

# NOT FOR BREAD ALONE

WRITERS ON FOOD, WINE, AND  
THE ART OF EATING

---

*Edited by*  
*Daniel Halpern*



THE ECCO PRESS

## CHARLES SIMIC

---

### *On Food and Happiness*

Sadness and good food are incompatible. The old sages knew that wine lets the tongue loose, but one can grow melancholy with even the best bottle, especially as one grows older. The appearance of food, however, brings instant happiness. A *paella*, a *choucroute garnie*, a pot of *tripes a la mode de Caen*, and so many other dishes of peasant origin guarantee merriment. The best talk is around that table. Poetry and wisdom are its company. The true Muses are cooks. Cats and dogs don't stray far from the busy kitchen. Heaven is a pot of chili simmering on the stove. If I were to write about the happiest days of my life, many of them would have to do with food and wine and a table full of friends.

Homer never wrote on an empty stomach.

-RABELAIS

One could compose an autobiography mentioning every memorable meal in one's life and it would probably make better reading than what one ordinarily gets. Honestly, what would you rather have? The description of a first kiss, or of stuffed cabbage done to perfection?

I have to admit, I remember better what I ate than what I thought. My memory is especially vivid about those far-off days from 1944 to 1949 in Yugoslavia when we were mostly starving. The black market flourished. Women exchanged their wedding rings and silk underwear for hams. Occasionally someone invited us to an illicit feast on a day everyone else was hungry.

I'll begin with the day I realized that there was more to food than just stuffing yourself. I was nine years old. I ate Dobrosav Cvetkovic's *burek*, and I can still see it and taste it when I close my eyes.

*Burek* is a kind of pie made with fillo dough and stuffed with either ground meat, cheese, or spinach. It is eaten everywhere in the Near East and Balkans. Like pizza today, it's usually good no matter where you get it, but it can also be a work of art. My father said that when Dobrosav retired from his bakery in Skopje, the mayor and his cronies, after

realizing that he was gone, sent a police warrant after him. The cops brought him back in handcuffs ! "Dobrosav," they said visiting him in jail, "how can you do a thing like that to us? At least make us one last *burek*, and then you can go wherever your heart desires."

I ate that famous *burek* forty-four years ago on a cold winter morning with snow falling. Dobrosav made it illegally in his kitchen and sold it to select customers who used to knock on his door and enter looking like foreign agents making a pickup. The day I was his guest—for the sake of my poor exiled father who was so good to Dobrosav—the *burek* came with meat. I ate every greasy crumb that fell out of my mouth on the table while old Dobrosav studied me the way a cat studies a bird in a cage. He wanted my opinion. I understood this was no fluke. Dobrosav knew something other *burek* makers did not. I believe I told him so. This was my first passionate outburst to a cook.

Then there was my aunt, Ivanka Bajalovic. Every time I wiped my plate clean she shook her head sadly. "One day," she'd say to me, "I'll make so much food you won't be able to finish it." With my appetite in those days that seemed impossible, but she did it ! She found a huge pot ordinarily used to make soap and filled it with beans to "feed an army," as the neighbors said.

All Serbians, of whatever gender or age, have their own opinion as to how this dish ought to be made. Some folk like it thicker, others soupier. Between the two extremes there are many nuances. Almost everybody adds bacon, pork ribs, sausage, paprika, and hot peppers. It's a class thing. The upper classes make it lean, the lower fatty. My aunt, who was educated in London and speaks English with a British accent to this day, made it like a ditchdigger's wife. The beans were spicy hot.

My uncle was one of those wonders of nature everybody envies, a skinny guy who could eat all day long and never gain any weight. I'm sad to admit that I've no idea how much we actually ate that day. Anywhere between three and five platefuls is a good guess. These were European soup plates, nice and roomy, that could take loads of beans. It was summer afternoon. We were eating on a big terrace watched by nosy neighbors who kept score. At some point, I remember, I just slid off my chair onto the floor.

I'm dying, it occurred to me. My uncle was still wielding the spoon with his face deep in the plate. There was a kind of hush. In the beginning, everybody talked and kidded around, but now my aunt was

exhausted and had gone in to lie down. There were still plenty of beans, but I was through. I couldn't move. Finally, even my uncle staggered off to bed, and I was left alone, sitting under the table, the heat intolerable, the sun setting, my mind blurry, thinking this is how a pig must feel.

On May 9, 1950, I asked all my relatives to give me money instead of presents for my birthday. When they did, I spent the entire day going with a friend from one pastry shop to another. We ate huge quantities of cream puffs, custard rolls, *dobos torta*, rum balls, pishingers, strudels with poppy seed, and other Viennese and Hungarian pastries. At dusk we had no money left. We were dragging ourselves in the general vicinity of the Belgrade railroad station when a man, out of breath and carrying a large suitcase, overtook us. He wondered if we could carry it for him to the station and we said we could. The suitcase was very heavy and it made a noise like it was full of silverware or burglar's tools, but we managed somehow to get it to his train. There, he surprised us by paying us handsomely for our good deed. Without a moment's thought we returned to our favorite pastry shop, which was closing at that hour and where the help eyed us with alarm as we ordered more ice cream and cake.

In 1951 I lived an entire summer in a village on the Adriatic coast. Actually, the house my mother, brother, and I roomed at was a considerable distance from the village on a stretch of sandy beach. Our landlady, a war widow, was a fabulous cook. In her home I ate squid for the first time and began my lifelong love affair with olives. All her fish was grilled with a little olive oil, garlic, and parsley. I still prefer it that way.

My favorite dish was a plate of tiny surf fish called *girice*, which were fried in corn flour. We'd eat them with our fingers, head and all. Since it's no good to swim after lunch, all the guests would take a long siesta. I remember our deliciously cool room, the clean sheets, the soothing sound of the sea, the aftertaste and smell of the fish, and the long naps full of erotic dreams.

There were two females who obsessed me in that place. One was a theater actress from Zagreb in the room next to ours who used to sunbathe with her bikini top removed when our beach was deserted

daughter. I sort of tagged along after her. She must have been bored out of her wits to allow a thirteen-year-old boy to keep her company. We used to swim out to a rock in the bay where there were wild grapes. We'd lie sunbathing and popping the little blue grapes in our mouths. And in the evening, once or twice, there was even a kiss, and then an exquisite risotto with mussels.

He that with his soup will drink, When  
he's dead won't sleep a wink.

-OLD FRENCH SONG

In Paris I went to what can only be described as a school for losers. These were youngsters who were not destined for further glories of French education, but were en route to being petty bureaucrats and tradespeople. We ate lunch in school, and the food was mostly tolerable. We even drank red wine. The vegetable soup served on Tuesdays, however, was out of this world. One of the fat ladies I saw milling in the kitchen must have been a southerner, because the soup had a touch of Provence. For some reason, the other kids didn't care for it. Since the school rule was that you had to *manger* everything in your plate, and since I loved the soup so much, my neighbors at the table would let me have theirs. I'd end up by eating three or four servings of that thick concoction with tomatoes, green and yellow beans, potatoes, carrots, white beans, noodles, and herbs. After that kind of eating, I usually fell asleep in class after lunch only to be rudely awakened by one of my teachers and ordered to a blackboard already covered with numbers. I'd stand there bewildered and feeling sleepy while time changed into eternity, and nobody budged or said anything, and my only solace was the lingering taste in my mouth of that divine soup.

Some years back I found myself in Genoa at an elegant reception in Palazzo Doria talking with the Communist mayor. "I love American food," he blurted out to me after I mentioned enjoying the local cuisine. I asked him what he had in mind. "I love potato chips," he told me. I had to agree, potato chips were pretty good.

When we came to the United States in 1954, it now seems like that's all my brother and I ate. We sat in front of the TV eating potato chips out of huge bags. Our parents approved. We were learning English and being American. It's a wonder we have any teeth left today.

visited the neighborhood supermarket twice a day to sightsee the junk food. There were so many things to taste, and we were interested in them all. There was deviled ham, marshmallows, Spam, Hawaiian Punch, Fig Newtons, V-8 Juice, Mounds, Planter's Peanuts, and so much else, all good. Everything was good in America except for Wonder Bread, which we found disgusting.

It took me a few years to come to my senses. One day I met Salvatore. He told me I ate like a dumb shit, and took me home to his mother. Sal and his three brothers were all well employed, unmarried, living at home, and giving their paychecks to Mom. The father **was** dead, so there were just these four boys to feed. She did not stop cooking. Every meal was like a peasant wedding feast. Of course, her sons didn't appreciate it *as far as* she was concerned. "Are you crazy, Mom?" they'd shout in a chorus each time she brought in another steaming dish. The old lady didn't flinch. The day I came she was happy to have someone else at the table who was more appreciative, and I did not spare the compliments.

She cooked southern Italian dishes. Lots of olive oil and garlic. I recollect with a sense of heightened consciousness her linguine with anchovies. We drank red Sicilian wine with it. She'd put several open bottles on the table before the start of the meal. I never saw anything like it. She'd lie to us and say there was nothing more to eat so we'd have at least two helpings, and then she'd bring some sausage and peppers, and some kind of roast after that.

After the meal we'd remain at the table, drinking and listening to old records of Beniamino Gigli and Feruccio Tagliavini. The old lady would still be around, urging on us a little more cheese, a little more cake. And then, just when we thought she had given up and gone to bed, she'd surprise us by bringing out a dish of fresh figs.

My late father, who never in his life refused another helping at the table, had a peculiarity common among gastronomes. The more he ate the more he talked about food. My mother was always amazed. We'd be done with a huge turkey roasted over sauerkraut and my father would begin reminiscing about a little breakfast-like sausage he had in some village on the Rumanian border in 1929, or a fish soup a blind woman made for him in Marseilles in 1945. Well, she wasn't completely blind, and besides she was pretty to look at—in any case, after three or four stories like that we'd be hungry again. My father had a theory that if

you were still hungry, say for a hot dog, after a meal at Lutece, that meant that you were extraordinarily healthy. If a casual visitor to your house was not eating and drinking three minutes after his arrival, you had no manners. For people who had no interest in food, he absolutely had no comprehension. He'd ask them questions like an anthropologist, and go away seriously puzzled and worried. He told me toward the end of his life that the greatest mistake he ever made was accepting his doctor's advice to eat and drink less after he passed seventy-five. He felt terrible until he went back to his old ways.

One day we are walking up Second Avenue and talking. We get into an elaborate philosophical argument, as we often did. I feel like I've understood everything! I'm inspired! I'm quoting Kant, Descartes, Wittgenstein, when I notice he's no longer with me. I look around and locate him a block back staring into a shop window. I'm kind of pissed, especially since I have to walk to where he's standing, for he doesn't move or answer to my shouts. Finally, I tap him on the shoulder and he looks at me, dazed. "Can you believe that?" he says and points to a window full of Hungarian smoked sausages, salamis, and pork rinds.

My friend, Mike De Porte, whose grandfather was a famous St. Petersburg lawyer and who in his arguments combines a Dostoevskian probity and his grandfather's jurisprudence, claims that such obsession with food is the best proof that we have of the existence of the soul. Ergo, long after the body is satisfied, the soul is not. "Does that mean," I asked him, "that the soul is never satisfied?" He has not given me his answer yet. My own notion is that it is a supreme sign of happiness. When our souls are happy, they talk about food.

# JUDITH B. JONES

---

## *A Religious Art*

One day this summer I found that my husband had posted on the refrigerator door—a catchall for all food notes in our house—this quotation:

Cooking is one of those arts which most requires to be done by persons of a religious nature.

-DIALOGUES OF ALFRED NORTH WHITEHEAD

Evan knew that that thought would delight me because I have always felt that the preparation of food is one of the most joyous and inwardly satisfying of all activities that we as human beings are peculiarly privileged to indulge in daily. Other creatures receive food simply as fodder. But when we take the raw materials of the earth and work with them—touch them, manipulate them, taste them, revel in their heady smells and glorious colors, and then through a bit of alchemy transform them into delicious creations—we do honor to the source from whence they sprang. Cooking demands attention, patience, and, above all, a respect for the gifts of the earth. It is a form of worship, a way of giving thanks.

The first time you make a loaf of bread, you usually experience, particularly if you are a child, an exciting sense that you are actually giving life to an inert lump of flour and water. You watch the dormant yeast become active (it's even more thrilling if you've done your own fermentation from scratch and captured the wild yeast cells that may be lurking in your kitchen). Then you knead the dough and feel it transformed from a sticky, lumpy paste to a cohesive mass that is smooth and resilient and bouncy under the heels of your hands. When you poke it, it springs back at you. It is alive. Sometimes it forms bubbles and blisters in its eagerness to expand; it doubles, triples in volume. And then after it has been punched and tamed, it responds to the heat of the oven, rising again, settling into the shape you have given it, and sending forth the most tantalizing aroma as it bakes. No wonder that through the ages we've endowed bread with symbolic meaning: the staff of life, the bread of heaven, the body of Christ.

Often when I look at the carts at the supermarkets laden with frozen dinners and other quickie foods that need only be heated in the microwave, which doesn't even give forth any smell as the food is zapped, I feel sorry for the people who are missing out on the rewarding experience of cooking. Wendell Berry wrote in *The Unsettling of America* that "If you take away from food the wholeness of growing it or take away the joy and conviviality of preparing it in your own home, then I believe you are talking about a whole new definition of the human being." I know in my bones exactly what he means.

I think of evenings in northern Vermont, where we live part of the year, running across the lawn to gather salad greens. I always wait to do it just before dinner because the light at that moment is so beautiful—the grass, the herbs, the various shades of the greens so luminous in the intensity of the setting sun. I feel deeply connected to these things that we have grown and that will now nourish us.

The first year we bought our place, before we had planted anything, we were fortunate to meet Adele Dawson, who gives workshops around the state on medicinal herbs and wild edibles (she's a gifted dowser, too). We asked her to walk the woods and pastures with us so we could recognize some of the wild plants around us. I learned about the little tongues of sorrel that spring up all over, about the shoots, flowers, and pods of milkweed, each stage a different taste and texture, which kinds of ferns made fiddleheads, how the poisonous chokecherry turns benign when cooked, and many more mysteries. The woods, I discovered, were full of raspberries and blackberries, and I would go picking deeper and deeper into the dark stillness of our mountain forest, reaching for yet one more plump, juicy berry to add to my hoard. I felt at one with the musty earth and grateful for the treasures it yielded; even the fear of coming face to face with a black bear abated because I was certain that with such abundance he couldn't begrudge me my small share of his supper.

I think, too, of the many months of the year in New York when I am far removed from the sources of our food and how much pleasure a few herbs grown on a sunny windowsill or a sack of stoneground flour, still smelling of the granary, can bring to our ninth-floor kitchen. These days in most cities we can all browse in farmers' markets, talking to the families who have grown the fruits and vegetables, exchanging information. I remember once being asked what I was going to do with a big bunch of basil I'd bought (that was years ago; now everyone knows). I learned that Brussels sprouts are at their best, still clinging to their tall stalks. after a frost has touched them. and that gooseberries should be

green and hard to yield the best flavor when cooked. Once I took home live eels. The fishman from Long Island said he didn't have time to kill them (or was he testing me?); fortunately, by the time I got home they had smothered in the bag so we didn't have to whack them on the head.

But what about all the time it takes, one is constantly asked—all the shopping, tracking down of choice produce, hours of attention lavished on the preparation of a meal? I guess to many people in our world of modern conveniences, it is irrational. But then most pursuits "of a religious nature" are irrational. In addition, there's the complaint that the results of our cooking labors disappear so rapidly, gulped down in a matter of minutes, that it hardly seems worth it. Jane Grigson, however, regarded this quick consumption as a blessing. "Cooking something delicious," she wrote in *Good Things*, "is really much more satisfactory than painting pictures or making pottery. At least for most of us. Food has the tact to disappear, leaving room and opportunity for masterpieces to come. The mistakes don't hang on the walls or stand on shelves to reproach you forever. It follows from this that the kitchen should be thought of as the centre of the house. It needs above all space for talking, playing, bringing up children, sewing, having a meal, reading, sitting, and thinking. . . . It's in this kind of place that good food has flourished. It's from this secure retreat that the exploration of man's curious relationship with food, beyond the point of nourishment, can start."

But even though our efforts disappear, we do derive great pleasure from them. We enjoy the sharing, the bustle and mess of that kitchen Jane Grigson describes, children licking the bowl, a guest pitching in, someone setting a table nicely—all the rituals that precede the main event. It is fun to tease and tempt another's palate with what we have created. We love to feel, as we hear appreciative murmurs and smacks of approval, that we have contributed in such a fundamental way to someone else's well-being.

Recently Ed Giobbi, the painter and wonderful Italian family cook, gave me a new insight into the nurturing aspect of cooking, particularly for a man. He told me that when his wife was pregnant many years ago and more recently when his daughter was about to give him his first grandchild, both times he felt left out and frustrated that he couldn't participate somehow in the process of birth. But he discovered that he could: all he had to do was cook for them, prepare naturally healthy foods that would nourish both the mother and the child she was carrying, bring tempting dishes to the hospital at the time of birth, and then make

wholesome meals at home *as* she nurtured the infant. In fact, we are talking about his doing a cookbook on the husband/father as nurturer and about the proper feeding of the young.

Ed would deny, I'm sure, that all this had anything to do with "a religious nature," just as Julia Child hooted when I showed her the Whitehead quotation. But I've been pursuing the root of the word "religious" and I find that it is thought to spring from *religare*, meaning to bind, to tie fast, to reconnect. Isn't that exactly what we do when we cook? We connect again to the earth, to the source of our food, and we bind to one another in the sharing of it, in the breaking of bread together, the celebrating of life.