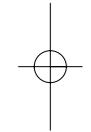
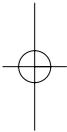


Appetizers

Food in Culture & Society



1

Epicurus, the Foodies' Philosopher

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“How could you be so interested in food when half the world is starving!” The silliness of such a criticism presumably sticks out more these days. But the apparent self-contradiction was less obvious back in March 1984, when epicurean interests were relatively written off. Scholars might respectably devote themselves to the economics of sugar production, the genetics of pig breeding, the nutritional measurement of populations, the ethnography of gatherer-hunters, and the politics of Third World hunger, but not stray towards meals as such, and certainly not the pleasure of their own stomachs.

The criticism was made at a lively dinner party, and the host specifically challenged my organizing of the First Symposium of Australian Gastronomy a few days later. Her objection only unlocked further fervor. We needed more food talk, not less. We could discuss both dinner parties and Third World hunger. We needed our conference. In the event, the two days of gastronomy and gourmandise brilliantly confirmed Brillat-Savarin's advice that such gatherings should combine food theory and practice. With the participation even of a couple of gastronomically inclined academic philosophers, we had begun confronting the mystery of meals.

Exhilarated, I resolved to take the question into the enemy camp, as it were. I would undertake a PhD to understand the intellectual embarrassment at our own dining. Indisputably, our existence depended on meals. We spent much time at, preparing, or paying for them. They connected people with one another, even across the oceans, and with the natural world. So why was the table scorned, and especially the enjoyment of it?

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The first finding was, of course, that the intellectual disdain was far from universal, and also softening. Some sharp London journalists, led by renegade philosopher Paul Levy, had already used the word 'foodie' in *Harpers & Queen* in August, 1982, even if the "new sect which elevates all food to a sacrament" was so tiny that all the foodies knew each other. Within academia, too, some well-credentialed thinkers were already working in the area. Following anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the then fashionable structuralists dressed up meals as 'culinary triangles', 'binary oppositions,' and 'grammars', an approach soon rivaled by more materialist scholars such as K. C. Chang and colleagues, Jack Goody, Sidney Mintz, Marvin Harris, and some of the French historians identified with the *Annales* school. The first significant academic journal in the area, *Food & Foodways*, would appear in 1985.

In wider reading, I looked into the ancient Greek philosopher, Epicurus, whose name had been appropriated for epicureanism as either irreligion and debauchery or, more positively, the display of refined sensibilities. Modern interpreters pooh-pooed any suggestion of the allegedly ascetic Epicurus' own lower-case 'e' epicureanism. However, I was forcibly struck that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, Epicurus announced that he had based his philosophical system on the 'pleasure of the stomach.' The more I investigated his system, the more I became convinced that here was the foodies' long-neglected philosopher, still suffering from the strictures of the much too high-minded academic tradition. Soon I had persuaded a few fellow foodies to restore the Epicurean tradition of monthly philosophical banquets in Adelaide, South Australia. Once we adopted a relatively formal structure of someone delivering a paper, before dining and general conversation, these events seemed appropriately to honor Epicurus' memory, and his request that such dinners should continue. More than two decades of further study and experience have only confirmed the correspondences between Epicureanism and epicureanism. Both value the material world, the senses, empiricism over ideology, pleasure within limits, friendship, and celebratory dinners.

Within recent Anglophone culture, foodies have not always represented a reputable philosophical position. They have not always articulated a political, theological, economic, or other framework. They have remained largely besotted with gastronomic consumerism. Yet



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serious food scholarship has been multiplying, including within philosophy. With more recognition, the epicurean conversation has begun extending from its natural home, the table, to take on the world. Especially when coming *from* meals, rather than *to* them, so to speak, thinking foodies can usefully develop Epicurus' big picture, which is astonishingly consonant with a modern liberal's. This chapter urges food philosophers to embrace their hero.

'The Garden'

Epicurus is thought to have been born on the island of Samos in 341 BCE. He studied and worked in other centers before settling in Athens in 308 BCE, dying there about 270 BCE. He arrived relatively late among the ancient Greek philosophers, implicitly developing and responding to Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, and others. He established a school called the Garden, because the community grew food on the outskirts of the city. The group studied, published, and slept and ate in a nearby house within the city wall in a respectable district known as Melite. While Epicurus was something of a cult leader, the school was known for egalitarian attitudes toward women and slave members. Two centuries after Epicurus, Cicero was impressed that the house still "maintained a whole company of friends, united by the closest sympathy and affection."

Epicurus sought to provide answers to all worries, and his system is generally accepted as both wide-ranging and internally consistent. His scientific theories included convincing versions of atomic physics and natural and social evolution. He took an empirical approach to knowledge, requiring not merely observation, but tentativeness. His moral system took off from his hedonism – so that right and wrong did not come from on high, but proved themselves by the everyday contentment they produced. He was a deist in that his gods were not concerned with human affairs. His numerous related insights included the ubiquity of limits, so that death was an end, and therefore "nothing to us." The quest for wealth and power was especially fruitless, and likely to bring inconvenience rather than happiness, so that he recommended the security of living unknown.



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His attempted social revolution, upsetting prevailing structures of both thought and relationships, spread widely through the Roman Empire, with numerous Epicurean groups being mentioned and writers identifying with the ideas. The New Testament preserves hostile references to the belly worshippers, and the movement eventually suffered at the hands of Christian authorities, so that all Epicurus' numerous books are now lost. Historians piece his scheme together from fragments, classical commentaries, and the surviving works of followers, notably the scientific poet, Lucretius. Epicurus retained influence within the Western tradition, especially during the intellectual revolutions leading up to, and including, the Enlightenment. His name also became associated, socially and politically, with liberalism.¹

So much is generally accepted, and is sufficient for Epicurus to be considered as a serious, materialist philosopher not without interest, although not nearly of the same rank as Plato and Aristotle. But perhaps he has been relatively underestimated because his ideas emerged from meals.

The Meal at Yport, 1886

Epicurus gave pointers for reassurance during periods of personal crisis. According to an abridgement once widely known as the "Fourfold remedy," and as recorded by Philodemus of Gadara (and translated by Gilbert Murray), a person should never forget:

Nothing to fear in God.
Nothing to feel in Death.
Good can be attained.
Evil can be endured.

For another quick impression, which sets such advice within a wider philosophy, modern interpreter John Gaskin opens his collection of ancient writings, *The Epicurean Philosophers* (1995), with a summary:

All that is real in the universe is an infinity of void space, and an infinity of primary particles in random and everlasting motion. Such is the physics of Epicurus.



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The ethics have a like simplicity: all that is needed for human happiness is a life among friends, a body free of pain, and a mind free from fear and anxiety.²

Note the lack of any direct reference to food in either of these thumbnail sketches. Nonetheless, for a third encapsulation, consider the picture on the cover of Gaskin's modest paperback. The oil painting shows a dreamy meal under an apple tree in the French countryside in the late nineteenth century. Dappled sunlight catches nine or ten guests with glasses of red wine in their hands. The long white tablecloth is scattered with decanters, bottles, plates, bowls, cutlery, and a large joint (possibly a roast turkey), and a young girl leans on the table, having just picked Flanders poppies and daisies. The cover uses a detail (about one-third, eliminating the bride and groom) of Albert Auguste Fourié's painting, *The Wedding Meal at Yport* (ca. 1886).

The book designer might well have made a snap choice of cover, improving the composition of a not entirely distinguished artwork. And yet the private, restful meal seems to encapsulate Epicurean philosophy, or at least its sensibility, more accurately than a sculpture of Epicurus' head, which is often used in books as if to indicate a great mind. While, in common with other scholars, Gaskin fails to make clear the centrality of the table, I like to think that the book designer glanced at Gaskin's two succinct paragraphs, speaking of friendship and happiness caught in nature's swirl, and intuitively recognized that Epicurus based his philosophy on meals.

The ancient scheme – interweaving ideas about the natural world, the reliability of knowledge, and the anxieties of everyday life with practical recommendations – was not only taught around the table, but, I propose, had also been discovered there. Epicurus made one or two direct and many indirect references to this. He was known at the time as the belly-centered philosopher. All circumstantial evidence of his method and his findings confirms that Epicurus used his eyes, ears, nose, and feelings of anxiety and repose to observe the world, and then communicated results to companions for further discussion. Confronting the conventional scholarly prejudice, foodies need to know that a table under an apple tree, well-disposed guests, food, drink, and conversation have long provided solid foundations for a successful worldview.

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The Age-Old Calumnies

Belonging to the next generation of Athenian philosophers, Chrysippus said that Epicurus followed in the steps of Archestratus, a scholarly gourmet (after whom Alain Senderens's great Parisian restaurant L'Archestrate was named in the 1970s), who traveled the ancient world in search of the delights of the belly, recording his findings in a lost text. In another characterization by a close contemporary, Damoxenus has a cook in his comedy *Foster Brothers* boast that he had studied at the Garden, explaining that Epicurus was a very good cook, because he learnt from nature. The later Roman poet Juvenal spoke of "cultivating one's kitchen-garden, like Epicurus." In other words, Epicurus was viewed in ancient times as a gardener, cook, and cookery writer, not only as an influential teacher.

Whatever his precise practical skills, Epicurus should certainly not be denied any love of food, despite recent scholars' attempts. More than two thousand years after Epicurus, Karl Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation in praise of this "greatest representative" of the Greek Enlightenment. Marx was particularly impressed by Epicurus' concept of the atomic swerve, which seemed like a universal motor of change that might even explain something like free will. Marx was yet to escape Hegelian idealism in favor of materialism, and so denied the importance of meals for the ancient system, concluding: "The principle of Epicurean philosophy is not the *gastrology* of *Archestratus* as *Chrysippus* believes, but the absoluteness and freedom of self-consciousness – even if self-consciousness is only conceived in the form of individuality."³

Twentieth-century scholars produced sporadic translations, introductions, and analyses of Epicurean physics, ideas of the gods, hedonism, and so on, and in every case either clearly distinguished Epicurus from lower-case epicureanism or just ignored the possibility. After recording 20 explicit denials, I gave up keeping a list, but to cite an influential student early in the century, Cyril Bailey claimed that the original Epicureans ate "nothing but bread as a rule with the occasional addition of a relish." This for him was well "removed from the living of an 'epicure'." Similarly, Epicurus "was no Epicurean sensualist," John McDade explained in his



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introduction to a more recent, gift-book version of Epicurus' "Letter to Menoeceus," retitled *Letter on Happiness*. "The use of the term 'Epicurean' in the English language to mean 'out-and-out hedonist' is, then, both unfortunate and mistaken."⁴

Those endeavoring to redeem Epicurus have rarely questioned the authenticity of his statement: "The beginning and root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach; even wisdom and culture must be referred to this." Surely this alone is clear confirmation of the importance of meals for the philosopher. The ancient compiler of gastronomic sources, Athenaeus, included the quotation along with another from Epicurus' collaborator, Metrodorus, who wrote to his brother: "Yes, Timocrates, devoted to the study of nature as you are, it is indeed the belly, the belly and nothing else, which any philosophy that proceeds according to nature makes its whole concern."⁵

Escaping from such evidence has required scholarly contortions. Two-thirds of the way through a relatively thorough textbook, J. M. Rist revealed: "We are now at the point where we can consider one of Epicurus' most notorious sayings, which has come down to us from many ancient sources and has been much misunderstood." When Epicurus said that the beginning and root of all good was the pleasure of the stomach, this was "paradoxical," and "exaggerated by the Epicureans themselves for polemical reasons." Epicurus meant "not that eating is fun, but that the beginning and root of all good is not to be hungry and not to be thirsty." So, according to Rist, Epicurus recognized the necessity of eating and drinking, and that was that.⁶

While Epicurus certainly recommended a simple life, everything had its limits. "Frugality too has a limit, and the man who disregards it is in like case with him who errs through excess." He left such other morsels as: "those have the sweetest pleasure in luxury who least need it." The important thing was not to become a slave to desire: "We think highly of frugality not that we may always keep to a cheap and simple diet, but that we may be free from desire regarding it." As he also explained: "Most men fear frugality and through their fear are led to actions most likely to produce fear."⁷

The most emblematic activity of the original Epicureans became their banquets on the twentieth of the Greek month. The banquets were sufficiently distinctive to warrant a lost book by the

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Cynic satirist Menippus, and for Epicureans to gain the nickname *eikadistae*, 'Twentyers.' A partly obliterated text from the later Epicurean, Philodemus, suggested that Epicurus' custom was to "celebrate this feast of the 20th with distinguished companions after decorating the house with the fruits of the season and inviting everyone to feast themselves." The head of the Academy in the second century BCE, Carneades, reproached Epicurus for having wasted time anticipating and recollecting pleasures, and for keeping a gastronomic record, as if in an official journal, on "how often I had a meeting with Hedeia or Leontion," or "where I drank Thasian wine," or "what twentieth of the month I had the most sumptuous dinner."⁸

Epicurus upheld the value of companionship, and one of his principal doctrines was that "Of all the things which wisdom acquires to produce the blessedness of the complete life, far the greatest is the possession of friendship." He presumably recognized that friendships were formed and maintained at meals, and that collaborators were additionally helpful with the tasks of food production and preparation. According to Seneca, Epicurus considered with whom was more important than what one ate. He advised: "You must reflect carefully beforehand with whom you are to eat and drink, rather than what you are to eat and drink. For a dinner of meats without the company of a friend is like the life of a lion or a wolf."⁹

Epicurus observed that some people wanted to become famous and conspicuous, thinking they would thus win safety from others. Instead, people were trapped by their own celebrity and power; they lost their freedom. Epicurus saw greater rewards in seclusion, extolling the "immunity which results from a quiet life and the retirement from the world." With advice to escape the "prison of affairs and politics," he offered the simple injunction: "Live unknown." Yet this did not stop him founding a highly successful missionary movement. Epicurus and members of his school published many books and letters, although their main method of communication would seem to have been across the dinner table. Living unknown surely meant reserving socializing largely to private meals. The networking power of conviviality is how I interpret one of his so-called Vatican Sayings: "Friendship goes dancing round the world proclaiming to us all to awake to the praises of a happy life."¹⁰



*Epicurus, the Foodies' Philosopher***The Gastronomic Default**

Leaving Epicurus aside for the moment, and relying on minimal observations, what might foodies believe? If they started thinking at the table, where might it lead? What might diners at the *Meal at Yport* decide about the world, or at least what might those who identify with the dappled tableau work out?

Experience would probably teach attentive diners that good food in good company can be immensely satisfying. They can feel at one with the world. This is what life is all about, they might reflect, even if only rhetorically. They might also learn the benefits of moderation, given that over-indulgence brings discomfort. In confronting the stomach's definite limit, they might contrast this with the endless fantasies of more figurative forms of greed, especially for wealth and power. Such prandial discoveries are at least plausible.

Quickly tiring of dining alone, gourmands would come to treasure companionship. Not only is friendship both pleasant and necessary, but it is typically maintained at the table. We often make and keep friends by sharing meals. There is no great loss, and much good humor, in serving others first, in looking after your neighbor. Hosts can positively glow with generosity. That is, on a social level, foodies seek out companionship and manage it using unstarched guidelines, a sensible etiquette that adds up to a view of ethics. Supplying the table necessitates social mechanisms, too, so that not only potluck dinners demonstrate that the ostensibly selfish needs of the stomach are most effectively served communally.

At some ontological level, observant gourmets might be humbled by nature – by white peaches, by champagne, and, more generally, by season, *terroir*, and careful cultivation. Reflecting that the roast turkey (or whatever awaits on the Yport table) was only recently gobbling, they might detect a gobble-and-be-gobbled world. Nature is not so much dog-eat-dog, but layered and interdependent. In this metabolic universe, the sunlight makes the wheat grow, and the seed turn into bread, while the poultry finds missed and spilled grain, before being sacrificed, and so on. Thoughtful diners might decide that ecological cycles conserve matter, which supports some idea about the indestructibility of primary particles. Diners might also sniff out, literally by olfactory means, some notion of atoms.



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Attentive diners have probably already found themselves learning through observation, satisfaction, and conversation rather than through ideologies and dogmas, and are not overawed by political and religious authority, preferring reclusive reassurances. Through their gardening, purchasing, cooking, and sharing, serious foodies have developed a workable understanding of the world, a broad set of findings, encompassing much, and all connected through the table.

This somewhat systematic set of viewpoints, which might be termed the foodie or epicurean default, would be relatively culturally independent, given that every individual confronts the same demands of hunger, collectively met within the one metabolic universe, and teaching elementary ideas about moderation, the golden rule, and so on. These table-top tenets mesh noticeably with those of Epicurus and also of many other meal-oriented commentators before and since.

Accordingly, in praise of gastronomic simplicity, Epicurus wrote to an unknown recipient: "Send me some preserved cheese, that when I like I may have a feast."¹¹ Being satisfied by a piece of cheese has been said to prove that Epicurus was not an epicure. On the contrary, the same request has been recorded by any number of unquestioned foodies. The inventor of 'aristology' (study of dining), Thomas Walker, wrote in his weekly London newspaper, *The Original*, in 1835: "Some good bread and cheese, and a jug of ale, comfortably set before me, and heartily given, are heaven on earth." As a more recent example, the culinary theologian Robert Farrar Capon praised "the plainest things in the world, prepared with care and relished for what they are." A good cheese, he wrote in *The Supper of the Lamb* in 1969, might "recall man to the humbleness of his grandeur and the greatness of his low estate . . . May you be spared long enough to know at least one long evening of old friends, dark bread, good wine, and strong cheese."

The various types of belly worshippers have been vilified in much the same ways. Epicurus defended his own epicurean tendencies in the "Letter to Menoeceus":

When, therefore, we maintain that pleasure is the end, we do not mean the pleasures of profligates and those that consist in sensuality, as is supposed by some who are either ignorant or disagree with us or do not understand, . . . For it is not continuous drinkings and revellings,



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nor the satisfaction of lusts, nor the enjoyment of . . . luxuries of the wealthy table, which produce a pleasant life, but sober reasoning, searching out the motives for all choice and avoidance.¹²

That unquestioned gastronomer, Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, made much the same defense in a prefatory "Transition," strangely included towards the end of *The Physiology of Taste* in 1825, going on to explain the root of such misrepresentation:

This equivocation has been instigated by intolerant moralists who, led astray by their extravagant zeal, have pleased themselves to find excess where there was but an intelligent enjoyment of the earth's treasures, which were not given to us to be trampled underfoot.¹³

E/epicureans have long had to confront a deep-seated antagonism within high Western culture. This is what I sought to understand in my PhD research, helped by my discovery of Epicurus and his gastronomic hedonism, and further investigations of the entrenched philosophical antipathy from idealists. Epicurus was a definitively materialist philosopher, another of his Vatican Sayings advising: "We must not violate nature, but obey her."¹⁴ Likewise, the foodies' preoccupation with physical reality makes it hard for them to escape the charge. It was no coincidence that the eventual arch-materialist Marx retained his early sympathy for Epicurus. It was not surprising that many academics, in defense of high culture, looked down on the stomach. The entrenched marginalization of both Epicurus and foodies has to be understood in the context of the hostile view, especially as represented by the classical and highly influential idealism of Plato.

The Seductions of Plato

The awe-inspiring philosopher of higher things, Plato (ca. 427–ca. 347 BCE), consistently denounced any serious interest in food. His distaste was the obverse of his adulation of a supposed "world of forms." For Plato, this other world was the real one, and ours a shadowy copy. His or perhaps a follower's *Seventh Letter* provides



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a neat introduction through a contemplation of a circle. The underlying argument is that human representations of circles are always inadequate. Even the most careful drawing is never perfect. Verbal and mathematical descriptions only point to the real thing. We seem to have a closer example in our heads, given how we know, or think we know, what a circle is. However, a circle in our heads can hardly be the real circle, which seems to require some kind of metaphysical existence. Through constant debate and reflection, Plato believed, philosophers reached out for the perfect, eternal, and ultimately unattainable circle. Plato often advanced this argument, notably when beautifully analyzing love in *The Symposium*: the lover ideally abandons mere physical lust to strive for real, sublime (platonic) love.

Plato worked hard at depicting a hierarchical model of the world, where ideas were supreme. By contrast to the wonderful realm of reason, food and drink reeked of the transient, inadequate, inferior, material world of the senses, bodily pleasures, and humdrum, non-philosophical activities. Anything to do with the stomach was inferior and to be shunned. Feeding reduced people to the level of animals, and the appetites needed strict controlling. According to his often-quoted attack in the *Gorgias*, cookery masqueraded as an art, but was only a “kind of knack gained by experience . . . a knack of . . . producing gratification and pleasure,” fitting under the heading of “pandering.” Sometimes Plato’s depiction was dualistic, with the world of forms contrasted with this lower world, and sometimes tripartite. Among his recommended three social classes in the *Republic*, the upper class were philosopher-kings, the middle class their enforcers, and the lower class were preoccupied with the production and preparation of food. As another example of the three-way division, in the *Timaeus*, he observed that our head, where the soul resides, is closest to the heavens, and that the heart with its passions came above the disruptive stomach, home of the appetites, below. The soul “lifts us from earth towards our celestial affinity, like a plant whose roots are not in earth, but in the heavens,” Plato declared.¹⁵

One of the twentieth century’s most influential thinkers, sociologist Emile Durkheim, claimed to provide a scientific account of Plato’s world of forms. In the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* in 1912, Durkheim explained pure knowledge in terms of a *conscience collective* – in French, and often translated as the “collective

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consciousness.” This is any society’s shared mental pool of knowledge. That is, the perfect circle sought by Plato could be viewed as not the circle in my own head, but the circle in all our heads. Lying beyond us as individuals, it can seem more transcendent. Importantly, the world of forms emerged out of activity in this one, and post-Durkheimian social science might describe the circle as a ‘social construct.’ Children are brought up drawing circles, talking about circles, and running around in them, until they have learned what everyone might be referring to. Durkheim further stressed that the widespread and deep-seated adoption of the notion of the circle gave it a somewhat illusory solidity or social facticity, as he called it.¹⁶

Plato had been an acute observer, but had elevated circles and other archetypes to an entirely other universe, rather than recognizing their place within this one. Plato’s glorification of the philosophers’ stock-in-trade, the use of rationality in quest of sublime truths, would have been of even more cultural benefit if it had not been at the expense of this-worldly, sensual experience and immediate, practical endeavor. Plato’s arguments might have more appeal these days, too, if they were not so elitist and even authoritarian, which was Karl Popper’s charge in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1949.

Epicurus is often viewed as responding to Plato virtually point for point. He reinverted Plato’s world (as Marx would do with Hegel’s), making the opposite case at every level, physically, ethically, and epistemologically. The secret is that, for Epicurus, the belly ruled the mind, rather than vice versa. Head and stomach should perhaps work together, although materialism is hard to avoid if we believe, along with Epicurus, that philosophy has ultimately to serve practical needs. So, rather than pursue knowledge for its own sake, Epicurus wanted useful knowledge, which helped remove unnecessary personal burdens. In place of Plato’s endless striving for unattainable truths, Epicurus respected the limits to knowledge, similar to those limits that made nonsense of quests for glory and riches: “The wealth demanded by nature is both limited and easily procured; that demanded by idle imaginings stretches on to infinity.” Of immediate interest to gourmets, Epicurus up-ended Plato by distinguishing the finite hunger of the stomach from endless desires, including for new taste experiences, which he blamed on the “ungrateful greed of the soul.”¹⁷ That is, an epicurean was to obey the stomach, rather than the soul’s hunger for novelty, which would never be satisfied.

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Plato's theoretical antipathy to meals requires further study and rebuttal. Moreover, an unconscious Platonism, letting the head or culture speak louder than the stomach, has to be guarded against. Take the case of nutrition, which is ostensibly an empirical science. Yet, in listing vitamins alphanumerically, in enumerating desirable nutrient levels and in prescribing geometric pyramids, it can seem to relate health to some rational truth rather than decent meals. Even within food studies, scholars have often given too much weight to food choices as mere signs and expressions of social or cultural conditions. These include not only the structuralists' deliberate treatment of eating as a language, but also statements along the lines that the upper-crust drink champagne to demonstrate their social superiority. The deceptiveness of this approach is brought out when inverted, as if people could be said to eat gruel to show they were poor.

One defense of so-called objective idealism, as exemplified by Plato, might be that it stresses a common culture. At least the tendencies towards authoritarianism admit a genuine concern with social cohesion. Against this, Epicurus' emphasis on the individual's physical and mental wellbeing has arguably been at the expense of the commonweal. This relates to the accusation that modern foodies pursue self-interest, "when half the world is starving." One possible defense for epicureans lies along the liberal lines that all people should be left to serve their stomachs, unmolested. Furthermore, the liberal suspicion of governments can be extended to wariness about the undermining of the free market by increasingly global corporations. An argument might be made that starvation has generally been generated by organized plunder, stimulated by the drive to economic growth, rather than by leaving others to pursue their own pleasure within natural limits.

Perhaps the freedom of the individual is a worthy political demand, but it hardly explains the workings of society. A more active defense of the epicurean position might be to point out that the drive to satisfy the individual stomach is the basis for society. Most forcibly, sociologist Georg Simmel explored in a 1910 essay on "The sociology of the meal" the apparent paradox that the material selfishness of the stomach became the strongest reason for society and for the highest sentiments. Epicurus had a similar argument in mind when declaring that self-interest was a sound basis of friendship: "All



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friendship is desirable in itself, though it starts from the need of help.”¹⁸ Epicurus preferred the less formally organized, more individualistic, face-to-face kinds of social engagement that extended out from the companionship of the table. He would seem to have conceived a more networked structure of society than Plato's corporate model, with philosophers at the head. In serving their stomachs, foodies develop a firm belief in the conviviality not only of the immediate meal but also the wider society. While large-scale organizations – both public and corporate – have often promoted technological and social innovation, epicureans can point to the often superior efficiency of more informal networks operating in a street market, for example.

Epicurus set out a sensible philosophy that diners might still identify with. He belonged to the cluster of positions often known as materialist and standing over and against the anti-food, idealist philosophies, archetypically Plato's. Associating with some kind of epicurean position, foodies do not need to seem merely self-indulgent and philosophically stunted. They join well-established and noticeably liberal traditions. In a final extolling of the foodies' philosopher, the same cultural shifts that have made room for food philosophy over the past one or two decades have also made it highly relevant.

Diners Strike Back

By the 1980s, second-wave feminism had demonstrated the unsettling androcentricity of advanced Western culture, including within the academy. The global mixing of cultures had encouraged post-colonial and multicultural challenges. Popular culture became a legitimate object of study. With the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991, Marxism went right out of fashion, too. Given major reevaluations of these kinds, intellectuals showed uneasiness with any unduly ambitious or all-encompassing theoretical perspective, questioning so-called grand theory and high cultural canons. Such openness, or perhaps loss of nerve, attempted a smile as postmodernism.

On the positive side, the loosening of academic draw-strings made room for hitherto scorned or neglected topics, and disciplines with names ending in '-ology' and '-onomy' were joined by those ending with 'studies', and not just women's studies. Cultural studies shook



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up the humanities by finding value in the previously overlooked. And food studies emerged, most noticeably during the 1990s.

On the negative side, this shift came with complaints about loss of meaning, vertiginous doubt, relativism, and trivialization. If nothing were important any more, then it did not matter if an interest in food were intellectually lightweight. True, food journalists have been preoccupied with the latest ingredients and smartest restaurants, and celebrity chefs their various *trucs*. Culinary historians such as Alan Davidson – one of the original ‘foodies’ discovered by Paul Levy and colleagues – explicitly rejected more philosophical and sociological approaches. Still other scholars referred food back to more ‘important’ areas, so that meals merely appeared in the works of great novelists or demonstrated women’s social position, for example.

Yet meals can provide not merely physical but real intellectual substance. Food studies are *prima facie* far-reaching, crossing into virtually every territory. Meals are not easily sectioned off, but bring people together with other people, the wider economy, and the natural world. Finally, the thought of Epicurus demonstrates that the ‘pleasure of the stomach’ can lead, at least according to the present author, to fully-fledged natural, social, and epistemological investigations. Epicurus might have justified his philosophy as promoting personal contentment, and yet this necessitated answers to life’s big questions. A belly worshipper’s love of conviviality went dancing around the globe. Of particular relevance, Epicurus’ thought was empirically grounded in everyday experience, and so provides a response to recent tendencies towards relativism. The circle is no mere social construct, but is based in the real struggle of material existence with its wheels, pots, seasonal cycles, and so forth. Equally, his materialist epistemology stood against absolutism. His propositions are thus also timely in that postmodern intellectual openness only seemed to invite a resurgence of various fundamentalisms, starting off with claimed economic imperatives of market capitalism.

Materialist philosophies, especially that of Epicurus, can come to the aid of foodies and, conversely, the fascination with stomachs has implications for philosophy. Food philosopher Raymond Boisvert’s webpage declares his hope that “philosophers could actually begin to grasp philosophizing as a ‘human’ rather than a ‘mental’ activity.” With a reconsideration of Epicurus as an epicurean, philosophy might deepen from words about words into words about the world.



Epicurus, the Foodies' Philosopher

His gastronomically based scheme inspired many effective thinkers behind progressive shifts in Western thought – Karl Marx has been mentioned, and Thomas Jefferson might also, to name but two. The main principles developed by Epicurus have been tested by time; his atomic physics remains good; his evolutionary theories still work; his emphasis on natural limits is urgently required; his ethical suggestions make sense; he proffers distinct answers, and yet remains suitably tentative.

The attempted quarantining of Epicurus from the epicureanism that carries his name helped shield Western thought from the deeper implications of sharing meals. Far from being trivial or immoral, the epicurean impulse can lead to a wide-ranging and highly workable framework. Socrates announced that he differed from other people in that they lived to eat, whereas he ate to live. Yet eating is living, and living is eating. While the authoritative Western bidding has long been that considerations of food and eating are unworthy, the tables need turning. Philosophical diners can strike back.

Notes

- 1 An enthusiastic account is provided by DeWitt, Norman Wentworth, *Epicurus and His Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1954.
- 2 Gaskin, John, ed. *The Epicurean Philosophers*. London: Everyman, 1995; Philodemus p. 77; "Introduction," p. xxiii.
- 3 Chapter 5 of Marx's doctoral thesis, entitled "On the Difference Between Democritean and Epicurean Physics."
- 4 Bailey, Cyril. *The Greek Atomists and Epicurus*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928: 224; McDade, John. "Introduction" to Epicurus, *Letter on Happiness*. Trans. Robin Waterfield. London: Rider.
- 5 Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, vol. 5. Trans. C. B. Gulick. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb), 1933, p. 546 (standard classicists' reference: XII, 546).
- 6 Rist, J. M. *Epicurus: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 104–5.
- 7 One basic collection of surviving writings, Bailey, Cyril, *Epicurus: The Extent Remains*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, includes these quotations on pp. 117, 89, 127, and 137 (classicists' shorthand: *Vatican* LXIII, *Menoceus* 130, *Stob. Floril.* XVIII, 14, *Porphyry ad Marc.* 28).

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- 8 These two overly neglected banquet references come from Festugière, A. J., *Epicurus and His Gods*, trans. C. W. Chilton. Oxford: Blackwell, 1955: 70, n. 56; and Plutarch, *Moralia*, vol. 14. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb), 1967: 546 (*Non posse* 1089C).
- 9 Bailey, *Extant Remains*, p. 101 (PD XXVII); Gaskin, *Epicurean Philosophers*, p. 69 (Seneca *Ep Morales* XIX, 10).
- 10 Such sentiments are often repeated, and examples appear in Bailey, *Extant Remains*, pp. 99, 115, and 139 (PD VII, PD XIV, Vatican LVIII, Plutarch *Adv Col* 1125D, Vatican LII).
- 11 Bailey, *Extant Remains*, p. 131 (Diog. Laert. X, 11).
- 12 Bailey, *Extant Remains*, p. 89 (*Menoceus* 131–2).
- 13 Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste*. Trans. M. F. K. Fisher. New York: Counterpoint, 1949: 363–4.
- 14 Bailey, *Extant Remains*, p. 109 (Vatican XXI).
- 15 Plato, *Gorgias* 462–3; *Timaeus* 90A.
- 16 Durkheim spelled out the argument elsewhere, including “The dualism of human nature and its social conditions,” in Wolff, Kurt H., ed., *Emile Durkheim, 1858–1917*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press: 325–40.
- 17 Bailey, *Extant Remains*, pp. 99 and 117 (PD XV, Vatican LXIX).
- 18 Simmel, Georg. “The Sociology of the Meal.” *Food & Foodways*, 5(4), 1994: 333–51; Bailey, *Extant Remains*, p. 109 (Vatican XXIII).

