



Sustenance

by J. Scott Miller, Dean

ANTHROPOLOGISTS originally assumed that the primary occupation of our hunter-gatherer forbears was, as with most animals, acquiring, preparing, and eating food. However, recent studies have revealed that *not* to

be the case. In fact, time spent on food preparation and eating was about the same for them as for us.¹ Just as our big brains give us remarkable advantages in terms of understanding and shaping our world, our omnivorous bodies have been created to process food in a way that frees us from foraging from dawn to dusk just to stay alive. Such abundant discretionary time underscores how central learning is to human existence. It also gives us time to play with our food!

What we eat goes beyond building bones and tissues. It also reveals where we were raised, denotes who we are culturally, and even reveals how we have negotiated our lives. Do we live to eat or eat to live? How does communal versus solitary dining affect our lives? These questions are not new, and many researchers, writers, still life painters, and filmmakers have addressed the place of food in the human experience. This issue of *Humanities* plays with food in several ways, underscoring its importance to our survival as well as the role it can play in how we understand and react to the world.

A few years ago, I read the story of an Iowa couple who started to produce artisanal Italian meats from local hogs. They were creating award-winning products, from a unique location—most *salumeria* are located on the coasts of the United States around urban centers—yet they had no prior experience in the industry and no Italian family roots. But they had lived in Italy for several years, and they had learned that Italian children wake up every day expecting that sometime during the day they will experience incredible food. This revelation—and the Iowa couple’s motto that “the food we eat can delight us each day”—inspired them to create high quality food and share it.²

One of my favorite food scenes comes from the Japanese film *Departures* (*Okuribito*): a mortician shares a meal of grilled seafood with his apprentice, saying that living beings must consume other living things if they want to go on living. “That being the case,” he says, “you might as well eat tasty food!” His point is that we should not go through life mourning the death of everything that keeps us alive—plants and animals alike—but rather live purposefully by serving others with the gift of life we receive from others’ sacrifices.

Since we all must eat, make it enjoyable! Because our survival depends on the sacrifice of other plants and animals,

do not waste that precious sacrifice. These two maxims can take us far toward living a rich and meaningful life and can enhance how we prepare our food.

How do we approach cooking: chore or pleasure? My wife is a foodie and Italian American, so food and kitchens play a central role in our life. As her *sous-chef* and fellow traveler, I have learned two lessons from her masterful food preparation and passion for fine cuisine: good ingredients matter, and if you bring a spirit of creativity and adventure to preparing food, you will have pleasant surprises.

We can apply some basic principles of humanities education to the kitchen. When we cook from a recipe, we begin as close readers who seek to understand the text. We then become translators, reimagining the final product using materials and knowledge we have at hand. Next, as we observe and consume what we have made, we are both admirers and critics, delighting in a new culinary experience while trying to imagine how we can improve upon it. If what we have experienced is good enough, we then use writing and photography to articulate the process for future reference and sharing. What began as a chore can metamorphose into a surprising magnification of joy that becomes part of our culinary tradition that enlightens and pleases others.

Given how eating is crucial to both our physical survival and our identity, is it surprising that the sacrament is centered around food? The importance of this ritual has been driven home to us during the pandemic as we have prepared and received the sacrament on our own plates and cups, sometimes pushing the normal definition of “bread.”

As partakers of the holy feast of sacrament, we translate a daily routine into a weekly sacred ritual of remembrance and covenant, one that reaffirms our identity and nourishes us spiritually. In ascribing symbolism to sacramental eating and drinking, we choose to remember Christ, and through that remembrance indicate our imperfect but sincere willingness to identify as “Christ-ivores,” people who draw their nourishment from Him. The benefits of such a spiritual dietary preference are many, including forgiveness for straying from the path, an example upon whom to model our life, comfort in sorrow, and divine guidance. Such sustenance is a bountiful feast, a weekly gift for which we can indeed be thankful. ■



1. Neil E. Rowland, “Order and Disorder: Temporal Organization of Eating,” *Behavioural Brain Research* 231, no. 2 (June 2012): 272–78.

2. “About,” La Quercia Cured Meats, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://laquerciaishop.com/pages/about>.