

# Graduate Association for Food Studies

**Title:** Review of “The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity” by Sandra M. Gilbert

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reveal historical patterns in the U.S. and France: culinary nationalism, culinary individualism, and the tension between food safety and pleasure. It is in this section that Ferguson's definition of food talk is the widest: she analyzes events, like the Nathan's Hot Dog Eating Contest, alongside children's stories like *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In these varied sources she emphasizes the difference between French and American food culture and, conversely, the unifying nature of those cultures within their contexts. "We do not share food," she says, "we share the experience of food" (51).

Part two focuses on cooks and chefs and their representation within food media. Much of the food talk here comes from interviews with chefs from Ferguson's previous research on culinary France, giving the term a more literal, and understandable, definition. Ferguson argues that cooks and chefs have taught America how to engage in food talk and gives spotlight to iconic chefs who have shaped the culinary imagination: Julia Child, Irma Rombauer, and modern tastemakers like Ferran Adrià of elBulli restaurant. She celebrates Rombauer in particular for her conversational writing style that brought joy to the experience of women cooking within budgetary and health constraints. She cites chapters in the *Joy of Cooking* that demonstrate Rombauer's ebullient spirit: "Favors for Children's Parties" and a chapter on cocktails in the midst of Prohibition.

Finally, part three illustrates food talk on the other side of the kitchen door, tracing the shift of the dining experience from "haute cuisine" to "haute food." Haute food represents a restaurant culture that has become informalized, Ferguson argues, even as it continues to produce and reflect class status. This informalization, marked by a "loosening of the forms" that previously dictated the dining experience, brings a more democratic era in dining but does not eliminate disagreement (141). Food talk, from the menus of five star restaurants to the jargon used by restaurant industry members to describe and categorize patrons, is the primary mode of negotiation for the tensions between tradition and innovation, chefs and reviewers, and the evolving manifestations of conspicuous consumption.

A lack of previous research in the field of food rhetoric or food discourse allows Ferguson room to explore what she sees as being important or poignant, much like her methodological mentor Walter Benjamin. Her analysis of selected sources, though sometimes seeming to be chosen at random, showcases her skill in connecting food talk to its larger cultural and social contexts. Drawing on her previous research in France, nearly all of her selected texts come from French or American culinary history. These texts

underline the differences in how those cultures' cooking and eating patterns have evolved over the centuries as well as how those patterns have emerged through discourse. Narrowing her constraints to two countries allows Ferguson to dive deeper into the minutiae of her subjects, a task she does with verve and joy.

Ferguson takes her texts for what they are: snapshots of a culinary event or opinion, representative of a speaker at a certain point in time. She does not privilege one over another, but because of this, an exploration of power relationships or outside cultural factors is missing. She leaves this question from her prologue unanswered: "[W]hy is need surprisingly muted in discussions of what makes our contemporary food world so different from what it was not all that long ago?" (xxi) It may be that those who do not have enough to eat cannot participate in food talk, and this missing material goes unmentioned.

Despite this shortcoming, Ferguson pulls together an informative culinary history covering hundreds of years while using a diverse, though limited, collection of sources. Her analyses are insightful and serve to deftly weave together texts of all different types and genres, taking the reader along for the ride. Perhaps most importantly, Ferguson showcases just how far-reaching food talk really is, opening up for analysis source material traditionally eschewed by sociologists and anthropologists. This book is an excellent addition to the developing field of food media studies as well a unique expansion on the field of culinary history.

## BOOK REVIEW | JULIETA FLORES JURADO

### *The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* Sandra M. Gilbert

New York: W. W. Norton. 2014. xx, 404 pp.

*The Culinary Imagination: From Myth to Modernity* is a book that has grown from Sandra M. Gilbert's enduring interest in food and its representations, both as a scholar and as a poet. Known for her groundbreaking work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (co-authored with Susan Gubar), a feminist analysis of nineteenth-century women authors, Gilbert approaches the subject of Western culinary imagination with an eclectic methodology that combines art history, philosophy, anthropology, and literary criticism with

personal testimony. This interdisciplinary perspective is well suited to explore the many ironies in the ways people relate to food. How can food be inextricably linked to festivities and celebrations and at the same time so inevitably evocative of mortality? How does food simultaneously symbolize pleasure and disgust, comfort and danger, everyday life, and the sacred or magical? Contemporary writers such as Michael Pollan have noted that in our time, as fascination with food in the media continues to grow, the rituals of home cooking are declining. Tracing our fascination with food to myth and to fundamental facts of the food chain, *The Culinary Imagination* demonstrates that food has always been the site of paradox and conflict.

Departing from Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous adage "what is good to eat is good to think," Gilbert explores contemporary ways of thinking and writing about food by focusing mostly on visual arts and literature from Europe and North America. She reworks and expands Brillat-Savarin's aphorism "tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are" as "[t]ell me how you envision food in stories and poems, memoirs and biographies, films and pictures and fantasies, and we shall begin to understand how you think about your life" (6). The works of Chaucer, Rabelais, Jonathan Swift, Louisa May Alcott, Emily Dickinson, Paul Cézanne, Franz Kafka, Roald Dahl, Kate Chopin, M. F. K. Fisher and Wayne Thiebaud provide some of the inspiration for this lavish menu.

It would be reductive to classify this book under "literary studies" because Gilbert's sources and theoretical influences come from a wide range of humanistic disciplines, and the works discussed include cookbooks, films, and paintings; nevertheless, the chapter on literary modernism is one of the strongest sections. Gilbert reads the poetry of William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence through the motif of the fruit bowl: plums in Williams's "This Is Just to Say," peaches in Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," and peaches, pomegranates, and figs in Lawrence's poems. The intimate encounter of poets with the quotidian sensuality of these fruits "changed the taste of poetry" (129). This thematic perspective contrasts with the more common periodical approach to the study of food in

literature. The close reading of well-known poems through this original lens could serve as an innovative model for syllabi of poetry or twentieth-century literature, and may also encourage students in this discipline to become acquainted with food studies.

Gilbert's discussion of the food memoir stands at the intersection of food and gender studies. The sixth chapter presents a complete account of the genre's predecessors: the domestic scenes of novels like *To the Lighthouse* and *Ulysses*, and the journey of the cook "from stove to study, dishpan to desk" (147). The in-depth analysis of M. F. K. Fisher's creation of an alluring, femme-fatale-like public persona in *The Gastronomical Me* illustrates some of the challenges of female gastronomes in a male-dominated discipline. From Fisher we also learn about the struggle of writers to legitimize their work in the literary field when their subject is food. In a subsequent chapter, Gilbert's exploration of the meanings of food in children's literature by authors including Maurice Sendak and Roald Dahl is both illuminating and eerie. It is always stimulating to read scholars who are directing their attention and experience to cultural products that only a few decades ago were not considered worthy of critical attention in literature departments, especially when these efforts go hand in hand with a revision of the traditional canons.

Even though *The Culinary Imagination* is over 300 pages long, some topics and discussions are constrained to a very small space. Several chapters have the potential of becoming whole books on their own. This may be due to the author's decision to design the book as a survey rather than one study focused in a few case studies. Still, sometimes it is difficult to find a unifying thread. The final chapter is concerned with food anxieties and their translation into utopic/dystopic narratives and is followed immediately by the notes and bibliography with no epilogue to recapitulate and assess the findings of the project. Other than this, *The Culinary Imagination* is a versatile, conscientiously researched book and a recommendable text for readers who are interested in the role of humanities in food studies and in the convergences of food discourses and literary criticism.