

# The Race against Rot: *Gastronomica's* New Editorial Team Weighs in on Saving Food

GASTRONOMICA'S INCOMING EDITORIAL TEAM GATHERED in Toronto this past fall to discuss the future of food studies and pressing issues for food scholars today.

The new team explored the theme of “saving food” as part of a standing-room-only public roundtable hosted by the University of Toronto’s Culinaria Research Centre. We can think about saving food in a material sense as the universal “race against rot,” as editorial co-chair Amy Trubek puts it. Documenting diverse food preservation traditions and technologies reveals a great deal about people’s cultural values, and how they relate to inexorable ecological processes of death and decay. In a figurative sense, saving food also draws attention to social and ecological threats posed by the dominant industrial capitalist food system. What questions should researchers and food studies practitioners be prioritizing to address the issue of saving food? What are some of the creative new ways of exploring the field? What needs saving, who ought to do it, and what should be left to molder away?

To hear what *Gastronomica's* new editorial team thinks about these issues in food studies, we asked them to weigh in on four questions, including a fun glimpse into how they “save” food in their own kitchens.

- Simone Cinotto (Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Gastronomic Sciences)
- Paula Johnson (Curator at Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History)
- Eric C. Rath (Professor of History at the University of Kansas)
- Krishnendu Ray (Associate Professor and Chair of Nutrition and Food Studies at New York University)
- Signe Rousseau (Instructor of Critical Literacy and Professional Communications at the University of Cape Town)

- Amy Trubek (Professor in Nutrition and Food Sciences at the University of Vermont)
- Robert Valgenti (Professor and Chair of Philosophy at Lebanon Valley College)
- Helen Zoe Veit (Associate Professor of History at Michigan State University)

## What does food need to be saved from?

JOHNSON: Imagine a world without field plows and fishing boats, cauldrons and cooking tools, family recipes and restaurant menus, culinary correspondence and kitchen stories from places and people in the past. That world, bereft of the historical material culture of food, would be a dismal and oblivious place without tangible connections to the ideas, innovations, and understandings about food, in the broadest sense, from those who came before us.

Curators, librarians, and archivists are savers. Through collecting, preserving, and providing public access to rich materials, we help researchers discover treasure troves of data about who we are, where we’ve been, and what has mattered over time. Our collections continue to reveal new insights on diverse aspects of food history—cultural, social, political, environmental, technological. They provide evidence of people and places that might otherwise be forgotten. And because they are saved for perpetuity, we can only imagine how new technologies, such as the experimental (emerging?) field of proteomics, might uncover new layers of insight through the analysis of proteins left on the literal pages of history.

RATH: Not all historians recognize the importance of food, though! Food needs to be saved from its perceived banality.

It's not just consumers who take food for granted by expecting seventy brands of breakfast cereal in the supermarket and watermelon in the winter. For far too long historians, particularly in my field of Japanese history, have simply ignored food unless it is relevant to crises such as famine or war. Yet, food is always central to daily life and it needs to be made central to history in the same way that gender, race, or class cannot be ignored.

**ROUSSEAU:** On the other hand, food needs to be saved from being *fetishized* and wasted.

**CINOTTO:** Yes, but food also needs to be saved from being desecralized, secularized. Because food saves. A Brazilian student of mine, Renata Fonseca Moura, just defended a fascinating dissertation describing her road trip following the paths of *vinho santo* (holy wine) making in Brazil. She decided to go on that trip to save herself from the trauma of Bolsonaro's election and some distressing events in her personal life. What she discovered, as a panspiritual raised Catholic, was the holy nature of wine and food, the magic in the travels of plants (like the grape), and the sacredness of the table as a sharing space. A healing experience.

I think food needs to be saved from becoming just another for-profit good that gets traded in financial transactions. Corporatization of farming, food processing, and food exchange, as well as state-led productivist projects, have transformed food into a mere commodity. But food is biodiversity, identity, culture, and pleasure.

**RAY:** It seems like we're all articulating different parts of an intertwined tension. Food has to be saved from becoming mere commodity *or* elevated art. The mundane is marvelous, and we should keep it that way. Good food belongs to the commons, argued over in the vernaculars, wrestled over as conceptions of taste in a foodshed. Simultaneously, food needs to be saved from private ownership of life forms. This includes excessive intellectual property claims over things, conceptions, and combinations, including elevation of everyday cooking into haute cuisine with a chef's signature.

**TRUBEK:** I want to save the foods that have a long history of representing the relationship of a group of people to a certain place. This can be the persistent planting of a certain variety of fruit or vegetable—the Northern Spy apple in New England and landrace maize in Oaxaca. This can be the efforts made by families to continue to make the particular filling-encased-by-dough dish so universally powerful in peasant and rural communities—the *burek* in Bosnia, the *momo* in Nepal, the *pierogi* in Poland, but then also in Burlington, Toronto, Chicago, and beyond. In this sense, I think food needs to be

saved from homogeneity, from the ever-present Granny Smith apple and the less and less present communal cooking event.

For me, at this moment, I'm going to leave to others the saving of food from the pernicious hold of abstractions articulated by well-meaning (and not so well-meaning) health experts, advertisers, scholars, and government policymakers who want to tell us how to choose our food.

**VALGENTI:** To build on Amy's comment about abstraction, food needs to be saved from thought, and *thinking* might be the way to save it. At issue is the way we relate to food. The more we relate to food through seemingly objective or real criteria—whether this be through the use of systems analysis and big data to understand the measurable impacts of our food system, or through the immediacy of sensory experience, or in the quest for authentic cuisine—the more we ignore the constitutive role that our thinking plays in food's objectification. Despite the unprecedented centrality of food in our cultural discourse, food risks disappearing from view because it is obscured by the concepts we use to identify, quantify, and understand it. Food needs to be saved from thought, or better, what thinking has (unfortunately) become—merely applied thinking or thinking in the service of ideology. Only by recognizing the role that thought plays within objectifying discourses can we moderate its opacity and recover the object from our attempts to grasp it. To save food we need to be thinking *through* food rather than about it—that is, aware of the ways that our approaches to food reveal as much about ourselves as they do about the object it studies.

**VERT:** If we're thinking *through* food, rather than just about it, then most of all, food has to be saved from decay. In its most literal sense, food preservation is crucial to human survival. If we're not constantly aware of that fact, it's only because we live in an environment where preservation has been outsourced to factories and where food waste on a massive scale has been normalized. In this environment, activities like home canning and cheese making are quirky hobbies, not skills with a perceived economic value. But there's nothing normal—and unfortunately, nothing sustainable—about the current food systems in wealthy countries. Without a change, of course, we may all have to become intimately reacquainted with food's perishability and ways to forestall it in the future.

For much of human history, food preservation was inseparable from cooking. In the nineteenth-century United States, for example, daily cooking involved techniques like smoking, salting, pickling, drying, and jam-making, which kept food good for months and were invaluable before widespread refrigeration. Today, cooking can still help us prevent

rot, especially by giving us the tools to use food up in the first place.

**If you were sitting down for a cup of tea with a policymaker, what would you want them to know about why “saving food” is so crucial in the current political moment?**

JOHNSON: First, I would offer a bite of food in addition to the tea! Perhaps the food would be made from a recipe shared by a migrant entrepreneur, a sweet prepared by culinary students, or fruit from a region in the throes of climate change. From there, I would make the conversation about the real people and places that are being affected by policies. I would absolutely ask my guest about her own food memories and find some common ground for the conversation. Next, I would invite her to attend a panel discussion or cooking demonstration that might lead into a broader discussion about migrations of people or the effects of severe weather on food producers. By demonstrating the long history of an issue in a “safe” environment where multiple perspectives are valued, perhaps the seeming intractability of the issue might dissolve.

RATH: If I could sit down with Japanese policymakers, I would talk to them about the recent development of so-called traditional diets heavy in seafood and rice. Even before the 2013 UNESCO recognition of the “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese (*washoku*),” Japanese policymakers touted the virtues of Japanese cuisine defined as a meal of rice and side dishes, and especially seafood. Such a diet supports Japan’s domestic agenda by aiding rice farmers and fishers, and it can benefit the country’s balance of trade. But if everyone ate as much fish as the Japanese, we would quickly decimate the world’s fish stocks. Rice paddies are a major source of greenhouse gases and require more nitrogen fertilizer than any other crop in Japan.

Despite mythology, rice provided no more than twenty-five percent of food energy historically for most of Japan’s population until the twentieth century. Rice eaters were the wealthy urban elite, and it is their diet that is now touted as traditional. There is a dire ecological need to rethink these culinary “traditions.” Historical examples can help us do that. In place of rice, Japanese ate many other grains historically that could be revived today, including various millets and barley. The diet before the 1960s was also largely vegetarian. If Japanese policymakers helped redefine *washoku*, they could save not only disregarded and healthier Japanese culinary traditions, but also create a more environmentally conscious way of life in the Anthropocene.

VALGENTI: After filling the policymaker’s cup, I would first ask: what can we do so that the many who have provided this tea, or this meal, have a greater voice in this decision-making

process, and as a consequence, in the daily food choices available to them? Eating—a means of individual survival—is first and foremost a communal act. It always involves another, even if that other is the food. Food serves as a great equalizer: we all understand the right we have to our own survival, but also our own tastes, the certainty of our own preferences, and the pleasures that accompany eating and commensality. But these very singular experiences always involve, and even depend, upon some other. And as much as food can be a tool for cultural division and identity politics, it is equally powerful as a tool for cultural exchange, understanding, and community. The best way to begin the conversation across divisions in society—questions of access, nutrition, labor, sustainability, and so on—might be to begin the conversation through food. In addition to getting food into the mouths of people who need it, we need to address the many ways that food issues are central to the empowerment of those without a seat at the table.

**This current political moment is defined by themes including nationalism, inequality, and climate change. What is the role of food studies in this context? How might food save us?**

TRUBEK: Food studies can help identify long-term problems in food systems. When has food labor *ever* been well compensated? When have those in power used food to integrate societies? Why are certain scales of agricultural production so extractive of nature’s bounty? Food studies can also bring new creative solutions and expressive opportunities for those committed to engaging with the messy and universal reality of moving food from the earth to the mouth.

CINOTTO: Having a long-term perspective is important and can challenge the use of “local food” rhetoric by neo-nationalists and fascists. This reveals the tremendous, sometimes scary, political power of food and food narratives. Food history shows the falsity of discourse imagining national cuisines as something pure and eternal, and in need of defense from contamination by excluding anything and anyone diverse and different. Our “food traditions” and local food are the products of centuries-long migrations of plants, animals, microbes, and culinary practices; of numberless exchanges and the global mobility of not only poor people looking for better living conditions or survival, but merchants, sailors, soldiers, missionaries, tourists, etc. It takes just a short step back in time to see that no cuisine is authentic because almost all of its ingredients come from somewhere else. Our food habits are creatures of migration; our local is global.

RATH: There is a story about how a Korean Zen teacher became angry when he discovered a watermelon rind in the compost with a small bit of red melon on it. That sort of obsession might provoke ridicule in some circles, but in a culture driven by the “maximum propensity to consume,” we need more examples of frugality and saving, particularly when it comes to food. Popular culture will not always provide these, so it is the role of food studies scholars to evaluate critically the human condition as it relates to how we fuel ourselves. Food studies can also suggest alternatives for sourcing and consuming food, as well as offer incisive reflections on conditions and habits that many of us might take for granted.

**What are some small (or big!) ways that you think about saving food in your own kitchen?**

CINOTTO: I was raised in a culture that obsessed over not wasting food, especially bread; food was never garbage. In my family, creatively reusing leftovers was not supposed to be a gloomy obligation of poverty (we were never really that poor, by the way) but fun. Family members earned points for culinary ingenuity and being a good “leftover cook.” Almost anything ended up in the filling of our Sunday dinner *agnolotti* (sometimes “sauced” with Barbera wine). To this day, my effort at saving food is not an effort but pretty much all about creativity. It starts with trying to shop wisely, and it continues with cooking and eating together with nice people as often as I can manage.

TRUBEK: We have an orchard and a one-acre vegetable garden. We are in a constant race against rot, making sure to pick the apples in a timely manner and get them sorted, pressed, refrigerated, turned into cider, fermented, sold, whatever. This race occurs in our home kitchen too. We are slicing tomatoes, sautéing mushrooms, peeling onions and garlic, chopping quince so that we can make (and then freeze or can) quince jelly—or tomato sauce, mushroom sauce, and so much more. We have to save our food or else we waste it!

VEIT: I’m always on a quest to waste less food. Meal planning and prepping in advance have been extremely helpful to this end, annoying as they can be in the moment. In my family, we try to plan meals the week before and then do our shopping and cooking on the weekend. I don’t always feel like spending my Sunday afternoons in a cooking marathon, but I know it saves time, money, and food in the long run. And it’s a pretty great feeling to come home on a weeknight to find a homemade meal ready to go in the fridge. We also cook big amounts:

the goal is to make enough food so that every meal provides five people dinner one night and lunch the next day. To make this possible, we invested in a lot of sealable glass food storage containers, some of which double as lunch containers. If our planning is slightly off (and it usually is) I wind up with a lunch toward the end of the week made up of motley leftovers in different small containers. It’s not always what I feel like eating, but I tell myself it’s faster, cheaper, and probably healthier than frequently eating out. And it definitely prevents waste.

RATH: In my home, we try to buy what we intend to eat rather than simply stock up. Judging by the emptiness of the fridge at the end of the week, we seem to do a good job of consuming what we buy. Half of the food in America is wasted. We may not easily stop what the farmer or grocer discards, but we can respectfully use what we buy, and compost any scraps.

ROUSSEAU: I find that for a household of two, the freezer is indispensable for not being wasteful.

VALGENTI: Daily practices (I cook every day) are concretions of thought, choice, environment, desire, and innumerable other factors. Examining those practices—what we often assume are our good practices, along with the ones we know are bad—is perhaps the starting point for saving food, for thinking critically about how human choice connects to biological need. More than just penitent introspection, this thoughtful practice is a reckoning with certain limits: financial, geographical, technical, social, and so on. Cooking is an intimate affair that places us in close contact with the other, whether it is the organism being prepared and ingested, the others who have brought this food to our kitchen, the others at our table, or even our own body as other to us. When we cook and feed ourselves, how do we minimize the costs that are part of the exchange with these others? How do we infuse greater care into our practices? This thinking is a good first step if we wish to save food in our kitchens. As a principle, it resonates broadly across all of our practices.

RAY: Cultivating carework is deeply important in my kitchen. I make a point of working with my teenage son to routinely cook everyday food for others. I try to think about equity in the food system as a precondition to cultivating pleasure. And to increase our sensitivity to animal suffering in our everyday consumption habits. Carework also involves lovingly raising a cat by feeding her good food.

JOHNSON: In a literal sense, I diligently practice composting, recycling, and creative leftover management. As my friend’s dear mother, Elsa Edwards, would say, as she combined leftovers for a new dish, “I’m making ‘you’ll never have this again!’”

Should I ever have time, I think I could devote a few days in July to preserving peaches, tomatoes, and watermelon rind pickles like my grandma did. Living in an area with rich agricultural land, there's almost no excuse for not putting by the bounty of summer.

In another sense, I am a curator at home as well as at work. I am aware of how much I value my grandmother's china, my

mother's handwritten recipes, my aunt's still-amazing German cheese plane and potato ricer, the cookbooks I've been given by dear friends at rites of passage, and the taste of foods that catapult me back to different phases of my life. The power of food-related objects, documents, and memories are constant companions in the ongoing dance between my work of saving food and food saving me. 🍷