

Let's start the foodie backlash

Food is the new sex, drugs and religion. Cookery dominates the bestseller lists and TV schedules. Celebrity chefs have become lifestyle gurus and cooking is referred to as a high art. Steven Poole has had his fill of foodism



Steven Poole

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'We are living in the Age of Food' ... stalls at Borough Market, London. Photograph: Alamy

On a crisp autumn evening in a north London street, a rôtisserie trailer is parked outside a garden flat, green fairy lights blinking on and off, warm chickens perfuming the air. A thirtyish hipster wanders out to where I'm standing with a friend on the pavement and drawls his unimpressed judgment of what is going on inside. "I think the arancinis are not quite spicy enough," he informs us, with an eaten-it-all-before air. "Could have more flavour, not really exotic." Right now I haven't the faintest idea what "arancinis" are (or that arancini, like panini, is already an Italian plural), but I nod knowingly while typing his thoughts into my phone, and my friend keeps him talking. "I thought the Korean burger was quite good," the hipster goes on, without much kimchi-fired enthusiasm, "but I think a lot of people don't make their food with enough shbang ... They kind of cater to the middle of the road." Twenty-five years ago, he could have been an indie-rock fan bemoaning the blandness of chart music. Now he's a social-smoking, foodier-

than-thou critic at a "Food Rave".

**You Aren't What
You Eat: Fed Up
with Gastroculture**

by Steven Poole



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The name of the Food Rave is entirely appropriate for a modern culture in which food is the last ingestible substance you can indulge in with obsessiveness without being frowned on by society. Alex James, the Blur bassist turned gentleman cheese farmer and Sun food columnist, has said: "My 20th birthday party was all about booze, my 30th birthday was about drugs, and now I realise that my 40s are about food." And he is not alone. Food replaces drugs in the gently ageing food-fancier's pantheon of pleasure, and brings along with it traces of the old pharmaceutical vocabulary. You hear talk of taking a "hit" of a dish or its sauce, as though from a spliff or bong; and a food-obsessive in hunter-gatherer mode is thrilled to "score" a few chanterelle mushrooms, as though he has had to buy them from a dodgy-looking gent on a murky Camden street corner. Food is valued for its psychotropic "rush"; Nigella Lawson refers to salted caramel as "this Class A foodstuff". Yes, food is the new drugs for former Britpoppers and the Ecstasy generation, a safer and more respectable hedonic tool, the key to a comfortably domesticated

high.

Western industrial civilisation is eating itself stupid. We are living in the Age of Food. Cookery programmes bloat the television schedules, cookbooks strain the bookshop tables, celebrity chefs hawk their own brands of weird mince pies (Heston Blumenthal) or bronze-moulded pasta (Jamie Oliver) in the supermarkets, and cooks in super-expensive restaurants from Chicago to Copenhagen are the subject of hagiographic profiles in serious magazines and newspapers. Food festivals (or, if you will, "Feastivals") are the new rock festivals, featuring thrilling live stage performances of, er, cooking. As one dumbfounded witness of a stage appearance by Jamie Oliver observed: "The girls at the front – it's an overwhelmingly female crowd – are already holding up their iPhones [...] A group in front of me are saying, 'Ohmigodohmigodohmigod' on a loop [...] 'I love you, Jamie,' yells a girl on the brink of fainting." The new series of The Great British Bake-Off trounced *Parade's End* in the ratings, and canny karaoke-contest supremo Simon Cowell is getting in on the act with a new series in development called Food, Glorious Food! – or, as it's known among production wags, *The Eggs Factor*.

If you can't watch cooking on TV or in front of your face, you can at least read about it. Vast swaths of the internet have been taken over by food bloggers who post photographs of what they have eaten from an edgy street stall or at an aspirational restaurant, and compose endlessly scrollable pseudo-erotic paeans to its stimulating effects. Right now, five of the 10 bestselling books on amazon.co.uk are food books, with

Nigellissima outselling *Fifty Shades of Grey*. According to the spring 2011 Bookscan data, British sales of books in nearly all literary genres were down, except for the categories of "food and drink" (up 26.2%), followed by "religion" (up 13%). (Before 1990, the bibliographic category of "food and drink" didn't even exist.) That food and religion alone should buck the negative trend is no coincidence, for modern food books are there to answer metaphysical or "lifestyle" rather than culinary aspirations, and celebrity chefs themselves are the gurus of the age.

It is not in our day considered a sign of serious emotional derangement to announce publicly that "chocolate mousse remains the thing I feel most strongly about", or to boast that dining with celebrities on the last night of Ferran Adrià's restaurant el Bulli, in Spain, "made me cry". It is, rather, the mark of a Yahoo not to be able and ready at any social gathering to converse in excruciating detail and at interminable length about food. Food is not only a safe "passion" (in the tellingly etiolated modern sense of "passion" that just means liking something a lot); it has become an obligatory one. The unexamined meal, as a pair of pioneer modern "foodies" wrote in the 1980s, is not worth eating. Most cannily, the department of philosophy at the University of North Texas announced in 2011 its "Philosophy of Food Project", no doubt having noticed which way the wind was blowing, and presumably hoping that it would be able to trick food-obsessives into hard thinking about other topics. One can of course think philosophically about food, as about anything at all, but that is not what is going on in our mainstream gastroculture.

Where will it all end? Is there any communication or entertainment or social format that has not yet been commandeered by the ravenous gastrimarge for his own gluttonous purpose? Does our cultural "food madness", as the New York Times columnist Frank Rich suggests, tip into "food psychosis"? Might it not, after all, be a good idea to worry more about what we put into our minds than what we put into our mouths?

People with an overweening interest in food have been calling themselves "foodies" since a Harper's & Queen article entitled "Cuisine Poseur" in 1982, one of whose editors then co-wrote the semi-satirical *The Official Foodie Handbook* of 1984. The *OED*'s very first citation of "foodie" is from 1980, an oozing New York magazine celebration of the mistress of a Parisian restaurant and her "devotees, serious foodies". "Foodie" has now pretty much everywhere replaced "gourmet", perhaps because the latter more strongly evokes privilege and a snobbish claim to uncommon sensory discrimination – even though those qualities are rampant among the "foodies" themselves. The word "foodie", it is true, lays claim to a kind of cloying, infantile cuteness which is in a way appropriate to its subject; but one should not allow them the rhetorical claim of harmless innocence implied. *The Official Foodie Handbook* spoke of the "foodism" worldview; I propose to call its adherents foodists.

The term "foodist" is actually much older, used from the late 19th century for hucksters

selling fad diets (which is quite apt); and as late as 1987 one New York Times writer proposed it semi-seriously as a positive description, to replace the unlovely "gastronaut": "In the tradition of nudist, philanthropist and Buddhist, may I suggest 'foodist', one who is enthusiastic about good eating?" The writer's joking offer of "nudist" as an analogy is telling. I like "foodist" precisely for its taint of an -ism. Like a racist or a sexist, a foodist operates under the prejudices of a governing ideology, viewing the whole world through the grease-smearred lenses of a militant eater.

Everywhere in the ideology of foodism we see a yearning for food to be able to fill a spiritual void. Food is about "spirituality" and "expressing our identity", claims modern food-knight Michael Pollan. His celebrated catechism of modern foodism, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, speaks of eating with a "full consciousness", and claims that every meal has its "karmic price"; it ends with the declaration that "what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world". And so chewing on pork products becomes a sublime union of self with planet, a Gaian eucharist.

Note, too, how many manuals of eating are termed "bibles": in the cult of "nutritionism" we have Patrick Holford's *Optimum Nutrition Bible* and Gillian McKeith's *Food Bible*, and there also exist a *Baby Food Bible*, a *Whole Food Bible*, a *Gluten-Free Bible*, a *Party Food Bible*, a *Spicy Food Lover's Bible*, and so on ad nauseam or perhaps ad astra. If you don't want the Judeo-Christian overtones that come with biblical foodism, you can instead attain communion with the druids, a possibility noted by Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in the late 1990s: "I suspect the fact that wild mushrooms (and the pursuit of them) have become popular alongside the burgeoning interest in New Age spiritualism may not be entirely coincidental."

Food, then, is considered the appropriate sustenance for all kinds of spiritual snackishness. But to suppose that eating can nourish the spirit looks like a category mistake: just the sort of category mistake that led the early church to define "gluttony" as a sin. (Man does not live by bread alone.) Gluttony, on the original understanding, wasn't necessarily a matter of eating too much; it was the problem of being excessively interested in food, whatever one's actual intake of it. Gluttony was, as Francine Prose (author of a pert monograph, *Gluttony*) puts it, all about the "inordinate desire" for food, which makes us "depart from the path of reason". (That diagnoses the figure of "loathsome Gluttony" in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, "Whose mind in meat and drinke was drowned so".) And the theologian Thomas Aquinas agreed with Pope Gregory that gluttony can be committed in five different ways, among which are seeking more "sumptuous foods" or wanting foods that are "prepared more meticulously". In this sense (whether we agree with it or not), all modern foodists, as the Atlantic writer BR Myers argues in his incisive "Moral Crusade Against Foodies", are certainly gluttons.

What about cooks themselves? If food is spiritual, then modern "celebrity chefs" have

become our priests or gurus, druidic conduits to the ineffable. The cook is in tune with the terroir; an interpreter of Gaia for our lip-smacking pleasure and spiritual improvement. We no longer trust politicians or the clergy; but we are hungry for cooks to tell us not just how to eat but how to live, the moralistic synecdoche easily accomplished since we now happily accept that one lives through eating. A 2011 advert for the supermarket Waitrose reads: "Love food. Love life." The ordering implies a conditional: if, and only if, you love food, will you then love life, in the right way.

The modern hunger to accord food spiritual "meaning" seems a relatively recent development: it is refreshing to note the absence of such inflated claims, for example, in the much-loved 1931 American cookbook *The Joy of Cooking*, by Irma Rombauer. Her rhetoric hits a modest peak in the introductory remarks: "This book is the result of a long practical experience, a lively curiosity and a real love for cookery. In it I have made an attempt to meet the needs of the average household, to make palatable dishes with simple means and to lift everyday cooking out of the commonplace." Cooking here is an enjoyable act, perhaps one even worthy of a certain "love"; and the author's aim is to help you cook nicer food, every day. What could be more civilised?

Yet since then foodist rhetoric has, like the early universe, experienced a period of rapid inflation. The foodist movement is desperate to claim other cultural domains as inherent virtues of food itself, so as not ever to have to stop thinking about stuffing its face. Food becomes not only spiritual nourishment but art, sex, ecology, history, fashion and ethics. It even becomes, in the mind of some of its more addled fanatics, a universal language. Alex James, for instance, told the Sun: "Food is a brilliant way to connect with anyone. I used to think music was a universal language. But if you go to Africa and play a Blur song, someone might have to translate. Give them cheese, though, and they can instantly taste it and react." And so a hunk of Cheddar becomes superior to *Nevermind*: a universal medium of communication; or at least, for foodists, a universal solvent of the intellect.

In 1932, Salvador Dalí exhibited in Paris his "hypnagogic clock", which he described as "an enormous loaf of bread posed on a luxurious pedestal". He also conceived a splendid project for a "secret society of bread", in which giant loaves (15m to 45m long) would be left anonymously in public locations in Paris or New York City. In this way, Dalí theorised, "one could subsequently try to ruin systematically the logical meaning of all the mechanisms of the rational practical world".

Sadly, the secret society of bread remained entirely conceptual. For the foodist, in any case, food is already art. As *The Official Foodie Handbook* put it back in 1984: "Foodies consider food to be an art, on a level with painting or drama. It's actually your favourite art form." Now such talk is everywhere, serenely unconscious of its own hyperbole. Bernard Loiseau's \$60 frogs' legs are "a dazzling show of artistry". Anthony Bourdain

heretically refers to Ferran Adrià as "this foam guy", but others are bewitched by the Spaniard's aesthetic froth: Adrià's foam is "incredibly beautiful [...] like a piece of art"; and his "wild genius in the kitchen is often likened to that of Salvador Dalí in the art world". (Adrià is not known, at the time of this writing, to have secreted enormous baguettes in major cities.) You can get the *Nigella Quick Collection* app for your iPad, which the launch PR said "curates" her meals, as though they were canvases or installation pieces.



Lakeland pheasants

on display at Borough Market. Photograph: Alamy

The idea that food is an "art form" in itself is a much stronger claim than traditional phrasing such as "the art of cookery" (on the model of the French *l'art de ...*), a more modest attribution of creativity and craft (*techné* rather than *poésis*) to quotidian activity. Now, leading foodists sound positively petulant about a supposed lack of artistic recognition. The former Microsoft executive and now patent-litigation entrepreneur Nathan Myhrvold, for example, is no doubt a very intelligent man, but he still exhibits a curiously pleading tone. "If music can be art, why can't food?" Myhrvold whines, plugging his own six-volume, million-word cookbook, ominously entitled *Modernist Cuisine*. (It costs £395.) It should be obvious that a steak is not like a symphony, a pie not like a passaglia, foie gras not like a fugue; that the "composition" of a menu is not like the composition of a requiem; that the cook heating things in the kitchen and arranging them on a plate is not the artistic equal of Charlie Parker.

The French writer and *nouveau romancier* Alain Robbe-Grillet relates the following scene of lunch with his friend Roland Barthes: "In a restaurant, he said, it is the menu that people enjoy consuming – not the dishes, but their description. Lo and behold, he had relegated the whole art of cooking – which he adored – to the status of an abstract exercise of vocabulary!"

But Barthes understood more than his friend. The restaurant menu is not only a kind of *poésie concrète*, as well as an enticing promise of satisfaction, an IOU for pleasurable

consumption in the near future; not just, as Barthes himself wrote elsewhere, the "syntax" of a given food "system". It can actually alter how we experience the food once it arrives. The linguistic framing of a menu description has been shown to change what people report having tasted.

In an experiment, two psychologists gave different groups of people Heston Blumenthal's "Crab Ice-Cream" while describing it differently: one group was told it was about to eat a "savoury mousse", the other was expecting "ice-cream". The people given savoury mousse liked it, but the people thinking they were eating ice-cream found it "disgusting" and even "the most unpleasant food they had ever tasted". The psychologists add that most food tastes "bland" without the "expectation of flavour caused by the visual appearance or verbal description of what is going to be eaten". One is reminded of Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil*, in which the plates of homogeneous brown muck at the restaurant are differentiated by the colour photos stuck in them and the savouring announcement of their names: "Numero deux, duck à l'orange", "Numero une, crevettes à la mayonnaise". (Slavoj Žižek calls this comic disjunction the "split between the food's image and the real of its formless excremental remainder".) The "exercise of vocabulary" in a menu, then, is never merely "abstract", as Robbe-Grillet thought. You eat their words.

For some examples of the modern state of the art in gastrolinguistic engineering, let us consider L'Enclume, the Michelin-starred restaurant in the English Lake District, and its bill of fare as advertised on its website in November 2011. As a literary-gustatory experiment, I'm going simply to read the menu without investigating further, so attempting empathetically to recreate the literary experience of the diner who has just sat down and read the dish descriptions, and is thereby set off on a pleasurable trail of wondering what exactly it is that he might end up eating.

The first dish I propose for our imaginative consideration is this: "Carrot sacks with brawn and juniper, fried cake and cress". It is surely a masterpiece of tantalising obscurity. I confess to having no idea what "carrot sacks" are: probably not the kind of coarse hessian sack in which one might transport 20 kilos of carrots, but then what? Tiny pretend bags made out of thin shavings of carrot artfully woven together? This dish also features "fried cake", which has me pondering the dubious desirability of frying a chocolate or sponge cake, but that cannot be it. Could it be a fishcake? Who knows?



Rob Brydon (left) and

Steve Coogan in the BBC series *The Trip*. Photograph: Revolution/Phil Fisk/BBC

One thing I do know is that "brawn" is pâté made from a pig's head: the name is an obvious example of menu euphemism. Verbs tend to ascribe benign agency to the parts of a dead animal, as with the announcement by the waiter at L'Enclume who, in Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon's TV series *The Trip*, introduces a dish thus: "You've got some little manx queenies which are baby queen scallops. They're resting on grilled baby gem and parsley coulis as well as a light creamy horseradish sauce." When the waiter leaves, Brydon comments: "Rather optimistic to say they're 'resting'. Their days of resting have been and gone. They are dead." (*The Trip* is, among other things, a wonderful satire on foodism, and the zeitgeisty truth that eating expensive food is now what middle-aged men do together: indeed, two men of my acquaintance went on a *The Trip* trip, eating in some of the same restaurants, and learned from one arch waiter that they were far from alone in their pilgrimage.) Even more cutely, animal parts are often said to be doing their "resting" on a "bed" (of spinach, or parsley coulis, as it might be), waiting for the eater to spear them, in a kind of sexual reverie of anticipated violence, like heaving-breasted heroines leaving their window open for Count Dracula.

It is an interesting question, meanwhile, why the word "baby" in menu descriptions does not disgust us. Surely the last things we want to eat are babies. But perhaps once we are lulled into an imaginative world where a "baby" lamb or the "baby" queen scallop can be "resting" (in the scallop's case, resting itself on another baby, this time a "baby gem", since vegetables too – baby carrots, baby greens – can share in the general babyhood of all nice things, and participate in tottering towers of babies all stacked up for our gastric enjoyment), we are cocooned in such a euphemistic dream that the incipient act of putting these "baby" organisms into our mouths doesn't register as the horrific dissonance it otherwise might.

Another dish on offer at L'Enclume is this: "Rare breed pork and crispy skin, salsify, onions and hedge garlic". (As with almost all of the menu, there is no clue to how any of this was cooked. At least we knew in the previous dish that the "cake" was fried. But

how did this skin get so crispy? Is it even pork skin? Perhaps it is the blowtorched epidermis of an ocelot.) Whenever I am confronted with the promise of eating "rare breed" pig, I do suffer some ecological anxiety. If these animals are so rare, should we really be eating them? Might they not be gobbled extinct by nihilistic gastronomiacs? There is no guarantee, anyway, that a "rare breed" will taste better than a common one; a "rare breed" might be an evolutionary blunder, a porcine DNA dead end. Perhaps it is rare for a very good reason. Happily, Sudi Pigott, author of the extraordinary foodist manual *How to Be a Better Foodie*, explains: "This doesn't mean pedigree breeds are about to become extinct – quite the reverse – they're undergoing a much-needed revival." The coming paradox: once a formerly "rare" breed becomes common as muck thanks to all the foodists flocking to pig out on it, restaurants will have to stop calling it "rare" and we will instead be invited, perhaps, to chew on "vintage pig". (Another dish at L'Enclume does, spectacularly, promise "vintage potatoes".)

Lest all the artifice of breed descriptions, chemistry-set jargon and ingredient rebranding in the posher kind of restaurant make a certain kind of diner suspicious, a parallel recent trend is the reassuring adjective "proper". It appears everywhere on gastropub menus ("proper pork pie", "proper mash"), in one-up-from-McDonald's burger joints ("proper hamburgers", promises the London chain Byron), and in the mellifluously matey warbling of Jamie Oliver munching a Vietnamese banh minh in an East End market ("That is a proper, proper sandwich"), and his own dish names: "Proper Bloke's Sausage Fusilli", "Roast of Incredible Game Birds with Proper Polenta". The use of "proper" anticipates and indulges (even implants) a suspicion of fanciness, whether it is owed to dubious foreign practices or modern industrial adulteration. It is also one of the favourite epithets employed by David Cameron: "proper politics", "proper punishment", "proper immigration control". "Proper" here works as a strategy to avoid seeming privileged, while at the same time tuning in cunningly to anti-intellectual prejudice (what is "proper" is not over-thought) – all as Cameron conducts, like some kind of over-moisturised Visigoth, his philistine economic campaign against the BBC, universities ("proper education"), and the National Health Service ("proper healthcare"). Just as one ought to be suspicious of the word "proper" when hoarsely brayed from the glistening lips of Cameron, one ought to be suspicious of it on a menu: is it anything more than a vatic invocation of old-school purity?

A menu dish name can even sneer, as well as promising gustatory pleasure, interesting mouthfeel, communion with nature, ethical responsibility, science at your service, relaxed and willing sacrificial meat, and a fish that does not sound trashy; and in doing all this it attributes, very flatteringly, subtle powers of discrimination to the prospective eater himself. As a literary artefact the menu is powerful indeed: a psychic amuse-gueule. No surprise, then, that someone should hit on the wheeze of making the menu a literal amuse-gueule as well. So at Alinea in Chicago, for example, one may, after reading

the menu, eat it, because it has been made with lasers, liquid nitrogen, and ink-jet printers. Perhaps the edible menu is to dining what edible knickers are to sex. Tactfully, I will leave the elaboration of that analogy as an exercise for the reader.

- This article was amended on 18 October 2012. The original said the OED's first citation of the term "foodie" was from a 1980 article in the New York Times magazine. The article was in a different publication, the magazine New York.



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