

Matías Bruera

# Mapping the Tasteland



Explorations in Food and Wine in  
Argentinean and European Culture

Translated by David Gorman

PETER LANG

## Prologue

At the most obvious level the human being shares with all living beings the need to feed itself. However, food is plagued with phantasms and passions, which go beyond its physiological and irreplaceably preservative character because it refers to the perception and exegesis of the world. Food nourishes us, it encourages us to interpret life and grant it meaning. It is a symbolic register in which a wider social reality is transcribed and condensed.

To eat is to assimilate or grasp the world. It is to become imbued with it through sensitive resonances which in everyday life throw us physically into a rich cluster of significant possibilities, although stereotyped by habit and self-reflective apathy about these possibilities. Every text, like every food, is a horizon of allusiveness, a cognitive reflex which delimits the profile of the reflection and which does not consume, as knowledge, the thickness of the material which it symbolizes.

In this sense, food, diet, and regime are indispensable categories for thinking about human behaviours and identities. And if we speak of identities and imaginaries, it is difficult to think of Argentina. It was believed to be "Trapalanda" or the "Empire of Plenty" (Martínez Estrada), an illusionary country plagued with gold and spices which attracted the frustrated pillaging conquistador; or it dreamed of being "Eurindia" (Ricardo Rojas), that new ethnic mystery, in which Argentina is the most fecund organ which assimilates the European and overcomes the American. Once a "second hand" European writer said: "Argentina is a European country; there the presence of Europe can be felt just as intensely as in Europe itself, and at the same time it is external to Europe" (Witold Gombrowicz). For the Argentineans the mere mention of the very name Europe has a particular resonance. The imaginary of Europe brings together a common denominator of aspirations: civilization and ecumenicalism.

Colonizer, discoverer and narrator of the world, galvanizer and usufructuary of the history which she herself forged, Europe has managed to impose its idea of "reason", which defines everything which came before

or which is outside of her as “myth”. The trifling familiarity of Americans with our culture is one more proof of the colonizing perspective of the history which she has imposed on us.

Our perpetually unfinished ethnic genealogy, the product of an always barren search, does no more than move with an unusual insistence the question about who we are, what defines us, our unfinished explanation of identity. America is a presence in ourselves in so far as we are Americans, but more still in so far as we are not. Our immigratory profile, which far exceeds the mere appearances of the European style and the occlusion of mixing and of original peoples, confronts us with an unprecedented situation: the absence of history. Just as colonization forms part of the bygone times of America, immigration as an historical rupture with a European past, does not cease to be a phantasm which wanders passionately and in a disquieting manner until the present as a direct consequence of our difficulty of being.

Our progeny has not made things easy for us. We are the legatees of characters which are at the very least confused, even destroyed. The inheritances were never easy to decode, and he who receives an inheritance always decodes it secretly. We never know its content and in this way the inheritance imposes a task, that of deciphering the legacy. From the promissory ideal of the new world, our place was a capricious extension of land, populated by images. The immigrants came in search of foodstuffs and the land always provided them in excess, up until today, although this time newly colonized by biotechnology.

In an epoch in which things Latin American acquire a certain visibility in their possible cultural recognition, perhaps it is time to settle accounts – in the wake of making our identity visible – with Europe. The link between Argentina and the old continent is just as promising as conclusive. Just as it always turned its back on its continental future, it aspired to identify itself with Europe – in its limits and possibilities. Argentina is nothing without Europe, and the gaze of the thinkers of the old continent has left a fruitful witness to its cultural ascendancy. Argentina is nothing without Europe in its colonialism, inheritance and immigration.

One is their writing. Argentina and Europe are the writing of others: of Montaigne, Balzac, Marx, Benjamin, Joyce, Svevo, Stevenson, Schwob,

although also of Sarmiento, Mansilla, Payró, Borges and Evita. European grammar delineated us from our constitution as a country on the basis of its Enlightenment, Romantic, Positivist or Revolutionary ideology.

And the link with wine and food is revealed in this construct, for writing is like cooking. It is a result which offers a thought, framed by language or ingredients, which in combination go beyond the individual order of the ideas or the dishes. Food characterizes the form in which existence is managed, permitting us to fix a series of rules of conduct and is assimilable not only to coexistence, but also to the social struggle. "Everything eaten is an object of power" (Elias Canetti).

To eat is to reassess on a daily basis that every vital imprint or mark of life is imaginary. *El pez por la boca muere*<sup>1</sup> and man defines himself by his jaws and discovers himself through swallowing. Every diet enunciates an ethics, an aesthetics and a metaphysics of devouring.

Foods do not only nourish our mortal body, but also our age-old imagination. Foods do not only fulfil a biological function but also have meaning. And they dramatize the imaginary dimension, that is, an unconscious but always present fabric of indigestible evocations and connotations – This results in a holistic poetics at the service of the gluttony of thought.

Although thought has never paid sufficient attention to food, every thinker has nourished some part of his work from a former alimentary ideology. However, the food has been devoured by nature and seasoned with the simple mark of vitalism. Food is, above all, culture when it is produced or created, when it is prepared or transformed and when it is consumed or chosen. The "kitchen sense" – Roland Barthes would say – is a cluster of complex and subtle signs which do not possess the beautiful simplicity of the letters of an alphabet, and to decipher it implies a constant struggle with the innocence of its objects. That is the search which we undertake with these essays which would map gustatory horizons and which bring together two continents, remote in their spatial dimension and civilizing perspectives, although close in the history of their ideas and their foods.

1 *Translator's note:* A colloquial phrase, best translated as "Least said, soonest mended" (literally: "The fish dies by the mouth").