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The Tastes of a Nation: M.F.K. Fisher and the Genre of Culinary Literature

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**The Tastes of a Nation:
M.F.K. Fisher and the Genre of Culinary Literature**

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Honors Thesis
2006
Katherine Stubbs**

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
II. American Food Culture: A Historical Perspective	11
III. A Genre's Genesis: Gastronomic Literature in the United States	23
IV. A "Poet of the Appetites": M.F.K. Fisher	27
V. Fisher's Influence on Contemporary Culinary Writers	61
VI. Notes Towards a New American Gastronomy	67

For Marina Alessi, whose Italian sensibilities inspired my own culinary awakening. For Katherine Stubbs, who guided me throughout this project with immeasurable energy, enthusiasm, and dedication. I am truly thankful to have been able to work with you. For Jennifer Thorn, who originally encouraged me to pursue this project and has offered support and advice throughout it. And for my family, who have provided me with the opportunity to indulge myself in this work.

I. Introduction

When I recall an experience I've had in a restaurant, or at a meal prepared in my own home, my descriptions include memories of specific ingredients, flavors, and aromas, as well as the other people involved in the occasion. My individual experience is informed by a vast array of influences unique to my own life, but when I record that experience, I am writing in what has become a well-established tradition of culinary or gastronomic writing, two phrases that I will use interchangeably to refer to non-fictional textual representations in which images and descriptions of food and the eating experience play a central role.

Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher introduced the modern tradition of gastronomic writing to the United States with the publication of her first book, *Serve it Forth*, in 1937. Until Fisher, writing under the androgynous byline "M.F.K. Fisher," used the subject of food to acknowledge the appetite and other physical and emotional hungers, it was not customary for women to express such desires. Before this, the majority of books written in America about food were instructional cookbooks, written by women to aid other women with the task of preparing meals for the family. Fisher removed the element of drudgery that had come to be associated with food preparation and eating and imbued it with sensuality, focusing on human hungers. Through her vivid and witty reflections on the pleasures of the table, Fisher demonstrated how food is connected to many aspects of life. She recognized the act of eating as a multilayered experience with social, cultural, economic, and political ramifications. In her eloquent prose, Fisher brought food into the spotlight and used it as an avenue through which to approach other arenas of life; she was respected as a writer and intellectual as well as an authority in the food world. Fisher did

not tell people specifically what and how to eat. Instead, she wrote of experiences that could result when one recognized and honored his or her individual appetite. She gave her readers individual agency, believing that, “you should eat according to your own tastes, as much as possible...” (*How To Cook A Wolf* 213).

Fisher was inspired to write about food when she traveled to Europe and witnessed the rich culinary traditions and the convivial sharing of meals embedded in European culture. Scholar Alice Lee McLean describes how as a young American bride living and writing in France, Fisher’s literary and gastronomic sensibilities were strongly influenced by French food philosophies and traditions:

During her time in France, Fisher not only honed a gastronomic expertise and a taste for pleasure, but she also gained an introduction to a genre of writing largely unexplored by food writers in the United States. Food writing in the United States and England was comprised of domestic cookbooks, while food writing in France fell into two main categories: cookbooks geared toward the professional chef and gastronomic literature ... the male authored genre traditionally focused on the palate’s education as an essential component of self knowledge (45 - 46).

In her approach to writing about food, Fisher boldly stepped into this genre of gastronomic literature historically dominated by French male writers, in particular the nineteenth-century French lawyer and gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. Instead of denying female appetites (physical, sexual, and emotional), Fisher used food as a means of articulating female desire. She recognized the significance and meaning of the act of eating by using food as the lens through which she viewed life. In her work, food

functioned to address many levels of human hungers, from providing basic physical nourishment to serving as a context for the expression of emotional and sexual fulfillment or lack of fulfillment.

When questioned as to why she wrote about food instead of more pressing social issues, Fisher answered, “Since we must eat to live, we might as well do it with both grace and gusto ... I cannot count the good people I know who, to my mind, would be even better if they bend their spirits to the study of their own hungers” (*How To Cook A Wolf* 350). She added, “Like most other humans, I am hungry. But there is more to it than that” (*The Gastronomical Me* 353). Fisher contended that even a simple meal, when shared convivially, is the ballast of life, the foundation of all human relations:

Too few of us, perhaps, feel that the breaking of bread, the sharing of salt, the common dipping in one bowl, mean more than satisfaction of a need. We make such primal things as casual as tunes heard over a radio, forgetting the mystery and strength in both ... There is honor and sanctity to eating together ... so it should be now, although we have civilized ourselves away from the first rules of life. Sharing our meals should be a joyful and trustful act, rather than a cursory fulfillment of our social obligations ... then, with good friends of such attributes, and good food on board, and good wine in the pitcher, we may well ask, When shall we live if not now (*Serve It Forth* 42-44)?

In her memoir *The Gastronomical Me*, published in 1943, Fisher used food experiences as the framework to contemplate her own life, and recognized that “our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that

we cannot straightly think of one without the others” (353). Fisher did not ignore other arenas of life; by addressing basic human hungers, Fisher used the subject of food as a means of addressing the cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the “more pressing social issues.” For example, Fisher demonstrated a connection between food and the political arena when she wrote, “Wherever politics are played, no matter what color, sex, or reason, the table is an intrinsic part of them ... every great event in history has been consummated over a banquet board” (*An Alphabet For Gourmets* 701). Fisher’s close acquaintance, Jeannette Ferrary, noted that Fisher “seemed to have made it her business to know the most amazing minutiae ... and then she gives you the works: the mythology, the politics, the gastronomy, and any other relevant details, all rolled into one” (*M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 23). Fisher had an ability to recognize the relevance of food to nearly any situation, and the literary skill to portray that relevance.

As a young girl, Fisher was intrigued by the events that took place in the kitchen. Even in her childhood, she recognized the significance of preparing and sharing a meal. She recalled:

Evidently I loved to cook ... I loved to read cookbooks ... and there was always an element of surprise, if not actual danger, in my meals ... but I still think that one of the pleasantest of all emotions is to know that I have nourished a beloved few, that I have concocted a beloved story, to sustain them against the hungers of the world (*The Gastronomical Me* 365-367).

Food and language both offered possibilities for creative expression. For Fisher, the acts of writing and creating a narrative, preparing and sharing a meal, and living daily life

were parallel registers of experience. Each of these arenas offered Fisher a comparable opportunity to present herself creatively and imaginatively.

But when Fisher was growing up, a repressive environment commanded by an austere grandmother stifled expressions of appetite in the Kennedy household. In what could be considered a lifelong reaction against her grandmother's customs, the adult Fisher confronted life with senses fully engaged. Fisher's perceptive palate was first cultivated as a young bride living in France, for "France was her catalyst, her inspiration, if not her salvation" (Ferrary, *M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 172). Her palate continued to inform her lifelong literary ambitions. Fisher consistently related to food at an emotional level as well as a physical one. As a result she was more successful at connecting with her personal desires, as well as articulating those desires in an identifiable manner to an audience. In doing so, she implied to her readers that they could recognize desires as well.

A glimpse into Fisher's personal life reveals the variety of influences that inform individual attitudes and personal preferences regarding food practices and philosophies, which include, but are not limited to, an individual's childhood experiences, geographic location, nation of origin, race, age, socio-economic situation, and gender. For the most part, these influences are out of the direct control of the individual. However, I will demonstrate in this study that there exists an additional category of influence. In the United States especially, this category informs and shapes personal taste and food preferences to an even greater degree, in most cases, than do the other factors affecting an individual. This is the category of the representation of food in literature, the media, and other arenas of discourse.

In the broadest sense, this category is a result of the increasing degree to which food is a subject of discourse in the United States, which has resulted in a shift in American attitudes towards food. For generations, Americans had considered the act of eating as little more than a way to refuel the body. Most people ate to live rather than lived to eat. Historically, Americans have been hesitant and reserved when it comes to food-related decisions, and have approached food with trepidation and anxiety. Equating food with pleasure has never been a sensibility embedded in American culture. The appetite was often repressed and for many Americans, food had negative associations, with guilt or sin. This attitude toward food was a result of a variety of cultural, social, political, and economic circumstances throughout the history of America. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, prevailing attitudes towards food started to change as people began to recognize that food should not induce anxiety and negative feelings. Food became more culturally, socially, politically, and economically relevant as people increasingly recognized the role that food plays within a society, and how it serves as a point of identity and connection for groups of people. As cultural awareness of food grew, people began more frequently to recognize its significance.

I believe that the recognition of this significance is, to a large extent, a function of the proliferation of textual and visual representations of food during the late twentieth century. Influenced by international food philosophies imported by American writers like Fisher, the United States participated in (and is still participating in) a gastronomic revolution. As a nation, we are beginning to realize that the foods we eat signify beyond their nutritional value. As did Fisher's sensibilities in France, so too is the American sensibility waking up to the possibility of finding pleasure at the table, and losing the

guilt associated with enjoying the act of eating. As public interest in food grows and its relevance to contemporary life is increasingly recognized, American writers and intellectuals will continue to acknowledge and address the multiple levels of food's significance.

The variety of textual representations of food in circulation now runs the gamut: from Fisher's oeuvre and her English translation of Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*; to the alimentary musings and memoirs of humorist Calvin Trillin, novelist Jim Harrison, and restaurant critic Ruth Reichl; to avant-garde cookbooks, food magazines, and restaurant reviews. While all of these representations together fall into the category of culinary writing, in this study, I will be focusing on two specific traditions, both of which have been influenced by M.F.K. Fisher.

The first tradition, which Fisher is largely responsible for creating in the United States, is the culinary memoir, an extended meditation on the food experience, relying on personal experiences, memory, and metaphor to portray the multiple levels of significance of an event. In her essay on culinary memoirs, Tracy Marie Kelly writes, "in culinary memoirs, the main purpose is to set forth the personal memories of the author. Food is a recurring theme, but it is not the controlling mechanism" (256). The fact that food can now serve as a metaphor and point of reference for other events in life is a testament to the increasing amount of attention that American society pays to food and food representations.

Within the body of culinary writing produced in the United States can be traced a genealogy of food representations, in which Fisher serves as a foundational and defining

voice. Fisher essentially created the contemporary American tradition of culinary writing. McLean observes that Fisher adopted “a focus on desire and on the act of eating traditionally reserved for [mainly French] male food writers ... this articulation reconfigures the bounds of women’s food writing and adds a female voice to the decidedly male genre of gastronomic literature” (24). Revising the French tradition by insisting upon the recognition of female desire, Fisher not only created a new literary genre, but also designated a new location for the expression of the female voice. In the last sections of this study, I will examine the culinary memoir as a medium for both men and women to address appetite and desire, and consider the growing number of people who use the subject of food as a framework for the expression of their personal memories. I will recognize differences between the male and female versions of the memoir. One point that will emerge is that the culinary memoirs of women tend to be more internal and reflective, while men typically focus more on the physical act of eating, often appearing proudly gluttonous in their gastronomic adventures. Despite these differences, my discussion will reveal that the main point is that food has become a viable way of discussing the self for both male and female writers.

A second tradition of culinary writing is that of popular culinary publications, which includes food magazines, newspaper columns, cable television networks, and restaurant criticism. Intended for mass consumption, these representations are extremely influential in the creation of food trends in contemporary American society. Americans especially are fascinated by cookbooks, which reveal much information about a given period and culture, and fall into both the category of the food memoir and the category of popular culinary publications. Researching for an article published in *The New Yorker*

annual food issue, Jane Kramer discovered that “some fifteen hundred cookbooks are published in America each year, and Americans buy them by the millions (142). Today, cookbooks are not purchased solely as reference materials; for many people, cookbooks offer a form of cultural knowledge and entertainment. Entire sections of newspapers are dedicated to food: for instance, every Wednesday, the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* publish weekly dining sections, which offer recipes, culinary tips, the latest food trends and gadgets, and of course, the food critic’s weekly restaurant review. Restaurant critics often garner cult following and have the power to decide a restaurant’s reputation. There are entire cable television networks dedicated to educational and entertaining discussions about food and to cooking shows, and the Internet has increasingly become a popular arena of discourse for those who are passionate and curious about food. All of these representations of food constitute a body of work that helped to inspire the gastronomic revolution of the latter part of the twentieth-century in the United States, and that continues to inform and shape the tastes and food preferences of Americans.

This project works to situate this gastronomic revolution within a historical context, arguing at greater length that our contemporary food culture in the United States is in part the legacy of the body of food representations. Here we witness the evolution of a particular culinary sensibility that appealed to readers differently in different historical moments, as exhibited by the variety of ways that Fisher’s body of work was publicly received. By the end of the twentieth century, Fisher’s ethos reigned supreme, because Americans began to view food with less fear and anxiety as they slowly became more comfortable expressing their physical appetites and desires. By the millennium, Americans began to respect and honor the physical appetite and give more consideration

to the quality and origin of the foods that they consumed. Feelings of guilt associated with the enjoyment of food began to diminish as well.

The gastronomic revolution of the later twentieth century essentially popularized food and the act of eating, and condoned the possibility of finding pleasure in this most basic of human practices. While this revolution was in part a reflection of the increased presence of visual and textual representations of food, there were in addition other social, cultural, economic, and political factors that contributed to this sea change. As Carole Counihan observes, food is a fundamental element of human existence and is linked to everything that we do. Thus, food itself is not exempt from various cultural influences, and is subject to change as a nation does:

Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds, and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family, and community relationships ... men and women define themselves differently through food and appetite ... food is life, and life can be understood through food (Counihan and Van Esterik 1).

In fact, food is connected to so much of life that its importance is often taken for granted. There are often parallels between attitudes toward food and other cultural attitudes; therefore, I would argue that to understand completely a specific historical moment, we must first learn how the people ate, try to discern their attitudes towards the act of eating, and finally, examine the factors that contributed to these prevailing attitudes.

In what follows, I will begin by outlining historical developments within American food culture. I will examine certain constituent tensions that have existed regarding ethnic and more conventional foodways, anxieties over food consumption and nutrition, and Americans' persisting inability to enjoy the eating experience. Only then will the nature of M.F.K. Fisher's intervention become evident. I will then turn to a brief examination of gastronomic literature as a genre before focusing on M.F.K. Fisher's contribution to this field, her philosophies, and her influence on contemporary American food culture. I will conclude by discussing how the gastronomic revolution of the second half of the twentieth century has changed the American culinary environment and provided an especially receptive audience for this food-related discourse.

II. American Food Culture: A Historical Perspective

Since Colonial times, a *mélange* of culinary practices and traditions has constituted American cuisine, beginning with the influence of Native American practices on the Anglo-Saxon traditions of the colonists. Subsequent waves of immigration have infused new flavors and traditions into existing American foodways, resulting in the diverse national table of contemporary America. Donna Gabaccia examines how the “two closely related histories – of recurring human migrations and of the changing production and marketing of food – help us to understand why and how American eating habits, and identities, have evolved over time” (7). As Gabaccia asserts, it is nearly impossible to understand the social history of the United States without also considering the history of the eating habits of its multicultural people.

However, Americans have not always been accepting of unfamiliar culinary customs. Only in the past century, after over two hundred years of conservatism, has resistance to unfamiliar eating habits begun to dissipate. During Colonial times, the heavy-but-essentially-flavorless meat-and-starch-dominated British cuisine was highly regarded by Anglo-American colonists, and they were reluctant to accept the unfamiliar fruits and vegetables offered by indigenous peoples. Before colonists learned how to incorporate the abundant local produce into their diets, they would often go hungry rather than take culinary advice from the natives.

Although dominated by the influence of British cuisine, the food traditions of the American colonists still varied regionally, influenced by developing local customs and product availability. When hunger necessitated that the colonists' diet become more flexible, the culinary traditions of the natives began gradually to appear on the colonists' tables. Cuisines and eating practices became more region-specific as elements of ethnic cuisines, such as African and Spanish, slowly worked their way into general culinary practices in the Colonial period and in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Today, in the early twenty-first century, many regions of the United States still retain elements of traditional local cuisines that were born during Colonial times, but they are threatened by the mass production and distribution of standardized food products, and the infiltration of national chain restaurants into these locales. This regional nature of American eating habits, created by generations of enclave traditions and further shaped by the infusion of the ethnic food traditions of newly immigrated people, made it nearly impossible to define a unified, "typical" American cuisine.

Yet, if there was a unifying element in the way that Americans approached food in the nineteenth century, it was an attitude inspired by the abundance of agricultural and natural products. European visitors who wrote about American eating habits “expressed amazement, shock, and even disgust at the quantity of food consumed” (Levenstein 7). Evidently, Americans failed to adhere to certain aspects of the traditional British conservatism when it came to portion size. They also ignored the communal and leisurely approaches to the table associated with Europe. Significantly, the increased availability of food did not appear to increase the pleasure that the colonists derived from it:

The abundance seemed to breed a vague indifference to food, manifested in a tendency to eat and run, rather than to dine and savor ... foreigners often remarked on the eerie silence that reigned at American dinner tables, as diners seemed to concentrate on getting the tiresome burden of stuffing themselves out of the way in as short a time as possible (Levenstein 8).

This act of thoughtless eating inspired by the abundance of products in nineteenth-century America resulted from the widespread opinion that eating was an inconvenience; this opinion helped shape our contemporary attitudes towards food and fostered what could be said to have been a national dearth of conviviality and pleasure at the table. This mindset continues to exist into the twenty-first century.

Even though the mass immigrations of the nineteenth century infused new culinary practices into the region-specific cuisines of the United States, people generally continued to shun the unfamiliar culinary customs of immigrants, fearing that they posed a threat to national unity. Often, established citizens pressured new immigrants to

assimilate and become “American” by leaving behind the food preparation methods of their homelands and adopting the Anglo-Saxon-influenced customs of American eating:

In reaction to the arrival of immigrants in the late nineteenth century, cultural elites of the Northeast attempted to define what American eating should be ... educated American women proposed to Americanize the foreigners, by teaching them what, and how, to eat, and by developing ‘domestic science’ and ‘home economics’ appropriate for American citizens ... by proposing a national cuisine, domestic scientists helped arm a variety of reform movements aimed at limiting, or even turning back, the tide of cross-over foods and eating customs ... these culinary reformists shared some core values with the developers of modern, corporate, food industries (Gabaccia 125).

Domestic science was a specific and regimented way of running the household; adherence to certain routines was expected to result in a more functional and efficient domestic environment. Informational pamphlets that designated the proper amount and combinations of foods to be consumed in order to follow increasingly stringent nutritional guidelines were published and distributed. The prevailing attitude was that food was simply a source of nutrition, and food choices were made based solely on nutritional values rather than freshness or product availability. The eater’s appetite was of minor consequence. Food was viewed as little more than a source of fuel, and the time spent “refueling” was not valued or enjoyed. Eating was a measured, monotonous, and hurried task, devoid of pleasure.

These attempts to “Americanize” immigrants were made under the false pretense that there was, in fact, one national cuisine. Up until the beginning of World War II, there were attempts by many groups, including government-sponsored efforts like the America Eats Project¹, to identify, define, and promote a national cuisine. The idea was that a national cuisine would enforce national unity. The reality of the situation was that “culinary nationalism would not characterize the age of American nationalism ... The United States remained one nation divided into many eating communities, each forming its own distinctive market or ‘enclave’” (Gabaccia 35). Until it was recognized that this plurality of eating habits was precisely what made “American cuisine” unique, the quest to define a single national cuisine continued.

Attempts to define a national cuisine often ended in disagreement because of the regional nature of American eating customs. The multi-ethnic future of American eating was preserved because most immigrants chose, when possible, to retain the food traditions of their homelands. When they arrived in America, immigrants had little control over many features of their lives, such as housing and wages, so preparing familiar foods in a traditional way helped them to maintain a cultural identity. In addition, religion often dictated strict dietary routines, which helped to preserve ethnic food traditions. These traditions flourished in areas with concentrated populations of ethnic groups. Although many people were originally attracted to the United States by the promise of agricultural abundance, when they actually arrived, “eating bountifully did not mean eating like Americans. To abandon immigrant food traditions for the foods of Americans was to abandon community, family, and religion” (Gabaccia 54). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cultural commentators still viewed ethnic

foodways with trepidation and fear, as if they might somehow threaten American nationalism.

It is worth noting that early Americans had not rejected all non-British styles of food; the French culinary tradition long represented a level of cultural sophistication. Knowledge and appreciation of French food became a marker of prestige and status in the nation's history: "In the nineteenth century, America's newly wealthy industrial 'robber barons' discovered cosmopolitan, French-inspired food and made it a culinary symbol of their newly elevated status" (Gabaccia 95). Dining in a French-inspired restaurant, such as Delmonico's in New York City, became a distinctive mark of elevated social class as well as of economic capital. We might speculate that it was not the food itself that became attractive, but what it represented. While these early attitudes towards French food did exhibit increasing levels of attention paid to food, they still deemphasized the actual food itself and instead merely appropriated it as a cultural signifier.

It took many generations and a relaxation in attitudes regarding food preference before these diverse ethnic food traditions were recognized and admired as individual components of the larger identity of American cuisine. Respect for the culinary traditions of immigrants gradually grew during the food shortages of World War I. The meager economic circumstances of most immigrants necessitated frugality and creativity on the part of the women to feed and clothe large families. Increasingly, people turned to the immigrants to learn how to survive in times of scarcity:

As a relatively short war, World War I required but limited sacrifices of American consumers. Still, for the first time the federal government sought to manage food shortages and issued wartime directives to

housewives facing shortages of wheat and meat. Patriotic eating required the substitution of beans for meat ... the government distributed foreign recipes that were both rich and meatless (Gabaccia 137).

The culinary thrift of the immigrants garnered yet more respect in the Depression era. The agricultural abundance of the nineteenth century was a distant memory, but most of the pragmatic attitudes of Americans regarding food and the act of eating remained. The origin, flavor, and enjoyment of a meal were inconsequential because the objective was simply to fill one's stomach and stave off hunger. During the 1930s, largely for economic reasons, food continued to be primarily a source of anxiety for Americans, not pleasure. Americans did not take well to food shortages. While the economic situation in America eventually improved, this Depression-era mindset can be said to have further contributed to the American inability to view food as a basis for conviviality and a source of pleasure.

However, events such as World War I and the Depression helped decrease Americans' fears of ethnic foods, because there was often no choice but to eat them:

The confusion about what constituted regional American, as opposed to ethnic, corporate or invented foods in the America Eats project resolved itself in the face of a national wartime emergency. Any and all foods that helped solve a food crisis caused by shortages and rationing found acceptance as sufficiently American (Gabaccia 144).

A small but sound proof of the diversity of American food traditions came when efforts to feed a multi-ethnic military exposed regional tastes and ethnic preferences, and it became evident that the different geographic origins and upbringings of the soldiers resulted in different experiences with and expectations of food.

Individual Americans became more accepting of ethnic cuisines because they were assured by public figures that it was still considered “American” to eat seemingly “un-American” foods. Influential cultural commentators authorized the consumption of ethnic foods. It also became increasingly evident that there was no such thing as a national cuisine:

Between 1920 and 1940, the food fight gradually waned as America’s reformers and intellectuals, far more than America’s eaters, changed their views on ethnic eaters and their foods. Intellectuals speaking for the nation gradually came to terms with America’s diversity – a diversity no longer contained in enclave economies but reaching out into urban and regional marketplaces – and with the industrialization of America’s food industries (Gabaccia 136).

Once these foreign foods became more mainstream, familiar, and were designated as acceptably “American” (having been “Americanized”²), demand for them increased. Immigrants capitalized on this demand by offering their goods to the national market instead of offering them exclusively to members of their ethnic communities. Once large corporations recognized the profitability of mass marketing ethnic foods, they bought the small local producers, increased production efforts, and so began the commodification of ethnic cuisines:

The changing linkages of enclave, regional, and national markets created a curious, and in some ways paradoxical, cultural relationship between the ethnic and the corporate in food exchanges ... ethnic foods often lose their

ethnic labels, their “authenticity,” and – critics argue – their taste once they are mass produced by large corporations (Gabaccia 173).

No longer produced by the original immigrants, these foods began to lose their original form and flavor, and began to take on standardized characteristics.

By the beginning of World War II, the attempts that had begun in the late nineteenth century to define a national cuisine ended for good, and ethnic cuisines became more mainstream and part of the definition of America’s culinary identity. Gabaccia argues:

After fifty years of intermittent battling, American intellectuals decided that Uncle Sam could swallow immigrant and regional specialties and processed foods and actually grow stronger in the act ... as the United States rejected isolation and rose to global power, it also accepted a peculiarly American, and fundamentally commercial, culinary cosmopolitanism (147-148).

Despite Gabaccia’s insistence on American’s growing “culinary cosmopolitanism,” by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the very local traditions that defined America’s culinary identity were in danger of disappearing, threatened by the influx of standardized flavors offered by chain restaurants and the fast food industry³. When national corporations moved in and took over entire markets, they offered up a false version of ethnicity and shaped people’s perceptions of various cultures. Gabaccia acknowledges this tension when she writes, “perhaps no sector better represents the popularity of ethnic foods in contemporary American eating than the fast food industry” (170).

A survey of American sensibilities toward food and the act of eating would not be complete without an acknowledgement of another threat to local tradition and another revealing indicator of the nation's estrangement from natural agricultural cycles: the mass production of foods in canned or frozen form, which helped to create more consistently recognizable flavors. Canned foods had been available in the United States since the first half of the nineteenth century, but were expensive and not widely used in that era. In 1923, Clarence Birdseye developed a process for flash-freezing fresh foods, and in 1930, the first frozen foods were made available to the public. Thus, foods that were once seasonal became available year round. Mass distribution of products ensured that these products were available to the entire country. Technology also allowed for the creation of synthetically produced flavors, which cut production costs, aided mass production efforts, and ensured that the consumer always received the same product he or she had come to expect. Laura Shapiro notes that the tragic result was that "millions of American palates adjusted to artificial flavors and then welcomed them; and consumers started to let the food industry make a great many decisions on matters of taste that people in the past had always made for themselves" (xx). In other words, when people's palates became accustomed to these fabricated and standardized flavors, they lost the ability to discern real flavor, thus making the act of eating even more monotonous. American consumers became further removed from food in its natural form, and seemed satisfied by this monotony:

Nuances of flavor and texture were irrelevant in the scientific kitchen, and pleasure was sent off to wait in the parlor. To cook without exercising the

senses, indeed barely exercising the mind, was going to have a considerable effect on how and what we eat (Shapiro xviii).

Consequently, Americans became further removed from the sources of their food, and were no longer forced to consider the origin of the food products that would constitute their meal.

Following World War II, the government embarked on yet another politically charged social project. As soldiers returned home from the War, women were encouraged and expected to offer them a safe and comfortable domestic environment, and to serve nutritional meals to their families. Katherine Parkin describes how women were further encouraged by advertising efforts by food companies:

American culture in the twentieth century bound women, food, and love together ... cooking for their families was an activity emblematic of women's love ... by commodifying these attitudes and beliefs, food advertisers promoted the belief that food preparation was a gender-specific activity and that women should cook for others to express their love. This emphasis on giving was so complete that ads rarely portray women finding gratification in eating (52).

This discourse focused entirely on food as nutrition and sustenance, which women were expected to provide. The canned and frozen foods industries embraced the image of the ideal American housewife, directing advertising efforts almost entirely at the female homemaker. The ads suggested to women that these products would increase their efficiency in executing their societal duty of maintaining a happy and healthy domestic environment. Parkin notes that the Campbell's Soup Company advertised its soups as a

“wholesome, healthful tonic to appetite and digestion” (61). Advertising efforts promised that the increased convenience of these processed foods decreased time spent in the kitchen, freeing up time for women to pursue other interests. Implicit was that use of these products would enhance women’s desirability in the eyes of men. Erika Endrijonas writes that “time saved on women’s household tasks meant more opportunities for women’s personal development ... tempered however, by powerful messages that women should not neglect their domestic obligations to the family” (157). These ads suggested that food preparation was essentially drudgery, and using these processed foods could minimize time spent on this “undesirable” and regressive task. They promoted meals that were quick and healthy, but did not register the possibility of pleasure derived from the actual eating and the sharing of these meals. The act of eating, and enjoyment of the experience, like the original food products themselves, had been steadily deemphasized. Soon, “magazines and newspapers were conjuring scenes in which traditional, kitchen-centered home life was being carried out in perfectly delightful fashion without a trace of traditional, kitchen-centered home cooking” (Shapiro xix). What had once been a necessary function of life was now a practice to be transcended, or at least made less visible. The act of cooking was a social responsibility to be performed dutifully, and the origin and flavor of the food became hidden in the tin can.

The historical moments that I have addressed above contributed to the low expectation that Americans have for food flavor and quality, the minimal emphasis which Americans place on the meal, and the national hesitancy to enjoy the fundamental act of eating. Full engagement of the senses in the alimentary experience is not embedded in the American sensibility in the way that it is in more tradition-bound countries, where eating

customs truly define a national identity. Compared to Europe, America is a young nation, and our culture has encouraged convenience over quality for so long that in general, Americans neither take the time to consider what we put into our bodies nor do we possess the confidence to make food-related decisions without authorization by the media and other cultural commentators.

This is the American cultural atmosphere into which M.F.K. Fisher inserted her ideas on the significance of food, the art of eating, and the notion of taking pleasure in the entire experience. Her writing serves as a defining voice within the genre of gastronomic literature because in her meditations about food and eating, she repeatedly proved their significance and relevance to life.

III. A Genre's Genesis: Gastronomic Literature in the United States

“While the most exquisitely balanced dinner may never be relived, a book may evoke its graceful host”

-Clifton Fadiman

The founding fathers of the gastronomic essay were Frenchmen Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de la Reyniere (1758-1838) and Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826). Culinary historian Stephen Mennell defines the genre of gastronomic literature as a “genre in which some writing is mainly historical in slant, some mainly concerned to define what is correct and in good taste, some more practically concerned to provide a critical assessment of the eating-places of the day” (271). Mennell goes on to describe other possible components of a gastronomical essay, which include “a brew of history, myth, and history serving in myth,” “dietetic,” and “nostalgic evocation of memorable meals” (270). Gastronomic literature can be informative, humorous, and

reflective. At times it could be considered elitist and condescending. It almost always addresses some form of human appetite or universal hunger. The breadth of this definition makes it possible to apply it to many forms of literary representations of food.

M.F.K Fisher was not the first American to write about food. Before Fisher, there were a select few male food writers in nineteenth-century America, such as George Ellwanger, Theodore Child and Frederick Stokes, who wrote somewhat in the manner of Brillat-Savarin, but not as explicitly in that vein as Fisher later would. However, as were most Americans, Fisher was unfamiliar with these writers; her inspiration came directly from Brillat-Savarin and the philosophies of France.

Before Fisher dispelled the notion that only men could express physical appetites, women's food writing focused on the domestic sphere, and took the form of cookbooks. Cookbooks were, and still are, the most popular form of culinary writing in America. In the nineteenth century, cookbooks were often written out of necessity rather than from a desire to explore the appetite or discuss social issues. Most of these books were simply personal journals; they were not a conscious effort to discuss the self in a culinary context, nor were they usually intended for publication. However, in a sense, these cookbooks were precursors to the culinary memoir. Culinary historian Janet Theophano describes how, in these journals, "women have conserved a whole world, past and present, in the idiom of food ... women inscribe themselves in their recipe texts as testimonies to their existence" (120). As more women became literate in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they increasingly recorded their useful innovations, ideas, and reflections in recipe-like books that were likely kept close by in the kitchen. In 1796, Amelia Simmons published the first American cookbook. Her book, entitled

American Cookery, consisted of authentic colonial recipes, with hints from the author. It likely began in this journal form, which Simmons then edited for publication. These cookbooks were essentially lifelong memoirs in progress: “self-conscious or not, recording everyday acts of cookery is an act of autobiographical writing and self-representation” (Theophono 120).

Women’s culinary memoirs tend to be more serious than men’s, but there is no rigid model for either one. Like Fisher, both male and female authors choose food as the medium through which they recall events of their lives; they recognize that life is punctuated and made meaningful by memorable acts of eating. Food writers generally give a social context for their eating adventures, often recalling the political and cultural climate of a period or region. People who write about gastronomy respect and appreciate the many significances of food, which is why they write about it in the first place and use it as a device for a memoir.

It is no coincidence that many people who enjoy the eating experience go on to write about that experience. Many professional writers who do not write about food for a living dabble in the world of gastronomic literature. Clifton Fadiman wrote in his introduction to Fisher’s *The Art of Eating*:

A man who is careful with his palate is not likely to be careless with his paragraphs ... A good book about food informs us of matter with which we are to be concerned all our lives. Sight and hearing lose their edge, the muscles soften, even the most gallant of our glands at last surrenders. But the palate may persist in glory to the very end ... The ability to enjoy eating, like the ability to enjoy any fine art, is not a matter of inborn talent

alone, but of training, memory and comparison. Time works for the palate faithfully and fee-lessly (xxxix).

Thus, people who have a natural inclination to write of the human appetites often write about food and eating. M.F. K Fisher was one of these people. James Beard notes Fisher's ability to immortalize the fleeting experience of a meal:

For an art as transitory as gastronomy there can be no record except for a keen taste memory and the printed word. *The Art of Eating* reminds me again that in M.F.K. Fisher memory and word are joined incomparably. She writes about fleeting tastes and feasts vividly, excitingly, sensuously, and exquisitely (xxix).

Fisher has become the defining voice, female or male, in this genre of American gastronomic literature. The scope of her work was wide. Her early work was introspective and her later work focused more on questions regarding aging and human existence, but her ultimate objective throughout was to address human hungers. In the process, her writing encompassed nearly all components of gastronomic literature: memoir, criticism, history, recipes, and popular culture. This range made her words pertinent in multiple contexts. She wrote at a time when her food-related philosophies were far from mainstream popular attitudes towards food. Jeanette Ferrary points out in her 1998 memoir that Fisher's philosophies are more relevant today:

Lately there seems to be a Fisher renaissance afoot. Perhaps it was part of the rediscovery of women artist and writers in general; perhaps it was the food people and young chefs, especially women chefs, who found in her a precedent for what they were trying to do. Or maybe it was because people

like what she wasn't: she wasn't a chef, she wasn't self-promotional, she wasn't fooled or flattered or tricked by any of it. She was just trying to get some work done (*M.F.K Fisher and Me* 51).

IV. A “Poet of the Appetites”: M.F.K. Fisher

“If you are in bad temper, you should not be thinking about food at all”

-M.F.K. Fisher

In the world of gastronomy (which includes chefs, food writers and critics, culinary historians, and professional and amateur gourmands), it is rare to find an individual who has not been affected in some way by the words of Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher. By her death in 1992, Fisher had become firmly established as an icon in the gastronomic world due to three components of her life's work: the self-reflective early essays that explore connotations of various foods and food experiences; the insightful and nostalgic work of her later years; and her subtle yet powerful personal presence.

While food was the subject of nearly all of Fisher's writing, her work goes beyond simple descriptions of meals and ingredients (although it does contain these). Food was the medium through which she measured and expressed her personal desires and transformations. It is the framework in which she addressed many different social issues, from wars and historic events, to aging and infidelity, and offered everything from contemporary cultural critique to cooking advice. Fisher situated all of the above issues within the context of representations of food, and demonstrated that the entire human experience can essentially be understood by examining the many ways in which appetites

are expressed and hunger is fulfilled: “overlaid with multiple connotations, food becomes a metaphor for our basic human hungers” (Reardon, *The Art of Eating* xi). Embracing themes common to all of humanity, such as family and friendship, love, death, and change, Fisher writes:

All men are hungry. They always have been. They must eat, and when they deny themselves the pleasure of carrying out that need, they are cutting off part of their possible fullness, their natural realization of life, whether they are poor or rich. It is a sinful waste of human thought and energy and deep delight, to teach little children to pretend that they should not care or mention what they eat (*How To Cook A Wolf* 322).

Here, and throughout her work, Fisher used the words “hungry” and “hungers” as a metaphor for other desires. Food was the medium in which she was most capable of situating these desires. Fisher’s culinary and literary abilities paralleled each other, and she exercised her creative energies in both areas. Fisher discussed potentially difficult subjects within the universally familiar context of food.

Fisher wrote her first book after spending her early twenties living in France, where alimentary possibilities abounded. *Serve It Forth*, published in 1937, reveals her philosophies on food as a source of physical and emotional nourishment. In that collection of essays, she writes detailed and often technical accounts of the historical, social, cultural, geographical, and literary relevance of food. She maintains a self-reflective presence throughout. Crucially, Fisher offers a form of social commentary, considering various influences on the formation of taste. In retrospect, we can recognize that Fisher was one of the first to “(bestow) dignity and mythic dimension on the taking

of our daily bread ... as a writer, she made her own genre” (Ferrary, *M.F.K. Fisher and Me* xv). Fisher laments that:

Almost all people are born unconscious of the nuances of flavor, and many die so. Some of these unfortunate remain all their lives as truly taste-blind, as their brother sufferers are blind to color. Others never taste because they are stupid, or, more often, because they have never been taught to search for differentiations of flavor ... they like the experience of a full stomach (*Serve It Forth* 57).

By “flavor,” Fisher was not simply referring to flavors of food, but to a whole range of flavors and nuances of life. When she wrote of the “taste-blind,” Fisher was referring to the collective eating habits of the people of the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Contrasting American attitudes towards food with those of the French, she noticed that:

In general, France eats more consciously, more intelligently, than any other nation. Whichever France eats, she does it with a pleasure, an open eyed delight quite foreign to most people ... there is a gusto, a frank sensuous realization of food, that is pitifully unsuspected in, say, the college boarding-house or corner cafe of an American town. In America we eat, collectively, with a glum urge for food to fill us. We are ignorant of flavor. We are as a nation taste-blind ... You [here Fisher refers to anyone who could offer illumination to a naive American palate] would be a missionary, bringing flavor and light to the taste-blind. And that is a destiny not too despicable (*Serve It Forth* 58-59).

Fisher recognized that America in the decades leading up to the 1950s was a fertile ground for the fledgling gastronomic movement, and hoped her work would strike a chord in the minds and palates of Americans.

In the late 1930s and 1940s, when Fisher first wrote about food, she was registering and reacting against the period of American history characterized by a repression of physical pleasure and appetite resulting from the historical circumstances I have addressed above. These attitudes did not begin to change substantially until the late 1950s and 1960s. Ruth Reichl acknowledges:

America was another country in the fifties ... W.H. Auden said that he could not think of anyone in the United States who wrote better prose than Mary Frances Kennedy Fisher, but having chosen food as her subject her audience was extremely limited ... by the seventies things were starting to look up: A fledgling food movement had formed ... and the world was finally catching up to Mary Frances. Suddenly food writers were important, and M.F.K. Fisher, who had been focusing on human hungers for half a century, was thrust into the limelight (*A Measure of Her Powers* ix - xi).

As people began to pay more attention to food-related discourse in the latter part of the twentieth century, and recognized the far-reaching significances of food, Fisher's work became more culturally relevant. Writing about food, which was once considered frivolous and self-indulgent, increasingly garnered respect in both the literary and culinary worlds. While Fisher often inserted moments of cultural critique into her work, it is my contention that she rarely seems condescending because there are so many layers to

her messages, and her statements can be understood in many different ways. Even though she often addressed a specific historical moment in her writing, the fact that she wrote of such a fundamental and enduring need has ultimately made her work timeless. The fact that she often revisited, critiqued, and updated her own earlier work prevented it from becoming dated, and has added to the persuasiveness of her words.

In her writing, Fisher examined her ability to recognize and honor both physical and emotional hungers and appetites, and essentially worked to emancipate American appetites. Fisher believed that an expressive and receptive attitude needed to be cultivated beginning in childhood, and wrote, “one of the most important things about a child’s gastronomical present, in relation to his future, is a good *respect* for food” (*How To Cook A Wolf* 322). Fisher encouraged healthy recognition and expression of the appetite, “because we, and almost all American Anglo-Saxon children have been taught when we were young not to mention food or enjoy it publicly” (*How To Cook A Wolf* 320). She believed that the freedom to express physical appetites, and

The ability to choose what food you must eat, and knowingly, will make you able to choose other less transitory things with courage and finesse. A child should be encouraged, not discouraged as so many are, to look at what he eats, and think about it: the juxtaposition of color and flavor and texture ... and indirectly the reasons why he is eating it and the results it will have on him ... (*How To Cook A Wolf* 322).

Fisher suggests that the tendency towards the repression of these basic desires and reactions and a disregard for the nuances of flavor indicate a nation that is not only “taste-

blind,” but also blind and naive in other areas of life, and in danger of becoming provincial and overly complacent in other matters.

The impact of Fisher’s work on American attitudes towards food occurred gradually. Her writing reached a select audience in the 1940s and 1950s and gained popularity in the 1960s, as her work was published in magazines ranging from *Gourmet* to *The Atlantic Monthly*. Her early readership was limited to those with ties to the food world, but soon her “small cult of avid readers would gradually expand to include insurance salesmen as well as food and wine connoisseurs as she went about her business of turning language into something special – a stew or a story” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 66). Fisher approached cooking and writing with the same creative energy.

While the literary merit of Fisher’s earliest work was recognized when it was first published, Americans did not quite know how to relate to her sensuous expression of her appetites. Americans still experienced feelings of anxiety at the prospect of pleasure in the act of eating. A transformation in the way that America approached eating finally occurred in the 1960s when Julia Child introduced French culinary approaches to the United States in her *French Chef* television series and with the 1961 publication of her cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Americans seemed ready to acknowledge that there was something lacking in their culinary sensibilities, and thus, “by 1963 – when Julia Child launched her first television series – an audience was waiting” (Shapiro xxiv).

Traditional attitudes regarding food and the gastronomic experience were further challenged in 1971 when Alice Waters opened her restaurant, Chez Panisse, in Berkeley, California. This historic restaurant continues to be wildly popular in the present day. The

menus of Chez Panisse are inspired by French and Italian traditions: Waters emphasizes the importance of fresh, locally procured ingredients prepared in a manner so as not to obscure the original product. Waters embraces Fisher's philosophy of fully immersing all five senses in the dining experience, creating a vibrant dining environment to accompany the exquisite meal. Waters writes that Fisher's work should be "required reading for every cook. It defines in a sensual and beautiful way the vital relationship between food and culture (xvi). What is most important to note, then, is that while Fisher's literary work did not directly initiate a popular culinary revolution, as did the contributions of Julia Child or Alice Waters, Fisher's writing unquestionably defined and reinforced the evolving attitudes toward food in the United States, and she undoubtedly influenced both Child and Waters, in part by maintaining a close epistolary correspondence with both.

Today, with the omnipresence of representations of food in print and on television, which emphasize and condone a vast array of possibilities for finding pleasure at the table, the Fisher ethos is stronger than ever before. While Fisher's intent was not immediately to transform the eating habits of an entire nation, she planted and cultivated the seeds of culinary change in the United States, and now stands as an icon and an established reference point within the broadly designated "food world." Fisher's biographer, Joan Reardon, describes how Fisher is

Famous for creating a prose style that is resolutely first person ... she emerges from the pages of her books as a woman of conviction and great independence, answering to herself and to no other. And her compulsion to transform certain kinds of material – childhood, meals shared, refuges, cures, inner maps, hungers satisfied or not – into a curious blend of

narrative and essay, recipes and romance may well provide more than a hint of explanation for her well deserved literary reputation (*Poet of the Appetites* 27).

Many readers stumble onto Fisher's work as I did: serendipitously, often when they think they are looking for something else. I was struck by the resonance of her words, and amazed at the significance of her work, and wondered how it was that I had not heard of her before. This may be due to the fact that while her ethos defines a revolution, and her sentiments have become central to many people's approach to food, Fisher's actual work is still outside of the radar of the popular readership. The iconic status that Fisher attained later in her lifetime was partially the result of individuals within the food establishment promoting her philosophies. She has had a profound influence not only on Julia Child, and restaurateur Alice Waters, but also on gourmand James Beard, and on culinary memoirist and food critic Ruth Reichl, as well as countless more professionals and amateurs who share an awareness of and a passion for food. As these more public figures revolutionized American dining, Fisher's reputation and authority increased.

By 1949, Fisher had written a body of work that laid the foundation for her mounting literary and culinary reputation. This early body of work established "the benchmarks against which she wrote" (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 58). *Serve It Forth*, *Consider The Oyster*, *How To Cook A Wolf*, *The Gastronomical Me*, and *An Alphabet For Gourmets* were collected in the 1954 publication *The Art of Eating*, which exhibits the core of her gastronomical oeuvre and philosophy. Fisher's personal presence in these works is unmistakable: they serve as a reflection of significant events in her early life. By carefully examining Fisher's biography in relation to each of these autobiographical

works, I will trace Fisher's development as writer and suggest ways in which her work is situated within larger social and cultural contexts. "In each book, beginning with *Serve It Forth* in 1937, Fisher became more adept at creating her celebrated mix of subjectivity and history, legend and lore" (Reardon, *The Art of Eating* xi). Each book characterizes a definitive period in Fisher's life, whether it is a romantic relationship, a tragic loss, or a world at war. They are autobiographical, but beyond that, they are also aphoristic, and inspire self-reflection on the part of the reader. It is imperative to examine these early works in order to gain insight into Fisher's earlier life and oeuvre, which in turn give us a better sense of her personal development as a writer. These works also provide an understanding of how the evolving American attitudes toward food in the latter half of the twentieth century offered different contexts in which Fisher's work was received.

Fisher had lived over three years in Europe when *Serve It Forth* was published in 1937. In September of 1929, she married Al Fisher, whom she had met while studying at the University of California in Los Angeles. Al intended to pursue his doctoral degree at the University of Dijon, where they settled after a brief stop in Paris. Fisher came of age while living in Dijon, which was then considered one of the culinary centers of the world. Her gastronomic awareness grew, certainly, but she also matured as a writer, a wife, and a woman. In France, Fisher's daily experiences encouraged her culinary sensibilities, and her senses underwent constant stimulation. Along with French food philosophies, she was inspired by the myriad of culinary offerings of regional French cuisine and the abundance of fresh, local products. Fisher recalls of her early food-gathering experiences at the markets of Dijon:

I learned, with the tiredest feet of my life, that feeding people in a town like Dijon meant walking endless cobbled miles from one little shop to another ... butter here, sausage there, and rice and sugar and coffee still in another place. It was the longest, most discouraging, most exciting, and most satisfying week I can remember (*The Gastronomical Me* 438).

She had direct contact with her food, which forced her to consider and appreciate its origin, quality, and flavor. This piqued her senses, heightened her gastronomic awareness and sharpened her observation of the natural world.

Fisher's gastronomic education coincided with other forms of cultural education. Her husband's academic circles offered her the opportunity for stimulating literary discussion. She studied sculpture and drawing, and enrolled in French language courses. As her literary horizons expanded and her alimentary awareness grew, Fisher became increasingly curious about food and its various connotations, especially in relation to her daily life. This curiosity flourished in all parts of Fisher's life. In her first book, she openly explored these curiosities. "Now I am going to write a book," Fisher declares, "It will be about eating and about what to eat and about people who eat ... I serve it forth" (*Serve It Forth* 6). Indeed, *Serve It Forth* is an exhilarating and highly personal journey through thousands of years of culinary history, examining alimentary traditions from ancient Egypt to twentieth-century America, offering considerations on various types of foods, and detailed observations of influences on the development of a culture's collective taste. Ultimately, it is unimportant that the line between historical facts and Fisher's own personal elaborations is often blurred as she confronts the human appetite in *Serve It Forth*; she tracks the evolution of the human relationship to food by referencing

these different historical moments. Fisher situates her own increasing alimentary awareness within the gastronomical evolution of the world, and begins to formulate her own food-related philosophies.

Fisher begins *Serve It Forth* by describing the various traditions of writing about food that began with “the obsession for fine eating that swept over Europe, and especially France, during the nineteenth century, and had a strange and wonderful influence on the literature of that world ... the greatest writer was probably the least known – Brillat-Savarin” (92). Brillat-Savarin was a nineteenth-century lawyer and gastronome, and author of *La Physiologie du Gout (The Physiology of Taste)*, a collection of his lifelong philosophizing on all aspects of dining, published weeks before his death in 1825. In *Serve It Forth*, as well as many of her other works, Fisher made frequent references to this insightful and humorous series of aphorisms on many aspect of the art of dining. She later translated his text from French into English. Using Brillat-Savarin as a reference and model, Fisher describes two kinds of books about eating: “those that try to imitate Brillat-Savarin’s and those that try not to ... [that is] the stodgy, matter-of-fact, covered very practically with washable cloth or gravy-colored paper ... they are usually German, or English, or American” (5). Of the texts in the style of Brillat-Savarin, Fisher wrote that they are usually “short, bound impractically with creamy paper or chintz ... they begin with witty philosophizing on the pleasures of the table ... these books are usually French” (5). Fisher preferred the French texts, since “they are much more entertaining, if less useful, than their phlegmatic twins” (5), which were the American and British publications.

Fisher avoided writing in the straightforward instructional style of traditional American cookbook writers by imbuing her work with her personal voice and witty comments, in keeping with the French style exemplified by Brillat-Savarin. As she became familiar with the French food philosophies, she “gained an introduction to a genre of writing largely unexplored by food writers in the United States” (McLean 45). McLean has described how Fisher re-fashioned the “French, male-authored genre, which traditionally focused on education of the palate as an essential component of self-knowledge, into a form of gastronomic memoir” (45 – 46). By situating herself in this tradition of French male food writers and redefining this genre in her own terms, Fisher both legitimized her use of the subject and created an entirely new genre in itself. But she refrained from the snobbery and condescension that many people associated with France and French food writers at that time. Fisher’s writing reveals the evolution of her growing gastronomic awareness, which makes her philosophies less intimidating, and allows her reader to feel as if he or she is gaining experience alongside Fisher.

Throughout all of her work, Fisher repeatedly cites the influence of Brillat-Savarin, whom she referred to as “the Professor.” When Fisher discusses the moment in life when an individual becomes aware of his or her ability to taste and to distinguish flavor, she refers to the work of Brillat-Savarin. She writes of the newly educated eater:

He is pleased. He is awakened. At last he can taste, discovering in his own good time what Brillat-Savarin tabulated so methodically as the three sensations: (1) direct, on the tongue;(2) complete, when the food passes over the tongue and is swallowed; (3) reflection – that is, judgment passed by the soul on the impressions which have been transmitted to it by the

tongue ... Yes, he can taste at last, and life itself has for him more flavor, more zest (*Serve It Forth* 58).

Fisher's own culinary philosophy was founded on the belief that "how we gather, prepare, and eat food is inextricably linked to the quality of our lives" (McLean 107). She believed that direct contact with and appreciation of original food products would increase the recognition of one's taste faculties, and as a result, the individual would become better capable of living a more reflective, expressive, and socially involved life.

Fisher's unique subject and writing style distinguished her and earned *Serve It Forth* favorable reviews in America, but Fisher's parents, Rex and Edith Kennedy, took little notice of her literary success because it was assumed in the Kennedy family that "writing was simply something one did" (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 39). Fisher's childhood certainly stimulated her literary inclinations: she recalled that "the ability to write decently was just assumed in the family. I published five books before anyone at home even noticed" (Ferrary, *M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 105). Born July 3, 1908, in Albion, Michigan, Fisher was the oldest of four children; being born into a large family was a factor that compelled her to act to distinguish herself early. In a household of strong personalities, this was no simple task. Fisher learned to read at age five, and she voraciously consumed her family's extensive library. As she would do later in life, Fisher tried to distinguish herself within her family by creating imaginative stories and spending extensive time in the kitchen learning how to cook (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 16).

When Fisher was four years old, Rex moved the Kennedy family from Michigan to Whittier, California, where Rex took over the *Whittier News*. Edith's mother, Fisher's Grandmother Holbrook, occupied the role of supreme matriarch in the Kennedy

household. Grandmother Holbrook ruled the Kennedy roost with her rigid Christian morals and asceticism, and her “strong abhorrence of sensual pleasure” (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 15). The meals that she ordered the cook to prepare often consisted of leathery, tasteless meats and “vegetables cooked to a fare-thee-well” (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 15), and exemplified her tireless crusades against sensuality and the expression of pleasure of any kind.

Grandmother Holbrook’s frequent absences due to visits to Dr. Kellogg’s sanitarium⁴ brought out the gourmand in Rex, and revealed Edith’s passion for baking extravagant desserts. The difference between the monotonous meals served in the Kennedy household when Grandmother Holbrook was present and the more exciting ones served when she was away made an impression on the young Fisher, and alerted her to the possibility of a truly enjoyable and convivial meal. Fisher was aware of the presence of her strict grandmother in her young life, and that her sensibility was formed in opposition to that early influence. Fisher later reflected on her grandmother’s effect on her:

Without my first eleven years of gastronomical awareness when Old Mrs. Holbrook was in residence I probably would still be swimming in unread iambs instead of puzzling over the relationship between food and love ... I would not be this *me* but some other, without my first years in Grandmother’s gastric presence (Fisher, qtd. in Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 15).

While Grandmother Holbrook’s strict dietary regimen did not inspire pleasure on the palate, it did give Fisher a point of departure for her own culinary consciousness and

offered her something to react against. McLean notes that Fisher openly acknowledged that “the attitudes and conventions she rebelled against formed her personality and guided her behavior as much as those she actively chose to follow” (56). Without Grandmother Holbrook’s definitive discouragement of pleasure, Fisher would never have had a negative standard against which to compare a truly pleasurable experience at the table.

The Fishers left France and returned to California in 1932. There they met Dillwyn and Gigi Parrish, who had rented an adjacent cottage, and the two couples spent time together. Dillwyn, a Harvard graduate, was an accomplished writer, artist, gardener, and chef, among other things. From their initial meeting, Fisher was attracted to Dillwyn Parrish, and in her journals she alludes to her increasing preoccupation with Dillwyn, as well as the disintegration of her marriage to Al. The successful publication of *Serve It Forth* in 1937 was shadowed for Fisher as she tried to reconcile her loyalty to her husband and her love for Dillwyn Parrish. During her time in France, Fisher had become exceptionally conscious of her needs and desires, and she grew keenly aware that her marriage to Al Fisher was neither sexually nor emotionally fulfilling. She also felt that her potential as a writer was stifled, and she yearned to write for a living and not simply to exist as the wife of an academic. Fisher increasingly sought Dillwyn to read and critique her essays, and an intimate friendship developed between the two. Dillwyn and Gigi divorced in 1935, and the following year Fisher accompanied Dillwyn and his mother to Europe, while Al remained in the States to teach. Fisher returned home to Whittier, California at the end of 1937, announced her intention to separate from her husband, and their divorce was granted two years later (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 87).

In the meantime, Fisher and Dillwyn had returned to Switzerland in 1938 and lived an idyllic life at Le Paquis, their beautiful home on the shores of Lake Geneva, where they were constantly “in the midst of a vigorous cycle of gardening and grape growing” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 42). Dillwyn was the love of Fisher’s life, and they inspired and encouraged creativity in each other. At Le Paquis, “when the gardens were dormant and the *vendage* celebrated, Fisher wrote for her own pleasure” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 42). Dillwyn’s presence stimulated one of the most productive periods in Fisher’s literary career.

Fisher’s idyllic world was shaken in 1938 when Dillwyn exhibited the first signs of Buerger’s disease, which necessitated the amputation of one of his legs. The next year was fraught with continuous attempts to assuage Dillwyn’s severe pain. In early 1939, vacating Europe before the escalation of the Second World War, Dillwyn and Fisher returned to California and were married in a civil ceremony, and purchased a house in California, which they named Bareacres. They were both fully aware of Dillwyn’s worsening condition. To distract Dillwyn from the immense pain that accompanied his disease, Fisher began to write a lighthearted, witty little book entitled *Consider The Oyster*, which examined the history of the dual-sexed bivalve. *Consider The Oyster* was published in 1941, just a few days after Dillwyn Parrish committed suicide to end his suffering. In consciously writing and dedicating a book to someone, as she did with *Consider The Oyster* for Dillwyn, Fisher realized that “I must always write toward somebody I love, to make it real” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 47). Dillwyn’s sudden absence proves how influential his presence had been on Fisher. Without him, she lacked a direction towards which she could direct her fully recognized appetites.

Though Fisher's time with Dillwyn was brief, he had a profound effect on the rest of her life, both personally and professionally. For the remainder of her life, Fisher would try to come to terms with her love for Dillwyn, and his premature death: "Dillwyn taught her how to live and how to love, and when the time was right she wanted to write about the beginning and tragic end of 'my fifteen minutes of marriage' to Dillwyn Parrish" (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 47). Much of her later work revisited and grappled with her earlier work in an attempt to understand the powerful events that provoked her passionate bouts of writing. In an excerpt from *Sister Age* (1983), a book about the aging process, Fisher recalled, "I wrote fast, to compress and catch a lesson while I could still hear it ... so all the notes I took were caught on the run, as it were, as I grew toward some kind of maturity" (*The Measure of Her Powers* 362-367).

Following Dillwyn's death in 1941, Fisher traveled to Mexico to rest and to spend time with her brother David and sister Norah. When she returned home, she wrote in response to the food shortages and rationing of World War II, as well as for her own emotional rejuvenation, a type of how-to guide to nourish oneself in times of physical and emotional scarcity. *How To Cook A Wolf* was published in 1942, and as Fadiman notes, Fisher

Used what was a dire but temporary situation to discuss current fallacies regarding what people should eat, singling out the 'balanced meals' touted by popular home and garden magazines for particular criticism. Every chapter in this book is a how-to guide ... The important thing is awakening the palate to the pleasures at hand, whether they be starches or proteins. (xii).

Writing *How To Cook A Wolf* was, in a sense, a therapeutic exercise that Fisher set within the framework of a nation and world at war. The tone was somber but optimistic, and the advice Fisher set forth combined the practical and the philosophical. The 1940s culinary attitude primarily stressed the importance of nutrition. Fisher's work focused on all types of nourishment and she found a wartime audience whose prevailing attitudes allowed it to relate closely to many of the ideas proposed in *How To Cook A Wolf*. Her declaration that "now, of all times in our history, we should be using our minds as well as our hearts in order to survive ... to live gracefully if we live at all" (*How To Cook A Wolf* 192) spoke directly to American's wartime sentiments.

Fisher revisited the original version of this work in 1951, inserting a decade's worth of observation, reflection, and self-critique. In the 1951 edition of *How To Cook A Wolf*, Fisher notes:

One of the most dignified ways we are capable of, to assert and then reassert our dignity in the face of poverty and war's fears and pains, is to nourish ourselves with all possible skill, delicacy, and ever-increasing enjoyment. And with our gastronomical growth will come, inevitably, knowledge and perception of a hundred other things, but mainly of ourselves. Then Fate, even tangled as it is with cold wars as well as hot, cannot harm us (350).

Though it focused on seemingly banal details of everyday life, *How To Cook A Wolf* was a manifesto against the ills of the world. By focusing on acts common to all of humanity, Fisher emphasized the importance of maintaining humane practices in the face of the

inhumane practices of the war. She believed that nurturing one's gastronomical awareness would foster an increased sensitivity towards oneself and the rest of humanity.

Writing in an explicit relation to a national crisis gave Fisher the opportunity once again to examine food traditions of the United States. Interspersed with her culinary-minded practical advice on "How To Boil Water" and "How To Comfort Sorrow" were moments when she revisited her views on the state of American gastronomy. She continued to reference Brillat-Savarin's opinions:

Every now and then a sensitive intelligent and thoughtful person feels very mournful about this country and, deciding with Brillat-Savarin that, 'The destiny of nations depends upon what and how they eat,' he begins to question. Why, he asks, are we so un-gastronomic as a nation? (*How To Cook A Wolf* 320)

A major factor that Fisher cited in the "un-gastronomic" sensibilities of America was the nation-building tendencies born of a country at war. She felt that because of the nation's

Furious efforts to prove that all men are created equal, we encourage our radios, our movies, above all our weekly and monthly magazines, to set up a fantastic ideal in the minds of family cooks, so that everywhere earnest eager women are whipping themselves and their budgets to the bone to provide three "balanced" meals a day for their men and children" (*How To Cook A Wolf* 192).

Fisher's advice was to "balance the day, not each meal in the day" (*How To Cook A Wolf* 192). Her potentially anti-nationalistic views were countered by her "nation-building" advice, which spoke to the contemporary patriotic American mindset. This tension within

her work made it exciting and culturally relevant. In *How To Cook A Wolf*, Fisher defined her ideas of food within a public context; in her next work, *The Gastronomical Me*, she returned to a more reflective and autobiographical approach.

Following the publication of *How To Cook A Wolf*, Fisher spent the years from 1942 to 1943 as a screenwriter for Paramount Studios in Hollywood. Fisher was thirty-five years old, “divorced and widowed, and one of America’s most successful career woman” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 49). During the Second World War, American women were embracing the notion that they could function independently, and Fisher was the perfect picture of the prosperous and independent professional woman who was still fully domestic. This image of the ideal woman gained popularity in the 1940s the 1950s. *Look* magazine capitalized on this image by featuring Fisher in a series that focused on successful career women. The July 28, 1942, issue of the magazine ran a lengthy article on Fisher. The spread was “lavishly illustrated with full-page photographs, the article pictured Mary Frances in Hollywood pin-up-girl style, hand grinding coffee beans, doing her own shopping for ripe produce, growing grapes on her ranch” (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 149). Until that point in her career, Fisher had been recognized for her literary ability, but with the *Look* spread, we witness Fisher’s image and ethos being appropriated by popular culture. This moment prefigures the way in which Fisher would later be turned into an icon, to a very different effect.

Although she was publicly depicted as a successful and accomplished career woman, Fisher found her work at Paramount unfulfilling. She had been contracted to write scripts, but found that she had little emotional investment in her work. However, the job provided a much-needed paycheck. She led a relatively solitary life during these

years, but entertained a number of romantic partners. In May of 1943, Fisher left Paramount when she was six months pregnant with her first child. She was secretive about the details surrounding the birth of her daughter. She hid her pregnancy from her family, and concocted an elaborate story that would explain the sudden presence of an infant in her life. She prepared them for the birth of her child by hinting that she was trying to adopt. She speculated that she would finish her work at Paramount in late August (when the baby was due) and return to visit her family “with one of the two children I am trying to adopt” (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 158). She gave birth to a daughter, Anne Kennedy Parrish, on August 15, 1943. Fisher never revealed the identity of the father, although she finally admitted to some that Anne was her biological daughter.

Fisher’s imaginative ability as a writer was exhibited in her fabrication of events surrounding her daughter’s birth. Reardon describe how, for Fisher,

Writing, like cooking, was not so much about the facts as it was about creating a certain kind of control over reality and power over the one who consumed. Whether at the stove or at the typewriter, spicing up a dish and embroidering a story would become her signature (*Poet of the Appetites* 23).

Here, we again witness the similarities between Fisher’s creative approaches to writing, to cooking, and to living her life. The challenge of concealing her pregnancy was another opportunity for Fisher to exercise these creative powers. Reardon notes that the fact that

the truth of having a child out of wedlock could be so easily manipulated to serve her ends indicated to what extent Mary Frances had come to

believe that reality was a flexible concept, in life as well as on the page.

Subterfuge really worked, and in Hollywood there were many roles to play

(*Poet of the Appetites* 158).

Fisher played a range of roles with ease, and throughout her life as well as her literary career, she embellished reality, often erasing the distinction between fact and fiction.

Fisher recalled in *How To Cook A Wolf*, “The best talker I ever heard once said to me, ‘Never ruin a good story by sticking to the truth’” (198). This ability to embellish the truth was one of Fisher’s fortes, and ultimately increased appeal to her readers.

After *How To Cook A Wolf*, Fisher returned to a more personal and self-reflective writing style in *The Gastronomical Me* (1943). While autobiographical elements permeated much of Fisher’s work, none of her works was so personally explicit as in *The Gastronomical Me*. The work was a memoir, and as memoirs inevitably rely on the memory of the author, they are necessarily subject to authorial embellishment. *The Gastronomical Me* was Fisher’s self-portrait, with “food as its central paradigm” (Reardon, *Poet of the Appetites* 156). As with her other books, she wrote most of the text during a transitional period in her life, in this case between her departure from Paramount and the birth of her daughter. *The Gastronomical Me*, in the words of Reardon, was an “effort to put the past into some kind of context before assuming the responsibilities of a single parent [;] she had to journey into that past and chart more precisely the future course of her writing career” (49). Much of the narrative was comprised of recollections of events during her early life through her relationship with Dillwyn and the effects of his death.

Fisher prefaced the book with a verse by the Spanish philosopher George Santayana:

*To be happy you must have taken
The measure of your powers, tasted the
Fruits of your passion, and learned
Your place in the world.*

It is evident that over the course of this work she came to better understand her own “place in the world.” In *The Gastronomical Me*, Fisher revisited significant moments in her life, beginning with an early memory, recalling the sumptuous details and self-realizations that came of a simple meal shared with her sister and father:

I saw the golden hills and the live oaks as clearly as I have ever seen them since; and I saw the dimples in my little sister’s fat hands in a way that still moves me because of that first time; and I saw food as something beautiful to be shared with people instead of as a thrice daily necessity ... but it was one of the best meals we ever ate ... a big round peach pie, deep, with lots of juice, and bursting with ripe peaches picked at noon ... Perhaps that is because it was the first conscious one, for me at least; but the fact that we remember it with such queer clarity must mean that it had other reason for being important. I suppose that happens at least once to every human. I hope so (358).

She relived her first French dining experience. She recalled with amusement this early, innocent, and uneducated moment. It was

A shy stupid one, but even if we had never gone back and never learned gradually how to order food and wine, it would still be among the important ones of my life ... One of the great wines, which I have watched

other people order through snobbism or timidity when they knew as little as we did, would have been utterly wasted on us. [Our friend] started us out right, and through the months watched us with his certain deft guidance learn to know what wine we wanted, and why (399 - 401).

Revisiting these experiences later in life offered the emotional distance that gave Fisher insight. Experiences such as the one that Fisher recalled above made her life more relevant to Americans who might have been similarly intimidated and inexperienced at the table. Fisher's distance from the experiences being recalled made her more prone to embellish events.

At that point in her life, at age thirty-five, Fisher's self-awareness extended to observations of how she was perceived by other people. Fisher frequently traveled by freighter between Europe and America, and marked periods of her life by these numerous crossings, which offered her ample time to examine her own life and the people around her:

What have they (sea changes) to do with me, the gastronomical me? What sea changes were there, to make me richer, stranger? I grew older with each one, like every other wanderer. My hungers altered: I knew better what and how to eat, just as I knew better how I loved other people, and even why (510).

Increased perceptiveness about human nature inspired Fisher to observe other people, and to note the responses elicited by a woman dining and traveling alone. She was often amused by people's reactions to her ease at traveling alone, and enjoyed witnessing their discomfort at her solitary circumstances. She recalled:

I saw clearly for the first time that a woman traveling alone and behaving herself on a ship is an object of curiosity, among the passengers and even more so among the cynical and weary officers. I developed a pattern of behavior which I still follow, on ships and trains and in hotels everywhere, and which impresses and undoubtedly irritates some people who see me, but always succeeds in keeping me aloof from skulduggery ... there are many parts to it, but one of the most important is the way I eat (512).

Again, Fisher frames her human analyses in the context of food and the act of eating. In keeping with her character, Fisher constructed an external appearance that separated and protected her. Traveling alone, Fisher took pleasure in creating these facades. Fisher revels in having the freedom to focus all of her energy on analyzing her experience at the table:

I could eat what I wanted, and drink what I wanted. I could spend all the time I needed over a piece of pate, truly savor its uncountable tastes ... and if I felt like it, I could invite another passenger to dine with me, and order an intelligent and thoughtful meal, to please the chef and the wine steward ... but in general I prefer to eat by myself, slowly, voluptuously, and with an independence that heartened me against the coldness of my cabin and my thoughts (512).

Inevitably, Fisher's thoughts returned to the loss of Dillwyn, and much of *A Gastronomical Me* is a contemplation of Dillwyn's death. Time had elapsed since his death, which enabled her to realize more fully its effect on her; she was left feeling like a ghost. She recalled her trip to Mexico immediately following Dillwyn's death:

People thought I was in a state of shock at the dying ... I ate, with a rapt voluptuous concentration which had little to do with bodily hunger, but seemed to nourish some other part of me ... sometimes I would go to the best restaurant I knew about, and order dishes and good wines as if I were a guest of myself, to be treated with infinite courtesy (536).

Fisher remembers with satisfaction the meal she had fashioned out of the unpalatable food served on the plane: “It was a pleasant lunch, small yet nourishing, and I concocted it with a neatness and intense dispatch impossible anywhere but high above the earth, so that it was not ridiculous or gross or even finicky while I did it” (540).

The birth of her daughter Anne in 1943 marked a new chapter in Fisher’s life. She now had a child to support as well as herself, and the favorable reviews that *The Gastronomical Me* had received made her consider gastronomical writing to be a lucrative endeavor. She supported herself by writing extensively. She wrote for *The New Yorker*, *Gourmet*, and she penned a monthly column for *House Beautiful*. She also gave lectures on food and wine in the greater San Francisco area.

As Fisher became more established as a culinary writer, popular publications vied for her work, and in the mid-1940s she was commissioned by *Gourmet* magazine to write a series of articles on the subject of the art of dining. Structured on the letters of the alphabet, this series was later collected into *An Alphabet For Gourmets*, published in 1949. Fisher was concurrently working on her translation of Brillat-Savarin’s *La Physiologie du Gout* into English, and “the Professor’s” presence in *An Alphabet For Gourmets* was evident. She admitted that, “at times, I confess gastronomically, I grow damned bored. And that is when I call up the Professor’s ghost, and with a bow to him I

make, much more timetakingly than any modern recipe would tolerate, my own modest version of his turbot” (*An Alphabet For Gourmets* 690).

An Alphabet For Gourmets was a mélange of the events of Fisher’s life up to the mid-1940s, and was implicitly sexual. Many of the essays indirectly recalled experiences with various lovers, none of whom she names. In a sense, *An Alphabet For Gourmets* was a nostalgic exercise for Fisher. It was a synthesis of Fisher’s lifelong observations of the art of dining, infused with the self-reflective elements evident in most of her work. Her style continued to be personal and inward-focused, but Fisher wrote more with her audience in mind. As she had done in *A Gastronomical Me*, Fisher observed people’s reactions to her presence. She was aware that her visibility in the world of gastronomy and her confidence as a single woman intimidated some people. Consistent with the way in which the photo spread in *Look Magazine* had presented her, she appeared to be a successful, independent career woman. But those years in Hollywood, though punctuated by affairs with various men, were ultimately lonely for Fisher. Acquaintances were intimidated by her increasing gastronomic authority, and consequently didn’t request her presence at their tables as frequently as before. Fisher wrote, “I still wished, in what was almost a theoretical way, that I was not cut off from the world’s trenchermen by what I had written for and about them” (*An Alphabet For Gourmets* 581). Perhaps her potential hosts were not entirely mistaken in their fear of being judged by Fisher. In the section of *An Alphabet For Gourmets* entitled “C is for Caution,” Fisher wrote, “I always wish desperately, compassionately, that my hosts could summon enough gastronomical courage to turn their backs on rote and plan a meal dictated by no matter what faint glimmer of appetite within them rather than by other men’s rules” (591). Though at times

her views may have alienated others, the conviction with which she wrote speaks to the American ideal of strength and independence, and would ultimately help to solidify her opinions and philosophy.

In 1945, following the end of an intense love affair, Fisher began to experience anxiety attacks, and came to realize that the events of the past six years had taken an emotional toll. Feeling that a change in scenery would do her good, she boarded a train East with Anne and her nanny Elsa, and “sought refuge in New York City, where she planned to read, attend movies and concerts, walk, sleep, and even enjoy a river cruise” (Reardon, *M.F.K Fisher* 168).

On her second night in New York City, at the house of a mutual friend, Fisher met a man named Donald Friede. Friede worked in publishing, and was “intelligent, urbane and cosmopolitan – just the sort of man whose company she enjoyed” (Reardon, *M.F.K Fisher* 171). He wooed Fisher, and despite her “obdurate resolve never to marry again” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 171), the two were married in May of 1945. While Dillwyn had been her inspiration and mentor, Friede was her literary promoter, signing her contracts with new literary agents and actively encouraging her to produce work. In the fall of 1945, they moved to California, and a daughter, Kennedy Friede, was born on March 12, 1946.

While Fisher was writing articles for *Gourmet* and other magazines, Friede’s health and career were suffering on the west coast, and his health was bad as well. In July of 1949, he returned to New York to seek medical treatment and to embark on various professional endeavors. Fisher remained in California with Anne and Kennedy, frantically writing articles in order to put food on the table. Aware that Friede was not

present when she needed him most, physically and emotionally, she sought separation and the two divorced in 1950.

Fisher spent the years immediately following her divorce from Friede “revising, collecting, and anthologizing her works which had been under way since the early 1940s” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 56). She collected her first five books into *The Art of Eating*, published in 1954. The common subject of food links these five books, and the release of *The Art of Eating* was a testament to the changing culinary tide in America and the surge of attention given to food. A few years later, America’s increasing interest in gastronomy was obvious, and Fisher was recognized as a member of the vanguard in what was becoming a gastronomic revolution:

The early 1960s had ushered in *une frenesie culinaire*. Food became one of America’s main performing arts with the success of Julia Child’s *French Chef* TV series, and cookbooks became the reading choice for all those following James Beard to the backyard grill and Craig Claiborne to Le Pavillon. The number of cookbooks published was escalating every year, and their quality was so varied that even *The New Yorker* allocated space to cookbook reviews and sought out M.F.K. Fisher to write them (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 62).

As knowledge of food and food-related philosophies became part of popular culture, Fisher enjoyed a position of authority in the field. By the 1980s, when Fisher had been writing on the subject of food for nearly half a century, the culinary world was finally ready for her:

With cookbooks proliferating in unbelievable numbers, cooking schools – both professional and dilettantish – registering students for two years or two days, culinary guilds and societies flourishing and wine tours and tastings the “in” things to do in the eighties, Mary Frances’s books were apotheosized ... In the wake of such publicity, Mary Frances was introduced as the “doyenne” of American’s culinary writers. Her views on everything from secret indulgences to microwave ovens were sought, and interviews from publications as diverse as *W* and *Ms.* Knocked on her door. Recognition, so long in coming, was hers (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 108).

As the nature of Fisher’s work made it more culturally relevant beginning in the mid-1950s, the appearance of her name in a project helped lend authority to that project. She addressed America’s increasing fascination with wine when she wrote *The Story of Wine in California* (1962). She collaborated with Julia Child and food writer Michael Field on a cookbook entitled *The Cooking of Provincial France* (1968). She wrote over twenty introductions for the gastronomically-inclined work of others, which she republished in 1988 in a collection called *Dubious Honors*. In *Dubious Honors*, she muses whether being solicited to write these introductions was an honor or whether she was merely being used to sell books. She maintained correspondence with well-known figures in the food world, including James Beard and Julia Child. This twenty-year period, from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s, marked the period of Fisher’s life when she was most frequently in the public spotlight, and enjoyed the most popular acclaim. However, her authority and productivity did not diminish in the wake of this “Fisher-

frenzy.” Fisher was not a passing fad; she had become permanently established as a central figure in American gastronomy.

In 1970, Fisher moved to Glen Ellen, California, to a small house that a friend had specifically designed for her to live out the last years of her life. She called it Last House, and there she received many visitors, enjoyed the natural bounties of the Napa Valley, and continued to write prolifically. Her later literary work often revisited events of her early life and “the older she becomes, the more heavily she relies on memory and language” (McLean 139). In an attempt to sift through a lifelong literary career, she continued to write, but “with growing detachment, and she collected what she wanted from the past and discarded whatever proved cumbersome” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 105). She increasingly contemplated aging and the process of physical deterioration, and often her paragraphs about the disintegration of foods paralleled her comments on the deterioration of the human body. Her words were vivid, and she worked to remove an element of anxiety from the natural process of aging, and to make it sensuous and appealing. Recalling a shopping excursion in Provence, Fisher wrote, “I could almost feel the food in the baskets swelling with juice, growing soft, splitting open in an explosive rush toward ripeness and disintegration” (*The Measure of Her Powers* 313-318). She wrote on the process of human aging in a similar way:

I suppose deterioration implies that there is a constant process of disintegration and spoiling, but I don’t see why these many aspects are called symptoms. The trouble with this steady fading away is that every aspect of it is viewed with alarm and is generally found unacceptable, when really it is the natural thing and is symptomatic of nothing at all ... I

often wonder why and how we are kept so ignorant of what is really a natural process. (*The Measure of Her Powers* 406-41).

Fisher reflects on the overall purpose of her life work as well, and allows that she has spent her life “in a painstaking effort to tell about things as they are to me, so that they will not sound like autobiography but simply like notes, like factual reports. They have been set down honestly, to help other students write their own theses” (*Sister Age* 362-367). Fisher wrote until her death in 1992. Her final work, *Last House: Reflections, Dreams, and Observations 1943-1991*, was published posthumously in 1995.

Fisher’s continuing influence on gastronomic literature is indisputable, as is her authority within the world of gastronomy. But what makes Fisher’s work timeless is the fact that she addressed human hungers. She took natural processes like eating and aging that typically made Americans anxious and infused these with sensuality, as exemplified by her vivid recollection of eating a tangerine:

Almost every person has something secret that he likes to eat ... I discovered how to eat little dried sections of tangerine. My pleasure in them is subtle and voluptuous and quite inexplicable. I can only write how they are prepared. In the morning, in the soft sultry chamber, sit in the window peeling the tangerines, three or four. Peel them gently; do not bruise them. Separate each plump little pregnant crescent. If you find the Kiss, the secret section, save it ... after you have put the sections of tangerine on the paper on the hot radiator, it is best to forget about them ... on the radiator the sections of tangerine have grown plump, hot and full. They are ready. I cannot tell you why they are so magical. Perhaps it is

that little shell, thin as one layer of enamel on a Chinese bowl, that crackles so tinily, so ultimately under your teeth. Or the rush of cold pulp just after it. Or the perfume. I cannot tell. There must be some one, though, who knows what I mean. Probably everyone does, because of his own secret eating (*Serve It Forth* 26 – 28).

This description begs the reader to recall his or her own “secret eating,” and such is the nature of Fisher’s magic. She acknowledged and honored a range of human hungers – both physical and psychological – and made her reader more comfortable with addressing these hungers. Fisher’s body of work not only helped to liberate and inform America’s gastronomic sensibilities, but has helped her readers and acquaintances to recognize and appreciate their own appetites. She wrote of daily life, and revealed the possibility of finding pleasure in common objects and activities, which many people would have previously considered banal. She wrote with a worldly voice, but her manner was not condescending. She was not afraid to express her desires, nor was she afraid to express her uncertainties. She was humble but firm in her convictions. She embodied the American ideals of independence, strength, and self-reliance, but brought these ideals into the domestic sphere.

Fisher became an icon in the food world, and during her lifetime was an enigmatic character of sorts. Her solitary lifestyle attracted curious admirers, and “as more national attention centered on the excellence of California wines and produce and on a new breed of dedicated restaurateurs, more people included a visit to M.F.K. Fisher and the home she called Last House as part of their itineraries” (Reardon, *M.F.K. Fisher* 87). Indeed, part of Fisher’s charm was her personal presence, and her ability to

Command a whole roomful of attention, men, women, mixed or matched, if she chose. There was a sensuality about her ... people were attracted to her high sense of life, her wire sensitivity, it could be frantic or silent, sacred, lusty, noble, or each of these in turn (Ferrary, *M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 90).

Fisher was elusive because she was “a maker of her own mythology ... she is the mistress of ellipses ... she knows when to stop, how to leave things unsaid, and how most poignantly and specifically to not say them. She only suggests, it would seem, though it’s impossible to miss the point” (Ferrary, *M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 230). One does not need to have an appreciation or knowledge of food to appreciate the beauty of her prose. But after reading Fisher, a reader will certainly have gained something of the sort. Fisher had a unique power to inspire many individuals, not just those people in the food world. Ferrary recalls:

She was always stirring things up in the way, galvanizing people to take some sort of action that they every attribute to her influence. Nor was this dynamic limited to any one profession. It was a legacy sworn by aerial photographers, restaurateurs who had kissed her hand only once, ecstatic poets, defoliated editors, and at least an entire religious order that ran a bakery – to name a few” (*M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 223).

In contrast to American food trends, M.F.K. Fisher is not a passing fad. Her contemporaries respected her, her ideas defined a revolution, and I presume that the cultural relevance of her work will only continue to increase as America pays more attention to food.

V. Fisher's Influence on Contemporary Culinary Writers

“Until I discovered her writings, I had serious doubts about my sanity. And for good reason. I couldn't help noticing that other people could eat an entire meal and not utter a word about it...”

-Jeannette Ferrary

Most contemporary food writers and aficionados have been influenced by the work of Fisher in some way. Jeannette Ferrary describes Fisher's “radiating wit and style, her steel-trapped mind and her memory, her opinions. Not only was she a beauty, but she was a force, a magnet, a holy terror” (*M.F.K. Fisher and Me* 210). While male food writers cite Fisher's influence, female food writers are especially indebted to Fisher for creating a place in this genre for female desire and expression of the appetite. Fisher “left behind a body of work that celebrates the mutually constructed pleasure of eating and language, providing nourishment to the contemporary food writers who carry on her celebration of female desire” (McLean 225).

Today, the female culinary memoir is a more conscious effort to put the past into context through associations with food, and it often includes recipes; this format resembles the earliest cookbooks published. These recipes are not intended to be instructional, per se, but rather are included to help embellish the story. They punctuate the narrative, helping to conjure up memories through recollections of meals shared. Female memoirs are often self-reflective and introspective, and include reference to multiple appetites – emotional, sexual, and physical. M.F.K. Fisher set the standard for the female culinary memoir, and contemporary culinary memoirists such as Ruth Reichl and Jeannette Ferrary are indebted to Fisher.

Ruth Reichl, current editor of *Gourmet* magazine and past food critic for the *Los Angeles Times* and the *New York Times*, has published three food-themed memoirs. Since Reichl's field of work is the food world, it seems obvious that food and eating experiences would be the subject of her memoirs. But as in Fisher's work, Reichl's representations of her gastronomic experiences connect these with other arenas of life. Like Fisher, though more explicitly, "Reichl links gastronomy, sexual transgression, and language in a way that pays tribute to Fisher by openly celebrating what remains more implicit in [Fisher's] writing" (McLean, 212). Three of Reichl's memoirs, *Tender at the Bone* (1998), *Comfort Me with Apples* (2001), and *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise* (2005) were instant *New York Times* bestsellers. Unlike Fisher, Reichl did not have to wait half of her lifetime to gain a widespread audience; thanks to Fisher, there was a place for such writing in contemporary American literature. Of reading Fisher's work, Reichl simply but poignantly says, "it will change your life" (*The Art of Eating* xvii).

Jeanette Ferrary is a food critic, cookbook author, and the author of a memoir called *M.F.K. Fisher and Me: A Memoir of Food and Friendship* (1998), which also contains a considerable amount of biographical information on Fisher. After reading excerpts from *The Art of Eating*, Ferrary became a food enthusiast and a Fisher devotee. Ferrary attributed her own gastronomic awareness to Fisher:

Her writing helped me to understand that food is a valid and fascinating world to explore as a writer, which ultimately changed my life...It was both transformation and confirmation. In M.F.K. Fisher, I found permission to be myself (*The Art of Eating* xxii).

Fisher's work helped Ferrary to recognize and express her own desires. Eager to meet the woman behind the words, Ferrary wrote to Fisher expressing this wish. Fisher invited Ferrary for lunch, and the two developed a friendship. A large part of Ferrary's effort is to try to capture Fisher's personal aura. But Ferrary also uses her relationship with Fisher, the meals shared, and impressions gathered as a context to discuss her own evolution as a writer and cook.

Both Reichl and Ferrary expose inner desires, some of which are quite personal. In contrast, male-authored food memoirs predominantly focus on pleasure directly derived from the act of eating. Because men were historically more free to express their physical appetites, male culinary memoirs tend to be more forward in recognizing the desire to eat. The author frequently portrays himself, to an often-humorous effect, as proudly gluttonous as he embarks on the latest eating adventure. Contemporary male food memoirists include A.J. Leibling, Calvin Trillin, and Jim Harrison. While there is often little emphasis on emotional nourishment or assuaging human hungers in these stomach-driven eating adventures, male memoirists are indebted to Fisher for her passionate, unrestrained, and detailed descriptions of experiences at the table. Fisher asserted that men's "approach to gastronomy is basically sexual" (*An Alphabet For Gourmets* 584), and their gastronomical writing is much the same. Leibling conceded that "the primary requisite for writing about food is a good appetite" (Leibling, qtd. in Reichl, *Comfort Me with Apples*, 3). In *Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris* (1962), as the title suggests, Leibling framed his Parisian escapades by his descriptions of often excessive meals.

However, I have found nothing to surpass Jim Harrison's description and defense of a thirty-seven-course meal in France, a meal based on recipes from great cooks and French food writers of the past (including Brillat-Savarin and Grimod de La Reyniere):

If I announce that I and eleven other diners shared a thirty-seven-course lunch that likely cost as much as a new Volvo station wagon, those of the critical nature will let their minds run in tiny, aghast circles of condemnation. My response to them is that none of us twelve disciples wanted a new Volvo. We wanted only lunch, and since lunch lasted approximately eleven hours we saved money by not having to buy dinner.

The defense rests (*A Really Big Lunch* 78).

This is the ultimate example of the brazen appetite typical of male food writers. Harrison prefaces his book *The Raw and the Cooked: Adventures of a Roving Gourmand* (2001) with the disclaimer, "I would like to avoid here the merest suggestion that there is anything wrong with my food and wine obsession" (1). Harrison was fully aware of the absurdity of this event. When the lunch was over, at midnight, Harrison recalls that he "sipped a paltry brandy from the nineteen-twenties and smok[ed] a Havanna Churchill, and reflected that this was not the time to ponder eternal values" (*A Really Big Lunch* 82).

While much of Harrison's article is jocular, with his accounts of unmatchable gluttony, there are moments of his work with a more serious intent, as when he writes that "good food is a benign weapon against the sodden way we live" (*A Really Big Lunch* 82).

Harrison cites the importance of enjoying a meal, because, "like sex, bathing, sleeping, and drinking, the effects of food don't last. The patterns are repeated but finite. Life is a

near-death experience, and our devious minds will do anything to make it interesting” (*A Really Big Lunch* 82).

Calvin Trillin, a novelist and columnist for *The New Yorker*, shares Harrison’s philosophy. Trillin is equally shameless as he travels to far corners of the globe in search of gastronomic delights, and his many culinary memoirs range from *Alice, Let’s Eat* (1978) to *Feeding a Yen: Savoring Local Specialties from Kansas City to Cuzco* (2003). In *Alice, Let’s Eat*, Trillin recalls the tremendous precautions he took in order to stave off hunger on a flight from New York to Miami:

I climbed on board a flight to Miami, carrying, among other necessities, a small jar of fresh caviar, some smoked salmon had picked up at a "custom smokery" in Seattle the week before, crudités, with a pesto dipping sauce, tomato-curry lime soup, butterfish with shrimp en gelee, spiced clams, lime and dill shrimp, marinated mussels, an assortment of pate, stuffed cold breast of veal, a bottle of Puligny-Montrachet, a selection of chocolate cakes, some praline cheesecake, and a dessert made from Italian cheese-in-the-basket, fresh strawberries and Grand Marnier (51).

Although male-authored culinary memoirs are generally less serious than female-authored culinary memoirs, they still occupy a legitimate place within this body of gastronomic literature. Nuanced reflection is not as explicit as it is in female-authored memoirs, but it does exist, making it all the more poignant when it occurs.

The simple fact men use food as subject matter for a personal memoir testifies to the increasing presence of food and the role of food as a form of entertainment.

This brief survey of contemporary culinary memoirists raises and important

question: What is it that inspires people to write about food? Fisher observed that, “given the fact that almost every gastronome has some kind of literary predilection, it is amusing and interesting to speculate on the whys and whens of such a love” (*An Alphabet For Gourmets* 640). Perhaps, as Adam Gopnik points out, it is because “the metaphors of taste are so basic that they imbue and infiltrate our entire experience, and we no longer think of them as metaphors” (92). Reading and writing about food enables one “to access and recreate former pleasures, distilling the wisdom gathered from travels and communion with other cultures. Learning to savor this distillation of the mind’s palate, they nourish creativity from within” (McLean 225). These memoirists, for the most part, write widely on other topics as well. However, food is the context in which they choose to define themselves.

With the proliferation of gastronomic memoirs, food magazines, contemporary cookbooks, restaurant criticism, twenty-four-hour-a-day cable television networks devoted to food, and food-related websites, the culinary world has become part of everyday American popular culture. Food is trendy, and many chefs enjoy iconic celebrity status. The Food Network has helped popularize innovators like Rachael Ray and her show *30 Minute Meals*. In the new millennium, food has essentially become another form of entertainment for Americans. To be considered culturally informed, one must possess knowledge of the latest culinary fads. However, I would argue that this knowledge does not necessarily create pleasure at the table; it just makes for good conversation. The question that begs to be asked, then, is whether this increased awareness of food in American society translates into a changed attitude towards the actual act of eating and the ability to share a good simple meal. Inevitably, the discourse

about food has increased our gastronomic awareness as a society. However, there has arisen an unfortunate association of good food to elitism, which John and Karen Hess address in *Tastes of America*:

Once a sensual pleasure, food has become a snob thing, closely allied with those other preoccupations of women's journalism, Society, and fashions. The seasons have disappeared from our produce markets but have entered our cookery in the fashion sense – there are dishes that are 'in' this season, and dishes that are 'out' (240).

Certainly, more people are becoming aware that food is connected to multiple arenas of life, and are increasingly curious about these connections. While this curiosity has resulted in more food-related discussion, the attempt to obtain knowledge of certain food fads and their cultural connotations has also been detrimental to the ability convivially to share a meal and appreciate it in its most elemental form.

V. Notes Towards a New American Gastronomy

“Good cooking is beloved because, when it is good enough, it gives more immediate pleasure and then recedes more rapidly, more gracefully, than any other cultural thing, letting us arrange our lives, at least for a night, around it”

– Adam Gopnik

In this study, I have examined events leading up to and initiating the American gastronomical revolution that began in the 1950s and is still underway today. This revolution essentially instigated a change in attitudes regarding food, and made Americans a more receptive audience for culinary literature. I began with a brief history of culinary practices and eating habits in America since Colonial times, and demonstrated

that food and the practice of eating have been sources of dispute. These conflicts reveal that food and eating are culturally meaningful and politically charged subjects of discourse. But these conflicts are also symptomatic of a mood of culinary anxiety.

Historically, Americans have possessed a tendency to approach food with uncertainty, which is in part, I would argue, the result of a lack of confidence and a lack of ability to recognize and honor the appetite and make food-related decisions. In my analysis of M.F.K. Fisher as a central and defining figure within culinary writing, I demonstrated how she created a literary genre by infusing the female voice into a traditionally male-authored French style of gastronomic literature. In writing about food and human hungers, Fisher made a place for the recognition of the female appetite within gastronomic literature, addressed social issues, and persuasively conveyed French food philosophies to Americans. Fisher's writing style and ideas not only influenced other food writers, but affected the American food world more broadly, as chefs, restaurateurs, and food enthusiasts were fundamentally changed. When they were exposed to her work, even those readers who originally cared little about food and the act of eating were transformed. Today, Fisher's philosophies have permeated American's culinary sensibilities to such a degree that even those who have not read her work are exposed to her ethos. Because she wrote of human hungers, Fisher's words resonated with many who read her work, and she inspired her readers to recognize their appetites and realize the possibility of finding pleasure in the act of eating. Fisher offered vivid personal examples as guiding principles, but ultimately left her readers to discover and honor their own appetite, empowering them with feelings of independence and agency.

Americans are now recognizing the multiple significances of food, and how it shapes social, cultural, political, and economic relationships. But Americans' receptivity to representations of food in American culture, and their acknowledgment of food's centrality, has a dark side. Americans rely on cultural authorities to dictate what should be eaten; they lack the instinct and confidence to make decisions regarding food. They are more concerned with convenience, and with making the "right decision" concerning the latest food trends and scientific discoveries than with choosing a product that is fresh and enjoyable. Thus, the proliferation of food-related discourse is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is symptomatic of the increased awareness that Americans have of food; on the other hand, it has caused Americans to become dependent on representations to know how to eat. This dependence has alienated Americans from what these representations originally promoted: the possibility of finding pleasure and conviviality in the act of eating.

This dependence is, in addition, a reflection on the fact that the gastronomic history of the United States is fragmented, and does not offer a set of identifiable gastronomic traditions. In other words, there are too many different culinary practices in this country for Americans to identify with just one. Therefore, Americans look to external resources for culinary guidance. As a result, food related discourse has come to occupy an increasingly prominent place in contemporary American culture. The array of culinary practices in the United States has ultimately made Americans more receptive to the latest food trends, but has also contributed to a national complacency regarding adherence to a specific gastronomic tradition. Fisher recognized this complacency and confusion regarding American culinary practices by comparing Americans to Europeans:

“here at home we can, and do, drink what we want, and not always with such fortunate results as the more custom bound Europeans” (*Consider The Oyster* 180). Since European culture is steeped in gastronomic tradition, Fisher argued, Europeans maintain higher standards and do not approach food with the anxiety that Americans do, and thus have a more enjoyable eating experience. Because the United States is a nation obsessed with body image, nutrition, and staying thin, food has become an even greater point of anxiety. Americans often view food with trepidation, and associate enjoyment taken in the act of eating with sin. Thus it is my belief that while the profusion of food-related discourse has increased the attention that Americans give to food, it has made us that much more anxious about following “proper” food practices. But there are promising signs that as people pay more attention to personal taste and the actual food products, they are beginning to value flavor, quality, and local tradition over convenience. They are slowly beginning to lose the feelings of guilt that were so long associated with enjoying a meal. This greater awareness and concern for the origin of food products has led Americans to embrace gastronomic movements that seek to recover some of the traditional foods that have been threatened by the homogenization of flavor resulting from the mass production of food products.

One of these movements is the Slow Food movement, founded in Italy in 1986 by activist Carlo Petrini. Slow Food is an international movement, and

Stands in opposition to the fast food that landed on the shores and tried to take over, so the awareness that the issue was international was there from the start ... If fast food means uniformity, Slow Food sets out to save and resuscitate individual gastronomic legacies everywhere (Petrini 17).

In an interview, Carlo Petrini defines gastronomy as a “serious science that includes the production of food, agriculture, land economy, sociology, and anthropology.”

(“Interview”) By educating people about regional products, Slow Food emphasizes quality over convenience and attempts to increase consumer awareness of the fact that:

Today the gastronomic tradition has been flattened and absorbed by the food industry, which targets the foods it markets very precisely to specific age groups ... there was a time when every family’s table, rustic or rich, bore the imprint of a distinct identity in the way the ingredients were mixed and cooked, but today we devour objects that come already assembled (Petrini 72).

The early twentieth century witnessed the increase of the mass production and distribution of canned and frozen foods, effectively distancing humans from the natural rhythms of earth, which ended any limitations imposed by the seasonal nature of product availability. Scientific advancements have led to the ability to create and reproduce flavors synthetically. Regional gastronomic traditions are in danger of disappearing as the fast food industry infiltrates the most tradition-bound corners of the country and the world. The fast food industry is also responsible for capitalizing on the demand for ethnic cuisine, serving up commodified and homogenized versions of ethnic reality.

The burgeoning interest in ethnic foodways, though it may have been instigated by commodified versions of ethnic foods, has led to the phenomenon of “culinary tourism,” a term coined by folklorist and food historian Lucy Long. Long describes how food has become “central to traveling, and it is a vivid entryway into another culture, but we do not have to literally leave home to ‘travel’ ... food can carry us into other realms of

experience, allowing us to be tourists while staying at home” (1). However, once a certain food comes to signify an entire culture, it “becomes a commodity and a symbol ... and then what happens to the functions and roles they may have had for their original users?” (Long 9).

I would contend that currently, Americans concentrate more on what food represents in our culture and not enough on the actual food itself. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that “the United States is the country where Slow Food is developing the fastest” (Petrini xxii). Petrini recognizes that “this is significant, since it also happens to be the place where the industrialization of agriculture and production methods first spawned fast food” (xxii). The Slow Food movement aims to re-acquaint consumers with local traditions that have been lost and to remind people that real food has flavor and complexity. Petrini asserts that:

We need to reconstruct the individual and collective heritage, the capacity to distinguish – in a word, taste ... Slow Food endorses the primacy of sensory experience and treats eyesight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste as so many instruments of discernment, self-defense, and pleasure (69).

According to Petrini, in order to acquire an ability to discern reality from the media-induced hype in today’s food world, we must reacquaint ourselves with the pleasure of the act of eating:

The pleasures of the table are the gateway to recovering a gentle and harmonious rhythm of life. Go through it and the vampire of advertising will lose its power over you. So will the anxiety, conformism, and suggestive power of the mass media that the shifting winds of fashion

impose. Let go of standardized, sterile models. Freedom to choose could raise the quality of life and bring pleasure within reach of large masses of mankind (25)

Although Petrini and other Slow Food activists at times have been accused of being bourgeois elitists, their project entails a critique of capitalism and the media's role as a mediator between the eater and what is consumed. The insights of activists such as Petrini, I would suggest, would be impossible to introduce in America without the philosophies of a figure such as M.F.K. Fisher.

While the gastronomic revolution that began in the mid-twentieth century will continue to evolve, and eating habits will change, M.F.K. Fisher will remain one of the defining voices in this gastronomic movement. The literary genre that she refined will continue to influence people who are directly involved in the food world as well as a wider readership. As Americans become more attuned to their appetites, the Fisher ethos will increasingly inform American culinary sensibilities. Her words are applicable to almost any cultural context because they deal with fundamental needs and hungers of humanity within its natural environment. Her ability to find pleasure in everyday details of life in order to assuage human hunger will not soon lose its appeal. It was Fisher's hope that every person would eventually recognize and honor his or her physical and emotional appetites and have at least one memorable gastronomic moment:

Once at least in the life of every human, whether he be brute or trembling daffodil, comes a moment of complete gastronomic satisfaction. It is, I am sure, as much a matter of spirit as of body. Everything is right; nothing jars. There is a kind of harmony, with every sensation and emotion melted

into one chord of well-being. Oddly enough, it is hard for people to describe these moments. They have sunk beatifically into the past, or have been ignored or forgotten in the hard rush of the present. Sometimes they are too keen to be bandied in conversation, too delicate to be pinioned by our insufficient mouthings (*Serve It Forth* 83).

M.F.K. Fisher was rare among her contemporaries in that she was able to capture and express these gastronomic experiences. Her power to convey sensually and vividly an act that had previously been taken for granted is not just a result of her literary strengths. Fisher had recognized and honored her appetites, which made her comfortable expressing them. Fisher honored food and the act of eating by emphasizing the importance of recognizing one's appetites. In doing so, she left behind a body of gastronomic literature that has helped to create a literary genre and helped to inspire future generations to recognize their appetites and find pleasure in the fundamental act of eating.

Notes

¹ The America Eats project was part of the Federal writers project, which provided work for unemployed intellectuals. Begun in 1938, the America Eats project organized intellectuals in 42 states to write a guide on American eating. The goal was to define American cuisine. The project ended when the beginning of World War II ended projects for unemployed intellectuals, but the research carried out for this projects remains a testament to the diversity and disagreement that defines “American” eating (Gabaccia 139-144).

² The process which I refer to as “Americanization” of a product takes place when the product is first accepted as “ethnic” or “foreign” by consumers, and then becomes modified to suit American tastes and concepts. The product is further commodified when it becomes a representation of an entire culture.

³ The Fast Food Industry began in California in 1948 when Richard and Maurice McDonald transformed their traditional drive in restaurant kitchen into an assembly line style production, serving a scaled down menu. Compromising quality, they were able to offer consumers convenience and value (Schlosser 19).

⁴ Dr. John Harvey Kellogg, [founder of Kellogg’s cereals], operated a popular sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. Dr. Kellogg’s sanitarium was health clinic/resort based on Seventh Day Adventist principles that promoted physical and spiritual well-being through adherence to a strict vegetarian diet and exercise.