Setting the Table: An Introduction to Food & Philosophy

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> Socrates: *True enough. I was forgetting that they'll obviously need salt, olives, cheese, boiled roots, and vegetables of the sort they cook in the country. We'll give them desserts, too, of course, consisting of figs, chickpeas, and beans, and they'll roast myrtle and acorns before the fire, drinking moderately. And so they'll live in peace and good health, and when they die at a ripe old age, they'll bequeath a similar life to their children.*
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> Glaucon: *If you were founding a city for pigs, Socrates, wouldn't you fatten them on the same diet?*
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> *Plato,* Republic *372c3–372d5*[1]

Within the pages of this anthology, the reader will find a smorgasbord of essays written about a range of topics connecting what we eat with some very interesting and, in many cases, important philosophical concerns. We have arranged our authors' contributions thematically, in the hopes that readers can, as with *à la carte* menus, select essays that appeal to their philosophical palates. Of course, as with all bountiful spreads, we encourage readers to partake in every offering, as each essay is uniquely delightful and intellectually worthwhile. We hope that, as a result, readers will find their appetites whetted for further such discussions.

Our aims in producing this anthology are twofold. First, the editors and contributing authors – who appreciate the value of philosophical rumination – hope to show foodies, gourmands, chefs, and others who treasure food that critical reflection upon what and how we eat can contribute to a robust enjoyment of gastronomic pleasures. Relatedly, the second aim of our combined effort is to draw *philosophical* attention to *food itself*. Historically, philosophical discussions of food have been subordinate to gaining insight into other philosophical issues. Occasionally, talk of eating has served as a metaphor for other "nutritive" endeavors, like the acquisition of knowledge. Other times gastronomic concepts (e.g., taste) were adopted to specify certain classes of value judgments, most notably in aesthetics and philosophy of art. Alternately, we find philosophical conversations of what and how we eat embedded in arguments aimed at elucidating deeper, but only loosely related, points.

Such is, for example, the case with the epigraph quoted above. Socrates and Glaucon do not discuss diets with an eye toward establishing conditions for ideal culinary habits. Rather, the context in which this argument occurs is an investigation of *justice*. This seems clearly to be a case in which food is important only as an aspect of some larger issue. While this is not universally true of all food-oriented philosophical discussion (one thinks of notable exceptions like Brillat-Savarin), it seems to be the dominant historical attitude. Recently, however, there has been an increasing number of attempts to throw philosophical light on this underappreciated, if ubiquitous, aspect of human life. This anthology is a continuation of this movement; we support the thesis that food is, and ought to be, a proper object of philosophical reflection in its own right.

One might say, then, that this anthology, and the movement within which it is situated, starts from a suggestion drawn out of Glaucon's protest to Socrates. Human beings eat for more than mere sustenance; we are also reflective creatures with an apparently unique capacity for *taste*. To give food a just, properly nuanced, philosophical treatment requires sustained investigation: we are, as Glaucon indirectly observes, more than mere pigs, so discussion of our diets calls for more sophistication. Because we are reflective, we ought to think about what ramifications our diets may have for other people, animals, or the world at large. Perhaps we should ponder our capacity for gustatory delight, and attempt to pin

down what qualities make food *good,* in addition to nutritive. The faculty of taste, and its associate objects, might raise interesting questions for theories of perception and certain views of the mind. One may also wonder about the extent to which cultures determine food preferences, and so on. As mentioned, there is a cornucopia of interesting philosophical issues related to food; these are but a nibble of the topics here explored. Oddly, in contrast to the wealth of issues there is a relative dearth of philosophical literature, save perhaps in the fields of environmental ethics and aesthetics. Thus, *Food & Philosophy* serves up another course of timely food-oriented thinking, and one that attempts to broaden the discourse.

To this end, we have included authors from diverse but relevant backgrounds, all of whom take a reflective stance toward food. Many of our contributors are active academic philosophers, but the reader will also enjoy, and glean insights from, essays by professional chefs, food writers and critics, sociologists, and anthropologists. We are delighted to have assembled this range of perspectives, especially in the case of our culinary professionals. The thoughts of those who daily work with the subject matter should not lightly be set aside, and we take their inclusion as a mark of distinction. After all, who better to talk about food than those for whom it provides a craft and way of life?

We thank the reader for joining us at the table we have set. We are pleased that you have decided to share our aims and spend time ingesting our cooperative project. While the essays in this volume may not satiate you, we are confident that your palate for philosophy and food shall be enriched. This is our most profound hope: that you will find delight in further thinking philosophically about the contents of this volume.

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In the second part of this introduction, let us offer you a tour of what is going to happen in this volume, as well as to gesture toward some of the issues that will be covered therein. As you probably saw in the table of contents, the volume will be "served" to you as a meal, and one replete with five courses at that! We hope that you find it satisfying, though, unlike at a fine restaurant, we would not object if you still hungered for more after it is all over.

We start with a foreword by Odessa Piper, who is a highly acclaimed chef. In opening the volume, though, we did not *just* want

a chef with a high profile, but rather someone whose work and culinary ideals bear some sympathies to this project; we feel fortunate to have had her agree to participate. Piper grew up in New England, and went on to work on a farm in Canaan, New Hampshire that practiced sustainable agriculture. There are certainly philosophical and ethical elements to such approaches, and these were deeply influential on Piper's culinary art. She went on to open L'Etoile – in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1976 – which was part of an important movement in food to create local cuisine using only local ingredients. (Another well-known example of this movement is Alice Waters' Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California.) Drawing from her experiences and approaches to food, we think that Piper provides an excellent start to the volume.

After the foreword, we move into the first of our five courses: the appetizers. We decided to start with "Food in Culture & Society" as the essays in this unit really do set the stage for the rest of the book. Whatever else food is, it is inherently social and cultural. The food that we eat does not appear from nowhere, but rather derives from historical contexts and is shared with those in our communities; these communities provide us with our dining companions, as well as provide the infrastructure through which food is grown, distributed, and purchased. In some cases, of course, these "communities" can be quite large (as when orange juice is sent around the world from Florida) or, in others, quite small (as when we buy food at local farmers' markets).

We start with an essay by Michael Symons, which talks about Epicurus, whose name has grown to be synonymous with passion for eating and drinking; in addition to casual usage, we even see his name attached to "products," such as epicurious.com, which is one of the most popular online recipe resources. Symons talks about the influence of Epicurus, as well as some interpretative issues and traditions that attach to his work. Next comes an essay by Lydia Zepeda, who is a professor of consumer science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Zepeda is interested in decisions that American society has made about food, both in terms of *what* we eat, and also in terms of what we are willing to pay for it. She presents her case with substantial empirical data across the twentieth century, as well as international comparisons. Third, we have an essay by Jen Wrye, which considers vegetarianism as a social choice. While

vegetarianism is often defended on moral grounds, Wrye is also interested in the social contexts through which such decisions are made as well as various conceptual and theoretical issues underpinning vegetarianism. Finally, we have an essay by Sheila Lintott, which is about eating disorders. Obviously, there are social pressures that contribute to the proliferation of eating disorders, but Lintott discusses some of the aesthetics that underlie these pressures; she even invokes Kant, but we have encouraged her to be gentle therein. Thus concludes the appetizers.

Next, we present the first course: "Taste & Food Criticism." Again, we wanted to start with some of the cultural and social issues pertaining to food, but then we might notice that, once food is "underway" in some sense, people then start *talking* (or writing) about it. Some of these people say that food is good, or else that it is bad. Some of them say that certain food is better than other food. And so on. Well, how is this all supposed to work? Why do *those* people get to render commentary on the merits of certain foods? Do they enjoy some sort of privileged stature for some reason? Maybe they have *special training* and this training therefore entitles them to make the sorts of claims that they make. Or else maybe they simply can *taste* things that others cannot; we all have various taste thresholds, and some people are just *better* at tasting. (This is not necessarily good for them, though, as they might end up tasting the bad stuff more acutely as well.) On the other hand, maybe none of this is right and taste is just wholly subjective. If this latter line is true, then what should be the status of food criticism? These issues go back at least as far as the great philosopher David Hume, and constitute a serious and ongoing philosophical debate.

In the first essay of this unit, Michael Shaffer talks about the sense of taste. Philosophically, the perceptual mechanisms underlying taste have not received much attention – in fact, nearly all of the literature on perception has focused on vision, almost completely to the exclusion of other sense modalities – and Shaffer wants to remedy this. He argues that taste is *not* some sort of special expertise, but rather that those whose opinions we esteem as rather better at *describing* the sorts of things they are tasting; Shaffer thinks that the perceptual experiences of most of us are actually quite similar, but that our ability to translate those experiences into language can be widely divergent. Next comes Jeremy Iggers, who is a restaurant

critic for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. Iggers is interested in the phenomenon that many of the restaurants given the lowest marks by critics are, in fact, the most popular among consumers. This is especially apparent if we consider "branding": restaurants like Burger King and the Rainforest Café enjoy tremendous public appeal, yet seemingly lack any important culinary merit. *Why* is this? Iggers considers two options: either taste is subjective and the restaurant critic is therefore irrelevant, or else taste is not subjective and the public therefore makes poor choices about what it eats. While we will not give away his conclusion here, the reader might try to guess it from his above-mentioned job title. Last, we have an essay by Fabio Parasecoli, who is an editor for the Italian food and wine magazine *Gambero Rosso*. As with Shaffer, Parasecoli hungers for a better understanding of the perceptual mechanisms that underlie taste. In this essay, Parasecoli talks about some of the neurological and physiological features that give rise to taste, as well as some of the ways that food can be manifest in memories and how those memories go on to affect future perceptual experiences.

Next comes the second course: "Edible Art & Aesthetics." In this unit, we look at some of the aesthetic issues that attach to food. Most generally, we can ask *whether* food can be appropriately considered as an object of aesthetic import. We talk about paintings or symphonies being beautiful, but not about food; or, when we do talk about food being beautiful, we are usually talking about its *visual*, as opposed to gustatory, appeal. Why is this? *Should* food be considered an object of art? If so, what are some of the important questions that we need to tend to therein?

This unit starts with an essay by Kevin Sweeney, who is especially interested in whether taste, as a sensory modality, can ground claims of aesthetic judgment. As mentioned above, we uncontroversially attach beauty to objects of vision and hearing. However, many great philosophers, including Plato and Kant, have argued that the objects of taste can *not* be proper objects of art; Kant, in particular, argued that taste too readily admits of subjectivity to properly ground aesthetic judgments. Given the rise of modern gastronomy, we might wonder whether food has earned its proper place in aesthetic discourse, or else whether these traditional skepticisms should hold. Next comes an essay by one of the volume's co-editors, Dave Monroe, who is interested in a specific challenge to the aesthetic status of food: its

consumability. If you think of other objects of aesthetic worth (e.g., paintings), the relevant aesthetic practice (e.g., viewing them) is certainly not destructive. Other aesthetic objects (e.g., symphonies) can at least be reproduced later and, again, are thereby not destroyed in the process of appreciating them. Food, however, seems different insofar its destruction (through consumption) is *precisely* how we garner our appreciation of it. *If* aesthetic objects must (somehow) persist across time, then this might give us reason to think that food cannot be a proper object of aesthetic merit. Monroe considers whether this conditional is true, as well as whether food necessarily fails in the relevant manner. Third, we have an essay by Carolyn Korsmeyer. Korsmeyer is interested in some of the language that we use to describe food and, in particular, with seeming-opposites like 'delightful' and 'disgusting': how could *both* of these words attach to the same culinary objects? Consider, for example, *foie gras*, which some people champion and others detest. *Why* is this the case? One option is to have a radical subjectivity of taste wherein the same things, quite literally, taste good to some and bad to others. While this might sometimes be the case, Korsmeyer argues that the proper analysis has to do with *how* people are tasting: whether with their minds or else with their palates. Ultimately, she thinks that some of the disgust that we feel toward some objects might either be mitigated or exacerbated by the cognitive stance that we take toward the objects of our consumption. Finally, we offer an essay by Glenn Kuehn; this is clearly one of the most fun contributions to the volume, particularly as it concludes with a recipe for cheesecake! Kuehn argues that a central part of the aesthetic practice of food is the interaction that it fosters among us and the way in which it can stimulate communal growth and inquiry; he goes on to defend this vision by appeal to the work of John Dewey.

Whether appropriately or inappropriately named, dessert consists in "Eating & Ethics"; this title is not meant to disparage the importance or centrality of ethics but, well, this is just how the courses were going and this is where ethics was most at home in the volume. There are undoubtedly many ethical issues that attach to food, some of which were alluded to in the first unit on "Food in Culture and Society." Most generally, we can ask what *should* we eat? Organic? Free-range? Locally grown? Vegetarian? Foods that are not genetically modified? However we answer these questions, those

answers will necessarily display our ethical commitments; whatever the answers, we could always ask *why* the answers are what they are, and such a procedure would obviously be begging for some sort of moral invocation. Or, at least, a prudential one, which might amount to the same thing. This unit, then, surveys many of these topics and provides some guidance therein.

We start with an essay by Roger King, who talks about some of these broad ethical issues and how they connect with eating. In particular, he notices that eating places consumers in a wide network of relationships to plants and animals, soil, farmers and farm workers, and corporations, as well as to community, tradition, and future generations. What and how we eat configures and reconfigures these relationships, and therefore ethical questions necessarily arise when talking about eating. Next up is Matthew Brown, who considers picky eating as a moral failing. As he points out, we are quite used to people saying things like "I would never eat that," and we usually take claims to be unproblematic (often to the chagrin of an embarrassed host). However, Brown thinks that they *are* problematic because he thinks that we all have moral obligations toward openness, self-knowledge, accommodation, and gracefulness; he further thinks that these obligations can be observed by having an open mind toward a wide range of foods. The third essay of this unit is by Paul Thompson, who discusses the ethical issues that attach to genetically modified foods. Endearingly irreverent, Thompson makes the case that we should be able to eat whatever we like, though he offers various hazards and pitfalls pursuing genetically modified diets, as well as assessments of how those hazards and pitfalls should bear on the choices that we make about foods. Finally, we have Linda Jerofke, who writes about the moral elements of hunting and of consuming game meat. In her essay, Jerofke considers arguments both for and against these practices, both from traditional hunting and anti-hunting camps, as well as from other groups, such as Native American populations.

We are extremely excited about the last unit, wherein we have essays from chefs; we call this "Compliments of the Chef." While we have hoped to make this volume accessible to non-philosophers, it is worth noting that almost all of the above essays have come from academics (though this includes disciplines other than philosophy). Even in the cases where contributions have come from non-academics (e.g., Parasecoli and Kuehn), these have nevertheless been people with

substantial training in philosophy. Our chefs, however, do not necessarily have any background in philosophy, though they have all done an admirable job relating their craft in philosophically respectable ways.

First, we have an essay by Jennifer Iannolo, editor of the online food magazine *Gilded Fork*. Iannolo distinguishes between levels of 'sensuality,' arguing that more profoundly enriching gustatory experiences than those we normally have are possible, and preferable, once we adopt a reflective and appreciative attitude toward what we eat. Her essay is especially tantalizing and delicious, as she illustrates her thesis by appealing to ways in which our attitudes about sexuality and pornography mirror our approaches to eating. Next we have an essay by Christian Krautkramer, in which he argues that the standards governing cooking in restaurants and in the home considerably differ. Home cooks, he argues, have a special duty to their guests generated by the direct relationships of love and friendship between cook and diner. This fosters what he calls an "inclusive fraternity" of the kitchen – in the home, we come together to share both food and fellowship. On the other hand, the professional chef has a different set of duties, which result from obligations to the profession and, as Krautkramer argues, to the food itself. Thus, the restaurant kitchen, given a general lack of personal connection between cook and diner, becomes an "exclusive fraternity" of professionals. The third offering in this section is by Mark Tafoya, the executive chef for *Gilded Fork* and a culinary entrepreneur. He brings to light ways in which food and dining can play a role in bridging cultural gaps, thereby acting as a means of diplomacy. The "diplomacy of the dish," as he puts it, takes place in two ways. First, we can come to appreciate others by learning to enjoy their food. Second, we forge bonds and bridge diplomatic gaps by coming together to eat – a practice with a long history in human affairs. Tafoya's discussion is fleshed out by many wonderful examples. Rounding out this section, and indeed, our anthology, is a jointly authored essay by a husband-and-wife team of Colorado-based chefs and food bloggers, Aki Kamozawa and H. Alexander Talbot. They insightfully discuss the need to balance three considerations in culinary art: inspiration, taste (flavor), and aesthetics. In the course of showing why these conditions are important to a well-rounded cuisine, they draw upon experiences with various cooking methods, techniques, and ingredients. Thus,

we readers become aware not only of the important balance of inspiration, taste, and aesthetics, but also of how chefs are able to bring these together.

Finally, we conclude with an afterword by Woody Allen. This was an essay originally published in *The New Yorker* and, in addition to being hysterical, probably mentions more philosophers than any other essay in this volume. While we hope that the essays herein will be fun and engaging, it is worth appreciating the fact that philosophy need not be too serious, and Allen does an admirable job in making this apparent; it seemed an appropriate resting point for the volume.

In closing, we hope that you enjoy this volume as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. We also hope that it helps you to think philosophically about food and about eating. Bon appétit!

Note

1 Plato. *Republic*. Trans. G. M. A. Grube. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992.