

Gastrophénomica

Infused with id and intellect, Darra Goldstein's *Gastronomica* tucked into the multiplicities of the food world's groaning board with mouth and eyes wide open. Betty Fussell reflects on Goldstein and the journal she founded.

That first provocative issue of Darra Goldstein's *Gastronomica* in February 2001 got our attention. The cover was a close-up of a woman in ecstasy, sucking on a man's hand. Who noticed the tiny subtitle "The Journal of Food and Culture"? Movie buffs knew the image from Luis Buñuel's *L'Âge d'Or*, scandalous in 1930. Food buffs relished its sexiness. Literary buffs tasted its wit.

From first to last, the quarterly *Gastronomica* was erotic, visionary, unpredictable, witty, sophisticated, intelligent, exhilarating, fun! For the next decade, as America's food revolution took off, so did *Gastronomica*. It was a kind of artful flying circus grounded by footnotes, rooted in humane scholarship, and subsidized by a university press.

Goldstein's unlikely crossover between academic and popular ways of looking at food helped foster the burgeoning of food studies within universities. She could be scholarly without being stuffy. Mitchell Davis, himself a bridge between The James Beard Foundation and New York University's food studies program (from which he received a Ph.D.), recounts how her magazine "skillfully explores all the cultural diversity and richness of food without foregoing any of its deliciousness." As *Gastronomica* developed into "a *New Yorker* for foodies," he says, "it made you proud to be a foodie."

Goldstein was uniquely equipped to launch such a magazine. She had crossed borders not only on the map but also in the mind and imagination, plugging brains into guts and words into images to create new ways of plugging food into meanings. While her credentials were impeccable as the Francis Christopher Oakely Third Century Professor of Russian at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, she also had toured

America for Stolichnaya vodka and had consulted for restaurants like the **Russian Tea Room** and **Firebird**. While she wrote scholarly essays, she also curated exhibits for the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, wrote articles for the popular food glossies, published four cookbooks—*A Taste of*

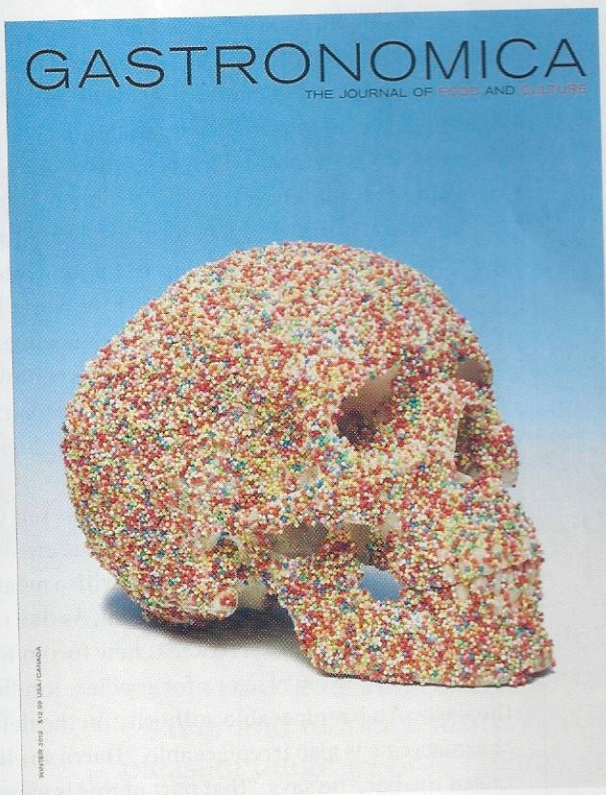
Russia, *The Georgian Feast*, *The Winter Vegetarian*, and *Baking Boot Camp*—and initiated the University of California Press series of California Studies in Food and Culture.

But her real training was as a global adventurer. During the 1970s and '80s she studied Russian at the Universities of Helsinki, Leningrad, Moscow, and Stockholm. She traveled throughout the Soviet Union into Central Asia, Ulan Bator, the Caucasus, and Israel. She was roughed up by the KGB, threatened by borderland machine guns in Georgia and Abkhazia, and denied a Soviet visa.

Over the past 12 years, Goldstein grew her journal in the belief that "food goes to the core of who we are or want to be." She conceived it after she'd taught

her dream course at Williams, "Feasting and Fasting in Russian History," which looked at a millennium of Russian culture through food. "I decided to embrace my passion," she recalls. She used multiple voices to evoke the multiple meanings of food for "a diverse and idiosyncratic audience." She connected the pleasure of food in all its rich sensuousness with an awareness of the deeper and darker issues food provokes.

She wanted to create a new audience, and she did. Without a single recipe, *Gastronomica* built a circulation of 10,000 from both subscriptions and store sales, attracting a mix of professionals and home cooks, as well as the academic-mind-



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Darra Goldstein's *Gastronomica* has won multiple awards for food journalism.

ed. Her table of contents was an eclectic smorgasbord of languages, voices, and forms. Between Latinate "*borborygmus*" (stomach rumblings) at the beginning and Cajun "lagniappe" (small bonus) at the end, she offered small-bite dishes like "antipathies," "celebrations," "investigations," "libations," and always a "chef's page." Her editor's page might have been titled "Feeding Desire" or "Survival Cuisine" or "Melting Pots and Rainbows" or "How the Other Half Eats." The entire rainbow of prose, poetry, photos, and paintings spotlighted food as a sexual, political, and cultural metaphor that yoked pop to haute, Greek barrel wine to belly dancing, the Chekhov short story *Oysters* to current world hunger. For Goldstein, food is an elemental way to connect to other human beings and our shared dilemmas. She links world hunger not just to social problems of poverty and nutrition but to human dignity in the face of chaos, disorder, and despair. In *Gastronomica* she relied on the power of metaphor to link art and appetite, history and chefs, scholarship and commerce, pleasure and understanding.

Who can ever forget the covers of *Gastronomica*? A split pomegranate releasing its seeds, an open-legged girl eating an ice cream cone, a pock-marked rolling pin as artifact, Laurence Fishburne armed with a meat weapon of flesh and bone, a Chanel N°5 perfume bottle filled with kimchi. As one of the most artful of chefs, **Dan Barber**, says of her: "Darra created a new forum for all the different ways of thinking about food—a literary agora for foodies, intellectuals, artists, and Americana enthusiasts. An irreplaceable authority on the delicious." He notes that the quality of her magazine is also irreplaceable. "Darra so elegantly, forcefully, and thoughtfully raised the bar," he says, "that part of this is simply nostalgic—no one likes anything well done to disappear."

Yet, that may be the case, because in this year in which the magazine won a James Beard Award, University of California Press signaled its intention to lower its production values. So Goldstein decided to move on after *Gastronomica*'s November number was issued. Her final cover is as evocative as her first: a close-up of a human skull covered entirely in sprinkles is set against a blue sky, like a Mexican sugar skull set on an altar for The Day of the Dead. Provocative? You betcha.

Betty Fussell is the highly acclaimed author of books and articles on food travel, movies, theater, and the arts. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Travel and Leisure*, and more. She was also the *Food Arts* Silver Spoon recipient in June 2002.