

The Art of Food

In his recent *Guardian* article, “Let’s Start the Foodie Backlash,” Steven Poole dismissed the “foodist” claim that food is art: “It should be obvious that a steak is not like a symphony, a pie not like a passaglia, foie gras not like a fugue...that the cook heating things in the kitchen and arranging them on a plate is not the artistic equal of Charlie Parker.” (But, then again, who is?) William Deresiewicz tackled the same subject in the pages of the *New York Times*: “But food, for all that, is not art.” And Adam Gopnik tells us, at the beginning of *The Table Comes First*, that he has been embarrassed by attempts to treat food as art.

Are Poole and Deresiewicz right? Does Gopnik’s embarrassment make sense? Later in his book, Gopnik explicitly compares the development of French cuisine to development in the arts (“Is this not the way big change often happens in all the arts?”), and he goes on to talk of “the job of artists, including cooks and painters, to make whatever they can of whatever matter lies at hand.” Perhaps he overcame his embarrassment.

Is food art? If we are using “art” to refer to crafts or learned skills, then of course there is an art of food. But there are also arts, in this sense, of fly fishing and motorcycle maintenance. So this is not the sense of “art” in which we are interested—the sense which applies to paintings, sculptures, plays, films, poems, and works of music but not to all those other activities (deception, fermentation, programming, war, etc.) which can be characterized as arts. It is often perfectly reasonable to say of a well-made cake that it is a work of art, but most such uses are figurative rather than literal. Food *can* be beautiful, but not everything beautiful is art so this does not seem to get at what we are after either. (And, of course, not all food is beautiful.) Ditto with creativity—some cooking exhibits it but not all does, and the arts, after all, hold no monopoly on creativity. On the other hand, although not *all* food is art—consider the fast food takeaway or frozen ready meal—this is also true of the arts mentioned above. Film, for example, is an art form, but not all films are art in anything over and above the craft sense. There is an art form of comics, but not all comics (think of instructional comics or crudely pornographic ones) count as works of art.

It is tempting to think that the question we should ask is whether food *can* be art. But this is all too easily answered. Duchamp showed with his readymades that just about anything can become art. If a urinal or a bicycle wheel can become a work of art, then surely a loaf of bread can become one too. Transfiguration of the commonplace, anyone? Perhaps more interestingly, food can be, and often is, used as a medium in the production of art. The contemporary conceptual artist, Rikrit Tiravanija, is well-known for a series of exhibitions which involve serving Thai food made on-site to gallery visitors. Not that long ago, I took a class of students from the University of Colorado to see Viviane Le Courtois' *Edible?* exhibition at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. Le Courtois uses food in a variety of ways to make art: the exhibition contained sculptures made of melted candy, another sculpture made of Cheetos, curtains made of candy and marshmallows, video installations of eating and food preparation, and an interactive installation involving an indoor garden and the chance to make and drink cups of tea from the herbs grown in it. And although most of us liked the exhibition a great deal, there's nothing very surprising about Le Courtois' artistic practices. After all, contemporary artists have shown that the range of materials that can be used as artistic media is wide open. Mark Quinn's *Self* is only the best known of many contemporary art works made with blood, and blood is only one of the bodily fluids that have been used in contemporary art production. If a sculpture can be made from blood, why not salty snack foods and candy?

Antonin Carême, the famous nineteenth century chef and cookbook author, declared that “the fine arts are five in number, namely: painting, sculpture, poetry, music, and architecture, the principal branch of the latter being pastry.” This is implausible (and almost certainly a joke) since one cannot live in a pastry, but there are extant art genres in which a specific food serves as an artistic medium. Perhaps ice is not a food (although it is regulated as such by the US Food and Drug Administration), so ice sculpture might not count, but sugar sculpture pretty clearly does. (For a fascinating portrayal of sugar sculpture watch *Kings of Pastry*, a recent documentary by Pennebaker and Hegedus which follows a prestigious French pastry competition.) I see no reason to think that butter sculpture—less popular than it once was, but still practiced in the US and Tibet among other places—should not also be considered an artistic genre of its own.

So food can be art. But it is plausible that in the above cases, food counts as art *in virtue of* belonging to some other art form. Sugar sculpture and butter sculpture, for example, count as art because they are forms of sculpture not simply because they are food. Is food ever art without being an instance of some other art form? That is a trickier question, and it is surely the one at which Poole and Deresiewicz were aiming. The question has also concerned a number of contemporary philosophers. Elizabeth Telfer, in her book *Food for Thought*, argues that food can count as art in its own right and that cookery is an art form since some dishes are “intended or used wholly or largely for aesthetic consideration.” Do we, then, have our answer? I think not. Telfer’s arguments rely on an unsuccessful definition of art. For one thing, a great deal of art throughout human history has been intended largely to perform a function rather than for aesthetic consideration—think of religious and political art. For another, being used as if it were art does not make something art. Telfer’s arguments, then, do not settle the question of food’s art status, although it does not follow from the failure of her arguments that food is not art. Perhaps more interestingly, Telfer goes on to argue that food is a simple and minor art form. It is simple, she argues, because it is incapable of exhibiting the complexity of form which other art forms display. It is minor, she alleges, because it is transient, lacking in meaning and incapable of moving us.

Food seems capable of moving at least some of us. Telfer says food cannot shake us fundamentally, and that we do not feel awe in response to it. I fear that she just wasn’t going to the right restaurants (or reading the right food writers). I’m not sure what else there is to say about *that* bit of reasoning. And transience seems to me to be a red herring. One-off performances and improvisations, happenings, the self-destructing art works of Jean Tinguely and various site-specific installations also exhibit transience. This may make it difficult for such works of art to pass the test of time, but it is hard to see how ephemerality by itself could underwrite some sort of devaluation of an entire form. Moreover, although prepared food exhibits transience, recipes simply do not seem much more impermanent than musical scores or choreographical works. Telfer says that recipes “may still not be able to speak to different generations...because the nature of ingredients changes,” but there does not seem to be a significant disanalogy here with musical works, since the nature of musical instruments changes over time too.

What about the alleged lack of meaning that food exhibits? This is a recurring theme in the writing of those who express scepticism about the art status of food. Deresiewicz, for example, argues that food is not art because it is “not narrative or representational, does not express ideas or organize emotions.” Like Deresiewicz, Telfer argues that food can neither represent nor express emotion. Now narrative is surely irrelevant. Many major art forms (music, architecture) and genres (haiku, abstract expressionism) are non-narrative. So Deresiewicz’s claim that food is non-narrative is beside the point. And strictly speaking, both are wrong that food is not representational. All sorts of food items function representationally as anyone who has made or eaten a dinosaur-shaped cake or a gingerbread man can attest to.

The principle of charity suggests that we cannot counterexample Telfer with an animal cracker. So the issue cannot be about whether food represents in this minimal sense. The crucial claim Telfer makes is that food does not represent in a more substantive sense. Food, she claims, does not tell “us something about the world and ourselves” and enable us to “see the world and ourselves in the light of ways in which they have been depicted.”

Carolyn Korsmeyer, in her *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, tackles the question of food and meaning head on and makes a robust case that food often functions symbolically. Of particular interest is Korsmeyer’s argument that foods often traffic in a specific form of symbolization which, following the American philosopher Nelson Goodman, she calls “exemplification.” In exemplification, an object both refers to a property and possesses it. A swatch of cloth exemplifies a particular pattern by both referring to that pattern and displaying it. Similarly, an item of food may do more than simply possess a property (saltiness, a hint of sage); it may call our attention to that property. Moreover, Korsmeyer goes on, following Goodman, to give an account of how food may function expressively (i.e., be appropriately described in broadly emotional terms) in virtue of the metaphoric exemplification of various properties. If this is right, it makes sense to say that chicken soup can express care.

So one way of defending food’s artistic status is to make the case for its capacity for substantive artistic representation—to argue as Korsmeyer does that food can not only depict, exemplify and express but, moreover, provide us with a perspective on what it

symbolizes. Another strategy, one to which I am more partial, is to argue that this capacity for rich representation is not necessary for something to be an art form or, even, a major art form. If induction on the history of philosophical aesthetics tells us anything, it tells us that the great danger of theorizing about the arts is overgeneralization. Mimetic theories of art fail because not all art engages in imitation. Expression theories fail because not all art works are expressive. Aesthetic theories fail because not all art traffics in the provision of aesthetic experiences. Finally, representational theories fail because not all arts, not even all major arts, function to provide us with a perspective on what they represent. (I'm thinking of absolute music, architecture, some abstract painting, and so on.) Food, then, can be a major art form without representing in the substantial sense to which Telfer refers. But this is controversial, and I expect some will disagree.

So does any food count as art without belonging to some other art form? I think it does. Not all arts are pure—there are hybrid art forms like comics, concrete poetry and kinetic sculpture which arise, as the philosopher Jerrold Levinson has described in his article “Hybrid Art Forms,” when two distinct art forms are combined. Prose poetry, for example, arises out of the combination of, well, prose and poetry. Levinson also describes cases in which new hybrid art forms (earthworks, video installations) are brought about from the combination of a prior art form and a “preexisting technological process or semi-artistic activity.” It seems to me that some of the most famous examples of molecular gastronomy, the dishes and meals at Ferran Adrià's El Bulli and Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck, are instances of an emerging hybrid art form which combines haute cuisine, sculpture, various chemical technologies and, arguably, one or more of the performing arts. (Following Nathan Myhrvold, we might call this new art form “modernist cuisine.”) The difference between works in this hybrid art form and the cases discussed earlier is that they are not art *in virtue of* belonging to the categories of sculpture or performance art. For the fact that modernist cuisine is descended from sculpture does not entail that it is sculpture. If this line of thought is right, there is food that counts as art without belonging to some other art form.

What about the aesthetics of food? More specifically, does food provide us with aesthetic experiences? In a way, this is even trickier than the question about the art status of food since disagreement about the nature (and even existence) of aesthetic experience

is so widespread. On the other hand, we do not need to settle the question of whether food is or is not art in order to answer this question. After all, aesthetic experience is commonly found outside of the arts—in our engagement with nature for example.

It might seem puzzling why anyone would doubt that food provides us with aesthetic experiences since we commonly describe food and drink in aesthetic language. We speak, after all, of elegant wines, delicate flavours and dainty pastries. Moreover, it is surely the case that we can have aesthetic experiences in virtue of the visual aspects of foods. The serious question, it seems to me, is whether we can have aesthetic experience which is rooted in the taste and smell of food and drink. And it is here that we can begin to understand the source of scepticism about the aesthetics of food. For it has been popular, since the eighteenth century at least (and especially since Kant), to associate the aesthetic with disinterestedness. Disinterestedness here has to do with a lack of connection to desire—on Kant’s account the judgment that something is beautiful is disinterested in that it is neither based on, nor the source of, desire. Now it is true that Kant himself uses the term “aesthetic” broadly so as to include judgments of the agreeable (including judgments of wine) which are not disinterested. But authors after Kant tended to use the term “aesthetic” more narrowly to refer to those disinterested pleasures and judgments. And the alleged disinterestedness of proper aesthetic pleasure and judgment has surely been one of the reasons that tastes and smells of food have been excluded from the sphere of the aesthetic. For nothing seems more connected to desire than the pleasures we take in tasting and smelling delicious food.

One response to this argument is to suggest that in certain cases we may, in fact, take disinterested pleasure in the flavours and odours of food. Or, more generally, that whatever state of mind underwrites aesthetic experience is a state of mind one can be in when responding to the smells and tastes of food. Although there is something attractive about such an approach, I think that a better response is to challenge the assumption that the aesthetic is essentially connected to disinterestedness or any specific state of mind. We have aesthetic experiences when we experience the aesthetic features of objects—beauty, prettiness, ugliness, garishness, unity, etc. Foods possess features of this sort, and they may possess them in virtue of their smells and tastes; for example, both chocolates and teas may have elegant flavours. When we experience this elegance, we are having an

aesthetic experience. There is, then, no trouble thinking of the flavours of food in aesthetic terms. But, as mentioned above, there is serious disagreement about the aesthetic in the philosophical community so this claim may be controversial.

I have argued that food can be art, that there is an emerging hybrid art form of food, and that the tastes and smells of food can be experienced aesthetically. Why are these issues about the art and aesthetics of food on people's minds? Here's one reason. The rise of foodies and foodie culture raises the question of whether the extent to which food has come to be valued in our times is, in fact, really warranted. Are we foodies just self-indulgent and misguided hedonists, or does food have some sort of significant value over and above nutrition and the provision of gustatory pleasure? No one accuses those who love Shakespeare, Ibsen or Vermeer of being self-indulgent hedonists. If food is art, and if its value is aesthetic, our intense concern for it seems legitimate. Perhaps. But art is not the only important thing in the world, and one can be self-indulgent in one's appreciation of art and the aesthetic. So although I believe that some food is art, I think we would be better off justifying our concern for food on its own terms. Let's make the case for the value of food as food and not worry so much about its aesthetic and artistic status.