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Rewriting the menu: the cultural dynamics of contemporary food choices

In common with the food and other choices we make every day, as scholars we decide to write about particular topics for a variety of reasons. These are determined partly by our own tastes and experience, and partly because we decide these selections fit within the structural frameworks that function in the context of the demands and practices of our workplaces and in response to larger societal forces. In making judicious choices about our research and scholarly writing, we make personal choices about what interests us and what contributes to the intellectual debates we judge to be important. Those of us who work, and write, in the discipline known as food studies are fortunate to be writing into a field that attracts considerable public interest as well as growing academic attention and this, in turn, also influences our topic choices.

Because food is so everyday and eating universal, writers with a scholarly interest in food choice come from many different disciplines and approaches. Like writers in other fields, we bring to their work a range of perspectives and viewpoints. We bring our personal histories, knowledge and experience, as well as our understanding of such factors as access and economics; religion, ethics and values; aesthetics, creativity and the media; and the possibilities and constraints of the environment. Acknowledging these factors that impact on the choices we make about our research and scholarship challenges the notion that the possibilities are boundless or our choices disinterested.

The past, present and future of our food has, moreover, become a contemporary preoccupation with many in the West, as various groups and interests compete to influence the choices we make about what to eat for breakfast, lunch, dinner and in-between. In this statement, we recognise that personal taste is individual and subjective, but that tastes can also be shared and relevant to both culture in its broadest sense and historical time and place. Conversely, as food is crucial to life, both for physical and cultural nourishment, eating is fundamental to how we experience and make sense of identity and place, as well as how we construct it. These features contribute to the complexity of the menu as well as how we choose from it. They also affect how we describe our choices, and why we make them.

This special issue of *TEXT* expands the idea of taste and choice as the forces shaping our menus (both gastronomic and scholarly), to place the focus on the cultural dynamics of food choices and the discourses and texts used to describe these choices. In this act of rewriting these menus, we recognise that food politics—as all politics—is shaped by competing discourses and influential figures, by culture and economics, and is imbued with moral sensibilities.

In putting together this collection, we wanted to take the idea that eating is one of the important ways in which we establish and maintain relationships, and extend this to the process of writing about food choices. In this, we sought to ensure that the creation, development and compilation of this series of articles would be both highly collaborative and one that developed and consolidated our scholarly and other relationships. In this, we recognised that authors would bring to the table their own preferences, knowledge and specialist expertise, but we wanted to create a writing environment where ideas would be developed, work in progress shared, and detailed (multidisciplinary) commentary provided during the various stages of manuscript development, rather than at the point of completed papers. That is, we sought to utilise the format and ethos of the creative writing workshop, but adapt it to the research context that is more usually inhabited by the scholarly conference.

During this process, moreover, the focus of attention was shared between the enhancement of each individual's ideas and writing, and the development of the collection as an entity in itself. For that reason, we called for papers that considered 'the menu' from a range of different cultural standpoints and disciplines. In asserting that the menu of our food choices has, and is, being re-written, our aim was to provide a space for exploring the most basic and foundational questions such as how?, why?, by whom?, for whom?, and, so what?, and then to bring to those questions a disciplinary depth in a multidisciplinary discussion that engaged all participants across their different fields of inquiry.

Such thinking was the starting point for work towards the first symposium of a group that was, in turn, to become the foundation membership of the Australasian Food Studies Network. This event maintained the traditions of the Greek 'drinking party' or *symposion*, through which the modern symposium got its name. While more food was consumed than wine, our concern was always to provide a series of opportunities for open and exploratory discussion. Abstracts and then developed drafts of papers were circulated and discussed before we met in person in order that we could avoid the formal presentation of papers in a lecture-with-questions-afterwards format that characterises so many academic gatherings. We also began the two-day symposium with an event that had a social as well as a scholarly focus. This was a culinary-focused excursion that enabled people to get to know each other and Byron Bay where the meeting was held, as well as to discuss the papers' themes and arguments. We thus started the first day with a trip to the wonderful local farmers' market, then moved on to a tour of Zentvelds' nearby coffee plantation and its on-site processing unit, and then a shared meal that featured local foods. The day was convivial in all senses of the word—we shared both ideas and food as central features of our lives as well as our academic practice. As all participants came to Byron Bay prepared and informed about each others' work, the discussion was continued and extended in the second day, with useful and detailed feedback provided on all papers. At the same time, as editors, our comments were also delivered with the aim of developing and shaping this issue of *TEXT* with both these writers' works and our potential

readership in mind. Writers then developed their drafts in light of this commentary and duly submitted them for *TEXT*'s usual double blind peer review process.

This process had a number of benefits. Most obviously, those submitting a paper for this Special Issue had the benefit of comprehensive and detailed commentary on their texts before the papers were sent for blind peer review. As editors, we could shape the issue in a manner that is not always possible even when works are commissioned and certainly usually difficult when an open call for papers is issued. Our close knowledge of the work that would be submitted also gave us longer than usual to contact and secure the services of suitable reviewers. The extra time was especially important in this case, as the multidisciplinary nature of the collection meant that we had to locate and recruit some referees outside our own discipline networks. This, in turn, provided a significant, and unanticipated, benefit in extending our scholarly networks and contacts and, we hope, in introducing new people to *TEXT*. We thank the referees and the useful, generous and gracious part they played in this process.¹

Such a process is time consuming and the teamwork element certainly goes against the grain of much contemporary academic experience. As Peter Coaldrake and Lawrence Stedman observe, “it is evident that universities more so than most organisations are built on a culture of individualism and academic personal autonomy” (1999: 5). At the same time, with the pace of internal institutional and structural change continuing to accelerate, the concomitant escalating demand on academics’ time and energy also runs contrary to the commitment we asked from each participant. This was the commitment to invest considerable time in reflecting on work by others—principally the imperative to read various drafts of all the contributions in this Special Issue and to provide sensitive, thoughtful and detailed feedback on these pieces, and to consider their own work in the light of these other pieces.

All the contributors in this Special Issue participated fully in this process, with feedback evidencing that they enjoyed the experience. One of the outcomes—this collection of articles—can now be consumed by others, but more resulted from this process than is visible in this collection. Conviviality is a central tenet of good relationships, and in this instance it has proved to be not only productive but also generative. Following the symposium, we have built the membership of the Australian Food Studies Network, with both the Network, and its participants, providing further opportunities for collaboration. Toni Risson hosted the food stream of the inaugural Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand Conference in Sydney (June 2010) in which many of us participated, met other colleagues and gained new research and dissemination prospects. Jill Adams has organised another event for the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival in 2011 and, also next year, some of us will reunite in Texas for the Popular Culture and American Culture Association’s annual conference. For our part, we edited a food-themed issue of *M/C Journal* (a journal with a focus on media and culture), set up a lively Facebook page for the AFSN and organised a winter research writing retreat. In December 2010, we will host a special stream on the phenomenon of ‘Masterchef Australia’ at the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia conference.

Through this experience, we have discovered that we have much to learn from food, and certainly more than what it reflects about the culture in which we live. Putting food at the centre of our lives for this scholarly and collaboratively creative (as well as gastronomic) moment has certainly provided us with personal as well as professional opportunities. In this, we believe that we can all learn from our parents' insistence to eat at the table together, and use this as a way to build and sustain academic practice, processes and relationships.

Endnotes

1. For confidentiality reasons, all referees are listed together in relation to this issue of *TEXT*.

Works cited

Coaldrake, OP (Peter) and Stedman, Lawrence 1999 *Academic work in the twenty-first century: changing roles and policies*, Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Higher Education Division) at <http://www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/occpaper/99H/academic.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2010)

Dr Adele Wessell and Associate Professor Donna Lee Brien are the co-founding convenors of the Australasian Food Studies Network. Their latest joint efforts are a co-edited issue of M/C Journal on the theme of Pig <http://journal.media-culture.org.au> and organising a stream of panels on the phenomenon of Masterchef Australia at the 2010 Cultural Studies Association of Australasia conference. In 2011, they will co-convene a multidisciplinary symposium on the theme of Local tastescapes and complete work on a co-edited book tentatively titled 'Influences and synergies: rethinking the relationship between Australian and American food cultures'.