

I AM NOT ONE TO rely on recipes. Most of what I have learned about food and cooking has instead occurred through observation, trial and error, and most importantly, collaborations with others whose impact cannot be reduced to a simple formula. Recipes, nonetheless, have a certain power: they speak for those who cannot be present and offer guidance when the path forward is uncertain.

The idea for this issue arose in the wake of the WHO's declaration on March 11, 2020, that COVID-19 was a pandemic. The Editorial Collective of *Gastronomica*, as a matter of course, was already conducting its regular meetings via Zoom, and each of us was experiencing the pandemic in different ways, on different timelines, and with differing degrees of intensity in Italy, Japan, South Africa, Canada, and the United States. As scholars and members of our local and global communities, we believed that it was important to respond to this moment and to find some order in the chaos—through mutual support, storytelling, and analysis. We were searching for a recipe to guide our efforts and provide some measure of certainty.

As stay-at-home orders multiplied in the wake of the spreading pandemic, recipes were having a moment. Again. A fascination with recipes is not new in times of infectious disease. Recipes were viral sensations long before social media. Recipes might even be the original meme. Through replication, transformation, and diversification over time, they coevolve with their hosts—benefitting from their strengths and exploiting their weaknesses. The rapid spread of recipes for tangy sourdough loaves and frothy dalgona coffees, for hand sanitizer and presidential Clorox cocktails, reveals the same latent pathologies of past pandemics. Much like Plague Water and the various “sweat potions” that promised relief during outbreaks of the plague in seventeenth-century Europe, the proliferation of recipes in the time of COVID-19 offers scant immunity from fear, inequality, scapegoating, and xenophobia.¹ Recipes, once synonymous with cures, seem to function merely as placebos.

The course of this history is baked into the very structure of the recipe, whose form and imperative voice originate in medical prescriptions or “receipts” from the sixteenth century. The popularization of these scripts—Hieronimus Brunschwig's *Liber pestilentialis* (1500) is noteworthy above all for its attempt to render the technical language of medicinal plague cures into the German vernacular—suggests a persistent epistemological problem at the heart of any public health crisis: how to disseminate curative knowledge to those who are in the best position to deliver care? In subsequent centuries, the spread of recipe collections and cookbooks reflected a similar dichotomy: those who were literate and could afford such texts nonetheless relied upon those whose skills and station placed them in the kitchen rather than at the dinner table.

M. F. K. Fisher's essay “The Anatomy of a Recipe” notes how the writing and transmitting of recipes later evolved to match the “changing tempo of reading, preparing, producing,” even though cooking, for the most part, remained unchanged.

The fundamentals of bread making, fermentation, roasting, and grilling have undergone only superficial modifications during the past century; and yet, Fisher's praise for the modern recipe notwithstanding, the global food system's radical transformations in magnitude and interdependence reveal how pervasive and insidious the anatomy of the modern recipe has become.

This familiar structure of the modern recipe—a detailed list of ingredients supported with a set of ordered procedures—is both a catalog of the dish's components and a technical guide for its production. And yet a recipe does not include what is sufficient for its success: the art of cooking is not the outcome of the recipe but rather its underlying premise. Cooking challenges any distinction between theory and practice. But there is a different logic at work in the modern recipe: a distinction not between head-work and hand-work, but between having and doing, between the possession of resources and the labor that transforms and delivers those resources. The structural logic of the modern recipe is no longer curative but instead reveals the deeper pathologies of capital: the quantification of all goods, the exploitation of essential labor, the devaluation of care work.

This special issue offers no alternative therapy; it records the stories and reflections of those whose experiences are inscribed within this same formula—those who, through an abundance of desire, angst, anger, or hope, have rallied their voices to reflect on food in the time of COVID-19 and to document its complex symptomology. The Editorial Collective's response to the pandemic's impact was rapid but also cognizant of its limitations. Our decision on March 19, 2020, to produce this special issue would give us less than two months to request submissions and then to collect, read, edit, and submit the volume to our publisher. We issued a call for papers—or more properly, dispatches from the field—with rolling deadlines of April 10 and April 25. We received 185 submissions from nineteen different countries. Fifty-nine of those submissions appear in this issue to document, however imperfectly, the early stages of the pandemic.

These pages contain potential cures and welcome placebos: impassioned storytelling, pointed analyses, and testaments to mutual aid. But this issue is not a recipe to heal or even distract us during this crisis. At best, it is an incomplete list of ingredients—elements of a more salutary recipe yet to be written. They are provisions for a recipe that is, like all recipes, provisional and never definitive. If it resists the framework of having and doing, such a gesture relies on an interpretation of the recipe that is constantly under revision: definitely not a cure, but perhaps a path toward recovery; not a silver bullet, but a strategy for management and some level of immunity—a resistance recovered from the very pathogen itself.

A careful reading of recipes reveals that, despite their current ubiquity, they speak primarily through absence—what their fundamental structure obscures and reduces to a formula. The written text of a recipe gestures away from itself: to the actual dish one intends to prepare, to its origins in the author not present to instruct us, to the knowledge and skill required to complete the dish, and to the aspirations and anticipation of those who will make or enjoy it. Through these fundamental forms of absence, recipes unite communities, recovering and relaying the bonds of kinship and friendship among those in proximity and to those who remain at a distance. Recipes cannot replace what is lost, but their ritual performance, through cooking and the pleasure it brings, recalls the origin of all placebos: the vespers of the Office of the Dead, a solemn remembrance for those who have gone before us.

There is no simple recipe for this moment. This issue, and the many voices contained within it, cannot speak for the essential individuals on the front lines of the

pandemic who could not share their stories, or the many lives already taken by COVID-19. Our hope is that this issue, through its collective force, will resonate despite these and more widespread absences the pandemic will inevitably expose: in our healthcare and support systems, in our political leadership, and in the institutions that have for too long ignored and even erased those who will suffer the most. No prescription can completely undo the pre-existing social conditions that have exacerbated the pandemic's impact, and as with any attempted recipe, our aspirations must reckon with the realities that will determine its outcome: some of them unforeseen, but many more the product of longstanding indifference, neglect, and willed ignorance. Beyond our most carefully orchestrated plans, there is perhaps greater wisdom in care, openness, and even the ability to improvise when the path forward is uncertain. This moment requires the courage to imagine a different reality and to transform the available ingredients into something new.

—Robert T. Valgenti, for the
Gastronomica Editorial Collective,
Lebanon, PA, May 2020

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