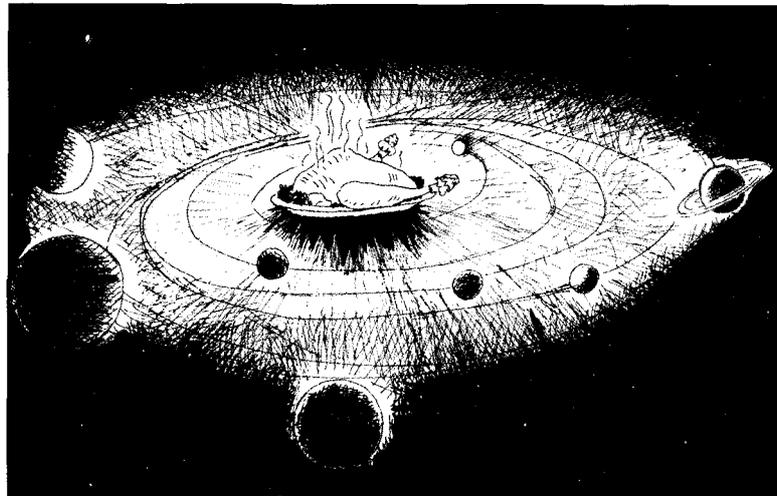


Food Fight

Have It Your Way

by J.O. Tate



H. Ward Street

Is anyone who thinks, as I do, that “dim sum” is Chinese for “damn soon” or that “sushi” is Japanese for “bait” even remotely qualified to write on food? Actually, I often volunteer unsolicited comments, more or less printable, as the case may be. I have noticed that the most thoughtful people I know prefer to talk about food rather than about ideas, and I regard that cultivated shortcoming as a point of wisdom. I think that what might seem to be an excessive preoccupation with food is a political statement of a kind. The politics of food is a register of history and “dialectical materialism,” and we would need a Karl Marx and a Max Weber and a Thorstein Veblen, as well as a Marvin Harris, even to begin to account for it.

Food became, as we passed the hunter-gatherer period, an index of human relations. Ancient societies were organized around food production (as well they should have been), and I enjoy thinking about traces of Chaldean beer, foodstuffs in the tombs of the pharaohs, and the *amphorae* that litter the floor of the Mediterranean. Food has been attached to religion and to magical rituals, as well as to mere self-indulgence. A few of the more notorious Roman emperors liked ice, hand-delivered from the Alps, to cool their drinks, and who can blame them? Capri is, after all, rather warm in August. The *Satyricon* of Petronius, or what is left of it, said all that could be said about the decadence of Rome, and the vulgar feast of the *nouveauriche* ex-slave, Trimalchio, was to inspire F. Scott Fitzgerald

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when he wanted to represent the Roaring Twenties, for he knew that we still live in the shadow of Rome. We can sense in this image of the gross feast a blurring of the distinction between magnanimity and waste and the unity of the political and the gastronomic.

Now, there is a lot to say about geography and climate, about the social stratification of ancient societies, about slavery and war as implied in the organization of agriculture, and so on. But I am not going to say it, because, as a register of politics and as a natural symbol, food itself says everything to us, without any need for explanation. When the prayer says, “Give us this day our daily bread,” we get the picture. Jesus did not neglect to multiply the loaves and the fishes (a particular winner as a miracle, if you ask me), and He presided over the Last Supper, or seder. But skipping ahead 15 or so centuries, we find that, as modernity loomed on the horizon, food was a way of indicating something that can be more easily intuited than explained. Rabelais showed what he meant, rather than asserting it, through the actions and the names of Gargantua and Grangoussier. Shakespeare spoke volumes when Malvolio was rebuked for his haughty puritanism — there would still be cakes and ale, at least for some. The banquet scene (punning on Banquo’s name, or is it the other way around?) says it all about the Macbeths, for if there is no festivity at the feast, then why presume to royalty, or even live? Closer to our own day, Charles Dickens made food central to his vision of community, as when Scrooge finally orders a turkey for the Cratchits. But for Dickens, orality was not without darker and even grotesque implications, as Prof. Harry

Stone has forcefully argued.

But to return to the Bard: It is no wonder that so many want to prove that Shakespeare was not Shakespeare, for his freedom of imagination and relaxed mastery of expression amount to an overwhelming embarrassment. How easily he represents the ignobility of Claudius, with his phony toasting and loud cannonshots. The poisoned wine in the last scene of *Hamlet* is even more offensive to our sense of what is right than the unbated and poisoned foil. Perhaps most of all in *Antony and Cleopatra*, Shakespeare projects a vision of the Mediterranean world in which we see a prophecy of our own inherited cultural split. The world of fecundity and pleasure is in the East and South, in the oldest civilization on those shores. The new bureaucratic puritanism of the North and West is represented by the passionless, humorless Octavius. Again and again, as in *Twelfth Night* and *Henry IV*, Shakespeare rings the changes on Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant. The future is with the ants, of course, but the departing glory is in the music and the pleasure-loving ways of the grasshopper. Shakespeare's outrageous recreations of the past are even better as prophecies of the future, as the ultimate politics of food plays itself out in our time. "What sport tonight?" asks Antony—a finer question, even in his bibulous and degraded state, than "What's on TV?"

Shakespeare sensed the divided future that was forming. The split would take the form of a new dichotomy, between the South and East—embodied by the Catholic cultures of Italy, France, and Spain—and the North and West of the Protestant cultures of Germany, England, Scotland, and Scandinavia. Here is where the politics of food works as an effective indicator. Would you rather eat in Genoa or perhaps in Bordeaux, or would you rather eat in Glasgow or even in Uppsala? Even to ask this question is to answer it, and that in itself shows a certain dissociation of sensibility. We have the values of Presbyterian lawyers but prefer the tastes of Catholic artisans. This is the most interesting or subtle of cultural-culinary clashes, but it is not the most important of food fights. I only wish it were.

I have not altogether meant to imply by the phrase "food fight" the image of John Belushi in *Animal House*, as he trashes the cafeteria. I have in mind numerous other struggles. There is the Marxist approach, for example, which reductively would ask something like this: In each food-consuming encounter, who is doing the work, and who is doing the eating? Who is in control of the means of production? Such questions are enlightening to consider in these, our strange days, as we live *la vida loca*.

We live in a bizarre situation, in which the good and the bad are strangely mixed. The fast-food joint is across the street from the pseudo-French restaurant. The third-rate pizzeria in the suburban strip mall is next-door to the bagel joint. In short, there has been, in the last 40 years, an explosion of multi-cultural services. The spectra of food have gone from craze to craze. At the top, there has been enlightenment: Julia Child, James Beard, Paul Prudhomme, Irene Kuo, and others have led Americans to renewed, or just plain new, appreciation of fine food from around the world. At the same time, there has been a tremendous increase in the amount and the availability of imported items, luxury goods, and what have you, so that you can cook or enjoy at home things that were once only names in books. But the blessing of increased sophistication has not been unmixed, for confusion and snobbery go with it, and it is hard to know which is worse. All that is on one side.

On the other is the virtual disappearance of farming in this country, replaced by corporate agribusiness. What were formerly and quaintly known as "tomatoes" and "peaches" now resemble, in our freezing supermarkets, major-league baseballs. Going shopping for fruits and vegetables can be a grim business in America today. But if you get off the plane in Rome in July, just follow your nose. The sumptuous odors of *ripe* (an archaic word meaning "ripe") peaches and apricots and plums make themselves known to you soon enough, and are, in themselves, from 50 yards away, a virtually erotic experience. *Santa Cleopatra!* Back stateside, you realize that produce picked hard and green rots before it ripens, as America itself has done. ("By their fruits ye shall know them.") Renewed efforts are required for finding the good stuff or growing it yourself. ("Do I dare to eat a peach?") Ripeness is all.

Peace and quiet and good companionship are as much of happiness as we can hope for in this vale of Pop Tarts, and teaching the young to appreciate the beauties of the table is one of the best things we can ever do.

Meanwhile, of course, there have been other developments. As Americans have accepted that all human needs must be adjusted to the advantage of big business in general and automobiles in particular, there has been a spectacular metastasis of fast food. Now, the point about fast food is not so much that it is *bad*—though, of course, it is that—but that it is *fast*. You are supposed to consume it more or less standing up or, if seated, to the tune of throbbing pop music. And this is the "fight" in "food fight": the struggle to avoid being dominated by others who want to take your money for giving you a hard time. You have had a good time, not a bad one, bomp bomp bomp, as loudness insists. And if, at this point, you do not fight, then you have given up, and you have been had. For everything that is anything in the experience of food, everything worth savoring and enjoying with others, has been destroyed in the totalitarian environment of fast food. In the fast lane, we can concede the need and even the appeal to the young, but it is no wonder that fast food has caused America to be despised, and rightly so. What is worse is that the ubiquity of recorded noise has been accepted in places where actual human beings would go, as in restaurants.

The excessive gap between street food and effete food—the stretch between the five-dollar lunch and the \$500 dinner, as we find it in Manhattan, for example—is an illustration of everything that is wrong with this country. "Only connect"—but there is no identifiable American cuisine anymore, or, if there is, it is the fodder of discredited natives. What a shame that the internationally minded have persuaded us to believe that there was no good food in this country until it was filled with immigrants and dot-com millionaires. Those with memo-

ries or any connection to the hinterland know what I am talking about.

But there are so many other aspects of the Eternal Struggle—feminism, for example. As an attack on the family and on human relations and particularly on women, it has been an aggression in the eternal food fight. “Labor-saving devices” and the requirement for two incomes to pay the taxes and maintain the cash flow have pretty much eliminated “dinner” (more properly known as “supper”) from family life. Well, let it go. We need more time to watch the propaganda and the commercials on television, anyway. “Frozen food” (an interesting phrase) zaps nicely in the microwave, so what is the problem?

I seem to remember that all the trouble started with Fourier, who wanted to liberate women from housework by stuffing everybody in “phalanxes” (what we call “apartment houses”), with a communal kitchen downstairs. Fourier has conquered, not through socialism or communism, but under the aegis of consumer capitalism. The most shocking thing about the whole matter is that Fourier was French. He is not my favorite kind of Frenchman—he is too much in the Robespierre or Saint-Simon mold. I like much better Brillat-Savarin, who declared quite rightly that “The discovery of a new dish does more for human happiness than the discovery of a star.” We can hardly imagine Brillat-Savarin, author of *La Physiologie du Goût* (1825), flipping burgers in the basement of some Soviet-style dormitory, though that is precisely what Fourier did imagine. French cuisine is still the most refined in the world, and that is a matter of demonstrable truth, not mere opinion. We are often provoked in America today, as inept poseurs impose themselves upon us, to remember the words of the Rev. Laurence Sterne: “They order, said I, this matter better in France.” They still do, but though that makes for what Philip Marlowe once called a “jazzy weekend,” such cannot be the answer to our particular difficulties; for in France, the food fight is well defined, and in America, it is not.

Those particular problems are inherent in our own culture and in our own follies, and we would do well to remember that those came—and come—from within, not from without. Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom I choose to blame for most of our cultural perversions, once declared that “A man is fed, not that he may be fed, but that he may work.” Old Waldo was exactly wrong, as usual. He should have said something like this: “A man works so that he may be fed. Then he takes a nap so that he may be fed yet once more.” But Waldo cannot be revised or corrected—he should, rather, be erased, for his individualist vision is incorrigible. There is no such thing as a man or a woman eating alone, or at least there should not be. Where are family and friends in this vision—watching reruns of *Sex and the City*? I think I will not be alone in asserting that, when we remember particular foods, we are recalling the circumstances in which we ate them, and with whom. We remember not so much the food as the occasion—the good times.

I remember distinctly some oxtail soup and *wiener schnitzel* at a rustic place in the Moselle valley of West Germany in 1954, and two others remember it as well. But do not ask me for the name of the place, because I will not tell. We must have had a good time there, and more than once. And I remember other such occasions, in which I learned something about the possibilities of human happiness on this side of the cemetery, in a mode in which recipes are not the point. I believe we all have memories like these, and the legitimate need for new opportunities for creating such memories. It is the quality of the expe-

rience, not the caliber of the food, that makes the difference. A humble encounter (chili slaw dog, Brazier Burger/Dairy Queen) can be the vehicle of a revelation, and let me point out that, for revelations, reservations are not accepted.

Some of my fondest culinary memories feature Italian food, both on this side of the pond and the other. In all cases, I remember well where and when, and I must frankly add that there was, in all of these memories, an element of cerebral excitement or elevation. I am not talking about Ellio’s Frozen Pizza, for heaven’s sake, but about the construction and the consumption of the simplest and the best pastas, surrounded by the sound of popping corks, continual professorial references to history and to the nuances of glorious regional cultures, and even a subdued background of Bellini and Donizetti. Such moments may be among the best of a lifetime—or at least of mine. And we could all mention many others, and maybe we should.

But I think we are at the point of defining the food fight, and that battle is not the struggle for a biological sufficiency of calories and vitamins in order to survive. The food fight is the struggle to maintain and to create moments for happiness—the rightful privilege to be exempt, at least sometimes, from imposition, noise, and agitprop. The food fight can mean throwing down your napkin and walking out when some servant of indeterminate sex announces, “My name is Bruce, and I’ll be your waitperson tonight.” The food fight can mean leaving a dinner party when the conversation becomes Beltway blather. The food fight can mean summoning the manager of some freezing supermarket and demanding to know the meaning of the latest outrage. The food fight may mean recalling how Don Corleone in *The Godfather* got shot while carefully selecting fruit to take home, or remembering how to make sauce when you go to the mattresses, or not forgetting the cannoli. So the food fight can mean driving 30 miles one way to obtain seasonal fruits and vegetables, or the food fight can mean realizing that “organic” food may also be genetically modified. Everyone fights the food fight every day, and too many people are on the wrong side.

But the food fight has an end, and that end is not to fight. Peace and quiet and good companionship are as much of happiness as we can hope for in this vale of Pop Tarts, and teaching the young to appreciate the beauties of the table is one of the best things we can ever do, for the young are endlessly instructed by the powers today that the table—and the home—is an oppression. The opposite is true. The invasion of the table and the usurpation of the home is the oppression foisted upon us by gross ideology that is broadcast by every vibration of our environment. Besides, children do not like to be nagged about their table manners perhaps because they need to be, but good manners are one of the noblest of human refinements. We recognize good manners exactly when we do not notice them, and we value our best friends for letting us be in a mutually constituted relation with them. And that means, sooner or later, eating with them in harmony.

Finally, let me pose a riddle as it was posed to me by an unlikely source of insight or humor: a Marxist professor who has a sailboat and a sports car and his share of appreciation of the amenities. He asked me, “What did the Buddhist say at the hot dog stand?” “I give up,” was all I could reply. With a wink, he told me the answer—and the last word on the food fight: “Make me one with everything.”

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Southern Gastronomical Unity

We'll Rally Round the Grits

by William Murchison



Why don't y'all try to guess—go ahead—which American region, in its unofficial anthem, celebrates food. Answer? The South. Permit me, Suh:

Dar's buckwheat cakes and Injun batter,
Makes you fat or a little fatter,
Look away! Look, away! Look away! Dixieland.

You see? We have been in the eating business a long time down here, and even if the author of the song in question, one Daniel D. Emmett, was a damyankee, he was not a totally unenlightened one. He sensed somehow or other what mattered in Dixieland. Food mattered then and matters now. All kinds of food, from buckwheat cakes to black-eyed peas, with stops along the way for ham hocks, cream gravy, collard greens, oysters, field corn, jambalaya, fried chicken, catfish, barbecue, pot liquor, hot buttered biscuits, rice, Tabasco sauce, spareribs, hush puppies, and she-crab soup. To imagine even a celestial portion of it is to fill the nostrils with imaginary aromas and the eyes with genuine tears. Eat away! Eat away!

Living anywhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line means eating particular things particularly well. At least that was our universal experience up to the advent of imports like the Big Mac and take-out Szechwan noodles. Even these distinctly non-Dixie products we have, to some extent, blended into our rituals. Southerners are famously adaptive. We have gone so far, if you please, as to appropriate Sauteed Escargot and Duck in Toasted Garlic Red Wine Sauce with Butternut Squash, Brie Tart, and Tarragon Horseradish Drizzle.

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But I was speaking of ritual. Food is ritual everywhere, no doubt, in some sense or another. Southerners are not the sole proprietors. But oh, how we relish it at our table. (Observe the sly, typically Southern insertion of a food trope—"relish"—in this context.)

Ritual is the Way Things Are Done. It is a conservative instinct. We do things in a certain way because that is the way we do things—always making room for marginal improvements, à la Edmund Burke. There is piety in this manner of leading life. Piety is a Southern speciality, like grits. It would have been unnatural had feelings of reverence been chased out of the kitchen with a large rolling pin. They never were.

It started with the cultural setting, though Southerners would hardly have spoken in such a high-toned-sociology-seminar sort of way. Food in the South is/was for the gathered—the nuclear family first of all, then the cousins and aunts, then the "club," then—well, you take it from there, wide as you care to set the markers.

Edna Lewis, the cookbook author and specialist in Southern cooking, writes of food as the "bond" of her onetime rural and black community in Virginia—"gathering wild strawberries, canning, rendering lard, finding walnuts, picking persimmons, making fruitcake." It was what the people of Freetown did together.

Another small example: the ritual, practiced in my wife's family a few decades ago, of the Day After Christmas Gumbo. This dish was produced by a relatively tight circle in a large extended family in Galveston: German and Creole predominantly, by way of southern Louisiana and like exotic venues. Into an immense blue-and-white Granitewear pot, somewhere around midday, went pretty much everything left over from Christmas dinner, along with appropriate seasonings. Membership cre-