

IS THERE SUCH A THING as a perfect food? A perfect meal? A perfect dining experience? And if so, what would it be like? Would it be a dream come true, would it exceed expectations, or would it be a disappointment because the reality could not match the desire?

For something that ultimately satisfies the most basic of biological needs, food has a curious relationship to notions of perfection, most notably beliefs about what constitutes an ideal or even perfect world. For far too many people around the world struggling with food insecurity, it is basic access to food and water that would be the ideal. For those with stable access to foods, however, often ideals of perfection are expressed through differential values associated with particular foods or the ways in which foods are produced, presented, and consumed.

Food's place within utopian visions was the theme of the 21st Symposium of Australian Gastronomy, which was held in Melbourne in early December 2016. Food scholars, writers, practitioners, and gastronomes of all sorts gathered from around the world to discuss and experiment with different visions of what might constitute a food utopia. Inspired by Thomas More's *Utopia*, published five hundred years ago, symposium participants drew connections between More's idealistic visions with those of other utopian thinkers and activists, such as Charles Fourier's ideas about gastroso-phy, Soviet-era socialist planners who imagined possibilities for liberation through communal dining, NASA scientists who dreamed of what farms and gardens might look like in space colonies of the future, and even contemporary scientists working in the fields of synthetic biology and hospitality management to create new technologically perfect foods and food experiences. Yet despite the prevailing sentiment of progress and improvement embedded in many utopian dreams, the realities are often far from ideal, and may, in fact, introduce new problems—a reminder compellingly presented by Darra Goldstein, the founder and previous editor of *Gastronomica*, in her brilliant keynote lecture about the myths of abundance promised by early Soviet politicians and socialist activists.

What, then, makes food such a persistent target of perfectability efforts? Why does food occupy such a central position within utopian projects, whether through the cultivation of edible greenspaces in unexpected places, the transformation of meals into escapist art, or efforts to create foods that can alleviate a whole host of social, environmental, and economic problems? Even if perfection is attainable, what would it be like to live in a perfect world? Would it be desirable and pleasurable, or might it become mundane and boring?

Thinking through the idealisms inherent in food activities seems an especially intriguing proposition at the beginning of a new year, as people in many parts of the world are still clinging to New Year's resolutions aimed at improving, or at least

changing, their daily lives, with food often playing a starring role in those efforts—i.e., dieting!

In different ways, each of the contributions to this issue addresses themes of idealism and perfection, with the various cases presented here illustrating clearly that utopian dreams are never singular and always contain internal conflicts and paradoxes.

The first piece is a roundtable discussion among four scholars with recently published books about immigrant labor and politics in the U.S. food system. Through careful case studies of the work of immigrants, much of it otherwise hidden from view, in plants, slaughterhouses, and farms, Margaret Gray, Sarah Horton, Vanesa Ribas, and Angela Stuesse think through the current challenges facing America's food workers—legal, economic, and health-related, among others—and possibilities for improving these circumstances. A key concern for each of these authors is the ethical dimension of food labor and how producers and consumers can work together to create a more just food system.

Julie Guthman also tackles questions about ethical labor and food but from a very different angle—that of young, university-educated farmworkers who valorize unpaid work on organic farms but rarely consider the larger implications of this work, especially the impact of voluntarism on waged labor. By juxtaposing elite volunteer farmworkers against migrant farmworkers, Guthman provokes a necessary, yet uncomfortable, conversation about privilege, hegemony, and the distances that exist within ideals of solidarity.

Visions and practices of the ideal person and the ideal society inhabited by that ideal person come through clearly in the articles by Chin Jou and Emily Contois. Jou provides a compelling study of early twentieth-century American dietary critiques, most notably how anxieties about food expressed larger concerns about modernity and America's future. Through careful documentation of food prescriptions and proscriptions from the early 1900s, Jou shows that food knowledge and advice often contained nostalgic reminiscences of past food cultures that were presumed to be better than those of the present moment. As Jou documents, this move to remember the past as better than the present is one that has been repeated throughout the last century and is part of contemporary food anxieties as well. Whether the past was in fact better than the present is debatable, but that back-and-forth reflection is part of larger societal fears about the dangers of modernity and the future. Moving directly to the present day in her analysis of how *Weight Watchers* creates and promotes dieting programs for men and women, Contois focuses on another set of issues relating to danger and the need for improvement as a path forward. By unpacking the gendered ideals of “feminine” and “masculine” that are encoded in different *Weight Watchers* weight-loss programs, Contois reveals how expectations about who can lose weight more easily reinforces values of what constitutes an ideal body, which in turn promotes ideals about the possibilities for personal transformation and emancipation.

Themes of anxiety and societies' efforts to respond to perceived concerns with heritage, identity, and politics link the articles by Andrew Tam and Carolyn Phillips. Tam takes us inside the culture of hawker food in Singapore and examines how the relocation of food hawkers from city streets to centralized food centers marked a reclassification of hawker food from a social problem to a material and edible expression of Singapore's multiculturalism. Tam shows that as hawker food has achieved greater recognition and become formalized as a viable and desirable cuisine, it has also become a potent symbol of the country's tensions between cultural distinction and democracy. Carolyn Phillips moves us geographically to China to explore how

another now-ubiquitous food experience—dim sum—emerged out of Cantonese teahouse culture in the late nineteenth century as part of a larger societal transformation marked by migration and multiculturalism. Through incredibly detailed and mouthwatering accounts of Cantonese dim sum, Phillips presents a compelling story of how these small dishes became bite-sized histories of China’s experiences with migration, foreign influence, and journey from dynastic rule besieged by colonial interests to modern geopolitical power.

Lastly, in a stunning photo-essay of the Friday farmers’ market in Oakland, California, David Bacon shows the beauties and possibilities of multiculturalism that can occur in small places that only appear for a brief moment every week. As Bacon’s images illuminate, the ideal utopia may be ephemeral, which makes its power even more appealing and valuable.

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