

# Understanding Ourselves Through Our Food

by Helen Vallianatos, PhD

Gastrosophy, the science or art of good eating, is an idea that seems easy to define, but in fact is a challenge to define because meanings of “good eating” vary across cultures and historical periods. The seven artists of the exhibit, *Gastrosophy*, explore the various ways “good eating” is constructed by highlighting the social, political and cultural functions of food. Food is a means that all of us use to define ourselves, to identify what marks “us” from “them.”

Through food, we signify our identities, including our gender, ethnicity, social status, age, religion, and our regional and national affiliations. For example, food items may be classified as women’s or men’s foods, or as “poor peoples’ food.” One of the most common ways we use food in our society is to define our ethnicity. Canada is a country of immigrants—we are among the top immigrant-receiving nations of the world. As immigrants settle in Canada, maintaining and reproducing the taste of home may be an important way of maintaining connections with distant loved ones. Engaging with the tastes of Canada can be a way of adjusting to their new life. The social status of a particular immigrant community may be illustrated through their ability to access their ethnic foods, and in the process, reproduce the aesthetics of home.

The power of food exists in its abilities to arouse all of our senses. When we think of food, the first sense that often comes to mind is taste. Taste is central to our ideas of who we are; from our uterine experiences, we begin to taste our world and our place in the world. The taste of home is most often grounded in our early development; it is no surprise that our comfort foods are usually those dishes that transport us to the comfort of our childhood homes. But tastes can and do change, and can be a way to connect with others—to taste new foods, and in the process, explore new ways of living. Smells can entice or enforce boundaries of self/other. Touch is part of the bodily knowledge we use in acquiring, preparing and consuming food; not only through our fingers, but also through the feelings food’s textures elicit in the mouth. The sounds and sights of food cooking, of meals being served and enjoyed, can instill pleasure (or disgust), even without the scent or taste. Such imagery has proliferated through various forms of media, and have enjoyed a long history in cookbooks, menus, and other texts.

How does food garner the power to speak—implicitly and explicitly—about who we are? Arguably, it is because of the everyday nature of food; it is something we require to nourish our bodies, but in the process, we nourish our souls. By incorporating food into our very being, we imbibe not just nutrients, but the cultural meanings and social values inherent in foods. Thus we perform our identities through our food practices. This is not just about the foods we eat, but the food rituals and practices that we perform while acquiring, preparing, and consuming meals. The hearth is commonly seen as the centre of the home, and how food work is divided within the family is a window to understanding age and gender roles. Consumption patterns within the family not only demonstrate age and gender hierarchies, but also represent emotions. The aesthetics of food allows memories and emotions to become enmeshed into our bodies; the smells and tastes of food can transport us to other times and places. The kitchen, as the hearth of the home, is often a place that is central to our sensory memories. Across cultures, the kitchen is the sacred space of the home, where culinary magic is engaged. It can be a sacred space that must remain pure, and where a family connects with its past (e.g. family ancestral shrines occupying a corner).

Food defines us. What and how we eat not only speaks to our individual social locations and our family and cultural histories, but also our social values. Our food choices are a mirror to our morality. The growth of industrial farming and global food distribution networks has become the

norm in our society, but simultaneously, some argue for seeking out locally produced foods and supporting small-scale farmers.

The artists in *Gastrosophy* examine many of the aspects of food and identity and leave us to ponder our relationship to food today. Marc Siegner looks at food culture and aesthetic cultural exchanges, as does the performance-installation of food preparation on the exhibit site. Robert Harpin and Sergio Serrano each explore the sensual aspects of food: Serrano through printed images and writings that invite us to consider how relationships to food vary through time and space, and Harpin through a playful critique of the elicitation of pleasure, and its associated morality, in the industry of cooking entertainment. Jeff Klassen uncovers the hidden social infrastructure in the production of food, Chelsea Boos references food preparation and ritual, and Mackenzy Albright and Rachelle Bowen question the remains, highlighting waste and the lurking dangers of consumption. Each installation in the exhibit encourages us to consider how every day food practices can be harmonized with our own beliefs and values.

Bon appétit!