

Matías Bruera

Mapping the Tasteland



Explorations in Food and Wine in
Argentinean and European Culture

Translated by David Gorman

PETER LANG

12

This book draws together the results of extensive research into the complex relationships that some modern European and Argentinean writers have enjoyed with food and wine. The European writers considered include Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Italo Svevo, Marcel Schwob, James Joyce and Robert Louis Stevenson; their Argentinean counterparts include Domingo F. Sarmiento, Lucio V. Mansilla, Roberto J. Payró and Ezequiel Martínez Estrada. Through an exploration of both fiction and non-fiction, the author shows how these thinkers' ideas about food and wine influenced modernity and how they continue to influence contemporary issues such as 'globalized' menus and food poverty.

Matías Bruera is a sociologist, researcher and teacher of the history of ideas at the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Quilmes in Argentina. He has published extensively in journals and magazines on the sociology of culture and food culture. He is the author of *Meditaciones sobre el gusto: vino, alimentación y cultura* (2005), *La argentina fermentada: vino alimentación y cultura* (2006) and *Comer* (2010). He is also a founding member of the journal *Pensamiento de los confines*.



Mapping the Tasteland

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Prologue

At the most obvious level the human being shares with all living beings the need to feed itself. However, food is plagued with phantasms and passions, which go beyond its physiological and irreplaceably preservative character because it refers to the perception and exegesis of the world. Food nourishes us, it encourages us to interpret life and grant it meaning. It is a symbolic register in which a wider social reality is transcribed and condensed.

To eat is to assimilate or grasp the world. It is to become imbued with it through sensitive resonances which in everyday life throw us physically into a rich cluster of significant possibilities, although stereotyped by habit and self-reflective apathy about these possibilities. Every text, like every food, is a horizon of allusiveness, a cognitive reflex which delimits the profile of the reflection and which does not consume, as knowledge, the thickness of the material which it symbolizes.

In this sense, food, diet, and regime are indispensable categories for thinking about human behaviours and identities. And if we speak of identities and imaginaries, it is difficult to think of Argentina. It was believed to be "Trapalanda" or the "Empire of Plenty" (Martínez Estrada), an illusionary country plagued with gold and spices which attracted the frustrated pillaging conquistador; or it dreamed of being "Eurindia" (Ricardo Rojas), that new ethnic mystery, in which Argentina is the most fecund organ which assimilates the European and overcomes the American. Once a "second hand" European writer said: "Argentina is a European country; there the presence of Europe can be felt just as intensely as in Europe itself, and at the same time it is external to Europe" (Witold Gombrowicz). For the Argentineans the mere mention of the very name Europe has a particular resonance. The imaginary of Europe brings together a common denominator of aspirations: civilization and ecumenicalism.

Colonizer, discoverer and narrator of the world, galvanizer and usufructuary of the history which she herself forged, Europe has managed to impose its idea of "reason", which defines everything which came before

or which is outside of her as “myth”. The trifling familiarity of Americans with our culture is one more proof of the colonizing perspective of the history which she has imposed on us.

Our perpetually unfinished ethnic genealogy, the product of an always barren search, does no more than move with an unusual insistence the question about who we are, what defines us, our unfinished explanation of identity. America is a presence in ourselves in so far as we are Americans, but more still in so far as we are not. Our immigratory profile, which far exceeds the mere appearances of the European style and the occlusion of mixing and of original peoples, confronts us with an unprecedented situation: the absence of history. Just as colonization forms part of the bygone times of America, immigration as an historical rupture with a European past, does not cease to be a phantasm which wanders passionately and in a disquieting manner until the present as a direct consequence of our difficulty of being.

Our progeny has not made things easy for us. We are the legatees of characters which are at the very least confused, even destroyed. The inheritances were never easy to decode, and he who receives an inheritance always decodes it secretly. We never know its content and in this way the inheritance imposes a task, that of deciphering the legacy. From the promissory ideal of the new world, our place was a capricious extension of land, populated by images. The immigrants came in search of foodstuffs and the land always provided them in excess, up until today, although this time newly colonized by biotechnology.

In an epoch in which things Latin American acquire a certain visibility in their possible cultural recognition, perhaps it is time to settle accounts – in the wake of making our identity visible – with Europe. The link between Argentina and the old continent is just as promising as conclusive. Just as it always turned its back on its continental future, it aspired to identify itself with Europe – in its limits and possibilities. Argentina is nothing without Europe, and the gaze of the thinkers of the old continent has left a fruitful witness to its cultural ascendancy. Argentina is nothing without Europe in its colonialism, inheritance and immigration.

One is their writing. Argentina and Europe are the writing of others: of Montaigne, Balzac, Marx, Benjamin, Joyce, Svevo, Stevenson, Schwob,

although also of Sarmiento, Mansilla, Payró, Borges and Evita. European grammar delineated us from our constitution as a country on the basis of its Enlightenment, Romantic, Positivist or Revolutionary ideology.

And the link with wine and food is revealed in this construct, for writing is like cooking. It is a result which offers a thought, framed by language or ingredients, which in combination go beyond the individual order of the ideas or the dishes. Food characterizes the form in which existence is managed, permitting us to fix a series of rules of conduct and is assimilable not only to coexistence, but also to the social struggle. "Everything eaten is an object of power" (Elias Canetti).

To eat is to reassess on a daily basis that every vital imprint or mark of life is imaginary. *El pez por la boca muere*¹ and man defines himself by his jaws and discovers himself through swallowing. Every diet enunciates an ethics, an aesthetics and a metaphysics of devouring.

Foods do not only nourish our mortal body, but also our age-old imagination. Foods do not only fulfil a biological function but also have meaning. And they dramatize the imaginary dimension, that is, an unconscious but always present fabric of indigestible evocations and connotations – This results in a holistic poetics at the service of the gluttony of thought.

Although thought has never paid sufficient attention to food, every thinker has nourished some part of his work from a former alimentary ideology. However, the food has been devoured by nature and seasoned with the simple mark of vitalism. Food is, above all, culture when it is produced or created, when it is prepared or transformed and when it is consumed or chosen. The "kitchen sense" – Roland Barthes would say – is a cluster of complex and subtle signs which do not possess the beautiful simplicity of the letters of an alphabet, and to decipher it implies a constant struggle with the innocence of its objects. That is the search which we undertake with these essays which would map gustatory horizons and which bring together two continents, remote in their spatial dimension and civilizing perspectives, although close in the history of their ideas and their foods.

1 *Translator's note:* A colloquial phrase, best translated as "Least said, soonest mended" (literally: "The fish dies by the mouth").

Acknowledgments

Every book is a narcotic that feeds the ego. It falsely stimulates the distinction of a person whose name appears in print in conjunction with a biography bound to the more obvious records or curriculum vitae. *Mapping the Tasteland* is the fruit of the generosity and the encouragement of a cluster of friends, colleagues and family members, without whom it really would not have been possible. I want to thank in particular: my partner María Bagnat for making me understand what I have been and what I can be; Claudio Canaparo for his dedication and his fraternal support; David Gorman for his patience and passion in the transmission of ideas; Marcelo G. Burello for his intelligence and generosity; Rodolfo Hamawi for his sincere affection and support; Nicolás Casullo (*in memoriam*), Ricardo Forster and Alejandro Kaufman for their constant presence and friendship; and last, but not least, Myrna and Jorge.

Translator's Note

It is of course impossible to translate a writer's exact words from one language to another without some loss of meaning or of style. As a language, Castellano favours long sentences with multiple sub-clauses nested one within the other; English by contrast prefers brief, direct and linear constructions. In preparing the translation have tried to stay as close to the Castellano as possible so as to retain something of the flavour of Matías Bruera's style of writing and way of thinking, while at the same time trying to produce a coherent text in idiomatic English.

Although *Mapping the Tasteland* is a philosophical / sociological analysis, it is written in a quite elaborate style, using words and phrases that are particular to the *porteño* dialect of Buenos Aires, mixing registers and deploying a profusion of metaphors and idioms and other figures of speech. As a result, a number of words and phrases from the original text defy translation; where this has been the case, I have left them italicized in Castellano in the text and have provided an explanatory note at the foot of the page.

About 30 per cent of the text consists of quotations from other authors in a variety of languages, ranging from English, through the romance languages and Latin to German and Danish. Where it has been possible to obtain a reliable version in the original language, it has been used, but in some cases it has been necessary to translate from the version in Castellano. Thus virtually all the quotations from English-speaking writers have been taken from the original English version. There were, however, a few exceptions where it was impossible to obtain the English version, and translation was therefore necessary, and this has been signalled in a note. In the case of writers of languages other than English the same effort was also made to find a reliable version in English but this was not always possible. Even when an English translation was found, it might not be reliable. In all cases in which a quotation has had to be translated, the translation was

done by me. The translations were then checked against the originals in Castellano, French and Italian.

I would like to thank the author for his constant support and help. I would also like to thank Adriana Montaña Critelli for her help in improving the translation and Victoria Patience for her translation of the first chapter, which I later revised. Any errors and inaccuracies that remain are of course my own responsibility.

David Gorman
La Matanza, Provincia de Buenos Aires
June 2011

PART I

Taste, Modernity, Centre and Periphery

Gourmet Physiology, or the Bourgeois Sorcery of Shapes

The tide brings daughters, the butcher shop creates boys.

— HONORÉ DE BALZAC, *Traité des Excitants Modernes*

Alphabet Soup

Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.

— JUDGES 14: 14

Words and food are the origins of every culture. Words are the beginning of culture, but so is food, because eating calms a body that expresses its fear of dying through losing the energy that makes it a living, speaking being.

In this way, food brings everything together: nature and culture, *physis* and *techné*, the raw and the cooked. This is the old dichotomy between feeding the body and feeding the mind. Out of a natural necessity, mankind has created a cultural possibility that surpasses all materialistic euphemisms: the preparation of food.

All things said and done, there is no wisdom that has not passed through the mouth and been tasted. Memory is appetite, words are food, grammar is a recipe, knowledge is nutrition, menus are rhetoric, facts are flavour, and writing is cooking. No appetite can ever be satisfied, but appetite can only exist when there is a lack. Knowing and eating, words and food, are both children of the same parent: hunger. “Anger was born in

the first person who felt hunger”,¹ says Ariadne, as recreated by Cortázar in *Los Reyes*. Eating your fill is one thing, overdoing it is quite another.

Words and food are charged with meaning. They are an ethos that can be interpreted in many different ways, like picking out an idea out of alphabet soup.

The Law of the Stomach

In any case, whether dietetic knowledge was considered an original art or seen as a later derivation, it is clear that “diet” itself – regimen – was a fundamental category through which human behaviour could be conceptualized. It characterized the way in which one managed one’s existence, and it enabled a set of rules to be affixed to conduct; it was a mode of problematization of behaviour that was indexed to a nature which had to be preserved and to which it was right to conform. Regimen was a whole art of living.

— MICHEL FOUCAULT, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 2: The Use of Pleasure*

Naming something means stipulating a sense and inscribing it into a certain worldview. *Gastér* or *gastros* (stomach) is the etymological root of all the compounds that appear on the culinary scene. “Gastrology” is the word the Greeks usually gave to cookery books until the poet Archestratos suggested the word “gastronomy” in his treatise on pleasure, in which he privileged the end product – the food itself – over the text concerning it. A variety of other concepts have subsequently held centre stage: in the writings of Rabelais or Montaigne, “gastrolatry”, or the science of the mouth; or, according to the Utopian Fourier, “gastrosophy”, which brings together

1 Cortázar, Julio, *Los Reyes*, Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1994, p. 19.

three fields of knowledge – agronomy, medicine and cookery – and tries to fight injustice by producing enough riches and abundance for everyone.

It is said that the gluttony of Roman feasts was so excessive that it ended up imposing the concept of “gastronomy” or “the law of the stomach”. It is suggestive that gastronomy turns out to be a discipline connected to *nomos*, or legislation. A portion, a share of the whole; etymologically confusing for some, but actually nothing more than an enlightening outburst. At present, the problem is not hunger – that is, the fair distribution of food – nor was it in the past. Instead the problem is excess, and the possible culinary combination that both stimulates the senses and increases capital.

Once the word “gastronomy” had been coined, all its supporters – from Berchoux, via Grimod de la Reynière to the creator of the physiology of taste, Brillat-Savarin – became caught up in the universe of the law.

Sins, excesses, and vices have always been the point of reference for all legislation. Why was the law never worried about hunger? Why, in view of such a great cultural tradition, has hunger always proved so natural? There is no such thing as blind justice, just as there is no innocent dietetics. Rousseau, conscious of the origins of inequality, of people’s eagerness for excess, and being a lover of natural humanity, confessed as few have done and wept before a shop window full of expensive food.

Gastronomy is rooted in artifice. Like the great glutton of a legislator that Leviathan represents, the veil of taste – a philosophy of “as if” – is drawn between the misery of need and the elegance of the conspiracy behind it: it is necessary to make an individual virtue of a need shared by all. There is no “art” without restrictions, no pleasure without order. Legislate stomachs and you bring order to human life.

The Physiology of Taste or of Nothing

Taste is taste.

— GUSTAVE FLAUBERT, *Bouvard and Pecuchet*

The hedonistic discourse on food and wine in hunger-stricken post-1990s Argentina is both suggestive and shameless. The appreciation of new and original delicacies has been accompanied by an unrecognizable surge of conversation about them. A lack of moderation has always dominated Argentina's consumerist cultural scene: while hunger takes shape as a picturesque image of the landscape, palates refine their tastes and make the distinguishing of flavours an added value for social and cultural connections. This distinction in sensibility has led to the material distance between the different parts of the social body deepening as never before. The intolerant rage of the quantitative has been confirmed by the fine temperance of the qualitative.

To rework an old local saying: "Tell me what you eat and drink and I'll tell you who you are". Although in terms of the physiology of taste, it is impossible to pin this essential characteristic down because it stipulates from the start that "the number of savours is infinite, for every soluble body has a special savour which is not quite like any other".²

Just as the mission of modernity is to bring order to the world, name it, and adapt it to our understanding, Brillat-Savarin grades and calibrates the phenomena of taste, describing: direct sensation, "the first impression arising out of the immediate action of the organs of the mouth, while the substance to be tasted is still resting on the front part of the tongue"; complete sensation, "composed of the first impression and the impression which follows when the food leaves its initial position and passes to the back of the mouth, assailing the whole organ with its taste and perfume"; and considered sensation, "the judgment passed on to the brain on the

2 Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme, *The Physiology of Taste*, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 40.

impressions transmitted to it by the organ”³. Taste is articulated according to a canonical narrative scheme which refers to the establishment of a lack, of a subject which seeks until it finds, and which eventually passes judgement on what it has found. What about those who do not find? Hunger cannot take part in this ritual, this ceremony. When the lack of food is a constant, everything seems delicious and nothing can be truly appreciated.

Taste is a luxury which responds to an understanding produced within the temporal sphere. As such, taste can be developed through telling a story about it. There are few better examples of this than Proust recapturing times and tastes:

No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place.

An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, but individual, detached, with no suggestion of its origin.

And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was myself. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, accidental, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I was conscious that it was connected with the taste of tea and cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature as theirs. Whence did it come? What did it signify? I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the object of my quest, the truth, lies not in the cup but in myself.⁴

Barthes has been a close observer of the link between gastronomy and language, especially when he points out the power of the latter to summon up the delicacies it is referring to at the very moment when they are absent, for eating and talking are operations that take place on the same part of the body: the tongue. The linguistic, sweet-toothed pleasure of the gastronome, who unfurls his speech with relish and summons fetishist desires through the use of strange words, is a stereotype of this kind of absence.

3 Ibid., p. 42.

4 Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, New York: Random House, 2004, pp. 60–61.

Few ideas are as bourgeois as that of taste, which takes absolute freedom of choice as a given, and declares null and void the primary concept of need by establishing that hunger is both the taste of the poor and the sentence they must serve.

We are speaking now of the physiology of hunger, which does not distinguish between Proustian *madeleines* and stale bread, and which is expressed through one distinctive attribute: the fact that the subject suffering the feeling metamorphoses into the feeling itself. In the Purgatory of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante describes it as follows: “Each in his eyes was dark and cavernous,/ Pallid in face, and so emaciate / That from the bones the skin did shape itself”.⁵ Language, with its transfer of meaning, personifies hunger as a hungry person who, by suffering, is devoured and consumed by hunger itself. Just as hunger is made flesh – or the lack thereof – in mankind, taste is not just an attribute of something in the way that something you could see or hear would be. The distinction between subject and object is paradoxically as much a characteristic of taste (Proust) as of hunger (Dante). In the two contrasting cases, the subject is shattered by the object.

- 5 Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The beginning of this divine comedy inspired the start of the astonishing existentialist fiction that is *Ferdynurke*, which masterfully sketches out one of the most powerful critiques of taste in relation to hunger: “Nothing that is really tasty can be really awful (as the word ‘tasty’ indicates), and only that which has bad taste is truly inedible. With envy, I was reminiscing about those beautiful, romantic, classical crimes, the rapes and gouging of eyes in poetry and prose – herring with jam, that I know are awful, unlike those wonderful and beautiful crimes in Shakespeare. So don’t talk to me, don’t, about those rhymed agonies we swallow as easily as oysters, don’t talk about the candy of disgrace, about the chocolate cream of horror, the little cakes of wretchedness, about the lollipops of suffering and the sweetmeats of despair. So why does this busybody of a woman, who uses her finger to tear at the most bloody social ills, death by starvation of a worker’s family of six, why, I ask, does she not dare, with the same finger, to pick her ear in public? Because this would have been much more dreadful. Death from starvation, or the death of a million in a war – this can be eaten, even relished – yet there still exist in this world combinations that are not edible, that make us vomit, that are bad, discordant, repulsive, and repellent, oh, even satanic, and these the human organism rejects.” See Gombrowicz, Witold, *Ferdynurke*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000, pp. 147–148.

Being and nothing. Taste implies a philosophy of nothing, a theology, if you will; or, in short, an ethics. The sensualism of Serres and his five senses or the hedonism of Onfray and his gourmet reason are difficult to grasp in places which suffer famines. The pleasure of taste escapes all attempts at reduction and thus escapes all science. It is revealed as an ironic kind of physiology which conceals a void that shelters antithetic, tautological values: “I like it” or “I don’t like it”. This is a “power of appreciation”, which in today’s Argentina is nothing more than a denial of hunger.

Society at Table

He who teaches philosophy today gives the other food not to please him, but rather to modify his taste.

— LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Aus dem Nachlass*

In every capitalist metropolis the increase in productivity and wealth brought with it two pithy symbols of social reproductivity: on the one hand, the table, the icon of a powerful minority which brings together healthy eating and good manners, hygiene and courtesy, and taste and fullness; on the other hand, the bed, the materially and spiritually limited space of a needy majority able only to reproduce their miserable existence and the strength they have lost during the working day.

The table is the sorcery of shapes, the *mise-en-scène* of a ceremony which tries to reproduce, in the domestic or public sphere, something that supposedly exists throughout the social spectrum. The ritual of expense and magnificence, courtesy and equality, grace and taste, the kingdom of civility and recognition. A micro society which brings together intersubjectivities in the act of sharing values and stimuli, a selective group practice which narrows and comes together in conversation. A tight sort of sociability watches over the pleasures of the table, helped along by supposed “pairings” of foods and wines, an idea which reproduces a certain model and is