

# Rumblings from the World of Food

## To the Editor

### *Biodynamic Viticulture*

I read Jason Tippetts's recent article on biodynamic viticulture ("The Science of Biodynamic Viticulture," Spring 2012) with interest. His inquiry into whether biodynamic viticulture can be a science raises questions about whether biodynamism is more "natural" than conventional viticulture. A vineyard—straight rows of heavily pruned vines protected from competition by herbicides, and whose fruits are not allowed to be eaten by animals—is not "natural," except in some quaint romantic conception. It does not matter whether the herbicide is seed burned in Scorpio or Round-Up.

Mr. Tippetts bemoans the Madiran region's change from heavily tannic wine to softer wine that customers prefer: is that not a "better" bottle of wine, one which the majority of people prefer? Tippetts's prescriptive definition of "good" smacks of snobbery. In the wine world this elite conceit of "we know better" is often paired with contempt for commercialization, a sentiment repeated several times in the article. Vintners with a noble title or a trust fund can make wine for their own pleasure, but the *vignerons* whom Mr. Tippetts would help need to pay taxes and rent by selling wines that people enjoy.

The article uses the words "prove" and "provable" a number of times in the context of science. This is a serious error: science does not evaluate theories by trying to prove them but by attempting to disprove them. Falsification is an empirical test, and one that the average person relies on every day. A *vigneron* who has heard a lecture on biodynamic viticulture might reasonably ask, "Does biodynamic work?" Well, does it?

Let's set up two plots of wines and bury stinging nettle, fill stags' bladders, and skin field mice for one of them. We will use conventional (or organic) procedures on the other plot. Will biodynamic viticulture be superior?

Rudolph Steiner's demonstration and lectures took place in 1924, eighty-eight years ago. Has anyone tried to falsify his "theories" in the meantime? All we get in Mr. Tippetts's article is an *ex cathedra* statement about the roots of biodynamically cultivated vines growing deeper. Ask *vignerons* to do something more than a little esoteric, without telling them why or whether they can expect a better harvest, and they may mutter under their breath, "Dogma."

—Zachary Nowak, The Umbra Institute, Perugia

### *Jason Tippetts responds:*

I am pleased that my article raised questions for Mr. Nowak—it was meant as an inquiry into whether biodynamics works as a scientific theory.

Mr. Nowak's first question, however, splits hairs over the definition of the term "natural." It is very difficult to say what is natural in our environment and what is not. I purposely left the term undefined in order to avoid debating this point. However, it is clear that there are degrees of naturalness. For example, small organic farms surrounded by woodland, with streams running through them, even if quaint and romantic are more natural than the huge monocultural wheat circles covering vast areas of the western United States. A handful of ash from burned seeds qualifies as more natural than a plastic container full of chemical solution.

Mr. Nowak's second point is also a question of semantics. He employs definitions of "good" and "better" that are based on quantitative opinion. In other words, something is "good" if it is well received by a majority, and "better" if it is liked by even more people. In disagreeing with this normative definition I only mean to suggest that there can be things, such as a certain bottle of wine, that are better than other things, without being easily recognizable as such. What ultimately allows us to recognize something as better than something else is knowledge about both things, in this case two bottles of wine. This knowledge is achieved through a process of becoming familiar with both bottles and understanding them in a sensory as

well as an intellectual way. This is not snobbery; it is a conclusion based on education, which itself is the result of hard work.

If, as Mr. Nowak suggests, a contempt for commercialization comes across in my article, it is only in the cases where commercialization is a direct result of misleading marketing. I am in no way opposed to winemakers creating a successful commercial enterprise by producing and selling a lot of wine, as long as they are producing and selling wine they believe in, rather than wine they have been told to produce because it will sell better. It is up to influential winemakers to steer the market towards better wine, and to help educate us about what is and is not good wine—not the other way around.

Mr. Nowak is correct about the methodology of science. Science does proceed by attempting to disprove, or falsify, theories. As long as a theory has not been falsified it can be maintained. However, it is erroneous to think that there is nothing more to it. Biodynamics is a perfect example of a theory that leads us to deeper questions about science. If the aim of science is to better understand the world around us both empirically and theoretically, then biodynamics, as unfalsifiable as it is, can still be considered a scientific theory. The important question is not whether biodynamics fits into a dogmatic version of reductive science, but whether theories that don't easily fit into the scientific mold can help us better understand the philosophical underpinnings of science itself.

As for the question of whether biodynamic viticulture is superior, there are many criteria regarding which practices in viticulture and oenology have better results. The debate will always be ongoing. Based

on taste, it is much easier to decide whether a given bottle of biodynamic wine is better than one that is conventionally produced. However, even if we agreed on certain criteria, they do not constitute actual proof that biodynamic wine is better. Ultimately, all we can do to decide whether biodynamic viticulture works better is to keep drinking.

## How Intangible Is Japan's Traditional Dietary Culture?

ERIC C. RATH

On March 9, 2012, Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs and its Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries announced a campaign to have the "traditional dietary culture of the Japanese" (*washoku*) listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Asset. If approved next year, *washoku* would join the ranks of the gastronomic meal of the French, traditional Mexican cuisine, gingerbread craft from Northern Croatia, and kabuki theater as representatives of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

*Washoku*, according to a press release from the Agency for Cultural Affairs, "utilizes various fresh ingredients" depending on such factors as the four seasons and the locale; has distinguishing characteristics including a "presentation style that reveals the beauty of nature"; follows a spirit of "respect for nature" that is fundamental to the Japanese people; is intimately connected with seasonal observances such as the New Year, rice planting, and harvest festivals; and has social customs that strengthen ties within families and members of a local community. The only mention of food in this brief definition is the "fresh ingredients" used to create it, suggesting the intangibility of *washoku* in more ways than one.

Evoking the Japanese "respect for nature" hints at choice ingredients and care in their harvesting or production. But it also reflects the pressing need for the Japanese government to reaffirm the safety of Japanese food internationally while providing domestic support for food production after the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster at Fukushima, which devastated agriculture and fisheries in the northeast and provoked many countries to ban the import of Japanese foodstuffs. The press release notes the urgency of Japan's UNESCO application to reassure the safety of Japan's food supply and to serve as a "symbol of Japan's recovery."

*Washoku* is often translated as "Japanese cuisine," but the Japanese government's definition indicates a broadly defined dietary culture well suited to UNESCO's designation of Intangible Culture Heritage as traditional, inclusive, representative of communities, and community based. Though paired with tradition, *washoku* and the related term "modern Japanese cuisine" (*Nihon ryōri*) are neologisms, coined in the Meiji period (1868–1912) in response to the arrival of "Western foods" (*yōshoku*) and the increased visibility of Chinese cooking in Japan. Both *wa* and *Nihon* mean "Japan." *Shoku* can refer to eating, food, and meals. *Ryōri* has similar meanings to *shoku*, designating a cuisine or referring to prepared food or cooking.

Where Japanese cuisine presents expectations of elegance, rarity, and style, traditional dietary culture, when considered more broadly than the Japanese government's definition to reflect what most of the population ate every day, was once much more monotonous, with almost all the daily calories derived from grains. From the early modern era (1600–1868) to



Above: Kyoto-style kaiseki.

PHOTOGRAPH BY TOMO YUN (WWW.YUNPHOTO.NET/EN/) © 2007

the first half of the twentieth century, 80 to 90 percent of the population derived up to 80 to 90 percent of their daily caloric intake from grains, eating at least eight bowls (approximately three cups) daily—3.5 times the quantity of rice that a typical Japanese eats today. By 1900 most Japanese ate some rice, but in rural areas especially rice was usually consumed mixed with other grains, particularly barley, but also varieties of millet. Sweet potatoes were sometimes added, or flour dumplings made from wheat, buckwheat, or even horse chestnuts and acorns were served instead. With almost all of the calories from carbohydrates, side dishes of fish or vegetables—for which Japanese cuisine is famous today—played only a small role in the “traditional” diet for most of the population. Greens or seafood were often added directly to cooked grains, not served separately.

Instead of monotony, by the government’s definition, the ingredients for *washoku* reflect local differences. Regional cuisines have received great acclaim in Japan particularly since the 1980s, but pride and commerce in local specialty goods is centuries older.

Today, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) promotes the marketing of local specialty foodstuffs to support rural communities facing aging populations and demographic decline among other economic problems. *Japan’s Tasty Secrets*, a free pamphlet in English available for download from MAFF’s Web site, promises gratification in its subtitle, *Local Food that Satisfies the World’s Most Demanding Eaters*. The pamphlet spotlights Chinese-style dumplings (*gyōza*) from Utsunomiya in Tochigi, batter-fried octopus (*takoyaki*) from Osaka, and salmon hot pot from Hokkaido, among other dishes. Yet local foods have not always been celebrated for their deliciousness. During World War II the Imperial Rule Assistance Association designated a “national food” (*kokumin shoku*) comprised of regional foods that were spotlighted not for their local flavor, but for their techniques of economizing on rice and, therefore, alleviating food shortages.

*Washoku* allows for greater inclusivity than either modern Japanese cuisine or wartime national food because it embraces values like respect

for nature that are not unique to Japan. *Washoku* offers natural, seasonal, and local foodstuffs and flair in presenting them for global appreciation rather than binding traditional food culture to expensive delicacies like choice cuts of fish for sushi. Consequently, *washoku* promises a wider perspective on cultural heritage than sushi, tempura, and sashimi—the triumvirate of modern Japanese cuisine—and the major gateways that many outside of Japan have thus far had to the nation’s dietary culture.

## Feet in 2 Worlds

JOHN RUDOLPH

People always want to know what happens behind the kitchen door in Chinese restaurants, but often they are afraid to ask. The same is true of Mexican restaurants, Indian restaurants, and many others that serve ethnic cuisine. So when a journalist who is also an immigrant tells a story about ethnic food, people are grateful to be getting inside information. If the story reveals something about the chefs and restaurant workers or those who grow the food, all the better. Never mind that in a different context those same immigrant workers would be criticized for “stealing jobs” from Americans.

In today’s food culture information about food has value, and information from people who are seen as reliable insiders is especially prized. This presents an opportunity for journalists who report for media outlets that serve immigrant communities. New York City alone has some four hundred ethnic and community newspapers. Across the country tens of millions of people rely on ethnic media as their primary source of news and information. For ethnic media reporters and editors, food journalism can be a way

to reach audiences outside of their own immigrant communities.

We started reporting on food at Feet in 2 Worlds ([news.feetintwoworlds.org](http://news.feetintwoworlds.org)) almost by accident. I created FIZW in 2004 to bring the work of immigrant journalists to public radio and the Web. Partnering with reporters and editors at ethnic newspapers in New York, Phoenix, Boston, and other cities, we focused mainly on immigration politics, along with stories about how immigrants—both legal and undocumented—were trying to find their place in American society. The food stories were always there, but they seemed too obvious to write about. There are so many cookbooks, Web sites, and articles about ethnic food, it felt wrong to devote our limited resources to such a well-covered topic when so many other issues were underreported and unknown outside of immigrant communities.

Then in June 2011 we published a podcast about a Filipino pop-up restaurant in Manhattan's East Village. The restaurant, Maharlika, had a mission to teach Filipino Americans about their heritage. One dish on the brunch menu had the provocative name "Eggs Imelda," after the late and notorious First Lady of the Philippines, Imelda Marcos. The restaurant's owner told us the dish had prompted conversations among older and younger Filipino customers about the history of the Philippines. And the podcast brought in so many new customers and increased awareness of Filipino cuisine that it helped her convert the pop-up to a permanent restaurant.

The story of Maharlika, brought to us by Cristina Pastor, a Filipino immigrant journalist based in New York, demonstrated how journalism about food can break down barriers between recent immigrants and Americans

who are removed from their immigrant roots by several generations. It is also a great way to talk about trends in immigrant communities that can't be adequately expressed through statistics or interviews with political leaders or academic experts. Regardless of how people feel about new immigrants (and many who leave comments on our Web site do not support immigrant rights), stories about ethnic food are always well received. In fact, our Maharlika podcast was so well received that our long-time radio partner, WNYC, asked us to produce a monthly podcast for their Web site, which we call Food in 2 Worlds.

In a recent contribution, "Has Migration Made a Cook out of the Haitian Male?" (<http://culture.wnyc.org/series/food-two-worlds/>), Haitian American chef and journalist Nadege Fleurimond explores how coming to the United States has affected



gender relations among Haitians. Fleurimond quotes Ronald Glemaud, a Haitian American man who was forced to cook after his divorce. “In Haiti the rule is simple: boys don’t belong in the kitchen,” he says. But, Fleurimond notes, “the stereotype of the kitchen as an exclusively female domain is changing as Haitian men find themselves immersed in American culture.” Today, Ronald’s friends regularly call on him for recipes and cooking advice. To highlight the point, Fleurimond ends her report with Ronald’s recipe for Red Snapper in Créole Sauce.

Interest in ethnic food has also allowed Feet in 2 Worlds to expand beyond journalism. In the winter of 2012, we began offering food tours of Jackson Heights and Astoria, two neighborhoods in Queens, New York, that are among the nation’s most culturally diverse communities. Working with a small tour company, Streetwise New York (<http://streetwisenewyork.com/foodtours.html>), and cookbook author Kathy Gunst, we created tours that feature great flavors in food often served by street vendors, as well as untold stories of immigrant New York. In Jackson Heights the tour visits the *Mi Mexico Lindo* taco cart that employs twelve people, all women. The owner, also a woman, has been able to buy a house and send her daughter to college with the money she made selling tacos under the elevated subway on Roosevelt Avenue. Tour-goers are enticed by the tacos filled with savory meats, including pulled pork and crispy pig’s ear. They leave with a deeper understanding of the contributions immigrants are making to the local economy as well as the challenges they face in their daily lives.

Americans are engaged in an intense and polarizing debate over



Above: *Mi Mexico Lindo* taco cart owner Mirna Arnone.

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the role of immigrants in our society. Food journalism will not settle this issue. However, stories about food can help to humanize immigrants who are often presented as stereotypes by the media and politicians. Immigrant journalists are uniquely positioned to tell these stories, and they also have a vital role to play in the conversation about the nation’s immigration laws and policies. Feet in 2 Worlds has helped dozens of immigrant journalists break into the mainstream. And for a growing number of these reporters and editors, stories about food are an important step in getting their voices heard by a wider audience on public radio and the Web.

## New Master’s Degree in Food Design

The Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium, in partnership with the Centre International de Recherche sur les Pratiques de Création, announces a new Master’s degree in Food Design. This multi-disciplinary program is designed for students interested in cuisine, art, and design. Instructors include chefs, designers, artists, food stylists, and scientists. For more information see <http://food-design.arba-esa.be>, or contact Françoise Laskar at [f.laskar@arba-esa.be](mailto:f.laskar@arba-esa.be).

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