

A Feast for the Full Flavor of Our Lives

by Jean Houston

*I should tell you that I am a cook. I have always been a cook. In fact, cooking is really the only craft I do well. I've even thought of writing a book called *Philosopher in the Kitchen* with chapter headings like "The Metaphysics of Crunch," or "The Ontology of Taste." But I gave it up, for truth to tell, all philosophy is already inherent in the splendors of cuisine.*

In ancient times people would burn the most succulent foods on the altars of the gods or, as in Bali, prepare an elaborate offering of beautiful food so that the divine beings might savor the tastes and aromas of these riches and declare us worthy of their favor. Relishing the many tastes and textures of our mature lives, we too can be the offering, a feast for the gods, sustaining and nourishing the divine within us. This is perhaps one of the richest mysteries there is.

A Sufi spiritual exercise offers a meditation on becoming divine food. To begin, you concentrate on your eyes, and as you do so, you also become aware that God is looking at you and you know yourself as good seeing. Then you focus on your ears and know yourself to be good hearing. Then you meditate on touch, and then on smell, and finally on taste and know that God finds you to be good smelling, good touching and good tasting. Finally, you are consumed by God, and become part of God's body.

To nourish is to be deeply nourished; to savor is to be deeply savored. We come to understand and call forth the beauty of the world wherever we may find it. The world has suffered much in the last few centuries from those who directed their appreciation only to goals and not to the enjoyment of what was met on the way. In maturity we finally have enough ingredients to celebrate the path, and where it leads us.

I invite you to a feast that embraces the full flavor of our lives, relishing the tastes--both simple and complex--that feed us. Such a banquet is also an initiation, a preparation for a life of true service, to the Earth, to all sentient beings and, yes, even to the gods. So Bon Appetit, and let us begin!

A special guest is present in the background, Herr Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, himself a devoted gourmet, whose music now will feed our souls as we feast our bodies. First let me give you something to drink, something bubbly to launch the appetizers, little epiphanies of taste. Do you like champagne? Then let me pour you a glass of Veuve Cliquot, a dry, witty, cleansing quaff. And for you nondrinkers, Pellegrino water from Italy with its bright effervescence that surprises the palate without attacking it.

And now for my first course, L'Horloge Gastronomique, the gastronomic clock. Here, for each of you, is a large plate with the numbers of the clock inscribed in roman numerals around the edge. At each number I've placed what the French call an *amuse gueule*, a small but provocative portion of pure delight. Mine are meant to take you on a journey, an opening processional of the feast of maturity.

At one o'clock I invite you to eat a baby artichoke heart, flattened to look like a sunflower and sauteed till golden brown in olive oil and garlic. It is a sunny morsel, a wake-up call for the taste buds, an invitation to a heightened state of awareness. This little burst of "Yes!" is newness incarnate, and in it we recall our own beginnings.

From the time I was three years old, the only thing I ever wanted for Christmas was a stove. I would climb up on the department store Santa's knee, and just as he began his mantram, "And what do you want for Ch..." I would interrupt with "A stove, Santa," and then hop down and bounce away. When Santa complied on Christmas morning, I was in ecstasy. Here was destiny realized. Little Mozart had his piano, little Picasso his brushes and paints, and I had my stove.

Destiny had to be deferred, however, as my father had found a bargain in children's stoves, one with DC current. I carefully prepared the batter for sugar cookies, plugged the cord of my stove into the AC socket, and before you could say "Julia Child," watched my dream destroyed in a sorry spectacle of smoke and seared wires. The following year, a similar scene repeated itself, and with the same curl-

ing smoke and acrid smell I had come to dread. This time my mother came to the rescue. “Never mind, Jeanie. We’ll make the cookies on the regular stove.” And from that moment on, the kitchen became the center of my household activities.

As I grew taller, my head slowly rising above the level of the burners, I took on more and more of the preparation of the family’s meals. Comic books were supplanted by cookbooks, and soon I began my ritual, continued to this day, of reading recipes while eating my morning Wheaties. I must explain that as an infant I went from mother’s milk to Wheaties, largely skipping the pabulum stage. Thus I am constituted by Wheaties, eschew all attempts at Granola, or bacon and eggs, and regard the morning reading of cookbooks and culinary magazines while eating Wheaties as sacrosanct. Because I am a gustatory thinker, I can read almost any recipe and taste its flavors within the prima materia of the Wheaties. Thus my breakfasts are extravagant feasts, the Wheaties transformed into Ballottine of Duck stuffed with pistachios and truffles. An Indian lamb curry of Rajahstan, spiced with fenugreek, cardoman, black mustard seeds, and pickled lemons fills the bowl, where anyone else would see only the familiar brown flakes floating in milk. I arise from table sated with the cuisines of many lands and planning my evening meal from the recipes which I have so richly savored. (A sad, late note: Wheaties has just been “improved” and toasted into paper. It has lost the qualities of resonance that made it so absorbing of imaginal feasts. Thus I am experimenting with Cheerios.)

Have a sip of whatever you are drinking and try my offering at **two o’clock**. It is an unctuous morsel of graavlox cured in pepper-flavored vodka with lemon juice added, sitting in a sweet mustard seed-dill sauce. Graavlox is salmon, cured, not cooked; its essence is not changed--merely deepened by spirits. It is met by the spice of adventure, for mustard seeds have long been carried in travelers’ pockets as a protective talisman. And, of course, as that great compendium of recipes, the Bible, tells us, if you but have the faith of a grain of mustard seed, you can do most anything.

Salmon is a holy fish, a storied fish; to Celtic folk it is always associated with wisdom. And why not, for a salmon will always find its way. Spawned in fresh inland waters, it follows streams and rivers into the salty ocean, there to live out its adult life, until finally, pulled by a call it must heed, it swims immense distances, leaping falls and cascades, to come home to the place it began. Maturity knows the eternal return--its risks and waterfalls, its sureties and comforts. Life fractally repeats itself, and this cyclical awareness, more than anything else gives wisdom and remembrance.

Taste now what is there for you at **three o’clock**--macademia nuts. A macademia nut is everything that a nut would be if it could grow up to perfection. The hardest nut to crack in the world, the fact that it is accessible to us at all symbolizes that nothing is impossible. Bite into it now and notice how this salty, gnarled, but golden stalwart of Hawaii is so totally itself, so possessed of its own macadamiaity. When crushed between our teeth, it is not vanquished, but gives of its essence, of its utter suchness, awakening the temples of our mind. In its generous, abundant, compassionate richness, it reminds us of the treasures of our own life, our talents and skills.

What does it take to crack us open and discover that our inner treasure is already fully formed? Within a protective coating of ego is a kernel of glory. Do but the work of stripping away, and it is there to be found. We are all already enlightened, say certain schools of Buddhist thought. Only peel away the shell of delusions, crack the bark of defenses, and discover yourself to be a full being, rich, compassionate, complete. And now in this feast of maturity, you are worthy of being macademia, ready to give utterly of yourself and to make perfection in large and small ways wherever you go.

Now let us consider what we find at **four o’clock**. At this hour we move from the solitary splendor of the individual to a more social reality that speaks to the meeting of cultures. For here we have Chicken Sun-Dried Tomato Spring Rolls. Soak two ounces of bean thread noodles in warm water and squeeze out the moisture. Then combine cooked chicken strips with salt, pepper, olive oil, marjoram, chives, and sun-dried tomatoes--a classical Italian mixture. Sun-dried tomatoes, memory and desire,

earth-bound, sun-kissed, crossed into something ethereal. Add the noodles and let the mixture meld for an hour.

Then dip a Vietnamese rice paper round in water to soften. Place the chicken and sun-dried tomato and olive oil mixture on the rice paper and roll it up. Heat peanut oil and fry. Spring rolls extraordinaire. Bean threads, rice paper, the ancient seeds of Eastern life, encased in and encasing what is essentially an Italian reality. When you bite into it, can you imagine what that does to your brain/mind system? Does it throw it out of kilter? Does it blow open the old categories? Does it spin the mind out of its usual culinary track? Born of a marriage between Vietnam and Italy, this is the movement toward planetary culture in two bites. Politicians may fret, fundamentalists may fume, but it is too late; multiculturalism has found its way into the mouth, and there is no turning back. The food of fusion changes the very way our mind and brain functions, lends them a planetary wisdom born from different soils, different realities. Swallow this dish and you are no longer culturally innocent. You have tasted a mature society that embraces the harvest of many cultures, many lands. In cuisine is the key to a meta-democracy, the lineaments of which we do not yet know, but the taste of which we begin to fathom.

I learned culinary politics firsthand by my ninth year, doing most of the cooking for my hybrid family. This required at least four burners going full blast. In one pot the flavors of Italian tomatoes, meat, and garlic melded into sauce to serve on pasta for my mother and her relatives, while in two others, chicken-fried steak and hush puppies sizzled for my Dad, who couldn't abide the taste of garlic. But always there was the burner which I thought of as my very own, the one on which I would cook my own particular food, sometimes a mixture of the two cuisines, ending up with something like hush puppy polenta balls steamed in chicken fried steak tomato sauce. Gradually my concoctions assumed their own distinctiveness, a youthful fractal of the latest in the crosscultural dishes offered by today's cutting edge chefs. I was generally the only taker for the fourth dish, my early attempt at fusion food. Thus began my complex, and some would say, surreal relation to cooking.

At five o'clock we return to basics. Here we scoop up with a bit of Lavash--the crisp flat bread of the Middle East--a potent amalgam known as Peasant Caviar. It is eggplant, charred over a fire until soft, its blackened skins peeled away, and the creamy flesh chopped up with onions, garlic, olive oil, lemon juice, and a bit of dill. One taste and one remembers things one never knew, caravans in the night and the footfall of camels, men drumming and singing in the fire light a verse of Rumi about his finding of the Beloved:

The result is not more than these three words:

I got burnt and burnt and burnt.

The eggplant's bitterness is taken by the burning and in its place is a smoky afterglow. This process is germane to the human condition, for we have all been burned, and if not destroyed, then like the eggplant we are rendered vulnerable, available to a new appreciation of the simple givens of life--onion, garlic, olive oil--the hand of a child, the smile of a friend, the wonder at the dawn.

At six o'clock, we reach the half-way point on the gastronomic clock, and we renew ourselves with a tiny hillock of mango sorbet held in an icy silver cup. It is the taste of refreshment--pure but with many latitudes. In 600 B.C. a special mango grove was presented to Buddha as a quiet place for his meditation. A place of reflection, mango sorbet is a precious moment in time, reminding us of our need for solitude, an interval each day, sacred and inviolable, when we may reflect and clarify. Icy yet sensual at the same moment, mango sorbet is a paradox that resolves our own. Go too long in the steamy succulence of life without an interval of purification, and one becomes cynical and sated. Receive it now, and as it melts, a tiny chime in consciousness sounds a pure call to wake up.

Seven o'clock is luxurious, an evening fete of diamonds and sybaritic pleasures, dining at the court of the czars in the grand old days before the revolution. A purse of caviar--not just any caviar, but gray, translucent pearls of Beluga, eggs fitted together like molecules, the DNA of the sea. They sit

on a small dollop of sour cream and chives and are wrapped in a tender, almost translucent crepe like a membrane of consciousness. One bite and the shadow of your knowing awakens as memories of ancient waters or Earth in space. You do not chew, but press it on the roof of your mouth like a holy word, where it explodes like the outsparkings of a trodden star.

At eight o'clock you get down and dirty, stomping in the red earth of the southwest. A little corn cake, about the size of a silver dollar, with a green smear of guacamole and a touch of chipotle salsa, and don't miss the garnish of cilantro. This is goddess food, Corn Mother food, the mothering gift of this continent. Navajo, Hopi, Zuni--they knew--corn is queen and for these folk, the eating of it is a conscious, celebratory, devotional act. Taste corn and be enlivened. Dip it in salsa, and your crown chakra blows open. You are illumined in more ways than one. The brain says, "There's a fire down there!" and sends in endorphins, a cascade of pleasure streamings. You get high on it, this dark food that brings you to light; it is shaman food, nearly psychedelic. This maize and its dark and peppery companion becomes a maze food. Something is chasing you through the labyrinth, the fabled minotaur, perhaps, but when you turn around, you find it is yourself. Freed now from insubstantial fears, the inner teacher comes forward, a dancing Kachina, eagle-headed, conferring Earth power and sky sentience.

A simple and needed perfection resides at **nine o'clock**, seedless red grapes. Little circular spheres that look like Mars, they are serendipity, happy chance. Englobed and nubile, ready to burst, grapes pop in your mouth, a sparkling wonder, the inner life of rubies. These are thirst-quenching and perfect, like a sunset on a mountain. Grapes have hidden colors, pure joy with a hint of sour--life as it is supposed to be. A joie de vivre about them, but mutability too, turning into wine or vinegar as you choose. A dancing kind of food, Janus-like, facing both the sour and the sublime.

At ten o'clock, a curl of prosciutto of Parma shaped into a rose. This is poetry in flesh, a buttery, blushing meat. There is an innocence about it, perhaps because until this moment, it is untouched and air-cured. That so feminine, sensuous, and silky a taste comes from the pig is no surprise. From Borneo to Ireland, pigs are holy creatures, always knowing where to find Earth's hidden treasures, and with knowledge of the underworld too. When choosing a totem, goddesses stand in line, hoping to be selected by the Great Sow.

But now, enjoy it, this succulence softened beyond its own excellence. How did it happen? Like coal transmutes to diamond from the pressure of the Earth, prosciutto is pressed until it becomes a dense jewel of flesh. This is familiar, yes? Our lives at maturity are compacted of everything we have ever experienced, everyone we have ever known. We are wisdom compressed into a core of excellence that, like prosciutto, is smooth, supple, protean, able to take on any shape.

Eleven o'clock presents us with a variety of olives, roasted in thyme, sage, olive oil. Olives are the gift of Athena. I wish I could take you to Her groves, the ones extending twelve miles to the sea from the Tholos, her circular temple at Delphi. Olives are the ambassadors of peace and possibility, their leaves crown those who have surpassed themselves. As you eat an olive, note how you are encompassed by the experience. It is so assertive that you cannot ignore it, for it has been cured, but still retains an integrity of flavor that is dimensional to itself.

Olive trees live forever, well, a thousand years or so. Nicoise, Kalamata, Gaeta, wrinkled old Sicilian, from green to brown to purple to black, salt-packed, oil-logged, or steeped in a briny, acerbic bath, their taste is like all the tears you have ever shed, tears that have tenderized you. They remind us of the healing that takes place between generations. One thinks of the end of Shakespeare's play of over-ripe maturity, when King Lear and his daughter Cordelia come together, and he reaches out to touch her cheek and asks, "Be your tears wet?" After being so maddened and so humbled, he cannot believe that somebody will weep for him. Is he dead, he wonders, and in heaven, and this lovely girl an angel? When he realizes that she is his beloved daughter Cordelia from whom he has been desperately estranged, he

reaches out and tastes her salty tears. I speak of this, for the olive is the Lear of trees. Gnarled by the elements, tortured and wind-tossed, withstanding time and change, its fruit at first bitter and then forgiving. . . .”When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down, and ask of thee forgiveness. So we’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at gilded butterflies. . .and take upon’s the mystery of things, as if we were God’s spies.”

We have come to the **final hour** of L’Horloge Gastronomique, and for it I have chosen a marriage of many flavors in one. Thus, at twelve o’clock, I offer you a tiny box of phyllo dough containing within curried coconut shrimp with a touch of coriander. Here at the place of the end, we have also returned to the beginning, for spices act as a melding of ancient wisdom and new beginnings. Curry is an evolved melange of spice, containing all previous evolutionary levels, and shrimp, a density of protein, is a paradox of the tender and the firm. These two, shell-encased, shrimp walking on the bottom of the sea and coconut heady at the top of a tree, come together, both eminently crackable. So like a human head, coconut is, with eyes to boot, and therapeutic too. Hawaiian kahunas tell us that wearing half a coconut on your head, wrapped around with a white cloth, relieves head pain. At the same time, coconut draws out the pain of life, evoking spirituality, psychic awareness, purification. Together with shrimp and spice, coconut restores our wonder, for often at maturity our enthusiasm begs to be renewed. Thus this delicate piece of “Oh, Wow!” enclosed in phyllo, a dough stretched tissue-thin and folded with butter, a luscious crackle, an archaeology to the tooth.

–from *A Mythic Life*, by Jean Houston