

Guest Editor's Introduction

'On the Table': Food in Our Culture

Lisa Milner

The 2010 Global Hunger Index notes that the number of people suffering from undernutrition last year was almost one billion (von Grebmer *et al.*). At the other end of the scale is the contemporary attitude to food, not so much as a necessity, but as a consumer ideal, a performance medium, a lifestyle enhancer or a signifier of identity, whether individual, community or national. Italian journalist and author, Giacomo Papi, believes that 'food has replaced fashion. Appearance has given way to the taste. It is a transformation in tune with an era that seems committed mainly to write a rule to its own greed. The mouth has become the most important organ. The kitchen is the art of this time'.

In recent years, there have been seminal changes in the ways in which we think and act when it comes to food. These changes include the development of a 'slow food' movement, the rise in popularity of books, courses and television shows on food, and a growing interest in ethno-specific cuisines. Growing popular awareness of what we put on our tables and where it comes from has taken place alongside a growing field of academic interest in food. Donna Lee Brien writes that:

Food has (at least for many in the West) moved largely from being a source of nourishment ('eat to live') to occupy a series of seemingly polarised positions. On one hand, the food industry intersects with that of the giant leisure entertainment industry (to entice consumers with a 'live to eat' attitude), on the other, food figures in serious discussions around such issues as identity, health, politics, science and local/national/international development. While food can form the locus of personal, physical and emotional matters including concerns about health, wellbeing and self-esteem, it also grounds global discussions about the sustainability and, even, the viability of life on earth.

This special section of *Australian Humanities Review* is dedicated to writing that investigates our relationship to food, past and present, and the changing place of food in society. We present a series of papers that together engage with

a range of perspectives and with topics such as the politics of food, consumption and identity, the philosophy of eating, and the role of food production and consumption in culture.

Responding to a growing interest in the histories of national cuisines, Colin Bannerman opens this issue with a nuanced introduction to written accounts of Australian food cultures. Barbara Santich examines some of the ways in which food provided a mediating pathway between colonial European and indigenous Australians cultures. 'Colonial experimentation' she writes 'required indigenous ingredients to be culturally appropriated, plucked from one culture and incorporated into another so that the foreign became familiar'.

Shifting to a more contemporary context, Adrian Peace's article focuses on how social meanings of eating kangaroo meat resound in contemporary debates. In particular, Peace looks at how the various prisms we view 'roos' through intersect—as nutrition, national symbol, bane of farmers, and a possible contributor to climate change mitigation.

In 'Swimming with Tuna', Elspeth Probyn similarly interrogates a food source as the site of multiple significations by looking at the changing nature of the Eyre Peninsula fishing industry and how the supply chain of tuna to Australia and the world affects many aspects of everyday life. While Probyn's article focuses on a globalised industry in a local context, Ferne Edwards looks at local organisations that are having broader social impacts. Her well-researched examination of localised, grassroots food movements around Melbourne draws attention to the movement's role as a viable alternative to large-scale food production.

Jemàl Nath and Desirée Prideaux, in 'The Civilised Burger', examine meat alternatives and their promotion in Australia. They provide discussions of current debates about ethical foods, the growth of alternative food products, and what this means in terms of human relationships with animals and the environment.

This issue also contains a section of reviews of some of the more exciting food books to be released in recent times. It is our hope that the essays and reviews, together with the food-themed Ecological Humanities section, provide you with much food for thought.

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Works cited

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