorry to say that the fruit did not live up to its potential. Despite its health-giving properties and market value, its surreal form and connection to fabulous legends, dragon fruit seemed to me totally tasteless. I have to agree with the great food historian Alan Davidson, who in the Oxford Companion to Food wrote that "the pulp is very faintly sweet, but so unassertive in flavour that the best favourable epithet which can be given to it is refreshing."

To improve dragon fruit’s flavor and thereby get it onto more tables in the United States, growers are now cross-pollinating Vietnamese plants with varieties from the Americas. With luck, their efforts will answer to the need for a tasty and healthy culinary treat for those seeking the next elixir.

**NOTES**


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**A Wholehearted Production**

**KATHERINE WHITE**

In 2006 Gregory Woodworth and his wife, Kelly Coughlin, moved from Boston to the Finger Lakes region of Geneva, New York, to open a bakery at Cornell University’s Technology Farm. The Tech Farm, a new facility built by Cornell’s Agricultural Experimentation Station, was originally intended to lure biotech companies to Geneva with the promise of laboratory space. Ironically, Woodworth and Coughlin’s artisanal bakery turned out to be one of the Farm’s first tenants. Their Stony Brook Cookies reflected the couple’s devotion to local, sustainable food production. Yet within a few years, working next door to the Agricultural Experimentation Station inspired them to give up cookies in favor of something entirely new: squash seed oil. In 2009 Woodworth and Coughlin set baking aside, and using the resources of the Tech Farm they began to produce a range of truly healthy, sustainable oils under the name Stony Brook WholeHeartedFoods—all made from squash seeds that would otherwise have gone to compost. Their work gives pause to locavores who believe that science and technology are the enemies of natural foods.

Through Cornell’s Food Venture Center, a subset of the Agricultural Experimentation Station, Woodworth learned that Martin Farms, one of New York State’s largest squash growers, was looking for a way to reuse, rather than compost, the sixty thousand pounds (thirty tons) of squash seeds they were left with each year. After several rounds of testing, the Food Venture Center succeeded in pressing a small amount of seeds into a food-grade oil. The representative suggested that Greg use this oil in his...
baking to create a line of “healthy” cookies. Woodworth’s test batches yielded tasty, nutty-flavored cookies, yet he saw even greater potential in the oil’s rich flavor. That’s when Woodworth and Coughlin decided to focus solely on producing roasted squash-seed oils.

The Tech Farm provided WholeHeartedFoods with startup equipment (a pilot-size oil press, peanut roaster, and moisture analyzer). Woodworth and his roast and press manager, Alaric Strauss, tweaked the existing oil extraction process by switching to a standard coffee roaster. The seeds are now roasted before being transferred to an expeller press, which squeezes the oil from the fibrous shells. Expeller pressing uses no added heat or chemicals—tactics that larger companies, such as Wesson, employ to homogenize their products. The WholeHeartedFoods method preserves the pure taste of the oil—which is then decanted, filtered, and bottled using a wine bottler. The shells that come out of the expeller—“press cakes”—look like skinny, tan corks. They are delivered to The Piggery, a farm in Trumansburg, New York, that produces fine charcuterie for New York City markets.

The first retail outlet that Woodworth and Coughlin approached was Formaggio Kitchen in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a gourmet shop they knew well from their Boston years. Woodworth recalls how Formaggio’s manager, Tim Bucciarelli, gathered the staff in a back room for a tasting. The couple stood watching—nervously at first, and then with increasing surprise and relief—as words such as “nutty,” “salty,” “fresh,” and “buttery” swirled around the room.

“Do you have a case of it?” Tim asked. Ecstatic, Woodworth retrieved the single case he and Coughlin had brought from Geneva and watched as the oil was immediately placed on Formaggio’s shelves. Today, WholeHeartedFoods ships thirty cases per year to all three Formaggio stores—in Cambridge, Boston’s South End, and the Essex Market in New York City. Other clients include The Filling Station in New York City, Whole Foods in Portland, Maine, and GreenStar Market in Ithaca, New York. The company produces four types of squash seed oils—butternut, acorn, delicata, and buttercup—as well as pumpkin seed oil, using one-third (twenty thousand) of Martin Farms’s seeds per year. Woodworth hopes to increase his production to meet Martin Farms’s supply, as well as his own growing customer base.

Part of the reason for the oils’ success is their versatility. At an open house hosted by WholeHeartedFoods for the Geneva community, appetizers included Southwestern Winter Squash Hummus, featuring two tablespoons...
Exhibition on Art and Food

Acquired Taste: Food and the Art of Consumption, an exhibition at California State University, Fullerton’s Begovich Gallery, is on view from October 29 to December 8, 2011. The exhibition features twelve established and emerging contemporary artists whose work underscores our reciprocal relationship to food: what we consume, how we consume it, and how it consumes us. Artists include Shannon Faseler, Dustin Wayne Harris, MyersBerg Studios, Mary Parisi, Victoria Reynolds, Jennifer Rubell, Stephen Shanabrook, and Greg Stewart, among others. A full-color catalog of artwork and essays by Nicole Caruth, Megan Fizell, and Jonathan Gold accompanies the exhibition.

For more information, visit www.acquiredtaste.sixpackprojects.com.

Food and Wine in the Republic of Georgia

Join Gastronomica’s Editor in Chief, Darra Goldstein, on a trip to the Republic of Georgia, where she’ll bring to life her Julia Child Award–winning cookbook The Georgian Feast. Trip dates are August 29 to September 8, 2012. For details contact Bob Behr at RBehr@williams.edu.

Norwegian Conference on Coastal Innovation

“Coastal Energy,” an influential conference on innovation and coastal development, will take place February 8–10, 2012, in Norway’s Lofoten Islands, during the annual cod fishery. A Michelin-starred chef from Paris who is passionate about Norwegian seafood will create an historic dinner based on the Lofoten cod fishery, which has been Norway’s lifeline to Europe since before the Middle Ages. The Norwegian Vikings traded codfish from Lofoten with merchants throughout all of Europe, especially those in the Catholic regions of the continent. During Lent, the dried stockfish ensured both salvation and good health. Pietro Querini, the fifteenth-century Italian captain and merchant who was shipwrecked off the Norwegian coast, first described Røst, the Lofotens’ outermost island; since then, trade between Lofoten and Italy has been of particular importance. In this historical perspective, stockfish has been more important to Norway than oil and gas.

“Coastal Energy” will set the stage for the crucial debate on how to sustainably explore existing and new energy sources along the Norwegian coast. Project manager Laura Johanne Olsen notes that “the delegates will meet through taste and art while listening to fascinating lectures on innovative entrepreneurship.” The conference will coincide with the Lofoten International Chamber Music Festival. The conference organizers would be pleased to welcome Gastronomica readers at the conference. Even though the sessions will be mainly in Norwegian, participants will enjoy extraordinary seafood in one of the world’s most spectacular landscapes.

For more information, please contact Laura Johanne Olsen at laura.olsen@salt.nu.

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