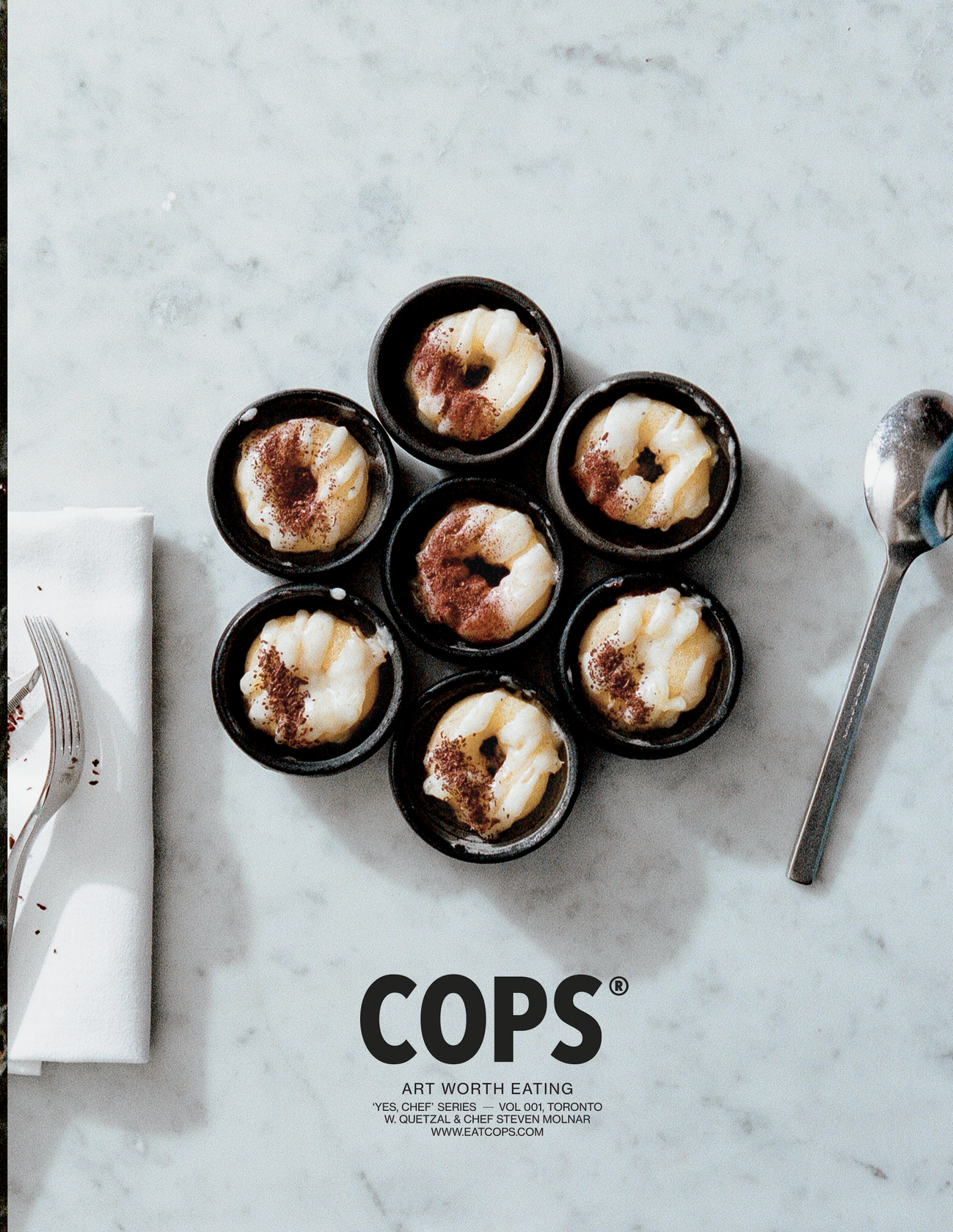
Serviette

04 ISSUE No.4
FOOD IS ABSURD







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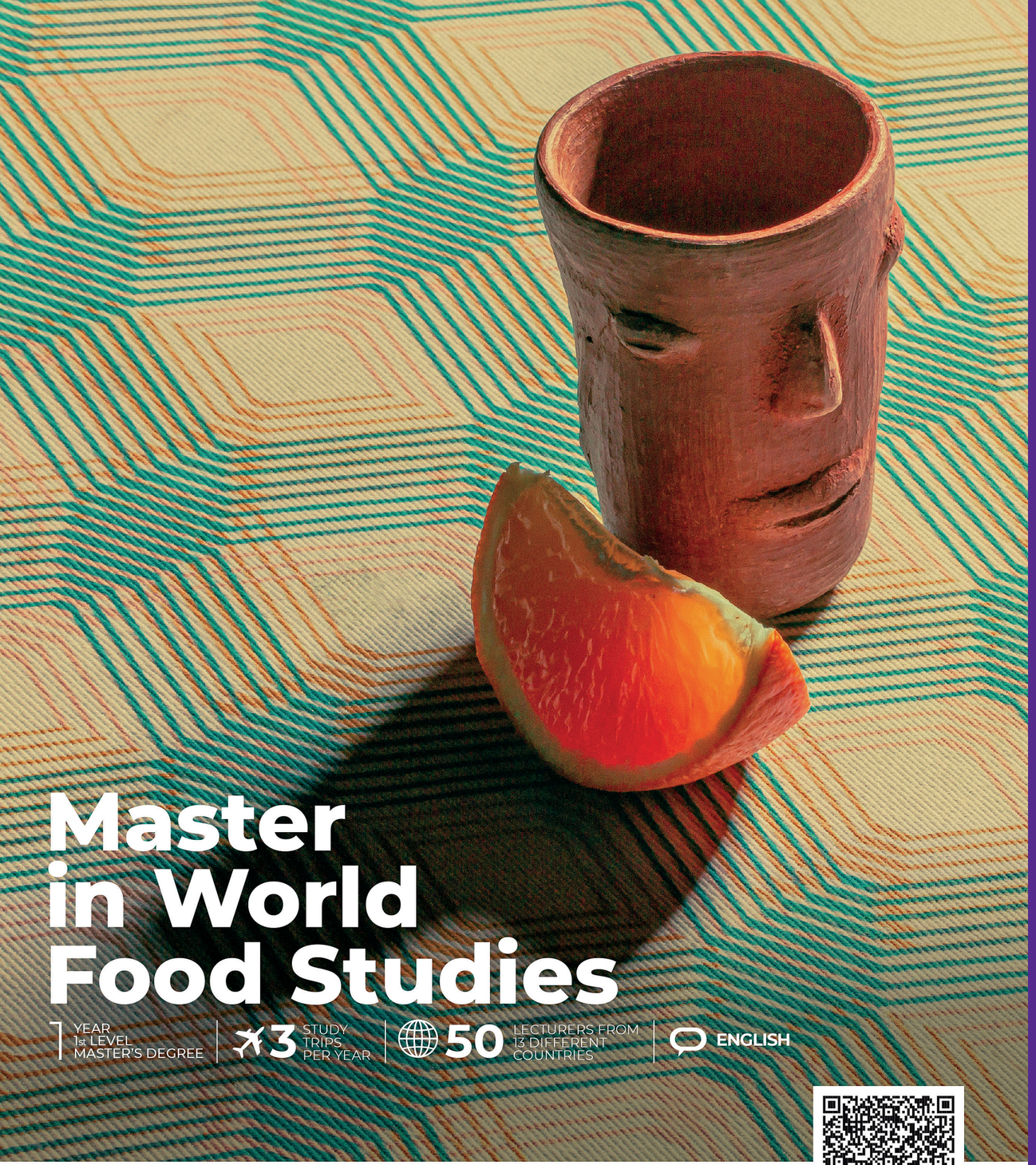

FROM THE PUBLISHER

We take food pretty seriously at *Serviette*, but we're definitely familiar with its more absurd side. I don't just mean the instinct to stack a fridge with at least nine types of mustard (though I'm guilty of that) or booking back-to-back dinner reservations while on vacation, with a back-up third option just in case (I'm guilty of that, too). I mean Ireland's duelling potato chip mascots, and Quebec's persnickety attempts to police pizza names, and Italy's lucrative business of parmesan heists—all of which you'll find explored in this issue, alongside a ton more stories and photo essays. But enough serious talk from me. On to the absurdity! Happy eating. —*Max Meighen*

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Forget about gold bars or a mid-career Picasso—there's serious cash to be made in stolen cheese.

Stop, Thief!

September 4, 1666. London is besieged by flames. For two days, the Great Fire has turned houses and halls and cathedrals to ash—and in his garden in Seething Lane, just west of Tower Hill, Samuel Pepys is digging a hole. In go his bottles of wine. Then he digs another, larger hole. That's for his wheel of parmesan cheese.

Back then, cheese was an investment—one hefty wheel likely cost Pepys several months' salary. Now, it's collateral. In northern Italy, the vaults of the Credito Emiliano bank hold some 400,000 wheels of parmesan worth upwards of €100 million, which it accepts in exchange for loans to cheese producers. (The loans can extend for 24 months, or the time it typically takes parmesan to age; Credito Emiliano's vaults are climate controlled.) These wheels are a tempting target for enterprising thieves, who, in 2009, tunnelled into the bank and made off with hundreds of hunks. "Thank heavens we caught the robbers before they grated it," one manager said.

In fact, cheese is the most stolen food on Earth—nearly 4 percent of the world's supply is nicked every year. In 2018, a separate gang of Emilia-Romagna robbers nabbed $300,000 worth of parm from a rural warehouse. A few years before that, an Illinois man packing Wisconsin cheese was arrested on the run in New Jersey. In Florida, cops seized purloined mozzarella just before it got to its destination, Hungry Howie's pizza distribution centre; in France, police remain mystified by a brazen heist of unpasteurized Comté. And in the tiny Dutch community of Fijnaart, the van Dorps woke up to find their dairy farm cleaned out of Gouda—thieves had rolled nearly 200 wheels into the night.

It's not easy to move this stuff on the black market, though it can be lucrative business in Russia, where a ban on Western food makes cheese a prized commodity, and where a Finnish variety called Oltermanni fetches four times its sticker price. That means local authorities must scramble to intercept goods before they leave the country. When thieves filched $187,000 worth of cheese from a dairy company in Kitchener-Waterloo, the cop on the case issued a public plea. "If you're approached by unknown individuals attempting to sell you large quantities of cheese, please have the courage to pick up the phone and contact us," he said. —*Danielle Groen*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SARAH WRIGHT / YES AND STUDIO

Separating fact from fiction from family lore on the hunt for Stalin's favourite wine.

Spin the Bottle

For ages, Georgian vintners have fermented wine in *qvevri*, large clay vessels that can hold a whole bunch of liquid (up to 3,500 litres) and are buried underground for months to stay cool. What comes up from the earth is a skin-macerated, amber-hued, delicious wine, and sure, it sounds a lot like trendy orange wine, but wines made this way are the oldest whites in the world. In 2017, researchers found wine traces on pottery shards from an archeological dig in Georgia: the residue of a 8,000-year-old vintage.

Joseph Stalin loved his feasts. Whiskey and vodka flowed like the river Mtkvari when he invited statesmen and foreign dignitaries to party. And he always brought along a crate of wine from his native Georgia. His favourite, many claim, was *Khvanchkara*—dark red, semi-sweet, from the Racha region in the western highlands.

Grandpa Kiazo from the neighbouring Lechkhumi would tell you these claims are wrong. Sure, Stalin respected *Khvanchkara*. But his favourite was definitely *Usakhelouri*, one of the rarest Georgian varietals, prized for its rich ruby colour, strong aroma, and full-bodied flavour. Grandpa Kiazo says his family had a separate *qvevri* where they aged *Usakhelouri* exclusively for Stalin. In fact, didn't you know that among Georgian wines, Stalin *only* drank *Usakhelouri*?

Grandpa Givi insists that Stalin loved wines from Kartli the best—and that he, Givi, once almost paid with his life for the privilege of delivering wine to the Kremlin. He stocked the train with excellent *Chinuri* (pale amber, pleasantly aromatic, light), but before officially signing it over, he gave the wine one last taste alongside a KGB officer. Turned out its delicate flavour hadn't survived the long road between Tbilisi and Moscow. Grandpa Givi says he had to work hard and fast to deliver a new batch, but can you imagine what would happen if the *Vozhd* tasted that atrocity?

Ask a winemaker from Imereti and he'll tell you both grandpas are lying. It was Imeretian *Tsitska* (white, sharp, dry) that Stalin preferred. He'll agree, though, that any unlucky chap who delivered a subpar batch was bound for Siberia. A winemaker from Samegrelo would say they're all mistaken. It was Megrelian *Ojaleshi* (deep red, semi-sweet, fruity) that Stalin adored—adored so much that at his bacchanals, he got his guests drunk and loose-lipped on other, low-quality wines while keeping the good *Ojaleshi* to himself.

Everyone across Georgia, it seems, has a relative, or a friend, or at least an acquaintance who swears they delivered the wine that Stalin most loved directly to the Kremlin doors. There's still a yearning, especially among the older generation, for the stamp of approval from Georgia's infamous son—a bloodthirsty dictator, certainly, but such a strong, influential, uncompromising man. Everyone understands that a man like him would only go for the best, don't they?

Then there's the claim—more academic, mostly fringe—that Stalin wasn't particularly fond of wine at all, that he'd have a glass or two, but nothing more. And that special crate? Well, he only brought his own wine because he was paranoid he'd be poisoned. But if there's one theory no Georgian will entertain, it's this one. Maybe Stalin loved *Usakhelouri*, maybe *Chinuri*, or maybe it was *Khvanchkara* all along. But a Georgian man with no passion for Georgian wine? Not even Stalin would stoop so low. —*Tamar Lortkipanidze*

CHICKEN AND CHARCOAL COVER COURTESY OF PHAIDON

Sometimes, it pays to be single-minded in your cooking. These highly specific cookbooks can help.

Six of One

1. ***Chèvre***
Tia Keenan
The New York–based fromager finds a shocking number of applications for goat cheese: You've got chèvre beignets, curried chèvre straws, chèvre ranch dressing, and caramelized bananas with chèvre yogurt overtop.

2. ***Chicken and Charcoal***
Matt Abergel
At his Hong Kong yakitori restaurant Yardbird, Arbergel gives every conceivable part of the chicken a spin on the charcoal grill. Here, he also breaks down the finer points of butchery, the best skewers for the job, and the tricks of the flame.

3. ***Egg***
Blanche Vaughan
Poach 'em, fry 'em, beat 'em into soufflés, drink 'em (Vaughan makes a mean prairie oyster), steam 'em (she's British, so she's partial to pudding), or channel Julia Child and whip 'em into mayonnaise.

4. ***Ham***
David Lee Fowler
Brine it, cure it, bake it with honey, smoke it in one of those giant green eggs, but do not—please—swap in some other protein. "When someone wants to substitute turkey ham for ham hocks," Fowler has said, "I just want to lie down and drink a bottle of bourbon."

5. ***My PEI Cabbage Cookbook***
Ann Thurlow
After pandemic restaurant closures led to a massive surplus on PEI's largest cabbage farm, Thurlow canvassed the province's home cooks, newcomers, nuns, and premiers for their best recipes. The *Times*' Sam Sifton is a major fan.

6. ***The Bloody Mary***
Brian Bartels
Look: We'll always prefer a Caesar. But if you're going to make do with this clamless cocktail, Bartels has 50 variations, like one with bone broth, another with balsamic vinegar, and one that somehow involves peanut vodka and strawberry jam.

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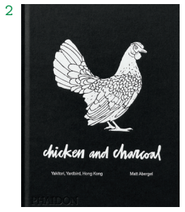

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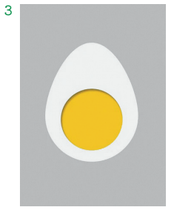

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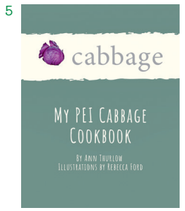

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Back in the 1930s, an Italian Futurist named Filippo Marinetti tried to cancel pasta. Imagine how well that went down.

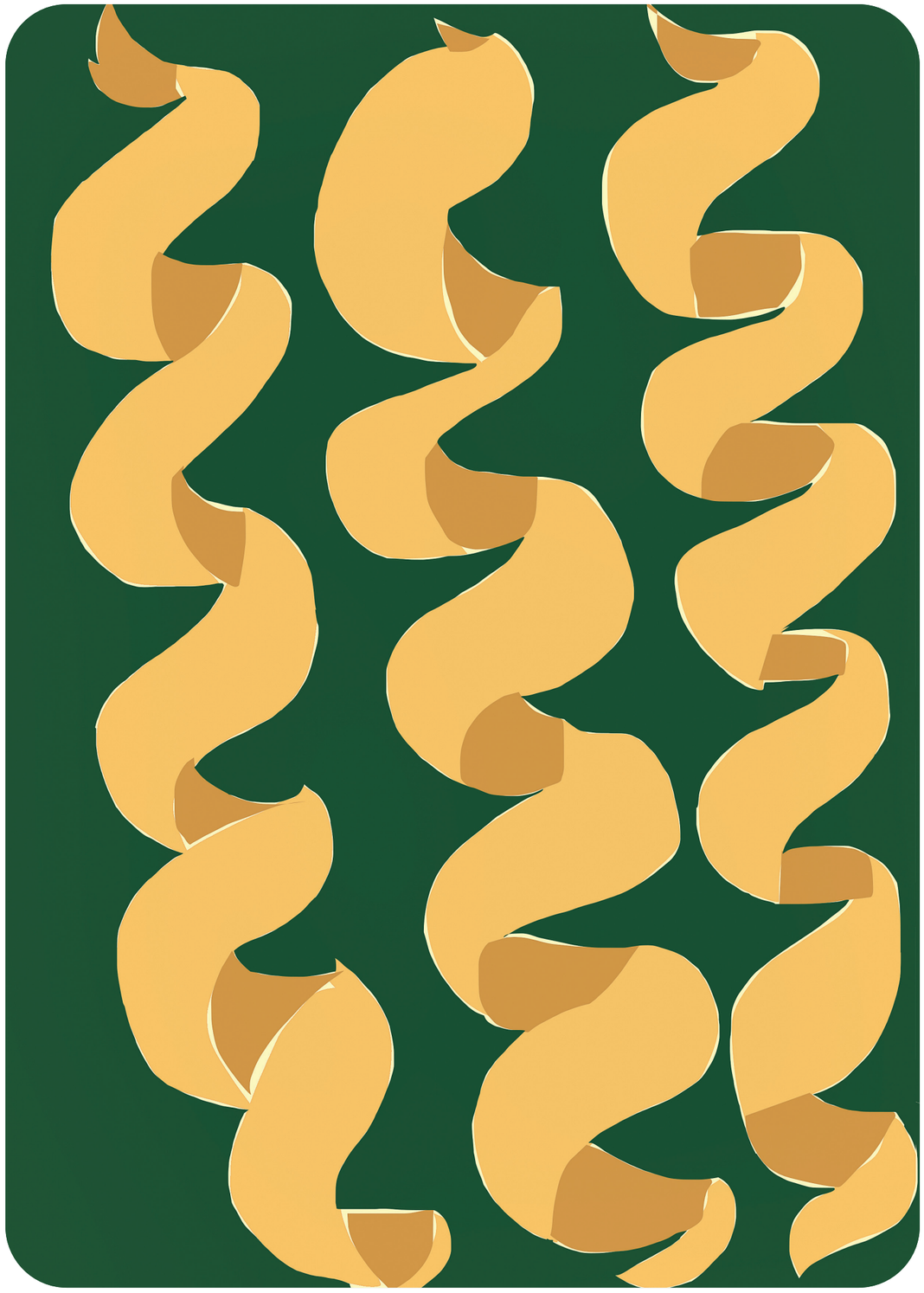
Wet Noodle

How poorly would you eat to extend your life? And by poorly, I suppose I mean "well": a smoothie of liquefied mushrooms, lentils, and broccoli for breakfast, a nut-and-chia pudding for lunch. Dinner—cooked vegetables and protein from a pre-approved list—resembles a meal. Maybe dessert is an avocado or a square of dark chocolate. But you'll need to eat all of these calories in a six-hour timeframe and take a few dozen supplement pills. Your reward for the effort will be the chance to look like Bryan Johnson, the 47-year-old tech millionaire who's trying to live forever through this diet, alongside some blood transfusions from his teenage son.

Across the world, rich tech entrepreneurs are currently in a global race to see who can interval train, calorie restrict, blood swap, and bio-hack (that's an industry term) themselves younger in something called The Rejuvenation Olympics (that's what it's actually called). These methods may sound extreme, but in the male-coded pursuit of the fountain of youth, they're hardly original. As far as theatrics go, they aren't even the most entertaining.

Please meet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian writer and artist from the early twentieth century who was a bit of a prick (and obsessed with his own), loved bowler hats and bowties, and incidentally founded the country's first fascist art movement, known today as Futurism. One of his favourite pastimes was to write lifestyle dictums disguised as political manifestos and get them published in newspapers, a sort of Jordan Peterson prototype.

Shortly before the Second World War, Marinetti wrote *The Manifesto of Futurist Cooking*—perhaps his most famous work, because it had the audacity to denounce something truly sacred in Italian culture: pasta. In his view, pasta was "an absurd gastronomic religion," a dish that was "no food for fighters," an assault of carbohydrates on the body that would leave his countrymen heavy and immobile and dumb. Unable to strategize. Unable to embark on colonial expansion. He believed that vitality (old-time speak for "longevity") could be achieved through synthetic foods that provided the nutrients strictly needed for survival. (Soylent, power bars, those AG1 Greens supplement commercials that seem to chase you around the internet; Marinetti would have loved them all.) Real nourishment, he argued, should instead come from artistic stimulation of the senses—through such refined experiences



Real nourishment, Marinetti argued, should instead come from artistic stimulation of the senses—through such refined experiences as eating cubes of beef while a trumpet blasted in your ears, or watching a skinned salami get placed upright on a plate, poured over with hot coffee, and doused in cologne.

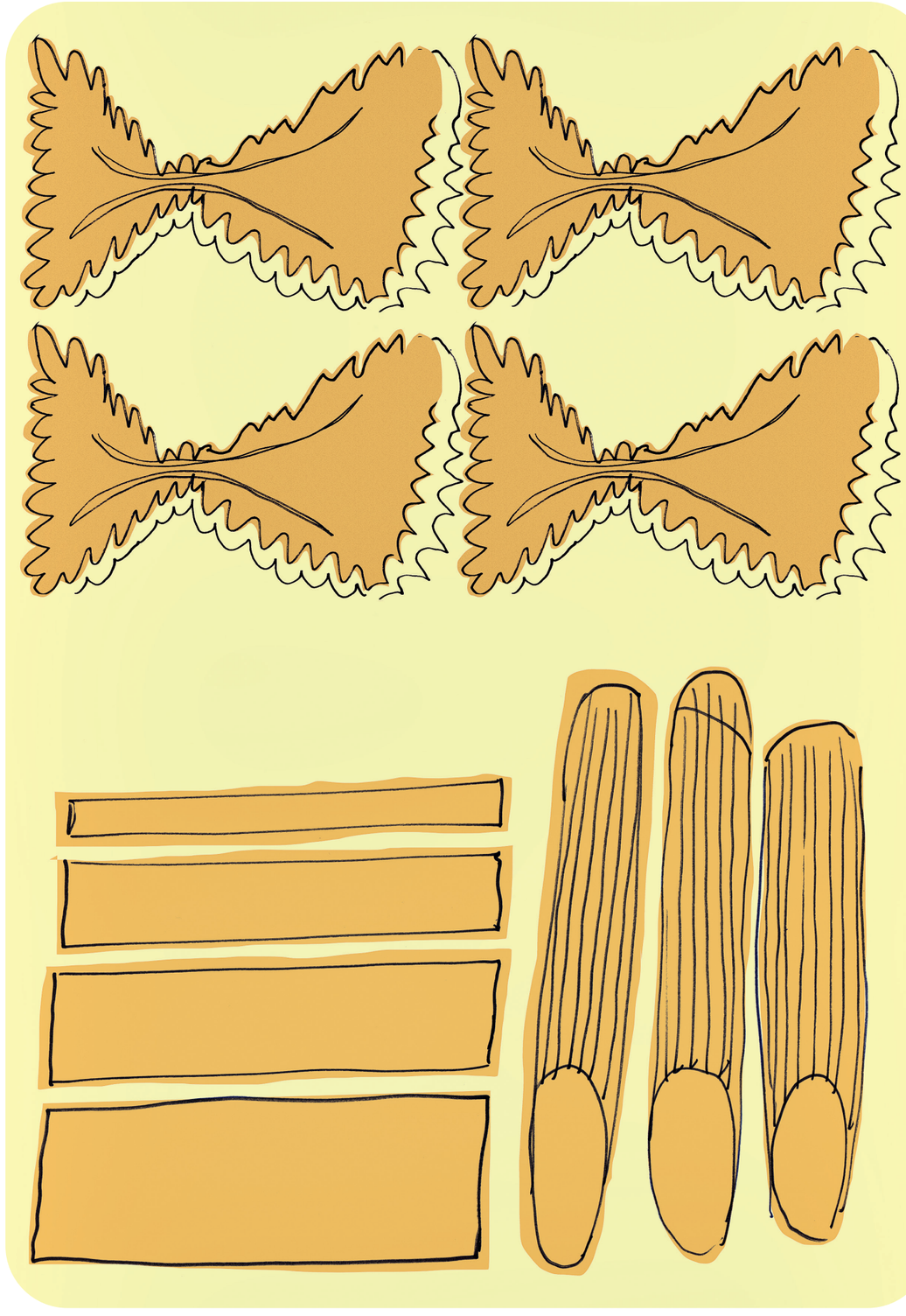
as eating cubes of beef while a trumpet blasted in your ears, or watching a skinned salami get placed upright on a plate, poured over with hot coffee, and doused in cologne.

Predictably, most Italians did not take to Marinetti's ideas about pasta. Instead, they got angry. Columnists wrote front-page editorials denouncing his name; a network of housewives staged a march through Milan to protest this evil pasta hater; a newspaper editor even challenged Marinetti to a sword duel, which he gleefully accepted and then promptly lost.

Published in 1932, *The Futurist Cookbook* was one of Marinetti's last major contributions to the movement. By that point, he and other big names in Italian Futurism had been staunch Mussolini supporters for nearly 20 years, united by their love of nationalism and their distaste for democratic government. Given how things turned out for Benito—and for the post-war Italian economy—Marinetti's drift into relative obscurity isn't all that surprising, especially in a culture where the pleasure of eating is tightly linked to living well. In some cases, that relationship even translates to living longer, without the need for shock theatre or tech-bro disruption.

Italy has one of the highest centenarian rates in the world, most of them living it up in remote and rural areas emblematic of the culture Marinetti sought to modernize—places like Genoa in the northwest, where seniors dine on pasta for lunch each day (eat it, Marinetti), or Sardinia to the south. Famously known as a "Blue Zone," that region is home to one of the globe's largest population of centenarians, men and women alike, largely because of what the people who live there love to do: eat vegetables with a little meat, drink a little wine with friends, walk wherever they can, and laugh as much as possible. Humourless biohackers of today, take note. —*Chantal Braganza*

La Cucina Italiana magazine knows that nothing draws readers like a little controversy, so back in 1931, the editors asked Marinetti to judge their pasta sauce competition. He arrived late, demanded to taste the sauces over rice instead of macaroni, and cast his vote for a safe entrant: *La Cucina* staffer Amedeo Pettini. But Pettini knew a bit about marketing as well, so he dubbed his winning creation—a mix of tomatoes, anchovies, fried artichokes, ham, and pistachios—Marinetti sauce.



Quebec's pizza serves a slice of linguistic controversy.

Dressed for Success

Quebecois folks are not going to business with a boiled hot dog. Instead, the hot dog goes into a steamer, and the bun also goes into a steamer, and what comes out is known as a steamé—unless you happen to work for the Office québécois de la langue française. They'd prefer you call it a *hot dog vapeur* (*vapeur* meaning steam), which absolutely no one does. If you order your steamé all-dressed, it will come topped with mustard, relish, and coleslaw. Not ketchup. Never ketchup.

My home province of Quebec is also home to Canada's first pizza joint: Pizzeria Napoletana, which opened in 1948 and still serves Montrealers classic thin-crust pies. Between the 1960s and 1970s (origins remain mysterious), the pie morphed during waves of cultural collision; Quebec-style pizza emerged like Venus from the sea when Greek restaurateurs went rogue. They baked pies with crust thick enough to support a carpet of shredded mozzarella, melted over a holy trinity of toppings: crunchy green peppers, earthy mushrooms, and sliced pepperoni that entirely cover the sauce. When ordered for takeout, as families, drunken revellers, and living-room hockey fans often do, the pie comes with a dough ball in the centre to keep the box from sticking to the cheese. This is what we call all-dressed pizza (also named *toute garnie*—we'll get to that). Like its polarizing Hawaiian cousin from Chatham, Ontario, all-dressed pizza is not for purists.

Along with its uncertain provenance, the pie doles out a slice of linguistic mystery, too. The French *toute garnie*, meaning served or filled with everything, was allegedly the original name. It's said to have been translated literally as "all-dressed" by anglophones in the city before the term and toppings migrated west, landing in Regina pizza ovens via a Greek Montrealer. The name then got re-absorbed by my brethren, who often dropped the "ed"—which is a hard ending for francophone mouths—and ordered a pie fit for a snake, *une pizza all-dressss*.

In Quebec, it's hard to talk linguistics and labelling, even for restaurant menus, without the Office québécois de la langue française (OQLF) rearing its gate-keeping head. The government body, created in 1961 to keep a hawk's eye on spoken and written correctness, publishes recommended usage on their website, including a page devoted to all-dressed pizza. They correctly identify the dish as one that includes pepperoni, green pepper, and mushroom, but take fundamental issue with its *toute*-ness. The OQLF's preferred name is *pizza garnie*, a dressed-down version that basically means there's stuff on it. Their list of verboten terms includes pizza *toute garnie*, pizza all-dressed, and, my personal fave, pizza all-dress.

Trying to steer notoriously shape-shifting language, especially in a place where linguistic mish-mashing is the norm, may seem like a lost battle. But there is no hair too fine for the OQLF to split. When I contacted the organization about their recommendations, spokesperson Chantale Bouchard echoed the website, stating (in French) that pizza *toute garnie* "is not semantically appropriate because the pizza this term designates is not entirely dressed—it rather includes all the classic toppings."

After stripping down language to its literalness, Bouchard then said the term *toute garnie* was based on its English counterpoint, rather than the other way around. When I asked Bouchard how that could be, since English sources claim all-dressed comes from the French term, she responded that, given the contradiction about first usage, the OQLF would remove its note about origins on the website's page. "However," she continued, "the word *toute* in pizza *toute garnie* is redundant, since the adverb means 'in its totality' and does not denote that the pizza is entirely covered." The page has since been changed, a surprising display of bureaucracy bending like a string of mozzarella.

In the end, I'm prepared to set semantics aside. This pizza represents a whole to me: multi-linguistic Quebecois people shedding their two solitudes to finally agree on something far more fundamental—a shared love of outlandish, gravity-defying food.

—Caitlin Stall-Paquet



PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIRGINIE GOSSELIN



Bringing the unexpected (and the odd dad joke) to Japanese haute cuisine.

Hasegawa's Playhouse

Among the trendy boutiques and natural wine bars in Tokyo's Jingumae neighbourhood, the entrance to Den—a Michelin two-star restaurant—is marked by a row of warmly glowing windows in lieu of a sign. Beyond the *noren* curtain that hangs in the doorway, squat clay figurines and impish creatures populate the countertops and corners. From their seats around a massive wooden table in the spacious main room, diners watch the team of young chefs prepare their food under the guidance of Zaiyu Hasegawa.

At 47, Hasegawa exudes a youthful energy, greeting each guest as he glides around the room, doling out a stack of red-and-white striped boxes. Every container displays the letters "DFC" above a white toque–capped portrait of Hasegawa, and inside, diners discover his seasonal take on "Dentucky Fried Chicken." On one winter evening, that meant a succulent fried chicken wing stuffed with rice and delicately bitter gingko nuts, nestled amid frosted pinecones and festive holly leaves.

Hasegawa's playful approach to modern *kaiseki*—Japan's seasonally influenced, multicourse haute cuisine—goes against the stiff formality that characterizes many traditional establishments. At Den, potatoes are served buried in roasted green tea leaves alongside a hoe and gardening gloves; whole smelt, deep-fried and balanced on their fins, appear to tiptoe across the plate. The signature salad, a medley of raw and cooked vegetables from his sister's garden, sparks joy with emoji-like smiley faces stamped into carrot rounds, winking beneath a tangle of leaves and edible flowers tossed in a salted kelp vinaigrette.

"A lot of people, especially young Japanese and travellers from overseas, tell me that they're afraid to go to *kaiseki* restaurants because the atmosphere is intimidating," Hasegawa says. "I want to make Japanese cuisine accessible to everyone. You can respect tradition and have fun at the same time."

His mother, a former geisha, was a gifted home cook who worked as the manager of Uotoku, an exclusive *ryotei* (traditional Japanese restaurant) in Tokyo's Kagurazaka neighbourhood. She often received bento boxes from the restaurant, and Hasegawa remembers feasting on an array of beautifully presented delicacies: fruit confections encased in clear, jelly-like agar; black soybeans, dark as onyx, sweetened with a mixture of sugar and soy sauce; and dashi-simmered gluten cut to resemble

autumn leaves with flame-hued tips. By high school, Hasegawa knew he wanted to become a chef. When he was 18, he began a live-in apprenticeship at Uotoku, though he and his mother initially kept their family ties a secret. After a stint under the three-star *kaiseki* specialist Hideki Ishikawa, Hasegawa struck out on his own at the age of 29 and launched Den in the city's Jimbocho book district in 2008.

In the world of *kaiseki*, where chefs usually spend their careers perfecting age-old recipes passed down through the generations, Hasegawa's experimental style feels like a radical departure. His love of the form, however, is what drives him to innovate. "It is precisely because we understand and respect the tradition of Japanese cuisine that we must push forward," he says. In 2016, the restaurant relocated to Jingumae, taking over the former space of French restaurant Le Gaulois, where Hasegawa and his wife, Emi, were regulars. Puchi, Jr., the Hasegawas' chihuahua, often dozes on a chair behind the front desk. After dinner service, Puchi bids farewell to guests, placing his two front paws together in a gesture of thanks.

An irrepressible teller of dad jokes, Hasegawa incorporates visual twists into his creations. His take on *monaka*, a traditional dessert typically made with sweet bean paste sandwiched between crisp rice wafers, features a savoury filling of foie gras and smoked daikon pickles instead. What looks like the beloved classic *age dashi tofu* is made with creamy cod milt, thickened with arrow root, shaped into cubes, and then deep-fried. Likewise, DFC originated as a playful jab at the Japanese tradition of eating fried chicken at Christmas—the result of a hugely successful marketing campaign by Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1974.

The aim, Hasegawa says, is to add an element of the unexpected. "First and foremost, the food has to be delicious. But if the meal makes you smile, it's all the more memorable." —*Melinda Joe*

Of the nearly 4,000 emoji available, there are some curious exceptions: no ketchup, no white wine, no artichoke, and a bunch of bread omissions (good luck finding toast or challah). But the window is now open to propose new emoji,and the Unicode Consortium's blog has a roundup of successful submission packages. How did the olive get through? Judges might've been swayed by the Marcus Aurelius quote, or by the melon emoji shade (people are far likelier to google *olive*), or they might just have had a weakness for Mediterranean food.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JACQUI OAKLEY

Liquid nitrogen, foams, assorted meat glues: a molecular gastronomist looks back.

Weird Science

Ivan Brehm spent four years as development chef at The Fat Duck in the UK. He considers the movement that changed the way we cook and eat.

Molecular gastronomy—most of us who worked in it abhor the term. It's like talking about water being wet. Everything is molecular! It's not that it wasn't accurate, it was just redundant.

For me, molecular gastronomy is something that happened. Past tense is critical. But it changed the way that we cook and its impact is undeniable. Most restaurants on the planet now have soy lecithin[1] in their pantry, regardless of the type of food they cook.

Back when I was starting out, molecular gastronomy was literally the coolest thing that had ever happened.[2] Cooking had always been seen as a creative, romantic act. Suddenly, we started talking about the science. That was important to me because my entire family were lawyers, and absolutely no one was excited about me wanting to be a chef. But there was Ferran Adrià of el Bulli on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* in 2003,[3] holding up colourful orange foam, heralding the new era. It just lit a fire in my gut.

The sheer avant garde nature of the movement meant you could subvert the rules that cooks generally adhered to. Why do we do it this way? Does it have to be that way? And should we explore a different way?

At The Fat Duck, I worked on a new version of Heston Blumenthal's famous mock turtle soup, part of The Mad Hatter's Tea Party course, using techniques that were incredibly cutting edge for the time. They required a $30,000 piece of equipment that we called The Rocket—it was a centrifuge, a super spinning device that allowed us to reduce and concentrate flavours, deconstruct ingredients, and create visually striking but also incredibly delicious food.

We used The Rocket to concentrate a stock into a jelly that was molded into a pocket-watch shape and coated in gold leaf. It could be dropped in a cup and then rehydrated with hot water and transformed into a delicious bouillon. And that was just one component. That full dish required a lot of recipe writing, a lot of research, process, and development—understanding the story of the Mad Hatter, the purpose of the Tea Party. We thought carefully about the font we'd use on the tea bag tag, and spent time designing the plates with UK ceramicist Reiko Kaneco. We employed the process of inquiry in the act of cooking.

I remember we investigated whether the temperature of the restaurant's door handle could provide either a positive or negative experience as the customer's first point of contact. We asked, did it make sense to chill the handle of the door on hot summer days? And to warm the handle of the door on very cold winter nights? I don't think people understand the degree of granularity that Heston was bringing to the entire dining experience.

But we all had to keep moving, to keep selling. Foam wasn't enough; spheres

1
A food additive used to create airy foams and mousses or to emulsify dressings and sauces.

2
At Madrid Fusión 2004, Blumenthal demonstrated the possibilities of liquid nitrogen to chefs for the first time by making his signature bacon-and-egg ice cream (pictured next page). The crowd went nuts, and that very same week, Blumenthal was awarded his third Michelin star.

3
Ferran Adrià's 2003 cover moment.





We all had to keep moving, to keep selling. Foam wasn't enough; spheres weren't enough. It became a race to see who could build or create the most outlandish technical things, and we got stuck in improvement for improvement's sake.

4
At Nouri, his restaurant in Singapore, Brehm plates a piece of sushi to symbolize the history of the dish, which began in Southeast Asia as a way to preserve fish before travelling northeast with the spread of Buddhism. A halved *idli*, a savoury rice cake from South India, is the base. A rectangular piece of fatty, pickled Japanese sardine crowned with shiso flowers sits at the top. Pressed between is pickled cucumber and a swipe of *prahok*, Cambodia's fermented fish paste.

5
Dark chocolate and blue cheese share more than 70 flavour compounds. Blumenthal made this cake partly in homage to French chef Michel Bras, who pioneered molten chocolate desserts in the early '80s.

6
Polish-American scientist and philosopher Alfred Korzybski coined the phrase to describe mistaking a concept for reality.

weren't enough. It became a race to see who could build or create the most outlandish technical things, and we got stuck in improvement for improvement's sake. My loss of meaning and purpose was not because of the molecular gastronomy movement itself, but from the vampiristic media around it. Chefs were heralded as rock stars, restaurants had PR teams—very quickly, things got detached from the core proposition, which was to cook good food. The movement died right there.

Today, if I were to look at that mock turtle soup dish again, I would include more cultural, historical, and anthropological conversations. I'd try to understand the context within which Lewis Carroll wrote, to understand the provenance of some of the preparations and their cultural purpose. Molecular gastronomy freed me up to that possibility: to be more creative, to explore dishes outside of a strict framework, to risk a dish making absolutely no sense and having only you, the cook, as a reference.

Now I see each new dish as an act of discovery, not an act of creation.[4] When Heston, armed with science, created his blue cheese and chocolate cake, people were like, my god, this man is a mad genius. How could you conceive of putting these two things together? But he only needed to look at the data and information, and pay attention, and think about how things are connected.[5]

We spent thousands of dollars on a monthly basis at The Duck on creativity workshops, and blue-sky-thinking sessions. Frankly, those were some of our least creative moments. It was too divorced from the process of just making food. Being really self-assured, I now realize, can also allow you to explore and find magic and let something unexpected happen—as opposed to intellectualizing things to a place where you can no longer contend with them, where a recipe is more important than what it tastes like. Today, most of my significant discoveries have been the result of observation and happy accident, not some crazy calculus. Because that's confusing the map for the territory.[6] —*as told to Rebecca Philps*

A TALE OF TWO TAYTOS

Written by
Anna Cafolla

Photography by
Lost Film Studios

Separated by a border but not a name, Ireland’s duelling crisp mascots are unwitting spokespotatoes for the complexities of Irish identity.



A

Amid the rolling green hills of Tandragee in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, sits a 500-year-old castle. Once, it was home to Ireland's most powerful clans and landed gentry; later, it was taken up by a U.S. army squad during the Second World War. Now, past the hulking grey defensive machicolated tower and corbelled arches, you'll find the castle's current resident, his head as knobbly as a farmer's market spud, sporting a red suit, matching hat, and cheesy grin with dandyish charm. This anthropomorphic potato chip is Mr Tayto, and he has lived in Tayto Castle, where Tayto Crisps are manufactured, since 1956.

Visitors to Tayto Castle, donning blue aprons and hairnets, can walk the manufacturing floor. The factory uses three varieties of potato from local farmers—Verdi, Lady Rosetta, and Lady Claire—that avalanche onto a conveyor belt before being syphoned off to be fashioned into one of 10 shapes at Tayto's standard 1.2 millimetre thickness (said to make for the crispiest crisp). Visitors sample these still-warm crisps straight from the moving belt, thrust into their apron wells. After the potatoes are cut, washed, and flavoured, a machine vacuum packs them into Tayto's brightly coloured packets. There's a "top secret flavour room" behind a lino sheet made to look like a bolted, medieval castle door. Kids shake hands with Mr Tayto—6 feet tall, soft and plush, more polyester than potato—and leave laden with Tayto snacks. On the way out, they pass a life-size figure of a knight on horseback, his shield painted with the yellow and red Tayto crest.

Tayto Group Limited's factory can produce one million packs per day, and exports to Canada, the U.S., and Japan. Classic crisp flavours include Prawn Cocktail and Salt & Vinegar, though there are also regional favourites (Curry Chip) and a hand-cooked line called "Tayto Craft" (Slow Roasted Beef & Peppercorn). One in every four packets of crisps sold in Northern Ireland is Tayto's famous Cheese & Onion: The cheese is bolshy and full-bodied, and there's a sweeter, more astringent onion flavour as you near the bottom of the pack. It lingers on the tongue—and the breath. Still, Cheese & Onion is a family pantry staple, and is sold in every Northern Irish pub worth its salt.

But Cheese & Onion is not, crucially, a Northern invention. That distinction belongs to Tayto Snacks, an entirely separate entity founded by Joe "Spud" Murphy in the Republic of Ireland in 1954. Murphy figured he could improve upon the earliest potato chips, which were first made in North London in the 1920s and had been imported to Ireland. Those crisps—plain, except for a salt sachet that came with the bag—were flaccid, tasteless sustenance. Murphy developed a production process at his Dublin factory that created the first flavoured crisps: cheese and onion. It was a hit—such a hit, in fact, that two years later, a businessman named Thomas Hutchinson purchased the licence and patent from Murphy to create his own Tatyo crisps across the border, in a castle in Armagh.

The two Tayto companies struck an unusual deal: Each would have their own crisps and snack portfolios, and neither would venture across the land border to trade on the opposite side. This sort of licensing agreement is fairly unique for food stuffs; Cadbury, for instance, sells its chocolate in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, even though its Dairy Milk bars are made in different factories, and the milk derived from different cows. (The ROI bars use full-fat milk from Irish cows, lending a creamier taste.) Tayto Group Limited holds the trademark in Northern Ireland, England, and Wales, and breaching that trademark carries big fines: In 2019, a businessman in Ballynahinch, Northern Ireland, ended up in court for infringement after selling the Republic counterpart crisps to pubs in Belfast and beyond. (The plaintiff's lawyer argued Tayto Group Limited was "using a very large sledgehammer to crack a very small nut.")

To tell the Taytos apart, there are different colours: The North's Tayto packs are bright yellow and red, while ROI's are primary red and blue. There are different compounds: Whereas Northern Ireland has Armagh castle, the Republic has Tayto Park, located in Meath about 60 miles away, where Tayto Snacks' operations moved from Dublin. Tayto Park was Ireland's first theme park and sixth most popular tourist attraction, with a zoo and the country's only wooden roller coaster. (It's now called Emerald Park, after Tayto Snacks' sponsorship ended last year.) And, even more vitally, there are different mascots for each house of Tayto. The southern Tayto, or Free Stayto, is stockier, with a black bowler hat, yellow striped pants, and a paintbrush smile. He is more docile, a doddery uncle figure. The Northern Tayto has a slight blush on his appley cheeks and his suit is a slimmer fit. He's a more streamlined spud.

CHIP SHOT



Free Stayto is more docile, a doddery uncle figure.



Nordie Tayto has a cheesy grin and dandyish charm.



The two crisp men share a name and little else, but over 70 years, they've come to articulate the complexities and contradictions of Irish identity. In Northern Ireland, where I'm from, many Irish Catholics and people who support reunification will reach for food ephemera—Barry's Tea, Boland's Jam Mallow Biscuits, Club Orange Soda (with bits)—to feel closer to the Irish identity on the other side. In the midst of lingering pain and political strife, though, firm allegiance to "Nordie Tayto" comes as light relief. National identity is fraught on both sides of the border; they are small regions that have experienced seismic social, cultural, and political shifts. The Church's grasp on the state has slackened and politics is always precarious. But somehow, the intricate architecture of Irishness—humour, pride, nostalgia, identity—is supported by a 1.2-millimetre slice of potato. As ROI's Tayto tagline confirms, it's "more than just a crisp."

WHETHER YOU'RE IN DERRY OR DUBLIN, Mr Tayto is an endearing, enduring institution. He has multiple fan pages and is memed endlessly. The love, IRL and URL, is cult-like—there is no compromise on your crisp of choice. Oasis's Liam Gallagher has shared his love for ROI's Tayto crisps on Twitter, while actor Jamie Dornan made a (Northern) Tayto crisp sandwich on Jimmy Kimmel. Reddit threads and Irish expat Facebook abound with diverging opinions: ROI Tayto is sweeter, Nordie Tayto is crispier. I have my own fond memories of visiting the Armagh factory for a high school business class, shaking hands with Mr Tayto while balancing an apron full of chips. After a two-year hiatus, the Armagh factory tours are set to come back—a tour guide recruitment drive is underway.

In part, these Taytos loom so large in the cultural psyche because they're both serious marketers. In the Republic, Mr Tayto ran as a novelty candidate for Carlow-Kilkenny in the 2007 Irish elections—and received a few discounted votes. The North's Mr Tayto is more a schmoozer of celebrities, meeting football manager Alex Ferguson, TV personalities like Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, and the band Snow Patrol at his Armagh abode. But the potato has also been a pawn in political theatre. As the implications of Brexit made themselves known, former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson visited the Armagh Tayto factory as a strange exercise to reassure Unionist politicians and voters that a Brexit deal would not create a de facto Irish sea border or negatively impact trading.

When it comes to narrative-making, ROI's Tayto takes a more proactive approach. In 2009, Tayto Snacks released *The Man Inside the Jacket*, a spoof autobiography co-written by Maia Dunphy, Ciarán Morrison, and Mick O'Hara. The book features clippings from the very first Tayto ads—one, splashed on an *Irish Times* front page in 1962, reads "often I'm imiTAYTOed, never equalled." *The Man Inside the Jacket* also places Mr Tayto, Zelig-like, into historical events, suggesting it was his ancestor, Turlough O'Taytaigh, who first brought potatoes to Ireland in the sixteenth century, and not Walter Raleigh, as the official record purports. Years after the book's publication, Dunphy heard a story she'd made up—that Eamon de Valera's 1959 presidential inauguration was where "Granny Tatyo" created the first-ever six-pack of crisps—featured on a radio quiz as fact.

"Tayto is in our DNA. The image of Mr Tayto is almost as emblematic



as the shamrock, but tastier," Morrison says. And the book was a runaway hit, bagging the Christmas bestseller top spot ahead of former Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern's autobiography. "People were buying the book for friends and family at home and abroad," Dunphy says. "It became the must-have stocking filler." Tayto Snacks was grateful for the success—and the literary assistance. "Mr Tayto could have written his own story," Dunphy says, "but his lumpy, tuberous fingers means he struggles to hold a pen. A few of us were happy to help."

FOOD IS AN EMOTIONAL CORNERSTONE of the diaspora experience—a potent, accessible taste of home for people who abscond from the island young, leaving behind rental crises, rural isolation, and a dearth of employment. Two-thirds of students who leave Ireland for university don't come back after graduation, 2021 research found, seeking higher salaries and better opportunities elsewhere. "But we still hold on to the old, comforting reliables," Dunphy says. "Find a successful Irish person abroad, ask them what they miss about home, and you can be guaranteed they'll include things like Barry's Tea and Tayto." Having left Northern Ireland more than a decade ago myself, I can confirm that Tayto Cheese & Onion—sandwiched between wheaten bread slathered in Kerrygold butter—does help the homesickness.

When Mikey Fleming tries to explain Mr Tayto to anyone outside of Ireland, he likens him to Mr Peanut. "But if Mr Peanut was also the president of Ireland," he says. Still, the crisp wasn't resonating quite the same way with Gen Z, so, in 2022, Tayto Snacks approached Fleming and Sam Moorhead, partners at the Dublin-based creative firm Lost Film Studios, to help appeal to a younger demographic. It had been years since his autobiography. Longer still since his electoral campaign. Mr Tayto needed to get on TikTok.

"Everyone lost their minds when Coco Pops became Choco Krispies," Fleming says. "People don't realize how deeply they care about something until it's changed." So to find the mascot's new cultural terrain, they disappeared him. Their "Where's Mr Tayto" campaign removed the character from crisp packets and dropped a zany missing persons report on social media. After fans spent weeks trading theories, his whereabouts were revealed (on TikTok, of course). Mr Tayto had also gone abroad, embarking on a global adventure across three continents.

In Galway, a 90-year-old lady booked it across a road just to shake his hand. On L.A.'s Venice Beach, Mr Tayto nudged in on a game of basketball, to the surprise and delight of a passing group of Irish people. He hit the Walk of Fame and rubbed shoulders with Hollywood's Marvel mascots, Cookie Monsters, and street buskers. He trekked dunes in Namibia, surveyed Victoria Falls, and climbed Pride Rock. He relaxed with a potato-roasted martini in New York's famed Irish bar Dead Rabbit.

The whole operation "was very analogue," Moorhead says. One actor, his identity heavily under wraps, flew to each location, hauling around his costume (spud head, big suit, bowler hat) in a carry-on suitcase. Either Moorhead or Fleming, along with a crew, would accompany him. On one occasion, the 40-degree heat in the Nevada desert swelled the actor's wrists so much, they wouldn't fit into the Tayto suit arms. Fleming donned the costume instead. "We want to keep the illusion alive," he says. "Irish people would hate to see under the hat."

The campy, charming personality of Mr Tayto has to toe a fine line. "He's technically in his sixties," Fleming says. "It's like your dad or mad uncle joining TikTok. He's not trying to be cool, but he has a great sense of humour and adventure. It's that contrast of who he is—a massive potato man—and where he is—on Venice Beach shooting hoops—that made it a hit." Mr Tayto's TikTok surged to 65,000 followers; Lost Film Studios won a bunch of international awards for their campaign. For Fleming and Moorhead, worldwide acclaim is topped by getting to work with a homegrown icon. "We've worked with a lot of celebrities over the years through advertising, but never with someone as universally loved," Moorhead says.

Irish identity is a mercurial thing, constellated for centuries by faith, culture, and politics. Borders exist as much in the Irish mind as they do on the land. I'm not sold on the idea that people should scavenge identity from the bottom of a crisp packet, then see it bolstered by guerilla branding campaigns. Still, Irishness feels like it is expanding. Irish became an official language of Northern Ireland in December 2022. And reunification seems closer than ever: A nationalist has become Northern Ireland's First Minister, 64 percent of people in the Republic are in favour of reunification, and there's growing support in England, Scotland, and Wales. If the border were brought down, then where would our two Taytos land? What is one island with two crisp empires and figureheads?

We can't know for sure, but fortune favours the bold, and at least one Mr Tayto is moving fast. When the Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar stepped down in late March, ROI's Tayto wasted no time getting #tayto4taoiseach trending. Maybe a second election campaign is in sight. Or maybe this potato has his eyes on the bigger, borderless prize. **$**

It had been years since his autobiography. Longer still since his electoral campaign. Mr Tayto needed to get on TikTok.

Go Bananas

Written by
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Photography by
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Styling by
Emma St. Germaine

Crack out the Jell-O mould: 1970s dinner party staples might be worth a second look.



If the nadir of 1970s culinary horrors

can be represented by a single dish, perhaps the seafood mousse is a contender: shaped into a curved pallid fish, garnished with strips of carrot for its scales and smile, and given olives for eyes that stare into your soul. It's a cursed object, the antithesis of a technicoloured Wes Anderson visual feast.

Similar creations ran amok through the '70s: vegetables bound in jiggly gelatin, bananas smothered in ham and hollandaise, neon salads, a hard-boiled-egg-and-ketchup spread, bananas cinched with herring, more gelatin, more mousse, more moulds. Sobering as it may be to consider that these dishes were once hailed as culinary revolutions, they were also a way to display wealth and art through food theatre. And they could be extremely silly, as culinary historian Sylvia Lovegren notes in her book *Fashionable Food*.

Those gelatin salads seem like relics of a distant time, but aspics have been around for longer. Both *Le Viandier*, a recipe collection from the Middle Ages, and *Kitab al-Tabikh*, the earliest known Arabic cookbook, list recipes for savoury gelatins swaddling either meat, seafood, eggs, or vegetables. Later, in the United States, aspic's popularity arose out of practicality. Making aspic was time consuming and labour intensive, so in 1893, domestic science pioneer Sarah Tyson Rorer suggested pre-granulating the gelatin, which helped Knox capitalize on its adaptability and launch a product called Sparkling Granulated Gelatin. Sometime in 1897, a western New York carpenter named Pearle Bixby Wait mixed that gelatin with fruit flavourings to create Jello-O, then swiftly sold the patent to the town's wealthiest resident, Orator Woodward, for $450. The rest, as they say, is history, fuelled by a dogged marketing strategy that promised both convenience and enthralling aesthetics to housewives who wanted to put something nourishing and visually striking on the table.

In 1904, that promise brought us "perfection salad." Created by Mrs John E. Cook of Pennsylvania, it was a gremlin concoction of shredded vegetables blanketed in soft, jiggly, lurid green gelatin, the precursor to all those Jell-O salads that would grace American tables for decades to come. During the Great Depression through wartime food shortages, home cooks (which is to say: women) were able to preserve food effectively and inexpensively by wrapping it in gelatin. And after the war, the same women and their daughters—raised on a steady diet of proper domesticity—wanted to put some work back into ready-made meals, so they looked for pancake mixes that required the addition of eggs and started fashioning pigs in a blanket into a wreath.

By the '70s, the Baby Boomers had come of age, caught between what Lovegren describes as the beginning of America's "post-Vietnam gloom" and an instinct to "abandon themselves to hedonism and silliness, in food and everything else." The decade was the stage for the power of labour, economic recession and inflation, coups and civil wars, sexual revolution, and gritty Martin Scorsese movies. Both food and fashion influenced each other: The




Kodachrome

Five decades removed, banana sardine boats and bridal dolls swathed in meat can seem crazy and surreal. It’s no surprise that now, across the internet, ’70s food is referred to as “a lawless wasteland.”

anything-goes flamboyance of flared jeans and feathered cuts paired well with showboat dinner parties that featured statement lamb chops arranged in a crown, stuffed salmon, towering tomato aspics, and aubergines stacked in a mould.

The outrageousness of the ’70s dinner party was also about crafting an experience that would impress guests. Women were entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers—more than half of them had jobs—which meant a little more household income and a little less time for cooking as domestic pursuit. Hosting dinner parties, however, held appeal for upwardly mobile families looking to display their culinary showmanship. What could be more theatrical than a jelly centrepiece enveloping imprisoned peas, eggs, ham, olives, and asparagus? Magazines and recipe cards duly transitioned from instructing housewives to bake cakes in the 1920s to instructing socialites on how to entertain in the 1970s.

Still, it was a time of conflicting messages: the advent of the food pyramid alongside unhinged nutrition advice that sang the praises of sugar as a weight-loss drug; second-wave feminism and the rise of women in STEM next to a host of sexploitation movies and the growth of commercial pornography. For ’70s women—who were still the ones putting together these parties, after coming back from their office jobs and getting the kids to bed—it’s possible there was a message hidden among all that gelatin. Maybe these spins on perfection salad were a tidy metaphor for the trappings of labour that women contended with back then. Maybe they saw their confinement reflected in the suspension of ingredients inside a trembling mass. Or maybe they were just high on cocaine.

Five decades removed, those banana sardine boats and macabre bridal dolls swathed in meat can seem crazy and surreal; it’s no surprise that now, across the internet, ’70s food is referred to as “a lawless wasteland.” Our trophies look a little different today, ranging from swanky espresso machines and tinned salmon in meticulous packaging to brand-name tote bags and glazed-donut skincare. If we’re showboating at a dinner party, we’re bringing food to the table in the cast-iron frying pans and Le Creuset dutch ovens they were cooked in. But, honestly, who has the time? Rents are high, wages are low, and the millennials are overworked.

We also know that sugar isn’t some magic weight-loss drug and that elaborate gelatin dinners are an awkward fit among the Keto diets, the clean eating trends, the detoxes, and the despair of today’s food culture. But in our lust and longing for virtue signalling, I’m sad that we’ve given up on high-voltage dinner parties, the joys of food play, the silliness that accompanies a seafood mousse shaped into a jaunty fish or a ridiculously delightful crown of frankfurters standing in a tureen of soup.

Maybe it’s time to bring back dramatic and bizarre celebrations of food. Maybe we should all get weird again with Farah Fawcett hair and lime Jell-O salads. Maybe we should be anarchists and stuff burgers into a whole cauliflower. So what if the food doesn’t taste great? At least we’ll have fun breaking out of the mould. Or maybe breaking into one. **S**



Hot Pockets

Los Angeles Times food columnist Jenn Harris on the best dumpling spots in the San Gabriel Valley—and how to stay safe from the dreaded dumpling squirt.

Written by
Danielle Groen

Photography by
Steph Martyniuk



A good dumpling crawl

demands variety—some *xiao long bao* soup dumplings, some potstickers, maybe a bun or two—but it also needs to toe a careful geographical line. Too much distance between locations and you risk losing momentum. Not enough, and you'll probably feel like you're going to die. It can help to stop for some tea midway through.

Pasadena native and *Los Angeles Times* food columnist Jenn Harris has perfected the art of the dumpling crawl—and she's mastered its dangers, as well. "You need to avoid the dreaded dumpling squirt," Harris says. "I've seen it; I've done it. If you take too big a bite, too quickly, molten-hot soup or juice will hit the back of your throat, which is really unpleasant, or it'll squirt across the table and hit someone else." Keeping yourself and your dining companions out of harm's way, she's learned, requires patience, finesse, and the occasional straw.

As a child, Harris tagged along with her grandma and her grandma's friends as they hit up strip malls across the San Gabriel Valley looking for the best Asian food. (Later, that same grandma would try to convince Harris' colleague Jonathan Gold that McDonald's made the best coffee; her impeccable taste has one blind spot.) "My parents love food, so we'd spend weekends driving to different parts of L.A., looking for this Korean barbecue place, or some tiny taco stand, or a restaurant in Little Ethiopia," Harris says. "I didn't leave the country until I was 20, but I was exposed to all these cultures and cuisines."

Harris still scours her grandmother's takeout menus for dumpling-crawl inspiration, but she's equally likely to take her cues from restaurant staff. "When we travel, I think we feel more permission to talk to strangers and ask for recommendations. That's so important to do in your own city as well," she says. "It's okay not to be an expert." But now, at least, you can walk out of any dumpling joint confident you aren't leaving a trail of soup behind.



Long Xing Ji Juicy Dumpling (140 W. Valley Blvd., Ste 211, San Gabriel) is a non-negotiable on any Jenn Harris dumpling crawl. It's her favourite *xiao long bao* spot in Southern California.









Long Xing Ji Juicy Dumpling specializes in two kinds of pork *xiao long bao*: a regular version, and a sweet one. "But that's deceiving, because it's not actually sweet; there's just enough sugar to somehow both counteract and boost the richness of the pork," Harris says. "So it's just the porkiest *xiao long bao*."

Don't miss Long Xing Ji's gigantic pork and crab dumpling, which arrives with its own straw (the only conceivable way to avoid the squirt in a dumpling this size). Use it to slurp up all the soup, juice, and finely ground crab and pork.

For more than two decades, the cash-only, cafeteria-style Kang Kang Food Court (27 E. Valley Blvd., Alhambra) has doled out *sheng jian bao* to San Gabriel Valley diners. The popular Shanghai street food is a superhero blend of yeasted bao, potsticker, and porky soup dumpling. "That texture is incredibly hard to get right: fluffy bun, chewy skin, and then super crispy on the bottom," Harris says. "It's all the best dumplings in one."









If you don't want to destroy your mouth on the scalding-hot soup in the middle of the *sheng jian bao*, you need to take the smallest possible bite (no, smaller; more like a nibble) and wait a beat or two for the steam to release. "Then you can sip the juice," Harris says, "because it'll be at a temperate where you're not going to kill yourself."



There are a thousand ways to doctor up your dumpling dipping sauce, but here's Harris': Add a whole lot of black vinegar to a ramekin with some slivers of ginger at the bottom, then stir in a few drops of soy sauce and enough chili to bring a little heat.

Hui Tou Xiang (704 W. Las Tunas Dr., San Gabriel) makes beef and pork potstickers that Harris describes as the savoury blintzes of the Chinese dumping world. "There's technically no soup inside, but they're so juicy that the likelihood of squirting hot meat juice across the table is very, very high," Harris says. "The trick is to exercise patience until you can shovel them in your mouth in two bites." She distracts herself with some leek pancakes while the *hui toi* comes to a reasonable temperature.









At P P Pop (127 N. Garfield Ave., Monterey Park), the pan-fried pork-and-shrimp dumplings land on the table all crowded together under a delicate, crispy lace crust. "You need to designate a dumpling separator so everyone gets some of those crispies," Harris advises. "And you definitely need to hook your chopsticks underneath the lace, then cock your head at a weird angle so you can bite sideways and avoid the dumpling squirt."

Written by
Heather O'Neill

Illustrations by
Klaus Kremmerz

CAKE WALK

The tough guy, the baker, the purple-rose maker.



When I was seven years old, I was sent from Virginia to live with my father in Montreal. My dad was a stocky tough-looking character. He was always dressed in a state of disrepair. He had a leather jacket and a large fur hat. His clothes were stained with paint and grease. He wore rubber boots that were stuffed with newspaper, which he swore was the best protection against frost bite. He had been in the army, in prison, and a member of a criminal organization, although now he was in his early fifties. He liked to spend his evening out on the street corner getting into fights.

My mother had decided she could no longer care for me, and packed my little suitcase and sent me north to meet my father. But she had not at all prepared me for the type of life I was to encounter in Montreal. My dad lived alone in a small apartment on the top floor of a run down–looking building. He was a hoarder. The apartment was jam-packed with everything he had ever accumulated in his life. In the tiny room, where I was meant to sleep, there were bureaus stacked on top of bureaus. There was a drawer filled with men's undershirts, another with broken watches, another with electrical cords. There was a bunk bed in the room. The top bunk was stacked with blankets and winter coats from the 1960s. The bottom bunk was a small cave in the mess for me to crawl into.

Every cupboard in the kitchen was bursting with culinary items. All manner of mixing bowls and blenders. Fancy glasses and coffee cups. Spice bottles. Bags of spice. But the counter of the kitchen had a tidy little spot where he would concoct dinner every night. He would throw together stir fries, spaghetti sauces, poutine. Everything tasted incredible. He was also keen to make desserts. He would take out bowls and mixers and start to bake. He made a batch of shortbread cookies that were different pastel colours, each with a small candied fruit in the middle.

While he prepared dinner, he liked to tell me the tale of how he had learned to cook. He said that as a young man, after the war, he had worked in a five star restaurant in Paris. The clientele wore fur coats and had poodles under their chairs, and they would begin to shriek if they did not like their flambé or their crème brulée.

"You are a very spoiled little girl. You are dining on recipes that are available in the world's most renowned kitchens. You are eating finer cuisine than any of the children in your class. They are at home now with their mothers feeding them Chef Boyardee or Hamburger Helper. But not you."

He was always quick to insult the mothers of the other children, in order to point out, even though he was a man, they had nothing on his parenting skills.

—

I quickly became a child who looked as though they had no mother. I wore t-shirts I got for free at festivals in the park, and pants I had made myself by cutting off the bottoms of my dad's trouser legs and wearing a huge belt. I wore one of those painted hats they were giving away at hardware stores, if you bought a certain amount of paint.

There was a girl in my class named Gloria, who most certainly had a mother. She was so well-groomed all the time. She was the kind of girl who arrived to school as though she were ready for picture day, every day. She would wear velvet pinafores and patent leather shoes. Her mother would make curls in her ponytails with a hair curler.

Everything she owned was adorable. Even her pencils had beautiful eraser tips in the shape of ice cream cones.

And then on her birthday, she arrived with the most beautiful cake. I did not know you could arrive on your birthday with a cake for everyone to eat at this school. It had certainly been unheard of at my old school in Virginia. Perhaps there were customs, here and there, in this new place that were in some ways interesting.

The teacher got a knife and napkins and cut us each a slice. To eat a cake in class seemed utterly surreal to me. The cake was covered in white icing. There was a ribbon of icing running alongside the cake. There were small white rosebuds with silver round candies in the centre.

—

When my eighth birthday, the first I was going to spend with my dad, came around, he asked what I expected him to do about it.

"Gloria brought a cake to school on her birthday. I would like to do something like that. But hers was very beautiful. I think her mother made it."

"Her mother's the blonde, right? She's full of herself."

—

My dad walked me to the bakery a couple days later. I believed we were going to purchase a cake, but instead, my dad stood in front of the window. He told me to point out what kind of cake exactly I was looking for him to make.

I looked at the display. It was filled with the racks of all manner of cakes. There were black forest and red velvet and lemon cakes. There was a tall wedding cake with a plastic bride and groom balanced on top. There was an assortment of birthday cakes with cartoon characters in the icing. But there was one on a lower rack, closer to my gaze than his, that caught my attention. It was a cake covered in pink and yellow flowers made out of icing.

I thought the flowers looked so real. The flowers seemed to be beyond the realm of human skill. They must have been crafted by a slender young fairy who made them after midnight with a



magic spell. Or maybe they were from nature. Maybe there was a field filled with flowers made of icing, and bakers went out early in the morning to pick them. Or maybe one baker made a cake and then planted some seeds for roses. And they bloomed that way.

However they were made, I assumed them to be beyond my father's capabilities. Nevertheless, I pointed to the cake with



It was a magic trick.
I did not think a brutish
man could be capable
of something so pretty.

the roses on it. He looked at it, and to my surprise, he did not dismiss it as impossible.

"I told you," he said as we walked home. "I was trained in a five star restaurant in Paris."

—

He had me climb up onto the counter. There was a rectangular door above the cupboards. This is where he kept the more specific cooking items: fondue pots, scales, pastry tools. He kept yelling at me, To the left! To the right! Then my hands felt the contours of a box, and he screamed, Okay, that's it, bring it down.

I took down a white cardboard box. It was packed with icing scrapers, nozzles, and pastry sleeves. There were little bottles of food dye. And there were small bottles filled with silver balls, and various assortments of coloured sprinkles.

When he put the icing into the pastry sleeve, it seemed so unsanitary. I thought it was a caulking gun, the kind I'd seen him use many times. In fact, he had a veritable obsession with caulking. He was often to be seen in various corners of the apartment, caulking sinks and windows.

"You can't caulk a cake!" I yelled.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he answered.

And then he began caulking the cake. To my utter delight, ribbons began to magically appear on the sides.

He changed to a different pastry sleeve and began to put green leaves on the surface of the cake.

I felt the kind of nausea I did seeing a snail slowly squeeze its head out of its shell. His fat hands were being covered in icing. I did not associate his hands with creating something so delicate. I associated them with lifting appliances, going through garbage, ripping apart buildings.

After what seemed like an hour, he was still working on the first rose, so I went off to bed. When I woke up in the morning, I walked into the kitchen to find the most spectacular cake on the table. It was three-tiered, covered in a little pink frosting, with a green vine running all around it. The top had pink and purple roses, fully in bloom, their petals exploding; I thought a bee might erupt from one. The cake was surrounded by a group of toolboxes he was going to take to work.

—

It was a magic trick. I did not think a brutish man could be capable of something so pretty. It was very strange to me, this cake that had come from nowhere, this cake that seemed far too pretty to resemble anything else in my life. It seemed to indicate I was a loved and adored child.

I brought my cake to school. It was a hit. The teachers from across the hall came to see it. My teacher called the secretary on the intercom to come and see it.

There were 27 roses, and there were 26 students in the class and one teacher. I thought for a moment it was a fluke. But then I realized this was something my dad would have considered. I was amazed, as I was not at all aware he was privy to this knowledge.

My dad never replicated that cake. He had spent all night working on it, in a fit of inspiration, or an attempt to outdo all the mothers in my class. It was simply too much effort. You don't look at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and say, Can I hire this guy to decorate the chalet.

—

It's so rare I am nostalgic for that time. There were aspects of my childhood that were very difficult and hard. I would not be able to survive them again. But I found myself, at 50, thinking frequently of the cake my dad made me when I was eight, and instantly feeling weepy.

I called my daughter, who is 29 and lives in a building across the street from mine. Arizona claims that when she was nine years old, I decided she was old enough to figure out how to feed herself. I never cooked a single meal afterwards. We lived off of take out and snacks.

At an early age, it became apparent that Arizona was one of these people who effortlessly made pretty things with her hands. She was able to knit patterns of deer in sweaters, carve birds out of wood. Surely, with her help, I could make a cake that paralleled my father's. And she's always up for any project. Only a few weeks before, I had talked her into making me a ball gown out of the rough draft of one of my novels, and then I strutted down the street in it, to the amusement of passersby.

I called her up and described my father's cake to her. "You hate cooking," she said. "You just want me to bake and decorate it, while you read a book. I'll only do it if you participate."

This made me hesitate. With my father, when I got bored, I was able to go off to sleep. But I decided I was up for the challenge. So I purchased a kit for making cake decorations. It had 25 different nozzles, which, of course, we would not need. But it seemed like excellent value for the $15.00 price tag.

We made a basic frosting recipe and put it into different bowls. Then we added food colouring. One must never underestimate the power of food colouring. If I have ever taught my child one cooking skill, let it be that. We were yelling at each other the whole time, holding the tiny bottles over the bowl: "One drop! One drop!"

I got to work on the pink roses. The frosting was a bit too liquidy. My roses looked as though they are going to melt away. I start surrounding them with little bushes of green, to hold them in place.

"I do like the colour of this green frosting," I said. "It looks like Scheele's Green, a colour that was popular in the Victorian era. It had arsenic in it and ended up killing women who wore dresses made in that colour. And wall paper in that colour was said to have almost killed the likes of Charles Dickens and Napoleon."

I learned to narrate cooking from my dad, who would always tell wild anecdotes about where his recipes came from. He had learned his spaghetti sauce recipe from a dying man in Bangladesh. His knowledge of stew came from a Polish girl who always wept into her cooking, to add salt. While I was busy discussing the history of the colour green, Arizona was quietly making a prefect trim of leaves on the edges of the cake. They looked like the sort of blue moss that grows from the eaves of mansions in Georgia. Then she created a purple wave around the base of the cake, while kneeling on the floor to be at eye level with her creation.

When we were done, I decided the cake was lovely, even if the roses were nothing more than drooping buds. "Look, clearly it takes years and years to make roses on a cake. Ours are from a spring garden in Versailles, in which the flowers have not yet bloomed. If we had been trained by a master chef in Paris, then we would have been capable of roses."

—

It was only later, before he died, that I began to fact check some of his stories, the ones from my childhood that I had taken as fact when I was too little to know anything about the world. I recalled the detail about the five star restaurant he had told me so many times. Where did you learn to cook? Where was this five star restaurant?

"The penitentiary," he said.

And it suddenly seemed much more wonderful and strange, that he had learned to make these pretty cakes for me, somewhere where pretty things were not meant to be. How could you use what you had learned in prison to delight a child? But he had.

Perhaps my father was only able to make them because he was in prison. Because he somehow knew how to grow something out of nothing. He knew to take the ingredients of his squalid life and make them into something of great beauty. And perhaps he knew at that moment, for me and for himself, that I needed him to perform motherhood in some exquisite form, even though there was no mother to be found. **S**

Written by
Amil Niazi

THE CURSE OF THE OMNIVOROUS KID

Illustrations by
The Bathwater

Millennial parents worked hard
to raise the next generation of foodies.
It's not all it's cracked up to be.

WE ASKED A BUNCH OF KIDS UNDER 12 TO NAME THE FANCIEST FOOD THEY'VE EVER EATEN. HERE'S WHAT THEY TOLD US.



MY husband and I decided to treat ourselves to some sushi after a long week. I had the menu for our favourite place pulled up on my phone; I'd already started salivating over the salmon sashimi he and I both love. We just needed to feed our two kids first. My husband tried to psych them up for a tried-and-true dinner classic, Annie's mac and cheese. He added some tuna to the mix. He referred to it as "bunny pasta" (there's a rabbit on the package) so it would seem more fun. Their response was tepid at best. Seeing him pour the packet of bright orange cheese powder over the wet noodles, I had a flash of guilt—but I pushed it aside, because these kids are six and three and Annie's has the word "organic" on the box, so it's hardly gruel.

Kids handled, we returned to our sushi order, greedily adding extra sashimi to the cart. As soon as our food arrived, though, the kids ran upstairs at the sound of the doorbell, trailing behind us, asking to see what we got. They circled our salmon like tiny vultures that had never been fed a morsel of food in their little lives. When we relented and let them have a few pieces, they pawed at it with their grubby hands, threw their heads back, and dropped the fish into their mouths.

It was a complicated moment for me. I didn't have sushi until I was 20—my Pakistani parents refused to acknowledge any food that wasn't desi food; if you can't eat it with naan, I didn't try it until I moved out. I wanted my kids to have well-honed palates, and I was proud that, unlike some of my friends' kids, their tastes went beyond cheese pizza and chicken nuggets. I've worked at it. Since my son was small, we've let him experience whatever we experienced. He's eaten fried shrimp and olives in Spain, where waitresses gushed over the cute, chubby baby in the fancy restaurant. He's eaten mussels on a patio in Croatia. Of course he has refined tastes!

Our daughter was born during the pandemic, so she didn't get to travel that way, but an older brother is a powerful motivator, so she eats just as adventurously as he does. I love that they'll eat anything, because it lets me imagine that when they're grown up, they'll be able to walk into any situation and feel at ease. I see them at some work function or dinner party, and when the main course comes out and it's weird, they don't bat an eyelash. Let's be honest: It's also a way of expressing to other parents how cultured and diverse my own food tastes are. "Ahhh, look at Amil's kid, eating that dried seaweed like candy," they'll think. "Amil must be a real gourmand and great parent."

It's possible we millennials—the generation that went ahead and made food our entire personality—have taken things a bit too far.

For better or worse, millennials created foodie culture. Small-plate restaurants? Whisky dive bars? Food trucks? You can thank us for that. Food was a form of social currency: It signalled how much we knew, how far we'd travelled, how cool we were. Our Instagram feeds were a grid of decadent brunches and dinners at hard-to-get-into spots, and our influence was wide. (Remember when Martha Stewart was posting terrible photos of her food?) Half of millennials still call themselves foodies; we are what we eat. And we want to seamlessly merge our family and our love of dining. Even before I had my own kids, I'd hear friends bragging of their brood's ability to not just devour certain fancy foods but decipher the good from the bad. Out went the picky eater. In came the particular eater. I know nine year-olds with bolder appetites than mine.

OUT WENT THE PICKY EATER. IN CAME THE PARTICULAR EATER. I KNOW NINE-YEAR-OLDS WITH BOLDER APPETITES THAN MINE.

Although it's possible I can't fully mould their food preferences—research shows about half of what kids love to eat is in their genes—I still like to think that we've made a difference by being so abundant in our offerings. That's what foodie culture does: encourages you to explore and delight in a world bigger than your own. Sure, we might not be able to afford a house or save for retirement. But my kids are already well-acquainted with Korean bulgogi, Pakistani biryani, and Chinese dumplings. They can experience the richness of the world through the food they eat.

Of course, saving for retirement isn't the worst idea. Plus I have a new baby now, so at this point, I might need him to subsist off chicken nuggets, rather than scanning the menu and confidently asking for a steak, despite not being allowed to go anywhere near a steak knife. Do you know how expensive it is having kids who know when alphonso mango season is? I'm so proud and yet I am so broke. Let's embrace our cheese pizza and french fry lovers—long may they last. **$**





Written by
Rebecca Gao

FROM BEAN TO BEAR

Photography by
Ryan Walker

What goes on at Soma, Toronto's downtown chocolate factory.

Chocolate-making is a marriage of food science, complex machinery, and Wonka-level imagination. For the past two decades, former pastry chef David Castellan and former architect Cynthia Leung have been dreaming up some of Canada's very best bars, truffles, toffee, and hot chocolate from their retail and production spaces in Toronto. When they first started in a tiny shop in the Distillery District, no one was making small-batch chocolate, and all the equipment available was designed for large-scale producers, so the couple had to jerry-rig plumbing fixtures and retrofit vacuums. But in 2015, they opened a 10,000-square-foot "bean lab" in Parkdale, where curious customers can swing by to see Soma's amazing (and adorable) confections come to life.

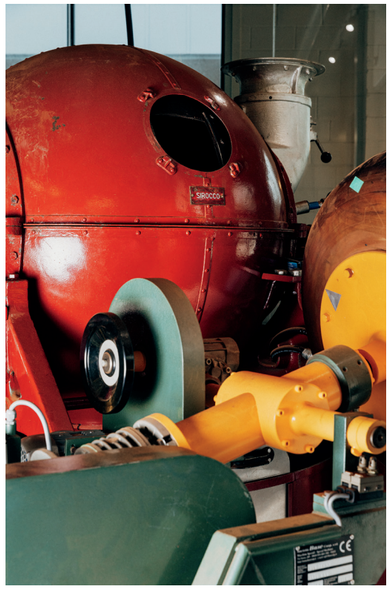
Every year, Leung, Castellan, and a small team of chocolatiers turn 12 tonnes of cocoa beans, sourced from plantations and farms in Central America, the Caribbean, Madagascar, and the South Pacific, into single-origin chocolate bars, vividly coloured fruit chocolates, and boxes of gorgeous truffles. There are also some playful creations—a gigantic chocolate birch branch; five pieces of chocolate "chicken drumsticks," complete with mini bucket—alongside seasonal delicacies. This year, for Easter, Leung wanted their annual "egg creature" to be extra special, so she concocted a 6-inch-tall baby panda called Bao Bao. (Last year, Soma made an egg-shaped beaver named Niblet, complete with bitty chocolate forepaws.) Aside from Bao Bao's white-chocolate egg-shaped body, which comes from a mould, all of his dark-chocolate elements were hand-cut by Leung and her team. Each panda is different: "Some of them are super muscular, others are skinny," she says. "I felt like a fashion designer, cutting out tiny flat pieces for Bao Bao's body—it was like making little bikini tops out of chocolate."

He sits on a nest of homemade *gianduja*, which the team created by crushing roasted hazelnuts and dark chocolate together and then hand-cranking the mixture through a pasta press. Inside Bao Bao's belly, you'll find a wrapped yuzu candy and a little rice-cracker donut—if, that is, you can bear to crack the bear apart. For Leung and Castellan, this blend of old-school techniques, hand-made delicacies, and goofy imagination is what Soma (and chocolate-making) is all about. Here's a closer look at the inner workings of their chocolate factory.

All chocolate starts out as cocoa beans, which grow exclusively between 20 degrees north and south of the equator. Soma's ethically sourced beans usually cost $600 to $1,000 for a 60 kilogram bag, but the price has tripled in the past 12 months after a bad harvest in West Africa, where most beans are grown. Climate change, bean disease, and pests all contribute to this hyper beanflation.



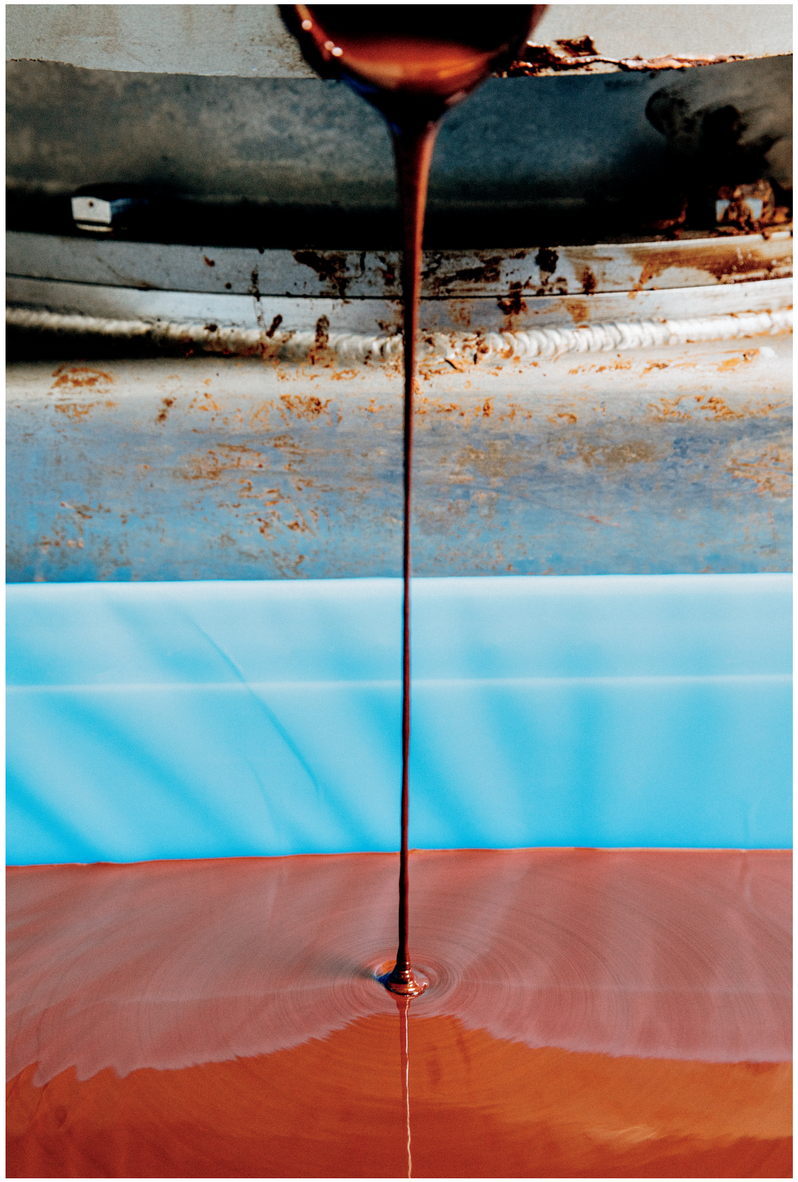






First, the beans go through Soma's destoner (top), a machine that separates them from everything else that might've hitched a ride: dead bugs, sticks, and, often, cigarette butts. The beans then get roasted (bottom left) 30 to 40 minutes at 120°C to bring out the chocolatey flavour. Next, the roasted beans are put through a winnower, which mechanically deshells the beans and leaves behind cacao nibs, the base of all chocolate.





The nibs are put through a grinder (left), which presses them into what's called chocolate liquor, the liquid form that's used in all of Soma's products. From here, it's a choose-your-own-adventure for the chocolatiers, who can add whatever ingredients they want (recently, Soma's experimented with pomegranate and Japanese whisky). Often, the liquor is sent to a conch machine, where it's heated, mixed, and aerated to remove unpleasantly sour and bitter notes. For bars, the chocolate is then tempered to get that shiny finish and satisfying snap.

One of Soma's signature products is their fruit chocolate. Here, they're making their black currant chocolate, which starts with the chocolatiers putting liquor into special filter bags, then applying hydraulic pressure and heat to separate the fat (AKA cocoa butter) and cocoa powder. The butter is combined with black currant powder and organic cane sugar. The whole mixture is then twice fed through Soma's three-roll mill to refine the chocolate and make the black currant and sugar particles as small as possible for a smooth bite.

Leung says that the black currant chocolate is one of their most popular flavours. Back in the early twentieth century, black currants (or cassis) were banned in the U.S. because they were a host for pests that threatened white pine trees; New York state only lifted that ban in 2003. As a result, many North Americans aren't familiar with the uniquely tart flavour of black currants. "There's a whole generation who doesn't know what it tastes like," Leung says. "We want to make these flavours common."









CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT: Soma stores the prepped and cooled liquor in plastic bins—a quick reheat gets it back to its liquid (and workable) form; truffles and fruit chocolate bars move fast out of the store; Soma also makes hot chocolate powder, which comes out in dried flakes from their massive dehydrator; and, of course, here's our good friend Bao Bao again.

Growing Pains

Cellular agriculture is meant to be a solution to our climate woes, but no one has figured out how to make this stuff economically viable or properly edible. Is it nuts to try to disrupt meat?

Written by
Jason McBride

Illustrations by
Niklas Wesner



In the spring of 2023,

the Australian start-up Vow unveiled a food product that was somehow both brand new and prehistoric, mouth-wateringly appetizing and jaw-droppingly grotesque, a dish that nobody had ever seen before and that was also completely inedible. They called it the Mammoth Meatball, and that's exactly what it was—a sphere of glistening ground meat, roughly the size of a toddler's soccer ball, and "grown" from the DNA of the famously extinct woolly mammoth. When the meatball was first presented, at a carefully orchestrated event held at Amsterdam's NEMO Science Museum, it did just what Vow hoped it would do: generated reams of news coverage, from the CBC to Colbert, *The Guardian* to *USA Today*, all of which placed the company at the forefront of a decade-long race to perfect lab-grown meat. It was an old-fashioned PR stunt, and a pretty good one at that.

For Vow's founders, George Peppou and Tim Noakesmith, the mammoth provided a poetic metaphor. The creatures were wiped out by climate change about 4,000 years ago, and now, with our own species similarly imperiled—partly because of our relentless reliance on exploitative animal agriculture—science and technology could harness the animal's genetic material to help us avoid such a fate. The process was complex: Vow identified the gene in mammoths that gives its flesh a meaty taste, and then, using African elephant and sheep genomes, grew and multiplied the mammoth cells. But the potential payoff was revolutionary. Climate change, Peppou and Noakesmith argue, is reversible, and substituting lab-grown meat for the conventional stuff is one enormous and vital step toward reversing it.

Lab-grown (or "cultured" or "slaughter-free" or "cultivated") food has been around since 1990, when the FDA approved a bacteria genetically engineered to produce rennet, the enzymes used to curdle milk for cheese. (For centuries before that, those enzymes were derived from the stomach linings of unweaned calves; the 1970s decline in veal consumption, which coincided with a boom in cheese consumption, led to synthetic rennet.) Cultured meat, meanwhile, has been a so-called emerging technology since 2013, when food scientists sampled a patty made of lab-grown cow muscle fibers at a press conference in London. That particular burger cost about US$330,000 to create, paid in part by Google co-founder Sergey Brin. Since then, hundreds of companies and university labs have been painstakingly trying to make such products cheaper, faster, and better able to replicate the appearance, taste, and mouthfeel of everything from steak to shellfish. Pretty much all these players are hoping to make the meat industry more ecologically friendly and humane, but it's also a tremendous financial opportunity. Conventional meat is a US$1.7 trillion a year business; capturing even a part of that would be huge.

Some of the biggest names in the lab-grown world, like the Bay Area's Upside Foods and Eat Just, have developed or are developing cultured chicken nuggets, duck, meatballs. Vow's distinguished itself by experimenting with tastes and flavours never experienced by human beings, but they're not alone in their exoticism; Primeval Foods, based in New York, is working on producing in vitro lion and zebra meat. Disrupting meat has, not surprisingly, attracted tech luminaries (Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos), but also major wealth funds (the Abu Dhabi Growth Fund), celebs long associated with green causes (Leonardo DiCaprio, José Andrés), and the biggest of the big conventional meat companies (Tyson, Cargill). Between 2016 and 2022, investors injected US$3 billion into the industry. Cell-based chicken has already been approved for sale in Singapore, Israel, and the U.S.

But if it feels like the industry is at a tipping point, it's not quite clear in which direction it will tip. There was more than one metaphor at play during the Vow press conference. As culinarily and scientifically spectacular as the mammoth meatball was, nobody ate the thing. Because humans hadn't consumed that particular protein for thousands of years, and because it was unclear how our immune systems would respond, regulators did not grant approval for consumption. Even the meatball's creators, who'd reportedly used a blow-torch to simulate a perfectly baked crust, hadn't sampled it. Theatrically presented in a dry-ice-filled bell jar, there was a look-but-don't-touch quality to Vow's creation. And that seemed to sum up the current state of cellular agriculture as a whole.

From the beginning, the industry's been the plaything of VCs enamoured of technological quick fixes and anxious for progress and returns. A lot of companies are working on the same thing at the same time, and competition, rather than collaboration, is hardly the most efficient way to solve a problem as enormous as the reinvention of food. And all that financial investment? It still only adds up to the cost of building a single EV battery factory. While the science has progressed over the past five years—you can buy ice cream right now that's made using these techniques—there's no real way of knowing when we'll see lab-grown beef at the grocery store. Lenore Newman, director of the University of the Fraser Valley's Food and Agriculture Institute, is bullish on cellular agriculture, particularly on the dairy side. But even she admits it could be 30 to 40 years before we have "3-D printed steak."

That hasn't stopped some governments from arguing that cell ag is a threat to both the meat industry and a certain way of life. In the U.S., there's legislation, both proposed and passed, to ban lab-grown meat in Florida, Alabama, Arizona, and Tennessee (where politicians are pushing for an eye-popping US$1 million fine just for selling it). Several countries, including France and Australia, are drafting similar bills, and Italy's hard-right government says they "intend to defend our civilization against a model driven by delocalization and long supply chains."

All of this has led, inevitably, to a sense that the promise of cell ag has curdled. This past February, the food journalist Joe Fassler argued in an extensive *New York Times* op-ed that the technology was "magical climate thinking, a delicious delusion," and that within the industry there was a "litany of squandered resources, broken promises, and unproven science." Isha Datar, the Canadian scientist who coined the very phrase cellular agriculture and who's currently the CEO of New Harvest, a non-profit cell-ag research institute, took issue with many of Fassler's claims, but conceded that we've "entered a period of disillusionment with cultured meat."

Conventional meat, however, remains more popular than ever. That consumption is inconsistent—the average American eats 273 pounds of meat a year, while the average Ethiopian only eats 12—but for large parts of the world, meat remains an efficient way to get your vitamins and minerals. The UN, in fact, has recommended that poorer nations ramp up meat production to address widespread malnutrition. Meat remains relatively affordable, especially in North America, where animal agriculture is massively subsidized and external costs, such as GHG emissions, are not factored into prices. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, meat is so completely integral to our lives that most people have a profound emotional attachment to it. It's the centrepiece of our holiest of holidays and an ingredient in the most mundane after-school snacks (hello, pizza pockets). It binds families and communities and cultures.

But meat is making the planet uninhabitable. Livestock emissions—generated by cow burps, manure, and also the feeds for those animals—account for 15 to 20 percent of all GHGs, more than all forms of transportation combined. Meat production is the leading cause of deforestation, which greatly

US$3 billion has been poured into lab-grown meat already (but you can't really eat it anywhere).



Lab-grown meat insists that we can eliminate the costs and cruelties of conventional animal agriculture without having to give up our burgers and bacon. We simply need to do more of what we, as a culture, already like to do: double-down on human ingenuity and pour a bunch of money into it.

exacerbates climate change. Climate scientists, having spent the last few years demanding we phase out fossil fuels, now insist we wean ourselves off meat and dairy—and quick. According to Harvard's Animal Law and Policy Program, if we're going to meet our Paris climate agreement goal of limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, we need to cut animal emissions by 50 percent within the decade. That gets iffier every day, given animal consumption trends—by 2032, it's expected that we'll be eating 85 billion chickens annually, up from 74 billion chickens now.

And therein lies the obvious appeal of lab-grown meat. It insists that we can engineer our way out of this crisis. It argues that we can eliminate the costs and cruelties of conventional animal agriculture without having to give up our burgers and bacon. We simply need to do more of what we, as a species and culture, already like to do: double-down on human ingenuity and pour a bunch of money into it. We don't need to give up meat at all. We just need to reinvent the meat wheel.

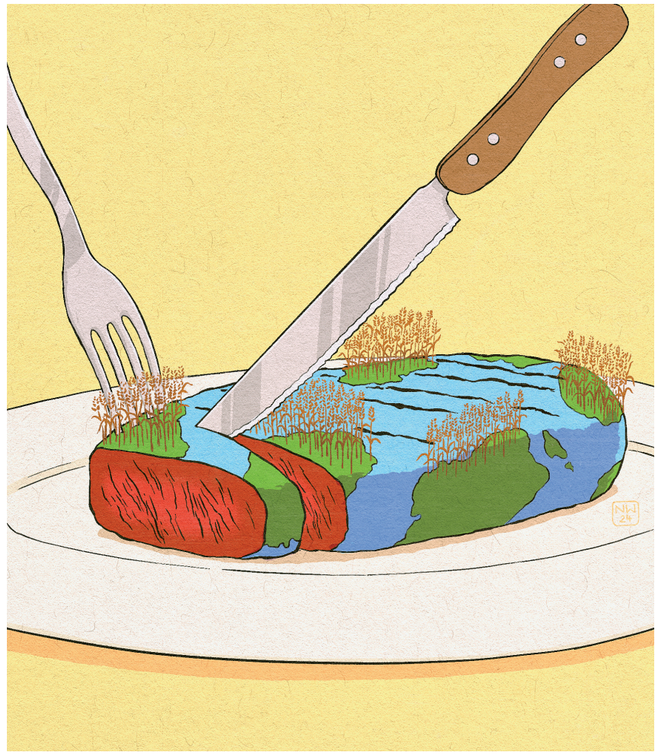


In Canada, more than 80 percent of the grain we grow goes directly into the mouths of livestock.

I had my last burger when Bill Clinton was president. It was the mid-90s, and I was 21, living in the Bay Area with my parents. That summer, while working at a bookstore, I read John Robbins' *Diet for a New America*, which went into exhaustive, persuasive detail about the inhumanity of factory farming and the costs of eating animal products. I was radicalized, and instantly gave up meat. At the dinner table, I became that beloved combo: the scold and the know-it-all. Fifteen years ago, I went further, and became vegan.

It was easy being vegetarian in California—it helped that I worked with a bunch of hippies and my family had an adorable pet chicken named Henry, who often napped on our kitchen counter—and I naively assumed that the rest of the world would soon follow suit. Or at least my family and friends would. This wasn't exactly the case. Instead, I opened myself up to a lifetime of complaint, confusion, and argument. Last Christmas, my dad—who won't let a meal pass without a crack about my diet—snuck butter into my mashed potatoes. My mother-in-law recently asked if I could eat turkey gravy because "it came from a can." I have, on at least two separate occasions, been called soy boy. Dinner party invitations remain few and far between.

But in the 30-odd years since my last burger, meat and meatlessness have cycled through different phases and trends. *Time* magazine wrote about the end of meat in 1999. Celebrated chefs and cooks, from Charlie Trotter to Mark Bittman, Amanda Cohen to Alicia Kennedy, have in various ways made vegetables hot and haute. Michael Pollan argued in 2009 that we should all be eating "mostly plants," and writers like David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Safran Foer published paeans to animal rights that had some impact, even if it was short-lived. The concept of less-wasteful nose-to-tail eating entered the mainstream in the late '90s, along with the concurrent idea that, on a small and local scale, meat could be raised, slaughtered, and consumed more ethically. That certainly helped ease the conscience of many a carnivore, so much so that *Portlandia* skewered the trend. ("The chicken you're enjoying, his name was Colin, here are his papers.") This made a shred of sense to me—my opposition wasn't *completely* to eating meat, but more to the way that meat was produced—but the



Almost half of the world's habitable land is used for agriculture.

consolation didn't go as far when you learned that 99 percent of all meat still came out of factory farms.

All told, I've managed to convince maybe a half-dozen people in my life to go vegetarian, and that includes my 11-year-old son, who has no choice in the matter (and who still scarfs down chicken whenever he can get it). But in the last decade or so, it has become undeniably easier to not eat meat. In North America, vegan products were rebranded as "plant-based," slightly softening the stigma, and ersatz beef, chicken, and pork infiltrated every grocer and fast-food chain. Even if the Beyond Meat boom went a little bust, the continued release of new and improved plant-based products—especially cheese, which, I swear, is getting much better—suggests a still-growing market. While it's tricky to get good data on the number of vegans in the world (surveys suggest it's anywhere from 1 to 3 percent), the vegan food industry is expected to double to US$92 billion by 2027.

At first, lab-grown meat appeared to be part of this same trajectory. Here was a scientific vision that might enable us to have our steak and eat it too, all while saving the planet from certain doom. Because, of course, what was really pushing more people toward veganism was fear: fear of losing more land and biodiversity to animal agriculture, fear of the GHGs that factory farms belch, fear of multiplying and mysterious zoonotic diseases, fear of a warmer and winterless world.

But techno-optimism's a hard thing to hold on to, particularly in our A.I.-anxious age. It's tough to find any industry—from movies to music, politics to the press—for whom tech's unfettered hegemony has been a net positive. Venture capital, tech's lifeblood, is hardly a benign force, either. How much do we want these things to be intervening in something as elemental as the food we eat? And why are we expending all this effort and money, contorting ourselves into such technological knots that we're literally exhuming prehistoric animals as some sort of climate change Hail Mary, to solve a problem that has always had an obvious solution? In the face of cataclysmic ecological peril, mass extinction, and the destruction of the biosphere, doesn't our persistence in consuming meat seem…a little ridiculous?

How about just giving it up? Or, perhaps more realistically, restoring meat to the place it occupied in our lives before its massive industrialization—when it wasn't a routine source of nourishment, but a rare (sorry), almost incidental part of our diets. A 2022 Stanford study argues that phasing out animal agriculture over the next 15 years, coupled with a global switch to a plant-based diet, is the best, most immediate way to reverse climate change. That would basically stop the increase of GHGs for 30 years, giving humanity a bit more time to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels.

The food writer Alicia Kennedy, author of the recent book *No Meat Required* and no fan of lab-grown meat, has come to similar conclusions. "Scaling back animal agriculture to a place where it works with local ecosystems, and isn't a labour and land burden, seems to me a much more reasonable approach to helping people cut down on meat production and consumption," she told me. As with the climate crisis in general, meat is a problem caused mainly by a few people having too much. "A recent study showed that in the U.S., only 12 percent of people on any given day account for 50 percent of all beef consumption," Kennedy says. "Overconsumption of beef specifically is a cultural issue hitting a small population—and perhaps easier to rectify than the creation of whole new categories of food."

Which brings us back to Vow. Just as I still have a bit of hope that self-driving cars will one day eliminate traffic congestion, a part of me hopes cell ag will prove to be a panacea, so I reached out to the company to see how things were going. Before I could speak with the co-founders, however, I had a pre-interview with two junior staffers. A few minutes into our call, they made it clear that they were both meat eaters and that the company was not opposed to animal agriculture, just factory farming. They didn't want to alienate the animal agriculture industry, they said, nor did they view the company's work through a "vegan lens." That was fine by me—at that point, I just wanted to hear about the meatball—but maybe my own vegan lens was too visible. A few days later, they declined to participate in the article, telling me that "the timing isn't quite right for us" and "this story doesn't quite align with our priorities for now." Those priorities include a second factory they say they're building in Singapore.

That factory was scheduled to open last year. I'm glad it's a priority for them, and I hope the urgency of the problem is hastening their work. But we don't need to wait for agricultural alchemy. We don't need to think about scale or investment or bioreactors. We don't need a prehistoric animal to save our bacon. All we need to do, in fact, is much less—just back away from the cow. **S**

Why are we expending all this effort and money, contorting ourselves into such technological knots that we're literally exhuming prehistoric animals as some sort of climate change Hail Mary, to solve a problem that has always had an obvious solution?



Written by
Katie Underwood

What the Shuck?

Photographs by
Kristina Dittmar

Decades before lobster went from poor man’s chicken to status cuisine, oysters charted a similar path. Ben “Moody” Harney is hell bent on bringing them back to the masses.

In the 1800s, long before hot dogs and halal carts owned the streets of New York, oysters were the go-to food of the people. Harvested from teeming river beds by enterprising seafarers, many of whom were African American, they were sold for pennies—and by the millions—at bustling stalls. It wasn't until Thomas Downing, a Black businessman and abolitionist, founded the exclusive Thomas Downing Oyster House in Manhattan in 1825 that oysters became the crown jewel (or pearl) of fine dining.

Here in the twenty-first century, Downing's legacy is being upended, in the best way, by Ben "Moody" Harney, a 37-year-old oystertender from Crown Heights. In 2019, Harney founded Real Mother Shuckers, which includes catering, history (and shucking) lessons, and a collapsible cart that Harney schleps around the city, serving Fanny Bays and bluepoints to curious newbies on a bed of ice. His goal? To give oysters mass appeal. Again.

When did you actually have your first oyster?
I was doing some non-profit work in Louisiana, and there was a drive-through daiquiri place. The daiquiris were *gigantic*. A guy was sitting out back grilling oysters over a barbecue pit, so I hopped out of the car and got a whole bunch. Eating them grilled was amazing, but I wasn't sure about the raw stuff.

That raw stuff eventually became your life's work. How did that happen?
I moved to Florida in 2010 and took a job at a chain steakhouse, mainly to get out of my girlfriend's parents' house. I thought I had to do the "Yes, chef, right away, chef" thing and work my way up through the stations. My colleague was the first person to say, "You know, you could just get a job doing oysters." So I did. When I went back to New York, I oystertended—like a bartender but for oysters. It was a way to get a really good salary, avoid prep work, and not have to stand over 5,000-degree grills.

When did you make the jump to raw?
While working at Maison Premiere in Williamsburg, I tried some oysters from Prince Edward Island and went, "Crap. These are actually delicious." Soon, I could smell the difference between East and West Coast varieties, the high salinity or lower moisture—and I'd tell our guests about it while wearing a goofy paper hat.

You're a fourth generation New Yorker and even you didn't know about the everyman origins of oysters. How did you stumble on that history?
At Maison, one of the guests recommended *The Big Oyster* by Mark Kurlansky. It was all about the origins of the oyster trade in New York City, from its influence on Wall Street to the pavement on Pearl Street, which got its shine from crushed shells.



So oysters built this city in a few senses, then. How did that look in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?
Back then, many whalers and most oystermen were Black. They built up Staten Island and orchestrated relationships with the Lenape, an Indigenous tribe. Downtown, oysters were sold in "dive bars"—underground cellars where you could initiate trades and meet "women of the night." Oyster stalls were the original hot-dog carts. I didn't ever think I'd open an oyster bar of my own, but after learning about Thomas Downing, I was a man on a mission. He took oysters from a street food to fine dining—a son of slaves from Virginia. Before him, I'd always looked at oysters as rich-ass white people food.

So you're upholding his legacy but also undoing it?
For me, it's about taking it from the yacht clubs and hotels and putting it into the hands of the common person. This way, people can try something they've never had and fall in love with it, like I did. I'm on a mission to get Popeye's to sell an oyster sandwich.

How much of your job is spent on oyster education—or re-education?
A lot of it. I did an episode of Netflix's *High on the Hog*, which is all about how African Americans influenced the country's cuisine. I've done lectures at schools and the Brooklyn Public Library. I do classes—about history and shucking—at the pier. I've also brought my cart to public housing facilities, giving people the rundown about how oysters are inherently a very Black thing and not a food to be afraid of.

Is the cart your way of de-bougifying the oyster experience?
The vast majority of the money I've made is from private events; the carts are more for shock value. Oysters are a crowd pleaser, a sexy food. When people see them on a plate, they get excited. Even if we're on the street, they're like, "Oh, we're about to *do* something. Let me raise my pinky!"

Who's your clientele?
When I first started, I was doing block parties. There was one on Tompkins Avenue in Brooklyn that happens every summer Sunday. People would show up to look hot, listen to music, drive their motorcycles on the block. A lot of my initial clients came from that party: city councilmen, local celebrities. Some were just Black folks wanting to support a Black man doing something cool. I've given so many people their first oyster. Probably thousands at this point.

Do you think oysters could ever reach their former Big Apple glory—or at least surpass bagel status?
Maris Stella, Deep Water—some of my favourite oyster farms outside of Prince Edward Island are right here, in our own backyard. Convincing everybody to eat them raw won't be an easy sell, but I think oysters will be more in demand. Not like bagel-demand. Maybe like...curry. **S**



