

Feeding the Foodoir: Hunger Artistry

The Proust madeleine phenomenon is now as firmly established in folklore as Newton's apple or Watt's steam kettle. The man ate a tea biscuit, the taste evoked memories, he wrote a book. This is capable of expression by the formula TMB, for Taste > Memory > Book.

—A. J. Liebling, *Between Meals*

Chick Lit + Chicken Lit?

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* has been breezy about the genre we have come to call *the foodoir*. Wrote reviewer Christine Muhlke in 2009, “Done well, memoirs about love and food go together like steak and martinis”; thus, foodoirs have “become a successful subset” of autobiography, “one part chick lit mixed with one part chicken lit” (Muhlke 2009: BR30). Her remark evokes recipe blogs, culinary comedies, cookie cutter romances, or—at best—soulful tales of transformation in the *Eat Pray Love* mode. And it does seem, lately, that culinary memoirs and related gastronomic tracts proliferate like cupcakes on bookstore shelves that used to be crammed with bodice rippers. Now even highbrow journalists confess to lying in bed dog-eared the pages of cookbooks (Adam Gopnik) and novelists take time off from plotting story lines to discourse on garden plots, dig into memories of dinners past, or fulminate about meats and fruits that ought to be forbidden (Barbara Kingsolver, Jonathan Safran Foer). In recent years, indeed, “food porn” or “gastro-porn” has come to be a label for the over-the-top luscious images and imaginings of meals ranging from sensual starters to sexy desserts featured in movies, magazines, videos—and even art galleries. No wonder the term “foodoir” echoes “boudoir,” as if kitchen and bedroom had merged in a fantasy collaboratively concocted by Julia Child, Doctor Ruth, Quentin Tarantino, and maybe even the Marquis de Sade. Is food the new sex, as a few commentators have claimed, and are “foodoirs”

versions of the old *True Confessions* that used to rivet hordes of high school girls?

In some cases this may well be true: cozy foodoirs, like mass-market recipe novels, come in bakers’ dozens. And yet the strongest of these works, especially the pioneering writings in the form, remind us that what is good to eat is also good to think, as Lévi-Strauss so long ago declared. Apart from dedicated gastronomes like Grimod de la Reynière, Brillat Savarin, and Alexandre Dumas, however, few writers have “thought” eating as intensively and extensively as twentieth- and twenty-first-century culinary autobiographers. M. F. K. Fisher’s *The Gastronomical Me*, for instance, arguably *the* paradigmatic twentieth-century work of this sort, is primarily a coming-of-age story but it is also a cultural history, a culinary polemic, a first-person tale of love and death—and thus a grief memoir—and even an informal cookbook. Similarly, “foodoirs,” ranging from Judith Moore’s *Never Eat Your Heart Out* and *Fat Girl* to Betty Fussell’s *My Kitchen Wars* and Ruth Reichl’s *Tender at the Bone*, gain intensity from a seamless melding of genres (Fisher 2002: 4–5).

As a commentator on her own work, Fisher famously stressed love, warmth, nourishment, and satisfied desire, noting in her preface to *The Gastronomical Me* that when “I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it [and also of] the wilder, more insistent hungers.” Yet this passage is quickly followed by a darker comment: “*We must eat*. If, in the face of *that dread fact*, we can find other nourishment and tolerance and compassion for it, we’ll be no less full of human dignity” (emphasis added) (Fisher 1943: ix). Ultimately, for Fisher the “dread fact” of eating is the ontological fact of primal hunger and of the food chain in which we too are mortal links, dining on mortality and in the end destined to become dinner ourselves, whether for worms or flames or vultures. Yet at the same time, in the face of the existential anxiety associated with food—*will I have enough to eat? will I have anything to eat? even, must I or can I eat?*—another “fact” balances the truth of dread, the voluptuous fact of eating: *I have eaten well and fully*, meaning not only, *I have*

survived but I have survived with pleasure! At its strongest, the food memoir does celebrate the deliciousness of survival, but sets that delight against the dread it also represents. Its flavors are sweet *and* sour, salt *and* bitter.

In its confrontation of such existential anxiety, the culinary memoir is often, then, a whole less lighthearted and far more transgressive than “chick lit” or “chicken lit.” Indeed, even meditating on food as a serious subject (what is good to eat is good to *think*) was once aesthetically transgressive. As Fisher noted, it wasn’t even proper to discuss the menu at the early twentieth-century American table. For the kitchen after all—whether inhabited by servants or (in the working classes) wives and mothers—wasn’t a place to contemplate in polite society. But when hired cooks metamorphosed into *home* cooks, food writing came out of the kitchen and the culinary memoir moved into the library. That cultural icon *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was intended, remember, for the *servantless* American cook—who might also be an ambitious writer. Fisher herself really wanted to be a novelist and indeed published a considerable body of prose fiction, but in a culture where it had become increasingly proper, and even fascinating, to discuss the menu, she entered the pantheon of American literature as one of the literary mothers of the powerful contemporary foodoir.

A Portrait of the Transcendental Gastronomer as a Young Woman

“Now I am going to write a book,” explained the young Mary Frances Kennedy (M. F. K.) Fisher in the preface to her early *Serve It Forth* (1937), and “It will be about eating and about what to eat and about people who eat. . . . Brillat-Savarin will haunt it, and very probably show himself in an inevitable aphorism. *The Settlement Cook Book* and Paul Reboux will peer shyly and with little recognition at their ancestors *The Harleian Manuscript* and Mrs. Glasse and Carême and Roselli. And people I know will talk a little and eat more.” Despite this intelligent account of cultural roots, however, *Serve It Forth*, especially as part of the sequence later titled *The Art of Eating*, is more about Fisher herself and her coming to culinary consciousness—indeed, her aesthetic development or *Bildung*—than it is about Brillat-Savarin, *The Settlement Cook Book*, or gastronomic gossip (Fisher 2002: 5).

To begin with, in a chapter about childhood tellingly titled “When a *Man* Is Small” (emphasis added), Fisher assumes that the gastronomic subject is male—a little boy who “loves and hates food” with special “ferocity,” and who can’t understand his younger sister’s calm hoarding of

cookies. Suddenly, though, in the midst of this portrait of a young man Fisher segues into self-revelation: a tale of the sophistication with which, as a teenager on dates, she would order “a German pancake with hot applesauce and sweet butter” while murmuring nonchalantly “Salted butter ruins the flavor” to “my Tommy or Jimmy.” That this soon-to-be acolyte of Brillat-Savarin is exceptional among women becomes even clearer a few chapters later, when she remarks that “cooking in itself is, for most women, a question less of vocation than of necessity. *They* are not called to the kitchen by the divine inner voice of [an] Escoffier” but “by the piping of *their* husbands’ empty stomachs,” so they “cook doggedly, desperately, more often than not with a cumulative if uninspired skill” (emphasis added) (ibid.: 6–7, 19).

Fisher’s implicit identification with the masculine continues intermittently throughout *Serve It Forth*. After, for instance, confessing that for “my own meals I like simplicity above all,” she adds that “I do not agree with the Greeks and Romans that *women* should be reserved for the end of a meal and *served* with the final wines and music” (emphasis added). The speaker of this passage might as well be a middle-aged male gastronome—Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, for instance, or Alexandre Laurent Grimod de la Reynière—while “women” might as well be a species of *petits fours*. Yet by the time Fisher wrote *The Gastronomical Me*, she was portraying herself not only as a “predominantly female” diner but a diner who (despite any male identification) is indisputably a *femme fatale*. In one of her most notable disquisitions on dining alone, she revels in her own voluptuous union of culinary intelligence with sexual sophistication, even while she continues to define herself as an *exceptional* woman (ibid.: 6–7, 19).¹

I quote the passage below at length because it is one of her major self-portraits and arguably a culminating moment in this memoir. “More often than not people who see me on trains and in ships, or in restaurants, feel a kind of resentment of me since I taught myself to enjoy being alone,” she declares.

Women are puzzled, which they hate to be, and jealous of the way I am served, with such agreeable courtesy, and of what I am eating and drinking, which is almost never the sort of thing they order for themselves. And men are puzzled too, in a more personal way. I anger them as males.

I am sorry. I do not like to do that, or puzzle the women either. But if I must be alone, I refuse to be alone as if it were something weak and distasteful, like convalescence. Men see me eating in public, and I look as if I “knew my way around”; and yet I make it plain that I know my ways around without them, and that upsets them.

I know what I want, and I usually get it because I am adaptable to locales. I order meals that are more typically masculine than feminine, if

feminine means whipped-cream-and-cherries. I like good wines, or good drinkin'-likka, and beers and ales. I like waiters; I think the woman who said that waiters are much nicer than people was right, and quite often waitresses are too. So they are always nice to me, which is a sure way to annoy other diners whose soup, quite often, they would like to spit in.

And all these reasons, and probably a thousand others, like the way I wear my hair and what shade my lipstick is, make people look strangely at me, resentfully with a kind of hurt bafflement, when I dine alone. (Fisher 1943: 190–91)

Self-possessed, seductive, ready to *épater les bourgeois*, the gastronome we encounter in this passage might be a modernist heroine. (Is she Brett Ashley? Is she Gudrun Brangwen?) Certainly she is in some sense both a literary character and almost a cinematic *auteur*—with considerable *hauteur*. Though she may be projecting her wish for admiration onto those around her, she claims to be sure she knows how people react to her: both sexes are puzzled or resentful, except for the waiters and waitresses who respect her *connoisseurship*, even while the audience that observes her (and she is clearly onstage) is transfixed by her glamour. She pities them (she is “sorry” that she baffles them) yet she unhesitatingly enacts her experience of dining for them, and at the same time *for herself*: she isn’t just a poet of the appetites, she’s a *performer* of the appetites. And all these qualities are hers perhaps primarily because she has *taught herself* to eat alone in restaurants (“slowly, voluptuously, and with independence”), one of the most problematic social acts in a world of public eating spaces not usually so masterfully conquered by women on their own.

Cultural critics have long remarked that restaurants are in some sense theatrical arenas, with meals at upscale venues a favored form of bourgeois entertainment, in which diners perform not only for their own tablemates but also for others in the room, even the servers and the *maitre de*. But, as many commentators have also noted, most people—quite a few men and almost all women—find eating alone in public difficult. Even solitary dining in private feels like a “stigmatized behavior because,” notes one sociologist, “it defies the [communal] expectations we have of eating” and is even “thought of as an unfortunate activity of the social outcast.” Adds this writer, “When I spoke with friends, family, and colleagues about this topic, the overwhelming response was one of embarrassment, as if we were discussing their masturbation rituals. And who wants to admit they’re having it, food or sex, alone?” In the theatrical arena of the restaurant, the solo diner is vulnerable to a kind of voyeurism that verges on the “predatory” (Lukanuski 1998: 116, 119).

Clearly Fisher is intensely conscious of the problems implicit in gastronomical solitude. She declares, after all, with considerable satisfaction that she “baffles,” “hurts,” or

“puzzles” observers of both sexes even while admitting that “I *taught* myself to enjoy being alone” and conceding further that “if I *must* be alone, I refuse to be alone as if it were something weak and distasteful, like convalescence.” Yet it’s plain too, from the pleasure she quite literally exhibits in “slowly, voluptuously” dining among an admiring circle of waiters and waitresses, that she imagines the arena of the restaurant as a stage for a bravura one-woman show, with the servers as walk-ons and the other diners as puzzled audience. Because she wears her hair a certain way, and her lipstick is a certain shade—because she is properly coiffed and literally as well as figuratively *made up*—she has herself become a spectacle, a star of the art of eating (Fisher 1943: 190).

The erotic flavor of Fisher’s gastronomic mastery is illuminated by a passing anecdote she relates with considerable gusto in *Consider the Oyster*, a book her biographer says she wrote to amuse and distract her second husband, Dillwyn Parrish, when he was dying. Quoting the French poet-gourmet Jean-Louis Vaudoyer, she notes that in his *Éloge de la Gourmandise* he “speaks of a woman he once watched eat something especially delicious. She savored her enjoyment with a carefully sensuous slowness, and then she sighed, as it came to its inevitable end, ‘Ah . . . what a pity that I do not have little taste-buds clear to the bottom of my stomach!’” To a curious prefiguration of the rearranged anatomy of pleasure that is the premise of *Deep Throat*, this little tale adds subtler thrills of voyeurism and exhibitionism. The food writer watches the diner while the diner, eating with careful sensuousness, watches him watching her and watches, too, her own performance (Fisher 1988: 181).

Most of Fisher’s memoiristic writings, but especially *The Gastronomic Me*, are narrated by a culinary celebrity even more skilled at enacting her role than Vaudoyer’s female gourmet, and they are marketed—with their glamour-girl portraits of the author—as seductive performances on paper of her voluptuously tough, even hard-boiled, persona as a transcendental gastronome: “I know what I want, and I usually get it because I am adaptable to locales. I order meals that are more typically masculine than feminine, if feminine means whipped-cream-and-cherries. I like good wines, or good drinkin'-likka, and beers and ales.” That the tone here is Hemingwayesque isn’t surprising, given Fisher’s disclosure that she had been “more than once bolstered in [her] timid twenties” by an “early Hemingway phrase”: “Never be daunted in public” (Fisher 1943: 190). Her pose and poise as Hemingway heroine is certified, too, by the story of Cesar, the misogynistic but lascivious Spanish butcher, with which she concludes *Serve It Forth*. As she and her then husband Al Fisher feast on “a massive filet of beef” and “plenty of good wine,”



FIGURE 1: *Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher: cover photo, 1943.*

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Cesar put down his knife and fork.

“She likes it, she likes good food!” he said wonderingly, to Al. “She cannot be a real woman!”

After that things were very pleasant. (Fisher 2002: 119)

Yet even while Fisher records such triumphs with keen satisfaction, we learn that they are hard-won. Most of her memoirs, but again especially *The Gastronomical Me*, are records of the pressures that shaped this charismatic speaker as she learned how to come to terms with the “dread fact” of eating. In some of her writings, to be sure, Fisher portrays herself as having had a kind of Frank Capra childhood in the Southern California small town of Whittier—bicycling among orange groves, close to her siblings and her honorary Aunt Gwen, and beloved by parents who were “young and beautiful and intelligent” (Fisher 2004: 63). But as a culinary narrative *The Gastronomical Me* is rich with tension, beginning in a kitchen that is at first presided over by a puritanical grandmother and then by a magnificent cook who turns out to be a madwoman.

“The first thing I remember tasting and then wanting to taste again,” the author rather surprisingly confides, was “the grayish-pink fuzz my grandmother”—a “grim woman”—“skimmed from a spitting kettle of strawberry jam. I suppose I was about four.” Weird though sugary, this primordial “fuzz” from a “spitting” pot out of a fairy tale may be nicer than raw potato—and it’s followed in the next chapter by a more prepossessing peach pie Kennedy père offers his two little daughters—but still, a conventional “poet of the appetites” would be more likely to begin her memoir with peaches and cream than with blurry fuzz. Then both fuzz and pie are succeeded by the advent of Ora, a self-contained woman who

cooks “in a kind of ecstasy” and whose savory foods Grandmother hates, especially because they inspire excited (and improper) commentary from the children (Fisher 1943: 3).

“I was very young,” Fisher explains, “but I can remember observing . . . that meat hashed with a knife is better than meat mauled in a food-chopper; that freshly minced herbs make almost any good thing better”—and, in short, “that most of my observations were connected in some way with Ora’s knife.” But of course the cook’s knife is always potentially a weapon, even while it is a tool that produces delicacies. Thus, one day, quite unexpectedly, “Ora cut her [elderly mother] into several neat pieces,” then “ripped a tent thoroughly to ribbons,” then “cut her wrists and her own throat, expertly. The police told Father there wasn’t a scratch or a nick in the knife.” (ibid.: 11–13).

Food and food ways prove, this early in Fisher’s memoir, to involve strangeness (fuzz) and, worse still, violence. Yet in the eagerness of appetite, the writer and her sister are, at least on the surface, unfazed, if slightly depressed. “The way of dying was of only passing interest to us at our ages, but our inevitable return to ordinary sensible plain food was something to regret,” confesses Fisher, adding rather mysteriously, “We were helpless then, but we both learned from mad Ora, and *now we know what to do about it, because of her*” (emphasis added)—know, presumably, how to wield a chef’s knife without unleashing its dread powers, but know, too, how dreadful its powers can be. And that even when the cook eschews a knife she has the power to harm becomes clear enough in the next chapter of *The Gastronomical Me*. Here Fisher insists that the “first thing I cooked was pure poison”: a pudding (“a little round white shuddering milky thing”) that she decorated with blackberries, to which her mother was ferociously allergic. And the next dish she prepared was equally deadly: a plate of excessively curried “Hindu eggs” so spicy that she and her sister, “with the desperate intuition of burned animals,” immediately raced to fill their scorched mouths with soothing mineral oil (ibid.: 13–15).

Fisher’s portrayal of her childhood cuisine as sometimes problematic—from the strictures of an ascetic grandmother to the deeds of a mad cook to the unpleasant experiments of a feckless schoolgirl—is central to her culinary–literary enterprise at its most successful. For whether as public performance or private experience, dining is always a source of some danger as well as carefully cultivated delight in this writer’s imaginative world. And for these reasons it is often associated, as well, with both eroticism and gamesmanship. One of the most dramatic episodes in *The Gastronomical Me* marks the young Mary Frances’s initiation into sexuality—and specifically lesbian desire—by counterpointing her first

swallow of a raw oyster, her first experience as a “belle of the ball” at a girls’ school Christmas dance (where two older girls fight to partner her), and her first confrontation with same-sex love gone wrong in the person of the school’s weeping housekeeper and the fat nurse (dressed up as Santa Claus) whom the superficially straitlaced housekeeper adores. Noting, “I stood staring . . . like a paralyzed rabbit. I was terrified [of] the costumed nurse, and of Mrs. Cheever so hideously weeping and of all old women,” the writer confesses in a moment of mingled erotic nostalgia and revulsion. “If I could still taste my first oyster, if my tongue still felt fresh and excited, it was perhaps too bad. Although things are different now, I hoped then, suddenly and violently, that I would never see one again” (ibid.: 28–30).

Less dramatic but equally telling is an episode in which the emerging gastronome forces herself to order from a menu properly as she travels across the country—and toward adulthood—with a sophisticated uncle: “I looked at my menu, really looked with all my brain, for the first time. ‘Just a minute please,’ I said, very calmly [and] stayed quite cool, like a surgeon when he begins an operation, or maybe a chess player opening a tournament.” And “never since then have I let myself say, or even think ‘Oh, anything,’ about a meal, even if I had to eat it alone, with death in the house or in my heart” (emphasis added). Just as “My First Oyster” is an early instance of dining as erotic theater, so this seemingly minor anecdote about the interpretation of menus is a foreshadowing of what was to become dining as performance, even gamesmanship (ibid.: 34–35).

But as *The Gastronomical Me* moves toward its sorrowful last course, the erotic tension becomes stranger—sometimes sadomasochistic—and intensifies. Following the “Sea Change” of her first marriage and first trip to Europe, the narrator recounts culinary initiations that are often paralleled by sexual, or more generally moral, transformations of innocence into experience. In the first Dijonnais pension where she and her husband settle after their journey to France, they encounter the monstrous proto-Nazi Klorr—“the most rat-like human I have ever seen”—whose prediction of a “Uranic” renaissance in Germany marks him as an acolyte of the misogynistic and anti-Semitic Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger, a notorious theorist of both Aryan superiority and “the third sex.” In a household already marked by hostile dynamics—a warring couple, an effeminate stepson—Klorr is passionately loved by the pale, ghost-story-teller Maritza Nankova, a Polish student whose gaze seems to Fisher to have a “kind of religious lewdness.” One night, when the quiet is disrupted by mysterious soft sounds, the author finds Klorr feasting on grapes and cakes, set out on the girl’s naked body

as on a table. Though the German disappears, “silent and unruffled as a rat, with [a] napkin in his hand,” “I knew,” Fisher says, that he “had been supping there, while Maritza lay naked on the bed and moaned for him. And I knew that he had put the empty grapeskins on her unprotesting flesh without ever touching her” (ibid.: 75).

Theatrical as this episode is—framed by bed and bedroom like a scene in what Fisher refers to as “the second act of an old-fashioned bedroom comedy”—it draws from the narrator a commentary that she even more self-reflexively pronounces as melodramatic. Confronting Klorr in the hallway, she declares in the most “completely pompous French that has ever been spoken outside a national theater,” that “Mademoiselle Nankova . . . is suffering from an extreme sexual overexcitement,” enunciating her syllables as in “a quotation from Racine.” Linking sex, food, cruelty, perversion, and performance, the encounter recapitulates the “wild” hunger dramatized in the painful oyster-eating sequence in the girls’ boarding school, even while it allows the author once again to take what she persistently calls “the measure of my powers” as both actress and observer (ibid.: 76).

In a restaurant scene later in the book, the narrator herself becomes the object of a kind of odd culinary desire when, alone at an old inn in northern Burgundy, she meets a mad waitress who is “fanatical about food, like a medieval woman possessed by the devil.” Obsessed with serving her solitary guest the treasures of a meal prepared by the famous Paris chef “Monsieur Paul,” who owns the place, the girl produces an interminably luxurious lunch, and eventually it’s clear that her gastronomic efforts are inspired not just by an almost insane devotion to the cook but also by a weird desire to seduce Fisher—who is as usual, despite her professed bewilderment, an artist of eating. As the writer sipped *mare* at the end of the meal, she confides, the waitress “watched me intently, her pale eyes bulging in the dimness and her lips pressed inward as if she too tasted the hot, aged *mare*”—and then, suddenly, “‘Permit me!’ she said, and I thought she was going to kiss me. But instead she pinned a tiny bunch of snowdrops and dark bruised cyclamens against my stiff jacket . . . and then ran from the room with her head down” (ibid.: 148).

Throughout all these emotionally charged anecdotes of culinary and erotic desire—and a number of others set in parlors and *pensions* throughout Burgundy and Switzerland—the young Mary Frances is learning not just to perform as a poised and seductive diner but also as a masterful cook, always in control of the voluptuous, sometimes eccentric repasts she serves to friends. Her account of her decision-making in her own kitchen parallels her description of the

decisiveness with which she enacts the role of gastronome in public (and sometimes private) spaces. In the first tiny flat that the couple rents in Dijon, she tells us, she was becoming convinced that it is “foolish” to serve a multi-course meal “just because the guests who are to eat it have always been used to” such dinners. “Let them try eating two or three things, I said, so plentiful and so interesting and so well cooked that they will be satisfied.” And when Al objects that this way of entertaining may seem inhospitable, she adds firmly that “I still believe this, and have found that it makes cooking for people exciting and amusing for me, and often astonishingly stimulating for them” (emphasis added). Indeed, she insists, “My meals shake them from their routines, not only of meat–potatoes–gravy, but of thought, of behavior,” although now and then she has to concede that “women past middle age” may experience a “spiritual upset” when she serves “an exotic or eccentric dish [that] would do more harm than good,” so she must “bow” to their requirements” (ibid.: 101).

Here again, as in her self-portrait as diner, Fisher defines herself as a “transcendental gastronome”—a chef soaring above not only traditional bourgeois conceptions of the menu but also the conventional sex roles of domesticated women who cringe from culinary innovation. By the time she has parted from Al Fisher and is living at the beautiful *Le Paquis* in Switzerland with her beloved Chexbres (the name she gives Dillwyn Parrish throughout her memoir), she has confirmed her kitchen style. Although she recounts idyllic pastoral picnics *en famille*—for instance, fresh-picked peas from the couple’s garden, “with little cold pullets cooked for us in Vevey”—she entertains as theatrically as she dines. On one occasion, she alarms guests by showing them into “what they could only guess to be a kind of stage-kitchen,” where they perceive no signs or smell of an upcoming meal. Then after “Chexbres and I let them suffer” a bit, the couple, “with the smug skill of two magicians,” astonish them with a simple meal of homemade stew, rolls, and salad. The proprietor of a nearby luxury hotel is especially astounded, murmuring “*Ça alors! Formidable!*”; he refused “to believe that I had made the stew . . . convinced that in our pride we were hiding a famous chef somewhere in the cellars” (ibid.: 151, 155–56).

As a couple, too, Chexbres and the narrator perform for each other, with Chexbres at one point inviting his love to join him for a spectacular Easter supper of gin and caviar and Fisher trumping his romantic move by politely drinking and dining—and then, surprisingly, retiring to her own bedroom. But gradually, in the midst of magic meals and glamorous meadows, a foreboding darkness creeps into *The Gastronomical Me*. Klorr was the first herald of the horrors that were soon to engulf Europe, and then, at *Le Paquis*, the “very

pretty pale limp” young woman with whom the writer’s brother, David, is in love unwittingly picks up the dreadful thread. Marked by a “stony lethargy” throughout her visit, the vaguely sullen girl suddenly comes to life at the dinner table as she reminisces about the excitement of the “escape[s]” she has witnessed on the beach at San Sebastián—“refugees [from the Spanish Civil War] trying to swim past the border into France, pretending they were summer people. It was simply breath-taking! The guards always spotted them . . . and then there was always shooting” (ibid.: 165).

On ships and in trains, the drama of Europe’s catastrophic slide into the Second World War is enacted and reenacted, as the author too dines on disaster. For while she crosses the Atlantic alone, to tell her family that she is going to divorce Al and marry Chexbres, she finds herself on a boat laden with Jews fleeing the Nazis and is filled with forebodings, not only of the death of the life she has lived abroad but also of her beloved’s impending demise. By the time she returns to Switzerland, toward the end of *The Gastronomical Me*, the book itself has evolved into a grief memoir. Chexbres’s death takes place offstage (as did the suicide of Dillwyn Parrish, who left their home to shoot himself) but his sufferings from Burger’s disease, including the amputation of one leg, occupy center stage, as the pair elegiacally cross and recross the ocean like “two happy ghosts.” The brilliant chapter titled “The Flaw” recounts the terror of a train journey from Vevey to Milan, during which Fisher and Chexbres witness the capture of an Italian political prisoner, who, they later learn, manages to escape from his jailers only by smashing a window and cutting his throat on its jagged edge: an offstage suicide that also prefigures Chexbres’s self-inflicted death. Throughout the train trip the two have continued to experience themselves as ghosts, “free forever from the trouble of life, surrounded with a kind of insulation of love,” but at this moment, as war and the fear of war seep through their shell, the insulation cracks: “We were not two ghosts, safe in our own immunity from the pain of living. Chexbres was a man with one leg gone, the other and the two arms soon to go. . . . And I was a woman condemned . . . watching her true love die too slowly,” as there, “in the train, we knew for a few minutes that we had not escaped . . . knew no knife or glass . . . could keep the pain of war outside” (ibid.: 209).

Finally, the school of love, loss, and loneliness in which Fisher has learned to be both an artist of eating and an artificer of meals yields the monitory tale of Juanito, the Mexican woman who sings mariachi in male disguise and is hopelessly in love with the writer’s brother David. Fleeing to Mexico after Chexbres’s death, Fisher encounters this forlorn being—a transvestite, a passionate drinker, and a powerful musician—

whose wailing of “La Malagueña” rises wildly above the background of the beer hall where she is entertaining to enact the grief that the recently widowed author cannot bring herself to fully articulate. She recognizes Juanito–Juanita’s dramatization of pain as one performer recognizes another’s genius, and claims that she is thankful “we were leaving” so that the singer would be “free again, as much as anyone can be who has once known hunger and gone unfed.” And with the admission that hunger can and perhaps inevitably must go unfed, Fisher implicitly returns to and revises her earlier statements of culinary (and human) self-sufficiency. As she was ultimately to admit in *An Alphabet for Gourmets*, the book that succeeded *The Gastronomical Me*, although “the slightly depraved ramifications of dining alone are plainly limitless . . . I prefer the category of Two . . . above all the company of One other, making the rarest kind of Two” (Fisher 1989: 744).

Two Portraits of a Hunger Artist as a Young Woman

Although Fisher frequently insists that she is writing about hungers—the “wilder, more insistent” ones and those that go unfed—she is really, as she tacitly admits, an aesthete of eating and a performer of culinary skill, style, and sophistication. Though her art is everywhere darkened by dread, it’s not so much energized by the force of gastronomic desire as it is by the memories that flavor past appetites. By comparison, Judith Moore, perhaps her most distinguished descendant, is a brilliant artist of quotidian hungers—the wildest and most insatiable ones. The author of two culinary memoirs—*Never Eat Your Heart Out* (1996) and *Fat Girl* (2006)—Moore died just after the second of these books was published to wide acclaim, so hers, unlike Fisher’s, was a career cut short by an untimely death. But even in her accomplished writings she was almost the opposite of Fisher.

Where Fisher, for instance, scorned women who “cook doggedly, desperately” in response to “the piping of their husbands’ empty stomachs,” Moore transcribes the ordinary pleasures of domesticity, canning, gardening, pie-making, and she revels, with some amusement and no little delight, in the cakes and casseroles of mid-century middle-class America. In *Never Eat Your Heart Out*, for instance, she painstakingly records the menus of the ritual potluck supper, including her own “cheesecake topped with canned cherry pie filling, to which I added red food coloring to make it brighter red,” and “Mrs. Delacorte’s famous sweet potato–pineapple Hawaii luau bake” and “Mrs. Hopper’s Tater Tot casserole.” “I didn’t like the taste of much of this food,” she

confesses, “and it wasn’t what I cooked at home,” but, as she trenchantly observes, it was “public food, like ‘good’ clothing,” and when someone died, you left it on his widow’s kitchen counter, along with a note saying “Our prayers are with you in your time of bereavement” (Moore 1998: 140–41, 149).

Where Fisher’s extramarital romance with Chexbres mostly takes place offstage, Moore tells all—or a great deal of it—in a chapter boldly titled “Adultery” that is at the center of *Never Eat Your Heart Out*. And gastronomy is at the center of her adultery, as she announces even before introducing her readers to her lover:

I don’t think I ever better got the feel for that complicated business of insinuating cold butter into flour and thence into a high-pitched oven . . . that produces *mille-feuilles* pastry, don’t think I ever stirred, sniffed, and tasted my way to a more provocative lime–ginger–garlic–soy–molasses marinade for duck than during the year I went out on my husband.

And where Fisher boasts of her pleasure in dining alone, Moore—recalling years of solitude after her affair has ended in separation—records the sorrow of dusk in the supermarket, cataloguing the solitary shoppers who line up with lonesome cans of cat food and Diet Coke: “The supermarket’s pneumatic door wheezes. What does one person eat? . . . one pushes the cart down aisles, reads about chili on the Hormel can, chicken divan in the freezer case, and because to eat this food elicits more hope than can come true, one grabs bread, cheese, and pressed ham, gets a can of chicken noodle just in case” (ibid.: 182, 203).

Finally, where Fisher recalls a secure childhood among the orange groves of Southern California, Moore records the traumas of growing up in an almost Dickensian hell, especially in *Fat Girl*. Here she tells of being fattened like a piglet by a hog- and chicken-raising farmer grandmother and then being confined to diet after diet by a whip-wielding slender, ambitious, singer mother. Ultimately, then, where Fisher commands and performs her appetites, Moore *suffers* hers: she is subjected to her own appetites and to those of others, victimized by the gastronomic yearnings of body and soul. By the time she writes *Fat Girl*, her narrative is a tale of struggle with such victimization, as if she were a female Prometheus chained to a mountain of flesh, clawed by the vultures of hunger. For this reason, perhaps, where Fisher’s texts are elliptical and elegant, Moore’s are headlong, ferocious and, yes, thick with feeling. “You’re too fat to fuck,” a man tells her as they dine on cheeseburgers in the first chapter of her case history of culinary desire (Moore 2005: 5).

Arguably, Fisher was *sui generis*, the first to write what is basically an autobiography focused on food, but she had

models, including not only such revered precursors as Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de la Reynière but also, in English, Elizabeth Robins Pennell, the author of a voluptuary's food guide titled *The Feasts of Autolycus, the Diary of a Greedy Woman*, along with such other memoirists and travel writers as the *New Yorker* writer A. J. Liebling (*Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris*) and his journalist counterpart Waverly Root (*The Food of France*). Her contemporaries included such popular memoirists as Betty MacDonald, whose *The Egg and I* was a bestseller in the 1940s, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, whose anecdotal *Cross Creek Cookery* detailed the delights of "Coot Surprise" and "Alligator Tail Steak." Yet as a memoirist of hunger, Moore too had significant ancestors. Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" was surely not one of these, with its spectacular display of anorectic mastery, nor is Moore—as she takes pains to tell us—writing the history of an eating disorder. But though she confines herself to a personal case history, Moore's *Fat Girl* has a place among more politicized histories of starvation. In her fleshly entrapment, she is the opposite of a concentration camp prisoner, but her obsession with hunger is acutely described by Primo Levi, who recalls the horror of hunger at Auschwitz: "a need, a lack, a yearning that had accompanied us now for a year, had struck deep, permanent roots in us, lived in our cells, and conditioned our behavior" (Levi 1984: 116). Less mortal but equally poignant memories of hunger preoccupy George Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, when he recalls how he and a friend, impoverished and desperate, "wrote dinner menus on the backs of envelopes [because we] were too hungry even to try and think of anything except food" (Orwell 1933: 65).

Of course it's odd—it might even seem immoral—to compare a book about being overweight to tales of real, deadly deprivation. Yet the paradox of Moore's *Fat Girl* is that, although she is surrounded by plenty, *the fat girl is starving*. From her earliest autobiographical writings, she defines her Grammy, the witchlike cook of her childhood, as "brutal, powerful, and repulsive." And though this ferocious grandma "never feeds me a bad meal," her food itself evokes Hobbes's classic observation that life in the state of nature—a state in which Grammy nearly lives—is "nasty, brutish and short." Her meals

do not hide the hard facts of the heavy thingness of things. Her cooking does not conceal being born, hard work, and bloody death; does not deny its roots; nor does it smother its origins in sauces. It smells like itself. It uses lard, thick cream, the fatback off the hog. . . . It is mixed with the hands and fried in iron skillets.

Nothing goes to waste. When Grammy butchers hogs she pickles the cloven feet. . . the pointed, cartilaginous ears, and the curling bone-and-gristle tails. . . Any pork remnants she grinds down into sausage, which



FIGURE 2: Judith Moore: author photo, 2005.

PHOTOGRAPH © MARK COSTANTINI/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/CORBIS

she stuffs into the hog's intestines. The last renderings and bacon grease, hoarded over the months in Mason jars, she turns into a smoke-blackened iron pot of swilling lye to make soap.

Gross in its materiality, this food evokes primitive hungers—and primordial fears: "Grammy makes pork roast in the iron roaster while I think of how the witch tried to fatten up Gretel for her oven. I see if I can still measure my wrist with my thumb and finger" (Moore 1987: 192).

Grammy appears both in Moore's early "Blue Plate Blues," from which I've just quoted, and then, even more dramatically, in *Never Eat Your Heart Out*, which features a grisly memory of a "hog sticking day" and its aftermath, a nightmare of culinary violence over which she presides, attended by her sidekicks, Bushels and Buckles.

Hog-sticking nights, while I got ready for bed, my grandmother and Bushels and Buckles, blood dried on their clothing, worked under the kitchen's dim overhead light. Bugs seethed, circling the bulb. . . . The kitchen resembled a butcher shop where a crazy drunken butcher was in charge. Disassembled hog crowded every surface. Hoofless legs and snoutless, earless heads and slabs of fatback and squares of what would be smoked into bacon were puzzled pieces. . . . The trio worked quickly, to keep the meat from going bad. . . . I don't remember what my dreams were, those nights. I had nightmares back then from which I'd wake, screaming, in the high four-poster bed, from which I always feared to fall.

After such knowledge, what hunger, one is tempted to inquire. Yet loveless, stranded with one or another wicked stepmother figure, the frightened, spiritually starved child becomes a desperate mouth, longing for fruits and pies, creams and puddings, delectable recipes for satiety, comfort, belonging. Thus she becomes both a victim of her own desire and its hideous representative (Moore 1998: 51).

Its representative: Moore depicts her own body, over and over again, as a monstrosity. To be sure, the head-shot on her

book cover depicts a pleasantly attractive woman, but in her memoir the writer recalls scornful young men shouting “Sooey pig, sooey pig!” and describes herself almost as she describes the hogs in her grandmother’s kitchen, in an orgy of self-dismemberment. “Between what would be my waist if I had one and my pudenda hang fat rolls. The rolls form swags, drapes of loose fat that droop between my hip bones. My freckled breasts lay flat on my chest, and from under my breasts sweat runs.” And its victim: as she separates her body into its grotesque components, she herself becomes a mouth, like the perpetually hungry, chewing, dangerously self-defeating mouth of the hog.

My mouth is dangerous. My lips and my teeth and my tongue and the damp walls of my cheeks are always ready. . . . When I walk through the kitchen—when I walk through the world—my mouth is on the prowl. . . . I am scared of the big, hot hole my mouth is. My mouth always wants something and most of what my mouth wants, I can’t give it.

For like the hog, the fatter she gets, the more likely she is to become meat for the slaughter, or at the least, a sacrifice to the scorn of a society in which her flesh imprisons, isolates, and stigmatizes her (Moore 2005: 12-14).

If Fisher, then, is a beautiful and beautifully made-up face, musing on the attractions of the way she wears her hair and what shade her lipstick is, Moore is an abject body, experiencing herself as nearly faceless though—in Sylvia Plath’s phrase—“Allmouth” (Plath 2008: 131-37). Indeed, like Chexbres’s limbs, amputated or ravaged by Burger’s disease, the body threatens to disappear by the end of *The Gastronomical Me*, while it rules all except language in Moore’s work, as if this writer were speaking flesh deconstructing itself into a series of horrified anti-blazons in a reversal of the Renaissance rhetoric whereby the lover celebrated his beloved’s multiple physical attractions: hair, mouth, breasts, hips, etc.

“Life is so brief that we should not glance either too far backwards or forwards . . . therefore study how to fix our happiness in our glass and in our plate,” wrote Grimod de la Reynière (quoted in Ellwanger 1902: 139). And yet this notorious connoisseur, called by Sainte Beuve the “Father of the table,” also meditated on the life and death implications of the stuff “in our glass and on our plate,” staging some of his most elaborate dinner parties as funeral feasts. Despite their radically different narratives, all these writers would agree with Betty Fussell that the kitchen is the one place in which we’re all required to begin again, each day, at ground zero—reborn after the death of sleep to feed the gut, brain, and soul

by daily murder and redemption (Fussell 2003: 30). And we too, their readers, are at the mercy of the same cosmic strictures, what Fisher called the “dread fact” of eating. When we walk through the world, our mouths, like Moore’s, are “on the prowl.” We submit to the voracity of the mouth, the sorrow of the mouth, concede our mortal knowledge that, as the poet William Dickey put it, “the galaxy is in the shape of an eating mouth” (Dickey 1978: 27). But we also rejoice in the adventures of the mouth, remember them, write about them. Our dread and our delight feed the foodoir that has become so fascinating to us in a servantless world where the quotidian sacrament of dinner so often replaces the sacred ancient feasts of bread and wine.

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NOTE

1. See *Gastronomical Me*, 183, for another passage on dining alone, in which the author declares that it saves her from officers and “predatory passengers” who might bother her “just because I was under ninety and predominantly female.”

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