WHENEVER I HAVE LEFT RUSSIA at the conclusion of fieldwork, I have always been the fortunate recipient of gifts from friends and colleagues who want to send me home with a reminder of happy times with them. These mementos have included small wooden or porcelain animal figurines, like the little Gzhel kitchen mouse that lives in a special spot above my kitchen sink and protects my kitchen, as well as delicate crocheted doilies, linen napkins and aprons, cookbooks, and of course jars and jars of homemade raspberry jam, black currant jam, apricot jam, pickled mushrooms, and puréed eggplant and pepper. Virtually all of the gifts have been for my table at home, which is significant given the amount of time I have spent sitting at the table with friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Food is at the center of everything in Russian daily life, largely because it brings people together. When my friends send me home with food and other kitchen items, they are also sending me home with a tangible symbol of our time together—and maybe even the hope that when I enjoy those goodies at home with my own family, the physical distance between us will somehow be mediated.

The tradition of sending people away with a taste of home and family is recognized as something special, as something to be treasured and even protected. I learned this one time, long before there were restrictions on what air travelers could take with them in their carry-on bags. As I was on my way to the airport after a summer in Moscow, a dear friend pressed into my hands several large jars of raspberry preserves. My friend was elderly and barely survived on a tiny pension, so the expense of the sugar, the jars, and the time spent picking berries was quite significant. I packed the jars into my carry-on bag and headed for the plane. At that time, the Moscow airport conducted a second security screening at the gate. I placed my bag on the conveyer belt to go through the bag screener and walked through the human screening machine, only to be pulled aside by an imposing, stern-faced security guard. “What’s in the bag?” he asked me brusquely, gesturing at the wavy image on the monitor beside the conveyer belt. I hesitantly replied, “Jam from my babushka [grandmother, the term I usually used to refer to my elderly friend].” The guard’s face immediately changed, and he smiled broadly, chuckled, and waved me through. Babushka jam, clearly, was sacred.

When I became editor of Gastronomica at the end of 2012, it was these memories of food and company from my time in Russia that inspired my vision for the journal. I wanted to take food as the inspiration for setting a metaphorical table that would bring us all together. And just like the many Russian tables I have enjoyed, I wanted to provide a broad spread of experiences: festive, abundant tables; meager, sparing tables; tables adorned with every sumptuous possibility; and tables set upon rickety boards with even more rickety stools crowded around them. I wanted us to sample appealing dishes, as well as not-so-appealing dishes. And, most importantly, I wanted
the food to be the entrée that brought us together and invited us to join with one another for rich, detailed, complicated, and messy conversations that might, in some cases, be pleasant, while in other cases could be deeply disturbing and full of conflict. Above all, I wanted us to ask questions, to debate, to argue, to challenge our expectations, and maybe even rethink our perspectives.
These are the experiences and approaches that I want to leave you with, as I pass on the journal to the editorial collective that will be taking up the mantle of guiding critical food studies in new directions. I also hope that, much like the remnants of jams past that linger in the back of my fridge, too precious to toss out, I have left you with a few little nibbles to squirrel away, savor, and possibly even eye suspiciously as you wonder what you should do with them.

It is bittersweet to write my final column. It has been an incredibly rich and rewarding opportunity to serve as editor of *Gastronomica*. I have had a privileged position from which to view the ways in which studies of food have evolved over the past six years. At one time, food studies tended either to be siloed rigidly according to disciplinary and professional boundaries, or rather uncritically and haphazardly glommed across multiple fields. Gradually, however, thanks to robust conversations that brought together multiple perspectives, disciplinary orientations, and theoretical debates, the strengths of individual disciplines have been showcased and new, transdisciplinary approaches launched. Along the way I have been particularly excited to learn of and feature work by scholars and practitioners from disciplines and approaches that had not necessarily been central to the broader field of food studies; they have emerged as key anchors and interlocutors, and their work has had an impact beyond their own disciplines and across multiple scales and approaches within the larger field of food studies. I have also been pleased to see that dominant North American and Western orientations within food studies scholarship are now sharing the stage with scholarship from and on other parts of the world, a change that is contributing to innovative reconfigurations and conversations across regions and intellectual traditions.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, it has been rewarding to watch as the concept of “critical food studies” has gone from being an intellectual idea to a recognized theoretical and methodological orientation in the field. At the time when I first assumed the editorship of *Gastronomica*, there was an emerging set of conversations and shared research projects that were focused on thinking carefully and deeply about the significance of food in multiple registers. Above all, the people who were involved in these conversations were interested in complicating the feel-good aspects of food by making a place at the table for the not-so-good, or perhaps more precisely, the not-so-simplistic dimensions of food—what my colleague Elizabeth Dunn has called “unhappy food.” The point was that although there are many aesthetically pleasing and rewarding facets of food, there are also many food experiences that are far more complicated, difficult, and even unpleasant. Food can be a way to force us to have more difficult conversations and rethink our assumptions.

When I was approached about becoming editor, there was not yet a systematic set of conversations across an entire field, although these discussions were happening in and across a number of places, often clustered around groups of scholars working at the intersections of the humanities and the social sciences, such as at Indiana University, SOAS at the University of London, University of Sheffield, and among food clusters in New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Scandinavia, and the many food studies networks across the United Kingdom, the United States, and elsewhere.

Not coincidentally, one of the sites where these conversations were taking place was in California, and specifically within networks of food studies scholars associated with the University of California—many of whom were also authors whose food books were being, or would soon be, published by the University of California Press. The University of California has long been a leader in innovative food studies
scholarship across many fields—whether in food history, cultural studies, anthropology, food science, food technology, agroecology, food labor, food insecurity, or food justice. And certainly the University of California Press has been a leader in food publications across many genres. This confluence of trends became especially prominent following a series of University of California–sponsored research programs, where a core group of scholars from inside and outside the UC system and UCP community solidified the notion of a critical approach to food—that is, a theoretically sophisticated and analytically inquisitive approach to food—and heightened an awareness of it on national and international radars. Here I want to identify some of those scholars: Julie Guthman, Charlotte Biltekoff, Carolyn Thomas, Susanne Freidberg, Melanie DuPuis, Alison Hope Alkon, Alison Hayes-Conroy, Jessica Hayes-Conroy, Patricia Allen, Aya Kimura, and Garrett Broad. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but these are some of the individuals who contributed to these conversations and in moving the conversations forward in their own disciplines and in the broader field of food studies. Their work was attracting considerable attention, and in turn, there was a noticeable growth of work by other scholars who engaged their ideas and approaches and then pushed beyond them.

It was this set of intellectual currents that were emerging at the exact time that I was asked to take on the editorship of *Gastronomica*. When the directors of the University of California Press asked me what I thought were the most interesting directions in food scholarship, this is the set of conversations and debates that I identified. This excited the UCP community, and the directors explicitly charged me with the responsibility of not simply catching this new wave, but getting in front of it, riding it, and seeing if I could bring others along for the ride. To invoke a concept familiar to Northern Californians, I was given the task of surfing the Mavericks of the food studies world, catching the edge and navigating through the exhilaratingly unruly waters of scholarship and a field in formation.

But this was not a task that I could accomplish alone. It took a village of creative, playful, bold, risk-taking intellectual leaders. And I believe that this village—members of the editorial board, authors, reviewers, and readers collectively—have done this. Over the past several years, “critical food studies” has gone from being the subtitle of the journal to a recognized concept that appears in conference titles, publication titles, job postings, and research agendas around the world. That does not mean that we have conquered food studies or minimized it or made it easier. Nor does it mean that there is any singular notion of what “critical food studies” is or might be. Rather, collectively in this journal, we have explored a new set of waves and opened up possibilities for exploring further and deeper. I am proud to have been part of this process. But more importantly, I have been extraordinarily proud of all of the people who have joined me for this ride, pulling all of us forward: my authors, reviewers, editorial board members, and even the skeptics whose feedback has helped sharpen ideas and approaches.

As is probably evident, I consider myself very fortunate to have worked with so many smart, thoughtful, insightful, and generous people at all stages of the editorial process. To them I owe many debts and much gratitude. I cannot thank them all, but I would like to recognize some of the folks with whom I have interacted the most.

First, I could not have done this without the incredible staff who have worked behind the scenes to build, maintain, and now pass on the journal. I have had two fantastic managing editors, Carla Takaki Richardson and Rebecca Feinberg, who have manned the front lines and back alleys of the journal to facilitate all of the hidden processes through which submissions come in, go out for review, receive
feedback, and move along the editorial pipeline from unfinished manuscript to copyediting, art editing, composition, proofing, legal contracts, and publication. Both Carla and Rebecca have also humanized the process for contributors, reviewers, editorial board members, the production team, and readers, with their good humor and diplomacy. Carla and Rebecca have been supported by several graduate student editorial assistants, who have overseen the journal’s book reviews and social media presence, as well as completing many other tasks ranging from opening random cartons of books that appear in the mail to checking that proofing errors have been corrected. I thank Stephanie Chan, Stephanie McCallum, Monica Mikhail, and Brian Walter. I am also grateful for the assistance of several undergraduate students who have served as editorial interns: Emma McDonell, Omar Lopez, Liz Smith, Emily Walden, and Egypt Claxton.

One of my greatest moments of luck was when Paul Tyler came on board as our copy editor. Paul is, hands down, the best copy editor I have ever encountered, not simply because of his technical wizardry, but because of his extensive knowledge of everything, which allows him to help authors (and me) convey their ideas as accurately and persuasively as possible. In addition, Gastronomica has been supported by several extraordinarily talented art editors who have ensured not only that the images that accompany texts are high quality, but also that they tell stories of their own. Many, many thanks to Rachel Walther, Patty Mon, and Mary Demery.

Perhaps the most daunting task I faced when I started as editor was in trying to line up an editorial board that would support the journal and me. Luckily, I was able to create a “dream team” of generous, thoughtful, and hardworking colleagues who have provided encouragement, mobilized their own professional networks, challenged me and made important suggestions that have helped me navigate the editorial process, and, perhaps most importantly, put in countless hours of work behind the scenes to provide reviews (sometimes on very quick turnarounds), make suggestions for reviewers, and work with contributors. Serving on editorial boards—especially when one actually has to provide service—is often a turnoff. But I was lucky to find colleagues who were willing to do the work, and many have done an incredible amount of heavy lifting over the years. I hope that I can repay some of their generosity and kindness in the future.

Of course a journal will never succeed if there are not authors and reviewers. Although many of us live in fear of overly critical peer reviewers (the dreaded “Reviewer 2”), I have been incredibly impressed by the care with which Gastronomica’s reviewers have attended to the manuscripts they have read and evaluated. Over and over again, reviewers have taken the time to write long, thoughtful reports that have helped me evaluate manuscripts, but more importantly, helped authors sharpen their ideas, solidify their arguments, and move their work forward—even if the recommendation was to reject. Overwhelmingly, Gastronomica’s reviewers have been incredibly kind and supportive, and I want to thank them for their otherwise invisible but important professional service.

I am also grateful to the many contributors who submitted to the journal. One of my greatest regrets was that I could not publish everything, but I did, in fact, read every single submission that came my way. I have learned so much from contributors who entrusted their work to me. I hope that they felt that they were treated with respect and dignity and that their work benefited from the process. And for the contributors whose work ended up in the journal, it was an honor to be able to feature your work and to accompany you as your work evolved and moved out into the world. Thank you.
Lastly, I owe many personal debts to friends and family who provided wise counsel and distractions at needed moments: especially Julie, Charlotte, Judith, Chris, Yuson, Jakob, Anne, Elizabeth, Melanie, and Harry. But above all, I want to recognize my husband Andy, our daughter Kaeley, and the furry creatures that inhabit our home. Andy has always read every single thing I have written, including every Editor’s Letter, and he is my most trusted critic. And Kaeley, who has never known anything but having a mother who writes and talks about food, is now an avid scientist who is working on her own “books.” I am looking forward to having more time to spend cooking meals, asking questions, and making memories with them.

By way of conclusion, it is with great enthusiasm that I introduce the pieces that make up my final issue. Every issue has been my favorite, and this one is no exception. There are a number of key themes that emerge from the articles and set up interesting and thoughtful issues for exploration, debate, and even disagreement, but the ones that I find most intriguing have to do with the intersection of political ideals and values of authenticity and protection. In different ways, each of the authors poses provocative questions about the ways in which different communities have made claims on something that appears to be authentic—whether an authentic cuisine, an authentic identity, or even an authentic experience—and the ideological logics on which those claims are based.

Michael Herzfeld begins the conversation by challenging us to think about the moralizing dimensions of food, most notably the sometimes paradoxical nature of moral relativism that seems to have a special place in culinary experiences. Herzfeld takes us through the rhetorical and performative dimensions of moral relativism to think about the ways in which competing power dynamics, claims on legitimacy and expertise, and invocations of right and wrong are always at play within decisions about whether to try something or not. David Haeselin picks up the theme of authenticity from a different vantage point—not from a restaurant table but from the front seat of a transport truck. While moonlighting as a truck driver hauling loads of sugar beets in the American Midwest, Haeselin finds himself challenged to reconsider how divisions between “industrial food” and “foodies culture” come to be, and come to be complicated. Along the way,
he presents a different way of thinking about what makes local foods meaningful and authentic. This question about who decides what makes foods, food cultures, and food experiences authentic and legitimate is central to Gaik Cheng Khoo’s article about the South Korean government’s efforts to globalize Korean cuisine, most notably in terms of their efforts in Malaysia. Here, as Khoo documents, performances of authenticity become modes of gastrodiplomacy between the two countries. In a different setting, Chuanfei Wang considers how Japan’s recent resurgence of sake drinking relies on the performative dimensions of authenticity from a different beverage experience—that of wine drinking. As Wang describes, Japanese consumers are revaluing sake as a local product by drawing on aesthetic styles from a nonlocal beverage. Collectively, each of these articles raises questions about how claims on the authentic also invoke discussions about how real experiences are made legible.

Percolating through each of these articles are questions about autonomy, notably the capacity of those who eat and drink, as well as those who grow, haul, and produce, to decide what counts as authentic or what does not. And it is this issue of choice, particularly in terms of the autonomy or agency of individual people and individual communities, that comes through in Rebecca Earle’s and Kathryn Falvo’s articles in this issue. In her fascinating account of the eighteenth-century career of the potato in Europe, Earle examines how politicians, statesmen, and philosophers connected the potato with the body politic, including within projects to promote choice and the individual pursuit of happiness. As Earle suggests, the potato was one of the ways through which ideals about individual choice and autonomy were articulated. Writing about a different setting roughly a century later, Falvo digs even more deeply into the political dimensions of food choice by examining an experimental, American utopian anarchist community, “Fruitlands.” Falvo shows how, even though this community was, ultimately, not as successful as its counterparts, its vegan-anarchist ideals were deeply rooted in American political movements of the nineteenth century.

The capacity of food cultures to open up spaces and create possibilities for political movements is perhaps most tangibly depicted in Karl Peterson’s account of the role of French champagne caves during World War I. Reims, a city at the front lines of the war, was built above two hundred miles of Roman-built caves that were used for wine production and storage by champagne producers. During the war, these caves became a refuge for local residents, who spent almost three continuous years living underground. Here, European political movements translated into physical acts of refuge that not only protected France’s citizens but also its champagne industry.

Finally, the explicitly political dimensions of food form the basis of a shared conversation and debate among a group of scholars working on the question of what makes “good food.” Drawing on ethnographic case studies from around the world, each of the authors presents a short critical reflection on the hierarchies of power that imbue notions of “good food” and make it a contested category.

I hope that you enjoy this last journey with me. But more importantly, I hope that you continue on with Gastronomica as the incoming Editorial Collective takes the next exciting steps in the world of critical food studies. Thank you for joining me!

Melissa L. Caldwell

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