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WE ARE WHAT WE SAY WE EAT:

WHAT'S ON THE MENU IN THE POETRY CLASSROOM?

[Tom Getz](#)

What's on the menu in a class reading recent American poetry are plums, grapes, blackberries, and apples; eggs, and bread with peach butter and honey; oxtail soup; water, coffee, tea, and wine; trout, beef, lamb, chicken paprika, and Genoa salami; corn tortillas, chili con carne, beans, rice; quiche with broccoli, bacon, cheese, and spinach; root vegetables; and chocolate, chocolate globs, and spumoni. However, to list food like this ♦as though it were merely factual, not actual, not an activity ♦is to miss the wonderful onomatopoeia and synesthesia ♦the kinesiology ♦of food when it is experienced through poetic metaphor. What are on the menu are cherries: "the fleshy sweetness packed / around the sperm of swaying trees"; plums: "delicious / so sweet / and so cold"; and "green chile con carne / between soft warm leaves of corn tortillas." To speak and hear food in the poetic mouth and voice and ear is why we are what we say we eat in recent American poetry.

With a nod to Shakespeare, if food be the food of love, eat on. A great pleasure we can have as careful readers of poetry, since we may love to eat, but we may love language even more, can be sharing poems with students in which we are what we say we eat. In these poems, the act of speaking and the food of which we speak are *of the mouth, of the body*, which seems obvious enough, yet, in a time of increasing abstraction or dissociation of sensibility, when many mouths are seen, often with horrified grimaces, behind glass (TV) and most food is eaten without participation in its preparation, we need vivid reminders. One test of incarnation is if we ourselves or other readers with whom we are sharing a poetic meal salivate, but if we do salivate, it will be at the sound and rhythm and physicality of language as much as at the anticipation of putting actual food into our mouths. It will be at the *substantiality of words* as they form our sustaining act of speaking poetry. In the poems I have in mind, we enact an incarnation of word and body and appetite which is often impelled by love ♦sexual and/or spiritual. Fundamentally metaphor, this poetry is a language of actual incarnation, though of course vegetarians are welcome at the table.

The purpose in focusing on poetic food is to combine a pedagogy with an ethics. To accomplish this, we need to emphasize the importance of reading with the mouth and ear ♦speaking and listening ♦as a way of actualizing and animating the relationship between mind and body and spirit, in other words, as a way of becoming more whole.

Galway Kinnell's sonnet "Blackberry Eating," like many of the poems ripe for tasting, begins with love: "I love to go out in late September / among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries..." (24). The crucial simile, ♦as words sometimes do, ♦begins the sestet:

the ripest berries
fall almost unbidden to my tongue,
as words sometimes do, certain peculiar words
like *strengths* or *squinned*,
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well,
in the silent, startled, icy, black language
of blackberry-eating in late September.

One of my students (Alexis Key) called this the "smorgasbord of Ss poem." In our performance of the lines, articulated syllables form an icy, black language, which is the "language / of blackberry-eating." Words in the mouth are *like* berries in the mouth, and the "like" almost disappears in an identity of word / berry. Each word is a berry, multi-faceted yet singular ♦a little synthesis of the one and the many.

In Helen Chasin's "The Word *Plum*" the word "plum," rather than the plum itself, is delicious, though I would suggest that in this poem and others the sense of "speech act" is so strong and so intimately linked with the act of eating that any sense of plum as mere fact or object-in-itself melts or burns or bakes away as we form the word in our mouths (214). The actual plum is drawn into our mouth as the poem teaches us to pronounce the word "plum." What the mouth does in eating underlies metaphorically the speaking. About this poem the same student wrote, "In 'The Word *Plum*,' I remember so clearly the juicy word *plum* feeling so luscious in my dry mouth. I prepared my taste buds. I fixed my lips

to push out p-l-u-m with the pout of my lips and the push of my mouth. The savory poem was in the plum of my mouth. Poetry was something I had learned to do with my mouth; language was something I had learned to taste. I bit into the word ◆plum' and broke open the taut skin of the juicy fruit with my 'lip and tongue of pleasure.' I spoke and listened. I felt the word 'plum' as I said it is 'delicious.' I bit and it responded to my mouth, saliva, and teeth simultaneously as I ate it."

The poem is short and tart.

The Word Plum

The word *plum* is delicious

pout and push, luxury of
self-love, and savoring murmur
full in the mouth and falling
like fruit

taut skin
pierced, bitten, provoked into
juice, and tart flesh

question
and reply, lip and tongue
of pleasure.

Plums may, of course, remind us of William Carlos Williams' well-known poem.

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

For Williams, the gift of the poem replaces the plums gobbled up. As in "The Word *Plum*" or "Blackberries," the language of eating is so sensuous, so appreciative, so full of the impulse to share, that the language is a more than adequate substitute for the actual food.

Aron Keesbury's darkly funny, gritty sonnet "Song to a Waitress" begins with a stumbling 11-syllable first line before the perfect iambic pentameter of most of the rest of the poem (218).

Yes. I want a big fat cup of coffee and
I want it hot. I want a big hot cup

of coffee in a big fat mug. And bring
it here and put it down and get the hell
away from me.

The opening line is like a bumbling stumble in Brueghel's painting "The Kermess" and in William Carlos Williams' poetic version "The Dance." With the beginning of the sestet, "And come back every now and then and fill / my big fat mug..." we realize fully the obvious, fat comparison of the mug of coffee and the mug/face of the man, and we realize that the octave, with its continual play on *fat* and *mug* has been a witty portrait of the man himself ♦ body and mind.

And come back every now and then and fill
My big fat mug and keep it hot and full.
And I don't want to hear your waitress talk
And I don't want to see you smile. So fill

My big fat mug and get the hell away.
I don't want to see your face today.

As another student (Kim Yeckley) wrote, the words are "short, stout, stinging words. Chunky mug-like words." The song to the waitress is an onomatopoeic of the personality of the man singing as it is of the liquid caffeine and sugar he keeps pouring into his mouth.

Another food poem which enacts the full, sensuous and sensual use of the mouth serves an epigram as an *hors d'oeuvre*. Sally Croft's "Home-Baked Bread" opens with a tribute to the book many of us were given when we married ♦ *The Joy of Cooking* (125).

Nothing gives a household a greater sense of stability and common comfort than the aroma of cooling bread. Begin, if you like, with a loaf of whole wheat, which requires neither sifting nor kneading, and go on from there to more cunning triumphs.

The poem begins with wholesome whole wheat, plays with "cunning," becomes more and more sexual, moves from cunning to insinuation to seduction in the kitchen to anticipated consummation in the upstairs bedroom. The poem begins

What is she not saying?
Cunning triumphs. It rings
of insinuation. Step into my kitchen,
I have prepared a cunning triumph
for you. Spices and herbs
sealed in this porcelain jar...

The sensuality of the poem comes with an imagery, sound, and rhythm of spices, rising, warmth, arousal, open vowels and opening bodies.

♦ The fragrance
is seductive? I hoped you would say that.
See how the heat rises
when the bread opens. Come,
...

Later we hear the wonderful vowels of ♦ warm bread spread with peach butter ♦ and smile at the insinuation of *bedspread* in *bread spread*. Bread is well-baked and eaten in the kitchen, or, metaphorically, in bed.

What cunning
triumphs we can discover in my upstairs room
where peach trees breathe their sweetness
beside the open window and
sun lies like honey on the floor.

Isn't it interesting that we can eat and speak, can consume and express with the same complicated orifice?

Carolyn Kizer's "Food for Love," begins with a provocative epigram from Samuel Butler II: "Eating is touch carried to the bitter end" (101). The poem opens with

I'm going to murder you with love;
I'm going to suffocate you with embraces;
I'm going to hug you, bone by bone,
Till you're dead all over.
Then I will dine on your delectable marrow.

This is a fairly indigestible appetizer (or it could be a very funny image of James Beard's good trencherman eating a whole chicken). The lover continues to prepare for her meal by first denuding her partner by drying him—turning him or her into a total desert (not dessert), then renuding him, watering him, until succulents spring up everywhere and he is resurrected. The poem ends with a holy communion:

Till you are a resurrected field in bloom,
I will devour you, my natural food,
My host, my final supper on the earth,
And you'll begin to die again.

In a lighter sauce, in Richard Armour's charming "Going to Extremes," a simple contraction gets the reader's lips out of the way; then the mouth turns as much as is humanly possible into a ketchup bottle, into a glottal bottle (196).

Shake and shake

The catsup bottle

None'll come

And then a lot'll.

Just as the rhyme of "bottle" and "lot'll" opens our ears and our hearing, the choice of "lot'll" instead of "lot will" opens the mouth and throat. We give up the determined, clenched jaw of "None'll come" and sound pours out of the mouth just as the bottle expresses its contents: "And then a lot'll."

We learn through performing these poems—saying them, hearing them, and understanding them simultaneously—that language takes its meaning not by referring to external objects-in-themselves but by the experience of speaking, hearing, and doing the language. As Wittgenstein says, "Meaning something is like going up to someone" (457; 133e). You can't take the mouth out of eating or speaking without risking linguistic, culinary, and personal abstemiousness and abstraction—a thin gruel, whether one is eating or speaking. Of course, we could select many additional poems for the consumption of reading with our mouths and minds. Other poems might include Robert Creeley's "The Language," Philip Levine's "Salami," Jimmy Santiago Baca's "Green Chile," James Wright's "The Fruits of the Season," John Berryman's "Dream Song #4," Li-Young Lee's "Eating Together," and Gary Snyder's "Song of the Taste." Whatever we order in our individual classrooms, may we enjoy healthful reading and *bon appétit*.

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