

# Introduction: Special Issue

## *Der Mensch ist was er isst* (Feuerbach) – Texts on Food, the Eating Process and the Philosophy of Recipes

**Marius Crous**

*Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are.*

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

One of the first known books of recipes, *De Re Coquinaria* (“The Art of Cooking”), is ascribed to the Roman Marcus Gavius Apicius, who lived during the reign of Tiberius in the first century AD. Like our contemporary cookbooks, this one is also divided into sections and contains almost 400 recipes. Apicius’s collection was translated into English in 1936 and both the complete Latin and the English versions are available online. In an online Latin version of the text the transcriber has annotated the recipes and added at some instances in the text: “This recipe is toxic, and should never be prepared”.

We have come a long way from this first recipe book (with its toxic recipes and all) and nowadays we are bombarded with recipes of the so-called celebrity chefs like Nigella, Jamie Oliver and their predecessor, the inimitable Julia Childs, who was recently the topic of the film *Julie/Julia*. We live in an age of nutritional supplements and a diet industry. There are ongoing debates on why it is justifiable to slaughter an ox but not a cat. Should we eat only fruit and vegetables and return to a life filled with nuts, berries and no caffeine?

Despite the renewed interest in cooking and recipe collecting, the subject of food has never received serious attention in the South African literary discourse, and I tend to agree with Virginia Woolf who writes in *A Room of One’s Own* that novelists “seldom spare a word for what was eaten”.

Further prompted by a quote from Ludwig Feuerbach, “Der Mensch ist was er ißt” [Man is what he eats], in his essay on the mystery of sacrifice, I

felt that there was a need to explore the relationship between people and food in literature. Cyrill Levitt (2007), who has translated and introduced Feuerbach's essay, is of the opinion that Feuerbach's obsession with eating and drinking pre-empted Freud's oral stage as part of the human being's psychosexual development. Feuerbach jokes about his famous dictum because according to him, he has made "an object of gastrology ... straight-away into an object of theology".

But as is evident from the contributions in this collection, the relationship between humans and food also includes anthropophagy (the eating of human flesh). The latter is the topic of Tony Ullyatt's article on the Hannibal Lecter novels by Thomas Harris. Through a close reading of the novels Ullyatt shows how the psychiatrist Lecter acts out his own cannibalistic urges, and in his doing so we are confronted with several taboos, as well as the age-old issue of what is normal and what is regarded as normal behaviour. Food plays a central role in Lecter's life, albeit the sensuous dishes he orders in restaurants or the body parts of his victims that he prepares.

Bert Olivier looks at the text *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert – the original before it was turned into a kitschy Hollywood film script starring Julia Roberts and Javier Bardem – and compares it to the film *Babette's Feast*, based on a novel by Karen Blixen. As Olivier points out, the pleasure derived from food is central to both texts and in his reading he shows how eating becomes a spiritual ritual, echoing Feuerbach's "from gastrology to theology". Focusing on these texts through the lenses of Plato and St Augustine, Olivier explores "the implications of the enjoyment of mundane pleasures, such as eating delectable, palatable food, for one's spiritual well-being and fulfilment, or more generally, for a meaningful existence".

It was in the introduction by C. Louis Leipoldt to one of his earlier recipes book that I came across a reference to Apicius, but Leipoldt also mentions the Chinese cook Hong-Tso who wrote about food centuries ago (Leipoldt [1993]2011: 6). However, Leipoldt's so-called "Cape Malay cooking" forms the topic of Riaan Oppelt's incisive reading. Oppelt shows that Leipoldt appropriates a concept such as Cape Malay and includes it in his writings on food without really engaging with the historical. There is no questioning of slavery and no attempt to "give voice to coloured slaves and servants".

Berni Searle is a photographer and conceptual artist, who has a unique way of exploring subjectivity within South African society. In her article, Este de Beer focuses on the visual representation of food, spices and culinary traditions in Searle's work. De Beer shows in her reading of Searle's visual texts how the body of the black female should be seen against the background of domesticity. The role of spices traditionally associated with women and women's relegated subject position as keeper of the kitchen are also under scrutiny.

In Eben Venter's novels the eating of meat plays a central role. Meat is not only associated with affluence and abundance but it is also a racial marker within South African society. His novels deal mostly with a disillusioned white farm boy who leaves behind the farm and his meat-loving family to go to the big city or to Australia where he eventually ends up becoming a vegetarian. Vegetarianism, in Venter's work, marks the completion of a rite of passage and a break with Afrikaner tradition and values.

I sincerely hope that this will only be the beginning of a renewed interest in the discourse on food and the role food plays in literature and culture in general. The intertextuality of recipes, the phenomenon of the celebrity chef, food security and the psychological link between food and anorexia are some topics that could still be explored.

## References

Apicius

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