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Taking food seriously

Scholar and cookbook author Darra Goldstein wants you to think about what you eat

By **Chuck Martin**
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Few people are more serious about food than Darra Goldstein, a professor of Russian at Williams College in Massachusetts, award-winning cookbook author and founder and editor of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture*, introduced this winter. But early on a Wednesday morning, the articulate scholar is wearing an apron and making pancakes — buckwheat blini, actually — for students and faculty at Miami University's dining hall in Oxford.

The night before, Ms. Goldstein lectured on Russian cuisine and culture as part of Miami's "Imagining Russia" series. But now she was having fun — standing at the griddle, telling the small crowd that despite much controversy, it is perfectly OK to eat your blini open-faced or rolled up.

The granddaughter of a Russian Jewish immigrant, she became intrigued by Russia during her first year at Vassar College.

"My grandmother and parents didn't talk much about Russia," she says. "They would only call it the 'bad place.' "

Ms. Goldstein has written several books on Russia and the former Soviet region, including *A Taste of Russia* (Russian Information Services; \$17.50) and *The Georgian Feast* (University of California Press; \$17.84), which won a 1993 Julia Child Cookbook Award for "Book of the Year."

After an hour of intense blini-making, Ms. Goldstein paused to sip tea and answer questions about the serious and not-so serious sides of food.



Darra Goldstein and Tom Glover pause during blini-making at Miami University. (Miami University photo) | [ZOOM](#) |

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Question: You looked very comfortable doing the blini demonstration. Somehow, I didn't expect that from such a scholar.

Answer: I do demonstrations several times a year, and I really enjoy it. I think it's an easy way to communicate to people. People are more open to experiencing new flavors and learning about culture when you have a direct connection with them.

Q: Do you feel you receive less respect from your teaching colleagues because you are so serious about food?

A: Yes, but it's changing. In 1974, when I was in graduate school at Stanford, I wanted to do my dissertation on food and Russian literature, and I was told it wasn't a serious topic ... Food studies is now becoming a discipline. It's like women's studies and film studies 30 years ago. People thought you couldn't study film because it's popular culture. With food, people think, well, we all eat it, we all understand it, so what is there to study? ... One of my goals with *Gastronomica* is to show food can be a serious field of inquiry. You can enjoy it and have a sensual relationship to it. But you can also really think about it and learn about different cultures and people.

Q: Do we need to be more thoughtful and serious about our food?

A: I don't think everyone has to be. If I go to a restaurant that has a cuisine that I'm not familiar with, that's wonderful. I want to know more about it. ... But not everyone wants to do that. Some people just want to have a meal. But it is good to think about where our food comes from.

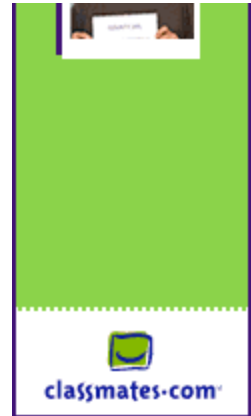
Q: If we had known more about Russian cuisine, do you think we could have saved ourselves some problems in the past?

A: When I was young and idealistic, that was one of the reasons I wanted to publish *Taste of Russia*. I wanted to show that the Russians are people. They are very hospitable, they are warm and embracing. But I'm not naive enough to believe that, if we understand Russian food, then we're not going to war with them.

Q: Do you think American cuisine has secured its place in the world?

A: What's exciting about American cuisine is what's exciting about America, in that it's always reinventing itself. Americans almost have an inferiority complex about their food. We think our food is not as refined as others. We're always trying to do something better, and it's precisely that impetus that makes American food exciting. American food is very cutting-edge. It doesn't always work, but there's always something interesting going on, and it draws from all over the world.

Q: What do you hope to accomplish with *Gastronomica*?



A: I hope it helps food studies become recognized as a serious discipline. But I don't want it to be perceived as a scholarly journal that doesn't appeal to people. I want it to be a mix of things. There should be something in every issue that piques your interest and makes you think about food in a new way.

Q: OK, about the first journal cover. I've heard some people who thought that was bread, maybe a Parker House roll, the woman was putting into her mouth. Have you heard that?

A: No, it's not a Parker House roll. (She laughs.) But I like that. (The cover is actually a still shot of a woman holding a man's hand in her mouth taken from a Luis Bunuel film.)

Q: What was the reaction to the cover?

A: There were people on my advisory board who weren't happy with it. But I ran it anyway because it said what I wanted *Gastronomica* to say. ... For me, it's the perfect cover. It's sensual, and I'm trying to say food on a certain level can be erotic. ... I wanted people to stop and think about it. If you had a visceral reaction about it, you need to stop yourself and ask why.

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