

Matters of Taste

"TELL ME WHAT YOU EAT, and I'll tell you who you are," declared French epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. In *Food Is Culture*, Italian culinary

historian Massimo Montanari demonstrates that who we are is also a function of how, when, and with whom we eat, in what order we consume our food, and how far from our homes it is grown.

To read this disarming collection of brief essays is to witness a superbly stocked mind grappling with matters that are vital to human survival. The fact that we must eat daily might suggest that food is more a biological necessity than a cultural artifact, but for Montanari, even a hermit in the desert, eating what roots and grasses he can scrounge, is making a cultural choice by rejecting the long-established tradition of processed foods. Our food preparations, necessarily informed by culture, "cannot be ideologically neutral," he observes.

Montanari's special insights arise from his synthesis of medieval history (his primary field) with current alimentary debates. Medieval cookery was a matter of mixing the elemental principles of the four "humors" (hot, cold, moist, dry) to arrive at a balanced diet. Our present-day fussing over carbs, fats, micronutrients, and antioxidants is its lineal descendant. What is a medieval hermit, after all, but a trendy raw-food vegan waiting for the 21st century to give him cookbooks, restaurants, magazines, and cable-access TV shows?

During a promotional campaign a few years ago by one fast-food chain, you were supposed to say "Broiling beats frying" at the restaurant counter in order to get a free food sample. But expressing such preferences amounts to much more than catch-phrase marketing. Montanari shows how, in the Mid-

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By Massimo Montanari.
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dle Ages, roasting beat boiling: To roast meat was to enjoy it fresh from the hunt, lavishing its fats on a crackling fire. To boil meat was to hoard up the juice in a stock, husbanding all the by-products. Royalty roasted, peasantry boiled. You suggested beef stew to Charlemagne at your peril.

In another essay, Montanari describes how medieval cooks, who by necessity used local ingredients, set great store by exotic imports. Today, when blueberries from Chile or asparagus tips from Peru are more readily available than produce grown in one's own neighborhood, the global village has no higher term of esteem than "local." We humans always want what's hard to get. Despised peasant grains of the past (barley, rye, spelt) are today's re-ché health foods. Pure white bread, once the ne plus ultra of refinement, is today's white-trash feed.

These seemingly arbitrary shifts in taste are the central theme of *Food Is Culture*. Coffee, for instance, may seem merely a functional stimulant. Yet Montanari shows how, over the centuries, coffee has sometimes been a drink of privileged classes and their exclusive venues, and at other times has served as the daily dram of the working classes. We never simply drink the stuff; we display our social standing by means of complicated preparations and far-fetched beans. Ordering coffee is, perhaps, a roundabout way of ordering our social world.

—Tim Morris

Final Cut

THE DECLARATION LAST year by Japan's new prime minister that he intends to rewrite his country's constitution, which renounces war, came too late for Yukio Mishima. The world-famous writer resented the pacifism imposed on his country after World War II and wanted Japan to turn aside from what he

MISHIMA'S SWORD:

Travels in Search of a Samurai Legend.

By Christopher Ross.
Da Capo. 262 pp. \$26