

## 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-

### FOOD IS CULTURE.

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.  
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saw as its drift into Western decadence. In the end, he sacrificed his life for the cause. On November 25, 1970, after a botched attack on a Japanese defense base, he committed seppuku—ritual suicide with a sword.

In the eyes of many, Yukio Mishima (the pseudonym adopted by Kimitake Hiraoka, b. 1925) was a right-wing fanatic and a national embarrassment. But he was also a phenomenally talented and prolific writer, three times nominated for the Nobel Prize, whose novels and plays still fascinate Western audiences. The very day he committed suicide, Mishima mailed his publisher the final pages of the fourth book in his epic tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, a work of historical fiction that blends the brutal drive for self-destruction with the beauty of reincarnation.

The history that has intervened since Mishima's death makes him ripe for a re-evaluation, but such is not the project of Christopher Ross, an adventurer whose previous book narrated his experience working as a London tube station assistant. Instead, he has written an entertaining mash-up of a biography that blends elements of travelogue, memoir, and martial arts manual, illuminating some of the mysteries of Yukio Mishima, Japan, and, of course, Christopher Ross.

Mishima admired the traditional values he saw embodied in the samurai, who disappeared along with Japan's feudal system, and he strove to imitate these warriors. But if Mishima styled himself a samurai, he was a strange one: a sickly and effete child who eventually developed a well-muscled physique, a preening celebrity who courted the spotlight, a homosexual who lived with a wife and children. Above all, he desired to become famous and to die heroically.

His death—whether heroic or not—is what inspired Ross's search for Mishima's legacy. But though Ross comes across as clever and worldly, he lacks the requisite nihilism. And he can't keep from inserting himself into Mishima's story, as when he disrobes and

descends into a torture chamber to meet someone whom he believes to have been one of Mishima's lovers. (He discovers that the man had instead been conscripted to witness Mishima pretend to commit ritual suicide, a variety of role-playing Mishima found immensely arousing.)

Because Ross is such a charming rogue, we don't mind that he never decides if the book is about Mishima or himself. Or that he can't refrain from digressions into the comically obscure—metallurgical arcana, say, or the ways a human body can be dismembered. The book gains traction when Ross focuses on his search for the antique sword that Mishima used to kill himself.

At last, a mysterious phone call reveals its whereabouts. But succeeding in his quest leaves Ross cold. When he sees the sword, he writes, "I am no longer thinking of death." And this is where he and Mishima part ways. For a short time, however, Ross grew very close to his protagonist. We know because he tells us that while he was writing this book, he was stricken with severe pains in his abdomen, pains he eventually realized were the pangs of a phantom seppuku.

—Andrew Starner

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#### SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

## Still on the Radio

KRISTEN HARING HAS WRITTEN a valentine to the ham radio community. This largely invisible sphere of two-way radio communication among technical enthusiasts blossomed in

the early 20th century, as amateurs built radio sets with tubes, wires, and switches, and launched Morse-coded messages on the newly discovered airwaves. In the decades since, changes in technology and shifts in the culture have diminished the romance of radio amateurs, but not their numbers. Today, they

**HAM RADIO'S  
TECHNICAL  
CULTURE.**

By Kristen Haring. MIT  
Press. 220 pp. \$27.95