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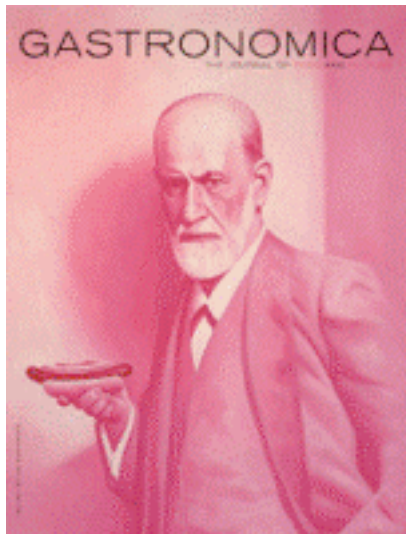
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## Pushing Against the Edges of Good Taste

(Literary News)

***Gastronomica* editor Darra Goldstein talks to Utne.com about her savvy, luscious, and provocative food journal**

interview by [Sarah Pumroy](#)



You could say Darra Goldstein has her plate full. She's the founder and editor in chief of [Gastronomica](#), the journal of food and culture that won the 2007 [Utne Independent Press Award](#) for social/cultural coverage. The quarterly is a labor of love she produces with the help of a part-time managing editor and design director while managing her work as a professor of Russian studies at Williams College. She's also the author of four cookbooks and numerous scholarly books and articles.

Each issue of *Gastronomica* bursts with articles that inform, conjure the senses, and reflect on the cultural impact of food. And each issue brings a bounty of content that ranges in style, format, and gravity, from playful poetry to weighty investigative pieces. Utne.com spoke with Goldstein about how she got the idea for the journal, what makes for good food writing, and why the glossies' food coverage is worth reading, even if it sometimes falls short.

**You have a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literature. How did you become interested in writing about food and where did the idea for *Gastronomica* come from?**

I've always been interested in food. When I started graduate school I wanted to write my dissertation on food and Russian literature. Because there are so many themes of eating in Russian lit, I just thought it would be a wonderful dissertation to write. This was back in 1974, and my professors told me it was not a serious topic. So I did a different dissertation on a Russian modernist poet. I'm not sorry that I did that because it enabled me to enter into a really wonderful world, but I couldn't stop thinking about food. I got the job at Williams and was teaching Russian literature but I was also continuing to write about food on the side. The two lives were very distinct: the Russian scholar and the food writer. It was almost as though what I was doing had to be secret, a little bit illicit, because I wasn't supposed to be doing it. But I couldn't help myself.



I thought there must be other people like me who were working in their own disciplines but were really interested in food and culture, and there was no place for us to talk to each other. That's when I got the idea for *Gastronomica*. I wanted to create a journal that would give legitimacy to food studies in academia. It's very much a crossover journal; I don't want it to be a dry, academic thing. I want lively writing but I also want it to help food studies be seen as a valid discipline.

**What makes for good food writing?**

One of the problems that I'm seeing now in academia is that food has become very hot. A lot of people are starting to write about food but are coming at it from the intellectual side, which is important because not enough people think about food in serious ways. But if they haven't ever spent any time in the kitchen, if they're not thinking about the textures of food and the smells and the taste and the way food is transformed in the kitchen—the sensual side—then the writing ends up sometimes informed, but more often a little bit flat because they don't have that more visceral connection to it. Sometimes I'll accept a piece that's entirely sensual. It doesn't always have to be overlaid with cerebral thinking.

## How do you find a balance between the creative and academic pieces?



I try to put the issues together so that they feel balanced. The poetry appears in every issue; that's really important to me. The artwork is another way of exploring the sensuality, the beauty, and the aesthetics of food, which I know isn't food writing but it captures a certain dimension of it that otherwise would be lacking. There are always two articles in the investigation section that are the ballast for each issue, and those are the most scholarly ones. And with the others I try to find a good balance between something that's more like a memoir and something that's more like investigative journalism.

**You've criticized the popular press for its upbeat, candy-coated coverage of food. Why do you think this is the tendency of the mainstream magazines?**

First, I want to say that I subscribe to all those magazines and I take them to bed at night. I enjoy reading them, and I write for them, so even if I critique them it's not that I don't think they should exist. But there is also a place for a deeper and darker exploration of issues surrounding food. With the trade magazines people want to be entertained and enter a fantasy world. It's a larger problem with American culture—the happy face, as though we should always be smiling. Smiling is good, but we also need to explore things critically and analytically. When you talk about food, the pleasure component is important, but there are also problems of hunger, food security, the environment, the food chain and the toxins that are introduced into it. These issues need to be explored.



## How has the magazine changed since it was founded in 2001?



When I started, I was insecure. I felt strongly that *Gastronomica* had to be serious to prove itself as an intellectual journal. I no longer feel that insecurity; I think that it has proved itself. Now I feel freer to be more playful, to have articles that are pushing against certain norms. For instance, in the May issue there will be an article that I find very disturbing, and I think readers will, too. It's about an artist who harvests her own eggs. It's a social commentary on caviar and the egg as a luxury good and the way women sell their eggs to make money. It's a perfect *Gastronomica* article because it's looking at food, but it's also horrifying and pushing against the edges of good taste. I would not have

had the courage to publish that early on, when *Gastronomica* was still getting established.

## What do you hope readers will learn from *Gastronomica*?

I hope they will take tremendous pleasure in discovering how wide-ranging the world of food is; that it's not limited to cooking. You can take almost any aspect of life and look at it through the lens of food and discover something new about it.

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