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## Food for Thought. Nourishment, Culture, Meaning

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# **Food for Thought**

## **Nourishment, Culture, Meaning**

Edited by

Simona Stano (University of Turin, Italy)  
and Amy Bentley (New York University, United States)

## **Foreword:**

### **Good to Think With**

This compelling collection of essays draws on a conference held at New York University in October 2019. The conference, co-organized by Simona Stano, a faculty member in the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin, and Amy Bentley, professor of food studies at New York University, convened scholars from around the world, giving them space and time to share ideas exploring the cultural meanings and uses of food from a variety of perspectives, often over good food.

Each unit in this volume unpacks a theoretical and empirical problem. It opens with a general model of how something so subjective as food is connected to other peoples' practices and thinking. This is done through language, linking two forms of orality; food is what goes in and language is what comes out. Both have a grammar. It is the rules of cooking, serving and eating, and modes of meaning making that this volume is after. A subset of signification is zeroed in on, in an early chapter, where food is sometimes paradoxically given a face, when Apulian bakers construct marzipan cakes in the shape of fish and lamb, while real fish heads and lamb heads are obscured in dishes. What is the temptation and the taboo here to give food a face? In a sense, this book is about the very science of intersubjective communication and obfuscation and the constitutive signs of such communication, and its limitations.

A second cluster of chapters engages with the problem of heritage-making in two directions: it turns our face away from the exclusive focus on European terroir strategies (which when uncritically celebrated turn out to be forms of ethnic cleansing about roots, excluding those with more portable practices) in attending to actors in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and in Tripoli, Lebanon and secondly focus on heritage as a view of the past from the present. As the present changes, so does its relationship to the past, which while opening up some modes of meaning-making, closes others.

Heritage is what current groups of unevenly endowed classes of actors fight to assert and assemble as their past.

Law is the register of social struggles fought, lost and won. A 1929 Missouri General Assembly bill called for the “sterilization of persons convicted of murder, rape, chicken stealing...”. The author asks what is chicken stealing doing in that list of capital crimes and what might it reveal about the relationship between race-making and law-making in American history? If that is an exemplar of state-sponsored violence for trivial crimes matched by deadly and disproportionate punishment, another author turns the question around. She takes two examples of the Black Panther Party’s 1969 innovative free school breakfast program and the I-Collective’s struggle to give voice to Black and indigenous food activists. She reveals the relationship between the medium and the message on the new terrain of food related social media in the pursuit of social justice. In the process she shows us how the new social media may not merely be the machine for the production of celebrity self-indulgence.

Modern life is unimaginable without advertising and media, which underlines the question about the relationship between reality and representation, undermining the easy fixity of either. Taking the example of advertising for tripe over the last hundred years in the UK, the authors outline the attempt to symbolically represent a sense of hygiene, purity, economy, and self-esteem that was eventually subverted by cheap muscle meat and the social construction of disdain, disgust and symbolic violence organized around class and locality. In another lovely chapter, the author poses the acute question: what happens when food becomes the plaything of the young—for instance on Instagram, as the audience for Netflix Master Chef, and via YouTube binge-eating shows—rather than the domain of the more mature cook and care-giver? In the process, this chapter seeks to provide much needed order to the vast landscape of food media in the twentieth-century and its weird proliferation in the already over-burdened twenty-first century.

A range of scholars in the final section argue that the current gastromania around food consumption, materially and symbolically, necessitates the extension of the analytical aperture

beyond need and nutrition. Starting from Barthes, where food is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviors”, these authors push the semiotic envelop to open up to aesthetic, ludic, critical, and utopian possibilities. From superfoods that promise to cure us of the malaise of modernity to new definitions for the toxicity of sugar, salt and fat, the range of fads demands new critical extensions to nutritionism, the gender of diets, and orthorexia.

The collection as a whole provides subtle instances of the bridge and the barrier between the textual and the paratextual, the subject and the object, reality and representation, individual ideas in our heads and collective discourses, and everyday practices to big theories of the self and the other. It brings to a head the conflict between science and everyday experience, pressing on the subject, the object, and the inter-subjective constitution of knowledge about our bodies, its ills and potential cures, both as myth and as medicine. This lively collection draws our attention to the gap between thinking and doing, where thinking is also a form of doing. It successfully connects micro-analysis and close-reading, to macro-changes and distant speculations, without leaching the thing, the sign and the subject of everything that might be ensconced within it. It takes us successfully from semiotic instance to broader theoretical hypotheses, about something as quotidian and ubiquitous as food, which at it turns out, is indeed very good to think with.

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We are also very thankful to all the academic centres and other entities that allowed the organisation and fruitful realisation of the international conference *Food for Thought* (New York, October 14-15, 2019), as well as to the scholars and public who very actively participated in it, originating a profitable and stimulating debate, which paved the way for this book.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Food for Thought: An Introduction

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Elected best pastry chef by the Relais Desserts Association (2016), Les Grandes Tables du Monde (2017), Gault&Millau (2018) and The World’s Best 50 Restaurants (2018), Cédric Grolet has also become famous worldwide for his 1.6 million-follower Instagram account (@cedricgrolet), where he frequently posts pictures of his culinary creations. Among these, his “cube cakes”<sup>1</sup> have attracted a great attention. Made of small, cube-shaped cakes assembled together, Grolet’s treats recall the famous Rubik’s cube, interestingly pointing to a conception of food as a “puzzle”, that is, a “brain-teaser” requiring careful consideration and exploration.

In fact, as Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) effectively showed, in order to be “good to eat” (*bon à manger*), substances must be first of all “good to think” (*bon à penser*). In other words, food must nourish people’s collective mind—i.e. their systems of values, beliefs, and traditions—to be considered suitable for their stomachs. Other scholars have since weighed in on the nature of food and culture, including cultural materialists (Harris 1985), who argue that the locus of cultural meaning resides in objects (rather than ideas about the objects) and also practice theorists (Warde 2014, 2016), who assert that a focus on practices and actions provides a third way to think about

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<sup>1</sup> [www.instagram.com/p/B0ISDolIUaB/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/B0ISDolIUaB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link).

culture and meaning, sidestepping tensions between emphasis on ideas and things. While food habits, preferences, and taboos are partially regulated by ecological and material factors, research has shown that all food systems are structured and given particular functioning mechanisms by specific societies and cultures, either according to totemic (such as in animistic religions), sacrificial (such as in ancient history), hygienic-rationalist (such as in contemporary Western dietetics), aesthetic (such as in gastronomy), or other types of symbolic logics.

This provides much “food for thought”. This commonplace expression assumes an intensified relevance in our era of globally connected food systems as well as instantaneous communications. Not only do cultures develop unique practices for the production, treatment and consumption of food, but such practices inevitably end up affecting also food-related aspects and spheres that are generally perceived as objectively and materially defined. Let us consider, for instance, dietary prescriptions, which are undoubtedly based on the material composition of food products, but are also dependent on the values and meanings conferred on specific food constituents by the narratives and discourses circulating within each culture; or food safety regulations, which are related to the concepts of dirtiness and hygiene—whose perception, as Mary Douglas (1966) effectively showed, is intrinsically related to cultural diversity.

On the other hand, Grolet’s cakes reveal a clear attempt to “conceal”, at least momentarily, food materiality—i.e. flavours, textures, substances, ...—and meanings—i.e. socio-cultural connotations—under a common “form”, following an increasing trend in experimental cuisine, as well as in food design and communication. Let us consider, for instance, the well-known graphic project “Cubes” by Studio Lernert & Sander<sup>2</sup>, portraying ninety-eight different foods cut into 2.5 by 2.5 by 2.5-cm cubes and arranged to form a symmetrical pattern. When asked about the meaning of their work, commissioned by the newspaper *de Volkskrant* for a food-related feature, the designers replied: “Food is an overwhelming subject ... You can go so many different ways. How can you

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<sup>2</sup> <http://lernertandsander.com/cubes/>.

photograph something when you can't decide?" (in Goldberg 2015). Eventually, the solution they opted for was "mak[ing] all of the food seem equally important by cutting everything into uniform pieces" (Ibid.). However, as we all know, such a uniformity cannot but be "ostensible", since unavoidable "differences" make food substances distinct from each other. In fact, not long after the release of Lernert & Sander's picture a "Food Cubes Quiz"<sup>3</sup> became popular on the web. Building on the "hints"—i.e. those elements such as colours and structural configurations<sup>4</sup> that cannot be totally concealed—suggested by the cubes portrayed in the designers' picture, players were requested to recognise the ninety-eight food substances depicted in the image, in a certainly difficult—but not at all impossible—interpretative "bet".

Even more interestingly, food substances acquire specific meanings in specific cultures and societies, precisely by virtue of the dynamics described by Lévi-Strauss and the other scholars mentioned above, evidently recalling the idea of a "puzzle" stressed by Grolet's creations. Hence this book proposes a collective reflection on the relation between *food* (nourishment) and *thought* (culture and meaning), calling into action various theoretical approaches and analytical methodologies, also in the aim to offer new insights on how the study of food can help us understand better what we call "culture".

To this purpose, the work is structured into three main sections:

(I) *Food, Taste, and Global Cultures*

Food and taste have always represented crucial means of construction and expression of sociocultural identity, as foundational food studies scholars Lévi-Strauss (1958, 1964, 1965), Barthes (1961), Douglas (1966, 1972, 1984), Bourdieu (1979) have effectively pointed out. What is more, in contemporary societies, migrations, travels, and

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<sup>3</sup> Which would be accompanied by smells, textures, sounds and flavours in a complete food experience extending beyond the purely visual perception offered by such a text.

<sup>4</sup> <http://lernertandsander.com/cubes/>.

communications incessantly expose local food identities to global food alterities, originating remarkable processes of transformation that continuously reshape and redefine such identities and alterities (Stano 2015; 2016). This originates a series of interesting questions: how can the cultural meanings and values associated with food be identified and described? How do the processes of hybridization (and domestication) of food and taste affect such meanings and values in today's world?

In the aim to explore these issues, the section opens with Ugo Volli's thought-provoking reflections upon the ceremonial aspects of food consumption, which point to the idea of "alimentation" and the potential of the semiotic approach toward its analysis. A compelling chapter by Massimo Leone follows, offering insights on the effects of meaning of the processes of attribution, or rather concealment, of a face to/from food, and recalling crucial issues in the study of food cultures and rituals, such as the idea of sacrifice and the consumption of non-human animal meat.

With Franciscu Sedda's "Phenomenology of a Symbolic Dish" the attention moves to cultural heritage and identity, encompassing the central problem of (un)translatability and emphasising the role of food in the processes of identity recognition and remembrance. Cultural memory and heritage are also crucial to Cristina Greco's analysis of Saudi "traditional" and "authentic" food, especially in the frame of the ongoing development plan Saudi Vision 2030, and to Henry Peck's study of Tripoli's sweets craft and its symbolic meanings across time and through sociocultural changes.

## (II) *Law, Power, and Media*

Both at the local and global scale, nutrition is ruled by a complexity of laws regulating quite diverse aspects—e.g. quality, safety, ecology, etc.—related to the production, trade and handling of food. Such aspects, just as any other facet of law, cannot be disentangled from culture (see in particular Geertz 1983; Rosen 2006). This explains the difficulty that might

be encountered in establishing transnational guidelines on food, as well as protocols and procedures on a more local scale. This section focuses on the cultural conceptions underlying food regulations and the way by which they contribute to activate specific meaning-making processes. Furthermore, it highlights the strong link between food and power, conceiving the former as “a weapon and a blanket, a means of control and of protest” (Avieli 2018: 14), that is to say, a tool for conveying, but also violating, social and cultural norms. This also means paying particular attention to media and communication, and the crucial role they play in shaping food and taste collective imaginaries.

Drawing on these premises, Daniel Thoennessen offers an attentive analysis of American chicken theft laws, recognising them as an expression of racialised political violence toward African Americans, while Suzanne Cope interestingly examines the relation between food, activism and political discourse, comparing the Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for Children Program to the contemporary indigenous group “I-Collective”.

Finally, the section deals with the crucial role played by communication and the media, thanks to David Bell and Theresa Moran’s careful reconstruction of the advertising campaigns of United Cattle Products’ marketing of tripe to British workers in the 1920s and 1930s and Bruno Surace’s captivating analysis of the new generations’ representations and valorisations of food products and practices, especially as reflected by the digital media.

### (III) *Nutrition and Culture*

Nutrition evidently relies on the material dimension of food, since it makes reference to its physical composition (in terms of nutrients, calories, etc.), but is also strongly influenced by the sociocultural sphere: not only do sociocultural factors such as ethnicity, class, education, and gender affect eating habits, but the very ideas of health, beauty, safety and a series of other concepts playing a crucial role in the definition of dietary regimes are culturally defined. Furthermore, contemporary foodways have increasingly emphasised the connection

between nourishment and aesthetics (mainly as a result of a generalised process of aestheticisation of food and taste), as well as the link between nutrition and ethics (as a dominant position supporting meat-free dietary regimes clearly shows). The last section of the book reflects upon such issues, also considering the decisive role played by communication, and especially by the mass and new media, in the establishment of specific collective imaginaries and the association of particular values and meanings to food products, habits, and practices.

In particular, Simona Stano offers a thought-provoking reflection on the relation among nutrition, culture and meaning by means of the analysis of some crucial issues in contemporary foodscapes, including the increasingly important role played by nutritional information in both governmental and media communications, as well as the opposition between genetically modified products and organic food. Nutritionism is also central to Emily Contois' contribution, which interestingly addresses the gendered effects of this ideology, examining the stereotypical representations of salad in diet and wellness media. Finally, Lauren Wynne, Gareen Hamalian and Neve Durrwachter examine the lively debate about orthorexia nervosa, comparing medical literature and narrative accounts by individuals who identify themselves as recovering orthorexics, and showing how it has become a salient disease category without even being formalised yet within the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

This rapid overview offers only a glimpse of the variegated and multifaceted reflections and analyses gathered in this book, which, exactly as Grolet's cakes, recall the Rubik's cube, in an attempt to "taste" all of its flavours, and above all to answer some of the most urgent questions underlying the "brain-teasing" study of food as a system of signs and sociocultural elements. Although research in this field has been increasing and evidently developing over the last decades, in fact, there are still several open questions, as well as a number of relevant case studies that

remain unexplored. While contributing to fill this gap, the essays that follow also aim at encompassing a series of crucial methodological issues concerning the study of food as a bearer of senses and sense, of value and culture, making leading scholars and young researchers from different fields (including semiotics, anthropology, sociology, history of food and media studies) talk to each other in a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue. Let us turn the page, then, and start solving our cube!

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