THE PAST FEW MONTHS since the last issue of Gastronomica went to press have been exciting ones in the world of food. In London the first in vitro meat hamburger was served, an event that is significant not just for what it reveals about advances in science and technology, but also for how it has forced uneasy but necessary conversations about animal welfare, strategies for solving the world’s food shortages, and the limits of what counts as “food,” “taste,” and even “pleasure.” In the Northern Hemisphere, fall harvests and harvest festivals have begun, enticing eaters and drinkers around the world to enjoy the delights of Oktoberfest, wine festivals, pumpkins, apple picking, and freshly juiced pomegranates, to name but a few. And in multiple international settings, food scholars and practitioners have gathered at conferences to share their work and push the field of food studies in new directions.

I have been privileged to attend two of these recent conferences. At the end of September, the University of Graz (Austria) hosted “Foodscapes: Access to Food, Excess of Food,” which was held at Seggau Castle in the Styrian countryside, Austria’s beautiful wine region. At the beginning of October, the Social Sciences Research Council hosted the workshop “Rescuing Taste from the Nation: Oceans, Borders, and Culinary Flows,” which was part of a larger conference on “Inter-Asian Connections IV: Istanbul,” held at Koç University in Istanbul, Turkey. Both conferences brought together an impressive international contingent of food scholars from a range of disciplinary backgrounds to address critical issues in food studies. Many important questions and themes emerged at these conferences, and I want to single out a few for special note.

In her keynote address to participants in the “Foodscapes” conference, Julie Guthman from the University of California, Santa Cruz (and a member of the Gastronomica editorial board), introduced a series of provocations about the field of critical food studies and its possible future. One of Professor Guthman’s questions to the audience was whether critical food studies is really about the food or whether it is about “something else.” As became clear, both in Professor Guthman’s remarks and in the papers and conversations that followed, while food may be a starting point, critical food studies is really about the “something else” that becomes revealed through food.

Taking up this provocation, participants discussed and debated such important issues as the role of alternative food movements in shaping new forms of civic engagement and sustainability projects, the ways in which certification regimes influence cultural understandings of locale and taste, and how taste preferences are not simply physiological responses to sensory stimuli but may also be cultivated by social, political, and economic relationships. Offering different perspectives in their own keynote addresses, David Evans from the University of Manchester and Valentin Thurn, a documentary filmmaker from Germany, challenged participants to think critically about food waste, how it is produced, where it goes, and whether consumers are complicit in the production of excess food. As both speakers noted, such questions
have profound implications for how consumers make choices about the foods they buy and how they consume them, how concerns with practical matters such as storage and transportation affect food choice, and even how cultures of blame (directed at both producers and consumers) emerge and become politically salient. With regard to questions about the materiality inherent in critical food studies, colleagues from the world of food and design introduced new ways of thinking about the intersection of form and function with the emotional and symbolic qualities of food. Collectively, discussions between participants highlighted important conversations and debates about the moral and ethical dimensions of food practices and food systems, the limits and nuances of assumptions about “pleasure” and “taste” associated with food, and the necessity of unpacking and even rethinking analytical and methodological approaches in order to move beyond a neoliberal, global capitalist framework in order to understand the significance and impact of other political economies.

The SSRC workshop “Rescuing Taste from the Nation” raised equally important questions for food scholarship. Drawing on the larger conference’s focus on rethinking “Asia” as a geographically, politically, and culturally constructed entity, participants in the food workshop examined the regional and global networks that have encouraged foods and food cultures to travel into, out of, and through “Asia” and other spaces, the role of imperialist and state-making projects in the creation of distinct (and not so distinct) culinary cultures, and the biosocial limits of “taste.” Workshop organizers Jaclyn Rohel, Cecilia Leong-Salobir, and Krishnendu Ray (also a Gastronomica editorial board member) challenged participants to think about how worlds of taste and pathways of trade comestibles open up new spaces beyond and between conventional boundaries of nation-states and institutional regimes. Taking up this charge, workshop participants from the fields of law, sociology, anthropology, history, and cultural studies examined not just how taste preferences and culinary cultures are formed, but how they traverse and upend expected political and cultural borders, so that taste as a circulating commodity itself becomes dislocated from a particular place, people, or value system.

One area of concern that emerged from workshop presentations addressed the value of food traditions in maintaining distinctive identities, a sense of personal dignity, and connections to a homeland and shared history, such as with papers on the culturally appropriate diets provided to indentured workers from North India while on boats taking them to the plantation islands where they would work and on the ways in which survivors of the Armenian genocide who fled to Bulgaria have used family recipes and memories of “traditional” foods to forge new lives and remember their pasts. A second set of conversations considered how the simultaneous movement and emplacement of foods and taste preferences produce new symbolic and physical geographies and relationships, with papers on the simultaneous “mixing” of cuisines and families in Malaysian communities that has created rich Peranakan and Eurasian culinary traditions; the flow of food technology and food technology experts, such as the brewers who have influenced the emergence of beer cultures in China, Japan, Korea, and India; and how colonial and postcolonial elites in Turkey, Israel, and Jordan have strategically used foods in their political negotiations. A third theme that emerged probed the body politics of food and taste with papers on how the emerging global market for olive oil is creating new consumers and producers in places like India and China, as well as new regulatory regimes that are in turn influencing taste preferences; the political dimensions of public hygiene as
evoked through cultural practices and public policies governing betel quid chewing within the British Empire; the way in which the circulation of a taste for turtle soup and mock turtle soup from the Caribbean to Europe and on to China illuminates how tastes for particular dishes move not just among geographic regions but among classes and cultures; and finally the changing nature of culinary professions, particularly that of chefs, in Istanbul under the influence of global flows of food-related fashions, fads, and people.

Together, the discussions and debates raised at these two conferences illustrate the power of food as simultaneously an object and an experience that merges the personal, the political, the social, the historical, and the geographic. Just as significant is that through such fascinating topics as these and the many others presented at these workshops, food scholars and practitioners are making important contributions to our understandings of how the world works. This is an exciting time in critical food studies, and I am very pleased that *Gastronomica*, because of its position at the forefront of this ever-evolving field, will be presenting the cutting-edge work that emerges from these and other events.

Going forward, the journal will be focusing more directly on critical studies of food. I look forward to bringing you the very best of the most thought-provoking, empirically rich, and theoretically innovative scholarship in the field. Look for an exciting lineup beginning in the February 2014 (14.1) issue of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*.

The contributors to this issue of *Gastronomica* initiate these conversations by taking us directly to the heart of the provocation “what is food” by enlarging its scope to ask who decides what counts as food, how food can be wielded as both political gift or political weapon in state-level negotiations over tradition, immigration, and human dignity, and how ideals of health are infused with spiritual practices, among many other questions. In articles that celebrate the vibrancy of longstanding cultural traditions, Carolyn Phillips traces the origins and mythology of China’s Kitchen God as a protector of the home, while Jenny Holm recalls how the simple pleasures of a New Year’s feast in Northern Ossetia refract deep family, cultural, and regional histories. Describing her first experience with maté during field research in Paraguay, Heather Millman explores the significance of this beverage in terms of its cultural traditions and medicinal properties, thereby showing the centrality of beverages within food studies and furthering our understanding of the relationships between food and medicine. Elizabeth Chatellier continues this interest in the healthful dimensions of tradition, and the spiritual qualities of food, in her account of the culinary traditions cultivated and presented by Monk Epiphanius of Mylopotamos of Mount Athos. Other pieces focus more directly on the political facets of food and the relationships of expectation, obligation, and despair that emerge between states and their subjects. Through an account of the traditional presentation of salmon caught by Maine anglers to American presidents, Catherine Schmitt explores how salmon and salmon fishing have been influenced by national policies regarding energy and water use. In a sobering account of the feeding practices for unauthorized migrants in American detention centers, Megan Carney critically examines how the provisioning and withholding of food frames an American biopolitics in which the bodies and appetites of detained subjects are manipulated for the extraction of political value by state authorities and economic value by the food industries that are contracted to provide meals to detention centers. Carney’s article offers keen insight into the unpleasant realities of the militarization of food and the eating experience.
Finally, in keeping with the festivities of the season and the fall and winter holidays that are at hand, other contributors invite us to ponder the ritualized qualities of food and food experiences in our kitchens, pantries, workplaces, and family get-togethers. Selections range from Will McGrath’s recounting of the slaughter of a pig for a special occasion in Lesotho, Diane Gleason’s narrative of Mediterranean cuisine, and Matthew Gavin Frank’s philosophically inspired musing on the symbolic nature of the bagel to Chris Wiewiora’s chronicling of the inner rhythms and harmonies within a pizza joint and Eric D. Lehman’s allegory about the unintended consequences of hard work, success, and the limits of class mobility as told through the narrator’s quest for the perfect soup.

In closing, I would also like to thank publicly Allison Carruth, who has served as Gastronomica’s Book Review editor for the past several years. Professor Carruth has done yeoman’s service by identifying books to be reviewed in the journal, soliciting reviewers, and working closely with reviewers and potential reviewers to ensure that the reviews published in this journal are of the highest caliber of critical evaluation. Professor Carruth is stepping down to join the Gastronomica editorial board and to focus on her own research and writing. I also want to congratulate her on the recent publication of her book, Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food. Look for a review of it in an upcoming issue of the journal.

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