

Much Depends on Dinner

What we eat, how we prepare and serve it, and what it says about who we are.

In Don Juan, Byron writes, “Since Eve ate the apple, much depends on dinner.” Indeed. Our relationships with food are complex and convoluted. What we eat can be a source of joy and delight, and of creative expression, as well as a reason for anguish, worry, dread and even fear.

Nearly every aspect of our lives affects what we eat: politics, religion, economics, geography, culture and ethnicity, aesthetics, health and personal taste. As a species, we have elevated many of our basic needs to an expression of who we are, what we believe, how we interact with our environments, and how we communicate and express ourselves. Food is no exception.

The books in this series explore and elucidate many of these aspects, though not all. Along with religion and politics, food is a topic that can spark intense discussion – meat and drink to participants in Let’s Talk About It!

The Last Chinese Chef **by Nicole Mones**

The first book in the series, *The Last Chinese Chef*, a novel by Nicole Mones, gives readers a window on cuisine that is both an expression of an ancient civilization and the tradition of a meal as fine art.

Maggie McElroy is a food writer for an American magazine. She has covered everything “...from Basque country-style platters in the Joaquin Valley to the German sausages of central Texas...” When we first meet her, she is reeling still from the recent death of her husband in a traffic accident. Just as she’s ready to return to work, she learns that she will have to go to China, where her husband often had business, to look into a claim on his estate.

An understanding editor arranges an assignment that will take her to there. It is 2008, the year of the Chinese Olympics, and the Chinese are including a Cultural Olympics that will feature a contest among the nation’s finest chefs. The final banquet requires “...not only great dishes, but also concept, shape, subtlety, and narrative force.”

There, Maggie meets Sam Liang, one of three finalists in the competition, the latest in a line of gifted chefs tracing back to the imperial palace. Sam’s great-grandfather, Laing

Wei, wrote the definitive book on imperial-style cooking. But his father and his uncles were forced to hide their names and their skills in order to survive the Cultural Revolution.

American-born, Sam returned to China against his father's wishes, to apprentice himself to his three exacting, loving and gifted uncles, carrying on the family tradition.

As she shadows Sam and his uncles in the complex preparations for the banquet and begins to explore the claim on her inheritance, Maggie's own notions of family and relationship are challenged on every front. Sam gathers "...bowls, plates, platters, paintings and calligraphy in tune with the arc of the meal"; Maggie gathers information about her husband's life in China. For the Chinese, she learns, a meal is more than food: "...it was *guanxi* – relationship, caring." The Liang family exemplifies this tradition. Their model, Liang Wei, taught them what he himself had learned: "The high point of every meal was never the food itself ... but always the act of sharing it."

Experiencing their family's love and warmth, the ways in which they deal with grief, and support one another, give her more than she ever expected to find in China and help her forge a new way of seeing her own relationship with her late husband.

The Tummy Trilogy

by Calvin Trillin

With the second book in the series, *The Tummy Trilogy* by Calvin Trillin, we move from the sublime to the earthy. Trillin celebrates the everyday cooking of regions and ethnicities, and most especially, the people who keep these traditional foods alive. He tries his hardest to sample every festival, fair, or pancake supper that features local specialties. As he says, "Fairs are good places to eat, particularly for stand-up eaters – which is one of the kinds of eater I am." He admits to another description of himself, "by a close member of my family," as "a sausage-eating crank."

His writing is anything but cranky, however, and his stories of the people he meets and the foods he seeks out are witty and entertaining. Since this volume is a reprint of three collections of essays (many of them originally published in the *New Yorker*), it is a buffet of eccentric characters and funny stories from chili cook-offs, crawfish boils, fried chicken feuds, pancake suppers, barbecues, fish fries, festivals, and beyond. It can be read by "dipping and swooping," as a friend calls it: sampling essays from all three collections. Of course, it can be enjoyed by reading straight through, as well.

Many of the down-home foods he rejoices in are in contrast to the more complex fare featured in *The Last Chinese Chef*, although Trillin is more than fond of Chinese food!

Still, the themes of tradition and family, ethnicity and local specialties are equally strong in both books. Although the Cultural Revolution is a far more dramatic example of politics affecting cuisine, this book, too, decries some of the changes in the way Americans eat that were just beginning when Trillin wrote his essays. (Michael Pollan, in the next book in the series, will deal with those changes in detail.) Trillin himself mentions in the foreword to this edition that now “Americans obviously tend to have a more serious interest these days in avoiding foods that are palpably ruinous to their health...” However, he begs the question of whether he himself has reformed his eating habits. As he says, “... it’s complicated.”

In Defense of Food

by Michael Pollan

Michael Pollan would agree with that sentiment whole-heartedly. The subtitle of one of the sections in *The Tummy Trilogy* is “Adventures of a Happy Eater.” Pollan’s *In Defense of Food* easily could be subtitled “Adventures of Confused, Worried and Unhealthy Eaters.”

As the author points out, in most of human history, people did not have expert advice on what to eat or how to prepare it. Culture and tradition dictated how and what to find, hunt or grow that was edible and good for us, and mothers taught us to eat what was put before us. Now, he says, “We are becoming a nation of orthorexics: people with an unhealthy obsession with healthy eating.” Ironically, we have grown fatter and less healthy as a result.

Pollan gives a fascinating account of how and why we got into this pickle, including details of some of the early theories of healthy diets. Early in the 20th century, for instance, John Harvey Kellogg (of cereal fame) and Horace Fletcher mandated a truly punishing regimen. Kellogg believed that eating animal protein resulted in toxic bacteria in the colon and masturbation. His colleague Fletcher (known as “The Great Masticator”) insisted each bite be chewed one hundred times. Meals at their Battle Creek clinic were often accompanied by special chewing music.

These fads aside, the later focus on nutrients (additives) at the expense of actual nutrition (contained in the food itself) kept most of us in the dark about what we were consuming at greater and greater rates.

Not all is gloom and doom, however. Pollan offers very practical suggestions for how to shop for food and eat more sensibly without giving up the pleasures of the table. In an echo of Wei Liang’s advice in *The Last Chinese Chef*, the author sums up his steps to better eating: Cook. Eat meals. At a table. Not alone, if possible.

A Homemade Life
by Molly Wizenberg

A Homemade Life by Molly Wizenberg is a tribute to her own family, who lived by those beliefs before Pollan ever put pen to paper. She tells us that the “...steady rhythm of meeting in the kitchen at night, sitting down at the table, sharing a meal...We built our family that way – in our own kitchen, seven nights a week.”

Now a well-known food writer, Wizenberg grew up in Oklahoma City. Both her parents loved to cook and to eat. As a small child, her mother encouraged her experiments in the kitchen, letting her make “mixtures,” peculiar concoctions such as Diet Coke and flour. Many members of her extended family were terrific cooks as well, as evidenced by many of their recipes included in the book. She remembers that “Everything interesting, everything good, seemed to happen when food was around.”

Food at celebrations, of course, is given and certain foods serve as memorial tributes to family who are no longer present. Molly’s Aunt Min was known for her “Hoosier Pie,” which featured both pecans and chocolate. Aunt Min always made it for Thanksgiving. After she died, her niece Sarah, Molly’s cousin, continued the tradition – and still does, more than twenty years later. Sarah did confess to Molly that she doesn’t think her in-laws care for it, but Aunt Min’s Hoosier Pie lives on regardless.

Despite her parents’ “quiet pride” at making everything from scratch (except biscuits), young Molly believed hers to be a “childhood of pathetic deprivation.” No processed foods in her lunch box! She found herself driven to steal cheese puffs from “an unsuspecting classmate.”

As an adult, however, she recognizes food as her *métier* and her passion. The recipes she shares with readers each evoke a specific memory – from *Tarte Tatin* and young love in France, to the Italian Grotto Eggs her father named and requested as he was dying, and the simple cake she made for her own wedding, which came to be known as “The Winning Hearts and Minds Cake.”

With *A Homemade Life*, Molly Wizenberg is guaranteed to win hearts and minds and insure her family memories will live on with her readers’ own.

Secrets of the Tsil Café

by Thomas Fox Averill

Wes Hingler, the narrator of Thomas Fox Averill's novel, *Secrets of the Tsil Café*, also grows up with parents who are passionate about food and cooking. Both are professional cooks, but with very different styles.

The family lives above the Tsil Café, Robert Hingler's restaurant. He serves food made only with ingredients known in the Western Hemisphere before Columbus. The Hopi kachina, Tsil, who stuffs hot red peppers into the mouths of runners overtaken in a race, is his totem. His dishes are hot and spicy, and he expects customers to adapt or eat elsewhere.

In the upstairs kitchen, Wes's mother, Maria Tito Hingler runs a successful catering business. Her approach to customers – and to life – is the polar opposite of her husband's. She tells us, "...I know exactly what will please someone. I adapt my cooking to them – spicy, bland, exotic, ordinary, sweet, salty. It's their party."

Robert and Maria are intense about one another, food, and their son. The foods they love and prepare are expressions of their distinct personalities. Wes remarks, "I was fed by one parent, stuffed by another. I was marked by both, nurtured by both." He is often confused and conflicted, caught between his parents. Again, from Wes: "I grew up with their arguments about taste, function, nutrition, spice, form, and life. They loved it."

As he tries to sort out his place in his family and in the world, and struggles with a growing list of family secrets he learns, Wes has a wide cast of interesting characters to observe and learn from: his father's Hispanic godparents, the many eccentric workers who come and go in the café, his Italian great-grandmother, and a local food critic who is in love with his mother.

As in the first book, *Secrets of the Tsil Cafe* climaxes with an elaborate and exotic banquet, planned and prepared to celebrate Robert Hingler's 50th birthday. In the end, Wes tells us, "Food had been everything in my family: from seduction, to individuality, to anger, to love."

Special note from the author:

What is *tsil*? As part of their rituals, Hopi Indians of the Southwest dress as their mythical ancestors. With headdress, mask, and body paint they become the elements of sacred foods, animals, and other gifts from the gods.

The *tsil* is that sacred food, the chile pepper, come to life. The Hopi also represent the ancestors and gods' gifts through the carving of dolls, called katsinas. The Spanish didn't have the *ts* sound in their repertoire, so they changed *tsil* to *chile* and *katsina* to *kachina*.

To pronounce *tsil*, imagine a hissing *t* at the beginning, as in saying *katsina*: (ka·tsin·a). Change the end of the word to say *Katsil*: (ka·tsil). Drop the first syllable and you have—*tsil*.

Each of the five books in this series emphasizes the strong relationship between food and family, yet each explores a somewhat different aspect of what our eating habits have to say about us. In *The Last Chinese Chef*, the return of restaurants after the Cultural Revolution is the breath of freedom, and the banquets prepared for the Olympic competition recognize and honor the traditions of an entire civilization.

The Tummy Trilogy is a series of witty love letters to regional and ethnic cooking, the kinds of treats “real folks” cook and serve their loved ones, and the recipes they hand down (and modify) from generation to generation.

Politics, economics, and science affect our ideas of what we *should* eat to an often confusing degree. *In Defense of Food* combines a fascinating look at how ideas about food have changed in the U.S., often to our detriment, and practical ideas of what we as individuals can do to counteract some of the less than salubrious results.

In reading *A Homemade Life*, we are privy to one family's love of food, cooking, and one another – complete with recipes. *Secrets of the Tsil Café* does the same with a fictional family, but one with clashing and very distinct individual ideas of what and how to cook, eat, and share a meal.

The authors and characters of each selection, however, would undoubtedly agree that much does, in fact, depend on dinner!

The theme “Much Depends on Dinner” was developed by Roxanne Rhoades.



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