



# Food for Thought

Over the last seven years, the quirky culinary quarterly *Gastronomica* has developed a fierce foodie following. **JEAN NATHAN** sinks her teeth into this sophisticated journal and talks to its passionate—and rather unlikely—founder and editor.

**P**ARROT-EATING IN THE RENAISSANCE. THE ETHICS OF dining on apes. The diet of Japanese sumo wrestlers. Not exactly *Gourmet's* table of contents. But then *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* isn't even remotely *Gourmet*. Its articles are more idiosyncratic, unexpected, and intellectual than anything found in the high-shine food-porn bibles. And its calm, elegant art-inspired covers (Andy Warhol's iconic silver Coke bottle, Wayne Thiebaud's suggestive *Girl with Ice Cream Cone*) spare us the commercial gloss of its ostensible competition.

In the seven years since its inception, this quarterly has developed a devoted audience, one as interested in thinking seriously about food as it is in making and eating it. The magazine contains almost no recipes and there's not a restaurant recommendation in sight. Instead, *Gastronomica* is filled with richly illustrated, brainy, and often lengthy pieces on everything from the medieval spice trade (accompanied by period woodcuts and 58 footnotes) to a meditation on the evolution of table manners (with a graphic comparing trends across the centuries) to an essay on how divorce

changed one family's approach to food and cooking. Readers give it high praise. To them it's *The New Yorker* for fooderati.

A labor of love and obsession: That's how Darra Goldstein, a professor of Russian at Williams College, in Massachusetts, describes the journal that she started and edits nearly single-handedly. The idea for *Gastronomica* was borne out of her longstanding belief that food is an intriguing and largely neglected area of intellectual inquiry and that a passion for the subject doesn't have to be purely extracurricular. She felt there was an opening in the field for a new kind of culinary magazine, one that would bridge the gap between the flashily commercial and the tediously academic. And with *Gastronomica* she has done just that, creating a fascinating, fashionable read.

Says Judith Jones, the esteemed cookbook editor and an occasional contributor: "*Gastronomica* embraces food not as a trendy subject but in the context of people and social history. It's serious, a magazine that couldn't have existed in America when I was young. We didn't take food seriously. It's a sign of how much more sophisticated we are in our response to food today." **CONTINUED »**

## Consuming Passions

It was over the course of a 1999 sabbatical that Goldstein decided to combine her culinary and academic pursuits and launch *Gastronomica*. Her vision, she says, was of a “venue for new thoughts and new findings, an outlet for readers and writers from all sorts of fields who shared a common interest in food.” For her advisory board, she tapped a wide-ranging group of people, contacting many of them out of the blue.

Today the board numbers 23 and includes Jill Norman, the British editor of Elizabeth David, Jane Grigson, Julia Child, and Claudia Roden; Phyllis C. Richman, the restaurant reviewer who helped shape American food criticism during her 23-year tenure at *The Washington Post*; and Nancy Harmon Jenkins, the writer and culinary historian. Goldstein wanted her contributors to be not just chefs and food professionals but amateurs as well, novelists and poets among them. *Gastronomica* would reflect the joy and fun of cuisine and would also delve into what Goldstein calls its “deeper and darker sides”: eating disorders, the marketing that fosters obesity, the politics of hunger, the emerging biotechnologies that both serve and harm.

“Darra has pulled off something very difficult—she’s publishing a journal that

and Chicago, had taken a teaching job at Texas A&M. “The high school there wasn’t particularly academically stimulating,” she recalls. “And I was sent home nearly every day for wearing my skirts too short.” Starved for something to do, she began cooking her way through the 12 volumes of the *Woman’s Day Encyclopedia of Cookery* that her mother had at home.



of intellectual discourse wasn’t shaken, however. In fact, in many ways Goldstein’s life since then can be seen as a mission to prove her Stanford advisor wrong.

Working in the Soviet Union during graduate school, Goldstein researched her first cookbook, *A Taste of Russia*. It came out in 1983, the year she started teaching at Williams. In the time since, she’s earned tenure and maintained a full course load even while publishing three more cookbooks (her second, *The Georgian Feast*, won two awards from the International Association of Culinary Professionals, including cookbook of the year, in 1994) and consulting for the Russian Tea Room and Firebird restaurants in New York City. And in 2006 she served as a guest curator for the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum’s “Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500–2005.”

After days spent in the classroom, Goldstein uses her nights to edit work from an impressive coterie of contributors including southern writer Roy Blount Jr., the poet Louise Glück, and Betty Fussell, author of *My Kitchen Wars*. With these authors Goldstein creates a magazine that is quirky, highly literate,

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has tremendous crossover appeal, with real value for academics who study food, for chefs and others in the food industry, and for the general public,” says Barry Glassner, a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California and the author of *The Gospel of Food*, a book on America’s obsession with the subject. (He is also a *Gastronomica* contributor.) “Graphically the magazine is just gorgeous. Editorially it’s clever. And a lot of the most important serious food writing out there appears in it.” He calls Goldstein’s decision to forgo restaurant reviews and recipes “brave,” adding, “*Gastronomica* is about the culture of food and the aesthetics of food, so this keeps the discussion at a very high level.”

Goldstein’s love of food and cooking took off during her time as a teenager in College Station, Texas, where her research-chemist father, fleeing corporate life after working in Pittsburgh

Her passion for all things edible continued as Goldstein majored in modern languages at Vassar, but it hit a brick wall of sorts at Stanford, where she did graduate work in Slavic languages and literature. There, hoping to combine her interests, she proposed a dissertation on food in Russian literature. Her advisor’s response? “You can’t do that. It’s not serious.” Disappointed but undaunted, she switched gears, writing on Nikolai Zabolotsky, a Russian modernist poet. But she can still—and will—deliver an impressive recitation of every food scene in the Russian literary canon, whether mouthwatering or erotically charged. (Two favorites are Oblonsky and Levin’s meeting in a Moscow restaurant in Chapter Ten of *Anna Karenina* and Chekhov’s story “The Siren,” in which a group of hungry judges, meant to be deliberating on a case, deliberate instead on their ideal meal.) Her belief in food as a subject worthy

occasionally uneven but never boring. And it doesn’t shy away from controversy. “We tackle issues that are in the air in order to show how complex they really are,” says Goldstein. “‘Sustainability’ is a buzzword now that author Michael Pollan is talking about it. But that’s a word being thrown about so much that it’s become devoid of meaning. We need to look into questions of distribution, hunger, poverty.” A recent special issue on the politics of food did just that, taking on Pollan along with other hot-button topics, among them the connections between obesity, hunger, and race in America.

Goldstein has produced what is one of the world’s most admired food publications. Now 29 issues in and published by the University of California Press, it has a rapidly growing circulation of 8,000—a big reach in the world of academic publishing—and has earned a slew of awards as well. *Utne Reader* gave *Gastronomica* **CONTINUED ON PAGE 255 »**

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a 2007 Independent Press Award for social/cultural coverage, proclaiming, “In a word: sumptuous...It’s clean and elegant...a perennial pleasure to devour, as satisfying intellectually as it is visually.” And earlier this year *Saveur* gave the publication a nod, listing what it called the “part highbrow food zine, part scholarly journal” in its top-100 list of favorite things.

Goldstein recently began to take her mission beyond the pages of the magazine, bringing one article to life each quarter at a Gastronomica Forum. The first was held in February at Astor Center in New York City, where she used the magazine’s fall 2007 article “The Salami Maker Who Fought the Law” as a springboard for dialogue. The piece is about the conflict between contemporary health regulations and traditional charcuterie-making, so Goldstein held a tasting of specialties from Manhattan’s Salumeria Biellese and led a discussion between a USDA official and Biellese part owner Marc Buzzio, the law-fighting salami maker of the piece’s title. Sparks—and *soppressata*—flew.

With her next issue, which comes out in May, Goldstein offers plenty of unorthodox fare: an article critiquing Terra Madre, the Slow Food movement’s biannual conference in Turin; one on the guilt-inducing tendencies of a fancy meal; and a piece titled “Is the Phoenix Kosher?”

Perhaps the most controversial story, however, will be the one on Chrissy Caviar, an artist who harvests and packages her own eggs as if they were, say, osetra (not for literal consumption, of course). Both a commentary on the practice of women selling their eggs and a meditation on the luxury trade in traditional caviar, the artist’s work exists at the very intersection of society and gastronomy where Goldstein has found her niche. It is the quintessential *Gastronomica* story, a snapshot of the magazine as it exists today and as it is likely to continue.

“I’m really going to be pushing people’s buttons with Chrissy,” says Goldstein. “I find her work very disturbing and never would have done this in the early days of the magazine. But I’m getting bolder.” ■

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*A yearly subscription to Gastronomica is \$47. The magazine can be found at select newsstands and bookstores and online at [gastronomica.org](http://gastronomica.org).*