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Finding Ourselves in Our Food

M.F.K. Fisher's The Art of Eating for the 21st Century



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A contemporary of Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher wrote in an ill-defined genre populated by recipes and food-centered autobiographical anecdotes. In 1954, five of Fisher's works were collected in *The Art of Eating: The Collected Gastronomical Works of M.F.K. Fisher*, a popular compilation that remains in print. Fisher biographer Joan Reardon notes early reviews such as J.H. Jackson's in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, who observed that Fisher's works are "like a refreshing breeze flowing from the twin sources of sense and sensibility. She writes, in short, as one adult to another—practically, often profoundly, and always beautifully" (Reardon, 2004, 241). The five collected books, *Serve it Forth* (1937), *Consider the Oyster* (1941), *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942), *The Gastronomical Me* (1943), and *An Alphabet for Gourmets* (1949) span Fisher's experience. From what people eat around the world to a specific, surprisingly scientific, as well as romantic look at oysters, from elegant wartime rationing to an intimate autobiography, as well as autobiographical essays conforming to the letters of the alphabet, these works together offer a broad range of Fisher's philosophical musings and graceful prose.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Fisher's mid-20th century thoughts resonate with our experiences today. The popular 1930-40s radio icon and former *New Yorker* editor Clifton Fadiman introduces *The Art* with an endorsement that highlights relevance to current readers: "The ability to enjoy eating, like the ability to enjoy any fine art, is not a matter of inborn talent alone, but of training, memory and comparison. Time works for the palate faithfully and fee-lessly" (Fadiman, 1954, xxxi). If we extend the advice of food and culture author Michael Pollan to eat the sort of substances our great grandmothers would recognize as food (Pollan, 2008, 148), perhaps we should also read and heed the kind of food literature

our grandmothers would have recognized as literature, particularly M.F.K. Fisher's.

In a present-day American (U.S.) culture that appears food obsessed, as suggested by such artifacts as *The Food Network*, *Iron Chef*, and dozens of glossy food magazines, Fisher demonstrates prescience in her understanding of the metaphorical qualities of food and hunger in our lives. While food is the overt topic of Fisher's corpus of work, her less obvious purpose is to address the uninformed quality of life and American culture, to point to food as a reflection of ourselves as well as our social and mental well-being. As such, perhaps our current food fixation is merely a re-visiting of the human fascination with the yearnings we experience. Fisher's texts are worth reconsidering for her eloquent prose on the human condition as seen through food and our many appetites.

Fisher has informed food writing by encouraging in it a sense of American mindfulness through conscious choices and memories of good eating, as such contributing to a segment of American culture that is redefining its relationship with food and the many kinds of hunger we nourish. Jan Zita Grover claims that Fisher writes about "food, that is, considered as a part of culture, not as a short-term tactical problem or a daily discipline" (Grover, 1989, 4). America's general economic condition and food supply is nowhere near the WWII rationing days that inspired Fisher texts such as *How to Cook a Wolf*. Still, the intellectual instincts in Fisher's claim that "a nation lives on what its body assimilates, as well as on what it minds acquires as knowledge," combined with her insistence that "our own private personal secret mechanism must be stronger, for selfish comfort as well as for the good of the ideals we believe we believe in," link American cultural ideals to the quality of our meals (Fisher, 1942, 189). Her ideas are attuned with 21st-century culture, at odds with itself in seeking economical food choices while yearning for self-sustaining, environmentally sound food practices. With her multi-faceted understanding of the word "hunger," Fisher claims that acknowledging and feeding our desires first with good food choices, next "inevitably [will come], knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but mainly ourselves" (Fisher, 1942, 350). M.F.K. Fisher at last reassures us that by improving our knowledge in pursuit of eating well, we will improve our own identities through the memories of experiences that bring out the tastes in our foods. From the important social practice of cooking and eating meals that educates and refines us as humans to the instinctive awareness of the intimacy of dining, Fisher's truth-seeking musings on the importance of food and food practices

offers a fresh yet charmingly dated look at the possibilities for satisfying all sorts of hungers.

At almost any given time, a scan through a contemporary health-focused text will find someone discussing the nutritional value of food. From why addictive properties antagonize our primeval brain functions to the benefits of organic and self-sustaining food practices, the functional side of food permeates today's world. Fisher supplies the antidote to what we understand as unhealthy modern behavior in the lean possibilities of WWII America. When working on a collection of dated dishes that evolved into the work *With Bold Knife and Fork* (1969) (not found in *The Art of Eating*), Fisher considered famous French chef Auguste Escoffier one of the "standard texts" she could draw from for such recipes (Reardon, 2004, 331). A concern of the early 20th-century chef was that dining had transformed from a "pleasurable occasion into an unnecessary chore" (Leherer, 2007, 54). Influenced by both Escoffier and French lawyer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825), Fisher urged 1940s readers to make the most of war-time rationing by suggesting how to maintain elegance and nutrition in *How to Cook a Wolf*.

Even though Fisher describes her *Art of Eating* (1954) as a "period piece" in the new introduction to a later edition of the collection, she improves her suggestions for how to eat well in times of rationing because eating well helps our culture retain a valuable identity; this advice is in recognition of principles of want and need and how the way in which these principles are met reveals our culture. In the context of the current economic squeeze that most Americans feel, Fisher's advice rings true that "when we exist without thought or thanksgiving we are not men, but beasts" (Fisher, 1954, 188). She implies that a version of world peace comes from good cooking and that, although there is "sniffing at the door [from the wolf of our fears] ... one good whiff from any of these dishes will send the beast cringing away, in a kind of extrasensory and ultra-moral embarrassment" as if the act of eating right should shame our fears and the sources of those fears into submission (Fisher, 1954, 188). In other words, as these practices expose who we are as a nation by the quality of our response to duress, Fisher claims we can take control of our lives and live elegantly, even on a budget, defeating our qualms through the social bonds and mindful practices of purposeful eating.

What is perhaps more evocative than Fisher's cultural instincts is her compellingly romantic prose about the social quality in food practices. Just her certainty that "sharing food with another human being is an intimate act that should not be indulged in lightly"

suggests the intensely private and personal quality Fisher finds in the nuances of eating (Fisher, 1954, 577). The multiple layers of meaning laced in uses of “hunger” exemplify the scientific and cultural qualities in shared meals. In the Foreword to her autobiography *The Gastronomical Me*, Fisher answers the implied charge that writing about food is not writing about what is vital in life by noting,

It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it ... and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied ... and it is all one (Fisher, 1943, 353).

Historian Donna R. Gabaccia insists that in order to “understand changing American identities, we must explore also the symbolic power of food to reflect cultural or social affinities in moments of change or transition” (Gabaccia, 1998, 9). While Gabaccia does not overtly acknowledge ties to M.F.K. Fisher, she calls on Brillat-Savarin as an inspiration for the title of her book *We Are What We Eat*, a historical study about the multi-ethnic sources of American eating habits. She notes that if Brillat-Savarin claimed, “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are” (Brillat-Savarin, 1949 [1825], 15), then today he would know Americans are “cosmopolitans and iconoclasts; we are tolerant adventurers who do not feel constrained by tradition” (Gabaccia, 1998, 225). Working from the same fundamental impetus, Fisher’s somewhat idealistic vision of the human relationship to food takes a more practical turn in Gabaccia’s history.

The narrative past of the simple bagel provides Gabaccia entry to the ethnically influenced quality of American cuisine from as early as colonial days. When the historian emphasizes how “[i]ronically, culinary nationalism would not characterize the age of American nationalism,” she acknowledges that the absence of an American cuisine is exactly what is so American about us (Gabaccia, 1998, 34). And while M.F.K. Fisher finds that hunger’s metaphorical qualities describe human desire for all sorts of pleasure, Gabaccia sees a similar role for food in the lives of immigrants to America at the turn to the 20th century. If food was a symbol of “social and economic equality missing in [immigrants’] daily lives” in their home countries, then “the bounty and ready accessibility of the food marketplace [in America] did evoke visions of *la cuccagana* [abundance or plenty] for many, allowing them to

indulge and enjoy a sense of equality and well-being as food consumers” (Gabaccia, 1998, 62). The simple availability of food, she claims, made immigrants content that they had improved their well-being by moving to America, and as such, filled a socio-cultural role beyond subsistence.

Gabaccia’s historical reading of the famous restaurant Delmonico’s as it influenced the American idea of sophisticated eating suggests that M.F.K. Fisher’s pursuit of the art and science of good eating may be situated in a socio-cultural moment of Fisher’s youth as much as anything else. Gabaccia emphasizes how Delmonico’s “interpretation of French cuisine was defined by offering choice and excess” obtained by hiring well-educated immigrants from European countries, resulting in “Delmonico’s signature deferential service” which marked the restaurant as “high class” as much as its food (Gabaccia, 1998, 95). Then noting how America developed a tradition of Grand Hotels and pretentious restaurants as an indicator of sophistication, these qualities of service and sophistication, as much as the food she consumes, marks M.F.K. Fisher’s increasing gastronomical refinement.

Additionally, in her “Food Fights” chapter, Gabaccia describes moving into the 1940s; M.F.K. Fisher’s observations about U.S. political conditions continue to match the historian’s understanding of food’s socio-cultural role in America. Tracing America’s nativism and xenophobia, Gabaccia argues that in the decades before WWII, a “veritable ‘food fight’ erupted over what it meant not only to be, but to eat, American” (Gabaccia, 1998, 121). The interesting direction that Fisher pushed this argument, as her focus was on the quality of individual life rather than illuminating an historical trend, was in forming a highly developed personal sense of taste versus producing a national identity based upon food choices. Much as Fisher in her autobiographical writing notes that, “Americans might do much better to take our eating choices very seriously,” Gabaccia concludes in her historical study by saying that we are a “nation of multi-ethnics” (Gabaccia, 1998, 232).

M.F.K. Fisher makes that already serious choice a much more personal and potentially threatening possibility when she says we open ourselves up to dangerous familiarity with others when we are too casual in our dining choices, both social and gastronomical. In contemporary culture where boundaries of promiscuity and personal privacy are becoming more blurred, this idea of intimacy might seem old fashioned. Yet Fisher’s beliefs about dining alone make a discerning socio-cultural claim that is echoed in those contemporary food texts acknowledging the relationship built in sharing food with other people. Much the same as a mother

warning her daughter against immoral behavior, Fisher asks readers to consider dining alone rather than carelessly risk the familiarity of a casual dinner partner. In fact, she offers advice on dining alone in public as well as learning to dine with satisfaction and grace at home. Fisher distinguishes between the social necessity of existence and the requirement for self-nourishment.

While Fisher writes in *An Alphabet for Gourmets* that there are few people she would like to eat or drink with, “[it] cannot be avoided if we are to exist socially” (577). In this way, Fisher anticipates Italian cultural historian Massimo Montanari, who writes that food is culture and that food becomes one of “the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity” (Montanari, 2004, xi). Even as Michael Pollan makes his social and political statement in his final, fully foraged meal in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, he makes the following point: The fact that the many hands that helped him find and gather the meal “were at the table was the more rare and important thing, as was the fact that every single story about the food on that table could be told in the first person” (Pollan, 2006, 409). Each of these authors, who are intensely interested in their respective angles on food, be it gastronomical philosophy, cultural history, or contemporary food culture, sees sitting down and sharing a meal with other people as one of the most important acts we do—literally what makes us human.

Tony Blake, science editor of Part III of Heston Blumenthal’s *The Fat Duck Cookbook*, observes that, “Eating and drinking are [part of the] interplay of reality and expectation, of conscious and subconscious activity.” Especially importantly, “We are putting part of the outside world into our own bodies, with all the potential risks that implies” (Blake, 2009, 466). The intimacy that resounds with the sense of sexual familiarity holds more potential when we consider that we are ingesting something other than ourselves, something Montanari claims only becomes a truly cultural behavior when we artificially alter that food through cooking (Montanari, 2004, 29). We trust people when we allow them to offer us substances to ingest into our bodies.

Ultimately, then, the social features of eating build to Fisher’s biggest argument: that eating, alone or in company, should be a well-informed and purposeful act. In these ways, Fisher predicts the contemporary movement of mindfulness. A popular definition of the practice is “to remember to pay attention to what is occurring in one’s immediate experience with care and discernment” (Black, 2012, 1). Fisher suggests that becoming more knowledgeable about eating while paying better attention to the excellence possible in

each meal is a way to a better lifestyle. Her passion for a well-informed discrimination for food resounds in a chapter title in her first book, *Serve It Forth*. “Pity the Blind in the Palate” criticizes people who do not teach themselves to taste. Fisher claims that while some people may be “taste-blind” as another might be color blind, “others never taste because they are stupid or, more often, because they have never been taught to search for differentiations of flavour” (Fisher, 1937, 57). Comparing the ignorant to people who claim an affinity for music but love to listen to it, she urges that person to “talk to other music-listeners ... [and] read about music-makers” (Fisher, 1937, 57). She suggests that people can learn from people who already practice smart gustatory moves, and that at last with the ability to taste “life itself has for him more flavour, more zest” (Fisher, 1937, 58). Despite the perceived snobbery in cultivating a palate, M.F.K. Fisher seems genuinely to want to improve her readers’ lives through helping them refine their affinities.

Generalizing about her native culture, Fisher criticizes America as a “nation taste-blind” (Fisher, 1937, 59). This disparagement of our culture’s ability to taste takes on an interesting twist in the context of modern science. A team of Oxford scientists proved that a word label can change the way we experience a smell, and thus our taste. When the same purified air given to a subject was labeled cheddar cheese in one test and body odor in another, the brain reacted appropriately to the words assigned to the unscented air (Lehrer, 2007, 68). In his chapter on Auguste Escoffier in the book *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, Jonah Lehrer compliments the French chef for understanding that “what we taste is ultimately an *idea*, that our sensations are strongly influenced by their context” (Lehrer, 2007, 68-69). Pushing the concept even farther, Lehrer proposes that the sensation of taste is “interpreted by the subjective brain, which brings to the moment its entire library of personal memories and idiosyncratic desires” (Lehrer, 2007, 70). Suddenly Fisher’s claims on taste and mindfulness come together when we understand that to educate our taste buds to have more sophisticated expectations, we must become people of greater discernment and judgment, not only in the literal foodstuffs we ingest, but in the experiences we save up to interpret our tastes with. The synergy builds an exponential effect such that Fisher seems to suggest that better food choices lead to more cultured experiences and more cultured experiences lead to better food choices.

M.F.K. Fisher’s observations about taste and mindfulness find their contemporary counterparts in the popular present-day genre

of the food memoir. People whose stories focus on the centrality of food in their lives' formation see how their increasingly complex relationship to food mirrors their growth as socio-cultural creatures in America. A striking example is the similarly lyrical and romantic prose of Diana Abu-Jaber in her memoir *The Language of Baklava*. In her Foreword, echoes of Fisher's layers of hunger whisper in Abu-Jaber's note that her family's stories "were often in some way about food, and the food always turned out to be about something much larger: grace, difference, faith, love" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 1). Abu-Jaber's foreword encourages us to read her memories with the same broader meanings Fisher teases out of the word "hunger." This link seems almost obvious when Abu-Jaber offers her teenaged peers a picnic with a "menu ... inspired by M.F.K. Fisher's descriptions of meals in the Alps and on the French Riviera," directly connecting the Jordanian-American's source of stimulation about food writing to Fisher herself (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 205). Food allows Abu-Jaber to highlight her childhood sense of difference from an imagined American identity while exploring immigrant desires through the ritual of ethnic friends and families arriving for visits at meal times: "They'll be hungry because everyone who 'comes over' [sic] is hungry: for home, for family, for the old smells and touches and tastes" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 6).

That her home becomes a diasporic center of Jordanian culture helps explain why Abu-Jaber often more closely identifies with her father's culture over her mother's American roots. Having spent time in Jordan a little later in her childhood, she can use people's distaste for what she considers "native" food, as a marker for someone who might also have distaste for her. As such, her growing mindfulness appears in the dissolution of her friendship with the only Caucasian child, Bennett, in her Jordanian neighborhood because she realizes his perception of her ethnicity challenges her own sense of identity. Originally she drops her "native" friends for Bennett's scooter, but she becomes conflicted over associating with him. When he refuses to eat cookies from a Jordanian friend and cites the superiority of a crumpet he's never really tasted because he's never been to England, she notes, "I glare at the scooter, and it occurs to me for the first time that when Bennett talks about native foods, he is talking exactly about the sorts of food my father prepares. A sick, disloyal feeling floats in my center" (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 43).

By the time Abu-Jaber narrates herself to the present, people in her life have committed suicide over a depression based on homesickness for a native land represented in succulent and perfect "golubsti" (164) and proven their avariciousness in small meal

portions and inhumane treatment of an enslaved maid (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 260). Finally Abu-Jaber conveys that her literal identity, her sense of home inside herself, emerges from a type of food. Finding herself isolated in a new job and new apartment, she “buy[s] bags of Zataar, cumin, and sumac, sometimes to cook with, sometimes just to have their comforting scent circulating in [her] apartment” (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 319). Ultimately she describes herself as two people: one with an urge for a sense of home largely completed by an ethnic cuisine, and another that melts into dreams that untether her from reality. That second, and seemingly more precious, self “wants nothing, only to see, to taste, and to describe. It is the wilderness of the interior, the ungoverned consciousness of writing” (Abu-Jaber, 2005, 327). Much the same as Fisher who is, in the end, pleased with her mindful growth as a sophisticated gastronome, Abu-Jaber links the ordinary hungers of her first self to the uninhibited desires played out by her second self. Abu-Jaber cultivates her understanding of the socio-cultural role of food to perform the supreme act of mindfulness by writing her own life’s narrative arc through the lens of her metaphorical hungers perhaps originally offered to her by M.F.K. Fisher.

For all the ways that M.F.K. Fisher resonates in contemporary writings, a return to her prose rewards readers with a careful inquiry into our relationship to food and a multitude of other hungers. Fisher’s work is an investigation into identity and memory, drawing on her recollections of how she developed her sense of a gastronomical self. She describes how, as people come to know themselves in their gustatory growth, each of those experiences is a fleeting pleasure: meals that become memories. In a sense she claims that the food choices we make build our sense of identity and show us what kind of people we are. And in her opinion, we should become people of cultivated tastes purposely living our lives as we mindfully choose our dining companions and thoughtfully prepare our meals.

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