

# INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

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This issue's topic is the creative use of trash foods; not food taken from dumpsters or garbage cans,<sup>2</sup> but foods that are or would be discarded because they are the remains of meals or are regarded as poor or of inferior quality for whatever reason. The essays of this issue deal with stratified societies, societies having large populations and divided by differences of wealth and power. In such societies, disdained foods are the usual fare of people who cannot afford or are denied access to desirable or preferred items. Yet, whenever it is possible, people restricted to limited edible resources enhance what they have, and what they create may become integral parts of national cuisines and the ethnic dishes that are enjoyed at ceremonial occasions and, often nowadays, family reunions. Some examples include the parts of butchered animals that become salami, sausages (wursts), scrapple, kishke (stuffed derma), chitlins (tripe in various forms), "head cheese," and aspic.

Where in such societies there is poverty and the diet includes animal protein, the poor may have the "bony, stringy, tough, bitter, coarse organs and cuts, located near the ends of limbs (shanks, feet) or near the organs of digestion (numbles, masa), excretion and sex (tripe, colons, penises, etc) . . . and the foods of slaves, prisoners, victims . . . foods that are toxic or near toxic, or tasteless, low in nutritive value, feared" (Sidney Mintz, personal communication). Even for the poor, however, with opportunity to enrich the diet, bits of leftovers and food scraps can be recycled to become dumplings or the *migas* of the Tepito barrio in Mexico City. To this short list may be added countless soups and stews, and a vast variety of foraged plants and mushrooms.

Institutionalized differences of wealth and power and unequal access to food simply means that the rich eat better, have more and a greater variety of food, and a greater range of condiments than the poor. To have political and economic power is also to have access to quality<sup>3</sup> (Adamson 2004; Alcock 2006; Goody 1982) which, under conditions of food preferences and a rich assortment of ingredients and condiments, encourages the emergence of *haute cuisine* as a culinary art with prestige and adulation extended to chefs (primarily men). Cooks (generally women) are not similarly appreciated for their talents with "low" cuisine. What originates as common or ordinary may rise in esteem, in which case the elevated status may be marked with appropriate changes in nomenclature. Stews may be renamed ragout, *carbonnade flamande*, bouillabaisse, *cassoulet*, goulash, and *pot-au-feu*. Similarly, soups are metamorphosed as potage, vichyssoise, and consommé. In this collection of essays there are no examples of high cuisine, but there are many examples of simple foods that are treasured.

There are certain kinds of mushrooms that are associated with haute cuisine, the price of which limits their enjoyment to few. Such mushrooms generally are not cultivated and may even defy being domesticated, but are harvested whenever and wherever good luck has them appear. A taste for mushrooms, as with foods generally, varies cross-culturally and like other foods may undergo changes of popularity. This is mentioned in Sveta Yamin-Pasternak's essay for this issue, with examples of societies where mushrooms are preferred or ignored and with examples of mushrooms that are highly prized in some parts of the world but are banal and unexciting in others. Of interest for this issue is the way notions of mushrooms as food were transformed within a decade or two from something reluctantly eaten under the dire circumstances of hunger to an important place in a people's diet. Her case example is the indigenous Chukchi and Yupik people of northeastern Siberia, in whose region mushrooms abound, but who avoided eating them except as emergency rations until Slavic settlers from eastern Europe introduced them to an elaborate fungus culinary culture.

This example of mushroom introduction to the diet of Siberian people is not a case where mushrooms were viewed with disgust or abhorred. Mushrooms were what people ate to stay alive and kept eating until more desirable food became available. In Mexico it is common practice for families to eat leftovers by making a stew from tortillas and bread no longer fresh, to which may be added bones and scraps of meat, a kind of food not served to guests. But the same food has become treasured. It is *migas*, a prized dish in a Mexico City barrio which originated literally from restaurant table scraps and garbage, stale tortillas, and stale bread. Pig bones and whatever meat clung to them helped complete the *migas* recipe. Now restaurants in this neighborhood run a brisk trade serving *migas* to a city-wide clientele, and must purchase fresh ingredients in large quantities to meet popular demand.

Examples of when *bas* cuisine becomes haute, when sows' ears turn into silk purses, are not common. But in this issue, Jennifer Jordan tells how the ordinary dumpling was chosen to be iconic in promoting the culinary attractions of an Austrian region intending to draw tourists who would relish stuffing themselves with what already was stuffed. Apparently there is a growing interest in promoting regional cuisines as a form of tourism for those who wish to experience "real" folk in their customary ways. Mexico has recently marked its regional cuisines as a national cultural heritage and also encouraged their development for tourism. For example, indigenous women in Michoacan "continue to prepare traditional dishes for festivals and community feast days [from] local vegetables, leftover seeds, gathered wild plants, etc., [dishes that] are consciously identified as critical to conserving community traditions and indigenous identities" (Lois Stanford, personal communication).

But where traditions are lacking, then of course they can be invented. Richard Wilk (2008) relates an amusing story of such an occurrence in Belize. In 1985, after the country gained independence and discarded its former name of British Honduras,

it received a goodwill visit from Queen Elizabeth. A banquet in her honor featured an agouti, which was hunted and greatly enjoyed by rural people, but disdained by urban Belizeans for its association with poverty and backwardness. The British press took advantage of the occasion to express outrage at serving the Queen a “rat.” Belizeans, who were then trying to forge a national identity, and with it a distinctive Belizean cuisine, took umbrage and made the agouti a source of culinary pride. It was featured in the best restaurants and tourist hotels as a traditional Belizean dish and became popular. Unfortunately, the alchemy that turned the trash agouti into fine dining resulted in over-hunting the beast and causing its price to rise beyond the peasants’ reach. Wilk also mentions certain local fish that once were stigmatized by their association with the poor, but which subsequently became popular by their identification with a national cuisine (Wilk 2008).

The subject of Robert Rotenberg’s essay is appropriate for this issue because it deals with parts of animals that are undesirable as food in American society—not because they are intrinsically bad, but because they are organs associated with sex and nursing. Yet, from an ethnocentric perspective, it is hard to understand why penises, udders, and testicles would be preferred eating in parts of the world *qua* food and not for their titillating value.

The article by Alfonso Hernández on migas and Tepito is unusual for this journal. It is not a scholarly paper in terms of ethnological reporting conventions, but it is of interest and belongs in this collection of papers because it is about a popular food today that had its origin as scraps and was the survival meal of the barrio poor in Mexico City. Migas has become symbolic of the barrio, Tepito, the neighborhood, and its people. More than mere survivors, Tepiteños are proud of their skills as industrious innovators, refurbishing old clothing, rehabilitating broken and junked appliances, and turning trash food into treasure: in short, realizing the potential in garbage, and recycling what otherwise would be discarded.

The paper by Hernández has as its focus not any one of the barrio’s items just mentioned, but all of them together, each part standing for the whole. Migas stands for Tepito, as the barrio stands for all who live, work, and enjoy life in it. Hernández, a community activist, writes with a simple eloquence of pride and defiance. He deliberately distances himself from the urban experts who would presume to know what is best for the area, and he boasts of Tepiteños’ successful resistance against attempts of developers and real estate speculators who would take it from them for their own profit. Alfonso is a fighter who declares he is waging a class war—not for radical political change, but to maintain Tepito’s distinctive style and identity.

The studies presented here, with the exception of Rotenberg’s essay on penises and udders, are about commonplace fare, where a soup is a soup is a soup, but is likely to be a delicious soup. In a way, this group of papers is a modest tribute to the cooks of the past and present who cared and care about husbanding food resources to their fullest potential, recycling leftovers into dumplings and stews and who, like the gourmets of high cuisine, care about good taste in its double entendre. Perhaps

because ordinary meals, with rare exceptions, provide ubiquitous pleasure, we may fail to appreciate them for the treasures they are.

## NOTES

1. This brief introduction would be much poorer were it not for the persistent prodding and relentless criticism of Richard Scaglione.
2. An exception here is the *migas* of Mexico City, which originated from the daily rounds of scavengers who gathered stale bread, bones from butcher shops, and leftovers from restaurants to resell in the barrios.
3. "A salient feature of the culinary cultures of the major societies of Europe and Asia is their association with hierarchical man. The extreme form of this differentiation is found in the allocation of specific foods to specific roles, offices, or classes, swans to royalty in England, honey wine to the nobility of Ethiopia" (Goody 1982: 99). To this we may add that Etruscan and Roman mural paintings and those of ancient Egyptian tombs indicate a frugal diet for the peasantry and splendid tables for the elite.

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