

University of California Press Blog

Interview with Author Darra Goldstein: Illuminating New Perspectives on Food and Culture

Darra Goldstein is Francis Christopher Oakley Third Century Professor of Russian at Williams College, series editor of California Studies in Food and Culture, and editor-in-chief of Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture, which recently won an Utne Independent Press award. She has published four cookbooks and numerous articles on Russian literature, culture, art, and cuisine. She has also organized several exhibitions including Feeding Desire: Design and the Tools of the Table, 1500–2005, at the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum. She was recently interviewed by Associate Director and Publisher Sheila Levine.

When did you start writing about food?

When I was at Stanford in the mid-1970s I wanted to write my dissertation on food in Russian literature. But none of my professors thought this was a serious enough topic. It was too domestic. So instead, I wrote about Nikolai Zabolotsky, a brilliant Russian poet. In 1978–79, I spent a year in the former Soviet Union. The generosity of the Russians, who had so little in those years, was extraordinary, and their hospitality gave me a way to enter more deeply into Russian culture. My first cookbook, *A Taste of Russia*, resulted from that experience. I went on to write three more cookbooks. Meanwhile, I was teaching Russian and publishing academic articles on Russian literature and art. It was like having two lives—dutiful Russian scholar and cookbook writer.

You had read an article of mine in *Food & Wine*, and you recognized, in a way that I wasn't yet able to, that my two halves could come together. You asked me to write on vodka in Russian culture. I decided that book wasn't for me, but as we talked I started thinking about writing a larger book about food in Russian culture. UC Press's commitment to the food and culture series validated that the study of food was a legitimate intellectual pursuit.

You also started our prize-winning journal *Gastronomica*. Why was it needed?

After my second cookbook, *The Georgian Feast*, won the Julia Child award, I started writing more frequently about food. In the mid-1990s I published one of my favorite articles, on Carême, the great French chef. Carême was celebrated for his *pièces montées*, fanciful sculptures for the table made out of a special pastry dough or sugar, which were fashioned after great architectural forms. I compared his architectural studies for the table with those for the city of St. Petersburg and published my article in a small scholarly journal. I doubt that many more than 50 people read it.

I decided there needed to be a journal where people like me, who were interested in a serious investigation of food but weren't necessarily joined by discipline, could come together and begin a dialogue that would also help legitimize the nascent field of food studies. I brought the idea of *Gastronomica* to UC Press,

because you and I had already developed a relationship. It is wonderful to be working with you on the book side of the house and with Rebecca Simon and her staff in the Journals Division.

What is most challenging and satisfying about editing a quarterly magazine?

I read every article that is submitted and edit every one that I accept! It's like having a second fulltime job. Gastronomica is helping to shape the field of food studies, which is wonderful. On a more personal level, I'm continually learning new things, and I feel very connected with the world, especially when I hear from potential contributors in Asia, or India, or Australia. One of the best things about Gastronomica is that it truly represents a global community.

And the book series? What are you most proud of?

What I love about our series, and something that distinguishes it, is that we are looking at food and culture very broadly. If you look at our list of twenty-plus titles, you might say it is eclectic, but you'll see the multiple perspectives represented. For example, the series includes historian Warren Belasco's *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food*, anthropologist Theodore Bestor's *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*, and nutritionist Marion Nestle's *Food Politics*. Taken together, the books show how multidisciplinary the study of food is, and how by looking at familiar subjects through the prism of food we can see these subjects in new ways, and make new discoveries. Our series shows both depth and range, which I find very exciting.

How do you see the future of food studies developing?

Food studies is now recognized as a legitimate mode of inquiry, but I do worry that there is not yet a sufficient number of people who are able to comment on all of the work being produced, and therefore there is a lot out there this is not critically sound. But this situation is slowly changing, especially as more academic programs are established in the field, such as those at NYU and Indiana University.

Food studies is more and more rooted in the social sciences. Although it is good to have a disciplinary home, ideally I would like the study of food to encompass other modes of thought, including the arts and the natural sciences. It is this inclusiveness that I aim to represent in the book series and Gastronomica.

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