

## Dessert Time

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“[A] fruit by itself was the promise of a world, an invitation to be in the world ... in its roundness, in its fruitlike roundness.”

—Gaston Bachelard

Einstein discovered that time—indeed all existence—is curved. I believe it is veering around dessert.

Mary Ruth, a neighbor from two doors down, happens to be a professional chef. When she and her husband, Lou, came to dinner not long ago, I served a frozen raspberry mousse. It was a beautiful thing: tall, a deep pink, with ivory rings and dark splotches to hint at the layers of toasted-almond meringue and chocolate within. Our party fell silent. All eye lines converged as I dished slices into pools of raspberry purée. Mary Ruth laughed knowingly. She caught my eye and said, "Everybody always stops talking when you serve dessert."

As dimensions silently bend, we prepare for aesthetic experience.

Like any work of art, dessert demands perceptual involvement. But when we engage with it, there are no velvet gallery ropes to separate us from our object. We'd never assume a disinterested attitude, consuming only with a twenty-second scan. With dessert we indulge our entire bodies—often with others. When I was a girl, my sister and I would silently sit down to our after-school snack. We'd screw open our Oreos and dunk the wafers into our milk. But first we scraped out the super-sweet cream, rolling it into a single, perfect ball that we divided equally, savored slowly, an icon of our bond. Dessert demands *ingestion*, an involvement more intimate than sexual congress; and one we frequently undertake for the sake of a social context. These particular aspects of dessert fascinated me from the time I began to cook, in junior high. In the kitchen I was drawn to the precision of baking techniques. In the dining room, I loved to stage manage the atmosphere of ceremony that sparked even before a dessert's arrival. Then I relished the sight of guests swirling forks in cream or icing, the rapture and exchanged looks as lips met with rum-soaked Savarin and fruit.

Pastry cook, stage manager, voyeur, I also savored my own portions of dessert. When I began to reflect on my long love affair, I noted that I ascribe qualities to dessert in ways that are similar to the systems traditional cultures use to evaluate, for example, a significant mask or fetish (objects that may be labeled 'art' in the West). Is it well made, confirming a standard of craftsmanship? Does it create a dramatic individual experience by working a charm or calling a god to inhabit the user? Does it move participants in a ritual to wonder or make them weep or laugh, building communal bonds?

If we pose such questions with a conventional definition of Art in mind, they sound quite odd. Dessert, however, sets us down in the aesthetics of the everyday, confirming, as Yuriko Saito observes, that “aesthetic objects do not constitute a set of special objects, but rather are determined by our attitude and experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Which is why dessert as a cultural phenomenon appeals to me even more than the custard pies and Black Forest cakes I've devoured. Relying on the mouth as it does, dessert is deliciously 'low,' culturally speaking—provocatively positioned to make a spectacular critical gesture. I want to claim dessert for aesthetics to strengthen the framework for understanding other powerful objects: those perfectly formed speakers we must caress before switching on a sound system; the walking stick or hat purchased while lamenting that we so rarely use them (as fashion denies us the experience of ceremonialized walking, but cannot blot out our desire); or the stranger's tattoos we admire and even touch so that physical interaction becomes part of the meaning attached to the designs.

The aesthetic brought forth with physical, and often social, performance: I don't want such a moment to slip away unnoticed simply because there's no frame of reference for understanding it. Developing a language and even an 'attitude' of dessert is the only way to capture such experiences. I want them to meld with the substance of my life, adding richness and flavor. I also want more.

Our sense of what is beautiful, pleasurable and meaningful too often comes from advertising—a notoriously conservative force in the machinery of consumerism. It even pre-packages art and our responses to it. We know what radical art is: distorted digital projection and odd sound effects, perhaps a glimpse of racial identity or a hint of sexual violence. A performance piece may showcase repulsive organic materials jettisoned into the crowd who cringes at the physical contact. In the safety of the gallery or museum we ponder the shocking gesture. Then we follow the exist signs back to complacency.

Seizing on aesthetic experiences that occur off the grid can be our only change to feel the “shock of the new,” to use Robert Hughes' phrase. We savor a moment of freedom outside the machine. Perhaps we sabotage its workings. Science writer Dennis Overbye grabbed his opportunity, admitting that, when presented with a molten chocolate cake, he “was suddenly being dragging into a vortex... sucked toward the edge of a black (chocolate) hole.”<sup>2</sup> Physicists have postulated that black holes suck in time itself; and, as time and space swoop in elaborate curves around a glorious confection, they carry us along, enclosing us in an expanding universe of aesthetic play.

Margaret Visser recounts that when the American aircraft carrier *Lexington* was sinking during the Second World War, “The crew brought all the cans of ice cream they could find out of the hold and gorged on the contents till it was time to go overboard.”<sup>3</sup>

The anecdote lays bare dessert's distinctive characteristic: dessert is an interruption. The word comes from the French, *desservie*, and it refers to the moment of “unserving” in a meal, when all the main dishes and serving pieces have been cleared away. Dessert is named for the hiatus that heralds it, but eating a dessert also takes a slice out of time. Mid-morning, mid-afternoon or post-meal, eating dessert has the feel of a ‘pause.’

Essentially temporal, dessert exemplifies the aesthetic mood, whose most fundamental characteristic is a slowing of experience so the senses and mind can engage fully with an object. Proust's tea-soaked madeleine is the confectionery icon of aesthetic timeshifting, a term I borrow from physician Stephan Rechtschaffen. But I like the *Lexington's* story because it demonstrates the power of dessert to shift time for the average person. Rechtschaffen explains the mechanisms at work.

Neuroscience has confirmed the wisdom of Buddhists and phenomenologists. Though we blame the rapid pace of everyday life on schedules, work and complicated relationships, the speed is actually generated by the mental processes we use to cope.<sup>4</sup> Thought, analysis and strategy-making, as Rechtschaffen explains, send electrons speeding through our brains. Life accelerates as we give ourselves up to mental time. The price is depth and dimension. My friend Susan was shaken to realize that she was so wrapped up in thinking about a project that she had no memory of the route she'd taken to work or where she had parked. This common experience, as Rechtschaffen points out, is fallout from mental time, where neural firing incinerates the sensory record. One can only imagine the searing heat it generated on the doomed *Lexington* in those moments before the crew raided the hold.

A different experience emerges if we break the chain of action and reaction and focus our attention on

the quality of a particular moment. As neurons fire, chemical and hormonal processes also do their work. They yield their products at a slower pace and we are ready to receive them: sensual detail, emotions, associative connections. Awareness fills. The rhythm of time slows and the 'now' dilates. Dessert, with all of its sugar, caramel, chocolate, fruit, vanilla, and liqueur, is perfectly constituted to shift time. Intense flavors deliver a jolt to the tongue, switching our focus to the body's interior. Sugar enters the bloodstream very quickly and creates chemical changes that affect mood; cream and its fatty cousins contribute a quieting sense of satiety. A phenomenal arena opens up for happiness and involuntary memories of childhood comfort foods, lunchroom sugar highs, or the lovers' intimacy blossoming over a sweet and flaky something in Provence, Tallahassee or Kalamazoo.

Well in advance of such scientific evidence, however, dessert has been recognized as a time shift. Advertisements catering to women regularly depict dessert as a retreat, a kind of boudoir on a seven-inch plate. The dessert lover relaxes contentedly. The laden fork slides slowly between her lips. Her expression of rapture confirms her experiential immersion in every note of chocolate or fruit. This is a slow-motion experience when compared to everyday life. Time curves and seals the sensualist in a bubble of awareness: this self-pleasuring woman seems more real than her alter ego, the harried workaday drudge.

And so back to the *Lexington's* crew. In face of the inevitable they paused. They grabbed dessert, a food that would seize their attention and slow time. Ice cream has also long been one of America's favorite comfort foods. The crew probably huddled around the cans of ice cream and fortified themselves with a collective sense of delay and solace before making their lonely dives.

Though some form of timeshifting characterizes all aesthetic experiences, however brief, with dessert we must understand two distinct forms of interruption. One type emerges at the point when dessert is served and actually consumed. Another occurs earlier, registering in what Dolley Madison would call the "Atmosphere of Expectancy" at her White House dinners. Time begins to shift once we turn our minds to what is coming.

Though today we eat desserts at any time, history insures that we still define dessert as a type of food with a specific location in the structure and rhythm of a meal. Hosts in the sixteenth century would invite select guests to withdraw to a special room or even a separate building—a banqueting hall—constructed specifically for service of fruits, confections, cakes, and wine. Dessert was separated temporally, spatially, even kinesthetically. Guests might eat standing up after the hours seated at the dining table. Thus today we move from dining room to living room, or shift from table service to dessert buffet.<sup>5</sup> We also take for granted dessert's sweet flavor, a distinction formalized in the seventeenth century, when the Western palate lost its taste for sweetened meat and vegetable dishes and only dessert showcased sugar. The same period came to define dessert as ornamental, and today—garnished and curlicued with chocolate and creamy swirls—dessert transports us into the realm of the pretty and whimsical.

I had my first immersion in dessert fantasy at the age of seven.

In 1962, my father took a job in Europe and I found myself crossing the Atlantic on the *Kungsholm*, an elegant white ship with an endlessly fascinating dining room. Imagine its impression on a child raised in graduate housing in Troy, New York. In that spare building complex I'd had no Barbies with eveningwear and sports cars. No tiara (*de rigueur* for today's pre-teen middle-class princess). Special clothes were treats from my grandparents.

But on the ship, we went to the dining room and the dark-jacketed headwaiter greeted us by name. He

led us past women in beautiful dresses, men in well-cut suits and the captain in his braided uniform. Finally he left us in the hands of our waiter, at our own table laid with white linen, crystal, and flowers. I felt very nifty indeed, in my blue-and-white herringbone suit. And I took up the menu from which I could order anything I wanted—escargots, frogs' legs, odd cuts of meat and fish in sauces whose names tricked my tongue when I placed my order. 'This,' I thought, 'is how adults play.'

The night before we docked, we joined the slow current of passengers in brilliant dress, strolling to the dining room for the Farewell Dinner. The music seemed brighter, conversation more animated. The dining room glittered as passengers donned sequined masks. Tipsy on the celebratory atmosphere, I recall none of the details of the meal. But at the end of the main course, the waiters vanished. The lights dimmed, setting the scene aglow in candlelight. Then, at the far side of the dining room, a cluster of lights appeared and unfolded into a line.

"Dessert was served as if by magic," writes Balzac, in *The Wild Ass's Skin*. And that's what happened on the *Kungsholm*. The waiters streamed back, each carrying on his shoulder a large silver platter with an ice sculpture, candles, and a dessert. Peacocks of ice, bears and deer, obelisks and nymphs towered over creamy confections; the procession circulated among the tables. Sounds, colors, and activity grew brighter with the promise of unimaginable flavors and the endless refraction of candlelight in melting ice.

The staff of the *Kungsholm* knew how to stage the shift from ordinary time into dessert time: disappearing waitstaff marked the temporal separation; the dimmed lights and candles created an illusion of spatial re-location; the procession of waiters added the moving buffet, turning the dining room into live theater. The waiters displayed their desserts at each table. A burst of applause would blot out the music and conversation. 'How can I possibly choose one?' I wondered as dessert after dessert passed our table. 'How will I remember the one I have chosen?'

Emerson criticized the hosts of his time who were relying on dessert instead of wit to entertain their guests. In the early nineteenth century, dessert was indeed becoming more fascinating than ever before, in part because of innovations in France. By 1831, when Balzac wrote of dessert's magical appearance, Antonin Carême had already transformed French culinary arts. His influence had been felt in the United States, where many of the spectacular desserts that irked Emerson were undoubtedly molded *à la Carême*. Carême's influence would hold sway more than a century later, on the *Kungsholm*.

Carême, the father of haute cuisine, cooked for Talleyrand, Alexander the First and the Prince of Wales. His extravagant dinners helped establish Betty and James de Rothschild in French society. (Balzac was a frequent guest.) Carême's most famous claim was that there are five fine arts, "painting, sculpture, poetry, music and architecture," the latter being the most important and having pastry "as its principle branch."<sup>6</sup> The young Carême went to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* to seek inspiration for pastry designs among the drawings of Italian architects. Producing two hundred sketches, he laid the groundwork for his theory of fine arts and a career that elevated dessert exhibitionism to a level not seen before or since. (Though accounts tell of a real jaw-dropper presented in 1682, at the christening celebration for Louis IX's grandchild. Pastry and marzipan, animated by clockwork, depicted the Dauphine's labor and the newborn Duke's arrival via vaginal portal.<sup>7</sup>) Carême constructed spectacular *pièces montées* of edible materials, often several feet in width, depicting musical instruments, ships, palaces, monuments, and ruins. He loved the Romantic landscapes described in Gothic novels. Carême displayed savories in this way as well, but the most famous constructions were the desserts, which he documented in *Le Pâtissier Royal Parisien* (1815) and *Le Pâtissier Pittoresque* (1842).

The specter of Carême floated over the *Kungsholm's* cuisine: the rich traditional sauces, the souffléed

potatoes, and, most particularly, the dessert procession. Philosopher Caroline Korsmeyer labels Carême's style a "stunt cuisine" that reveals little of flavor and savor. Correct in principle, she too hastily dismisses his displays from the aesthetics of taste. Carême's presentations initiated the process of timeshifting. They focused the diners' collective attention and set the context in which the (social) experience of taste could unfold, a feat that enables dessert to challenge the fine-arts frame of reference for the aesthetic. Even though critics have come to question the high Modernist notion that Art remains Art even in the absence of an observer, a person rarely feels her own agency in a gallery or museum. We do not assume that the stream of visitors affects the meaning of a painting or sculpture. The aesthetics of dessert, however, arise in part from the social context in which it is consumed.

Take the example of the croquembouche, an invention of Carême's that survives today. The croquembouche—a 'crunch in the mouth'—is a cone constructed of round cream puffs fixed together with hard caramel (providing the crunch). It's tall enough to conceal a bottle of champagne, which transforms the croquembouche into a social event. Guests gather to marvel at the pristine confection, then 'Oooh' in surprise at the cutting. The dismantling reveals the champagne (what kind?) followed by a (symbolic and democratic) division of sweets and wine. Equally important, the guests gather and jostle during the messy dismantling—a light finish to a formal dinner. These kinesthetic viewers then turn back into diners who ingest, with the ritual conventions adding their own flavors to the sensory waves dashing the tongue.

We tend to think of art as an object, and aesthetics as a phenomenon arising from that contained work; even performance art usually takes place in a staged context, separated from ordinary existence. Dessert is more like street art or guerilla art—it infiltrates the ongoing stream of life and draws its own life from it. The croquembouche is a classic example of an art form that fully unfolds only in an interactive context. We can also find this scenario by a fireplace or campfire when people gather, marshmallows on sticks, to make S'mores and savor them—like pastry and champagne—with milk, hot cocoa or even beer. The pleasure provokes nostalgia: Xando, a restaurant chain in the north east, offers the "Campfire Delight," S'mores for four to be made over a portable mini-campfire.

These less-than-*haute* examples underscore the frivolous spirit that takes over when we approach the dessert table (or campfire). This mood is a symptom of cultural assumptions we hold about dessert and the form of experience it represents.

One evening, friends Judy and Thor came to dinner. Judy raved over the watermelon salad dressed with fruit vinegars and spices. She and my partner, Doran, both took seconds. "I could drink that dressing," she announced and, on my go-ahead, grabbed the bowl and gulped. Later, I set a crème caramel on the table and Judy and Doran retired for a smoke. Minutes ticked by. Thor and I fidgeted. Then we dug in, consumed over half of the dessert, and grinned sheepishly when our partners returned, annoyed that we'd moved on to the final course without them.

It's not unusual for gentle clashes to ignite between those who prefer to wait for sweets, those who like to dive in right away, and the few, like my friend Andrew, who would willingly skip dinner for dessert. We all know our friends' habits. We can also classify them as savory vs. dessert enthusiasts. What's a bit odd in my stories is that Judy represents the savory while Thor, Andrew and raspberry-mousse-loving Lou are the dessert lovers. The oddness arises because, in the popular imagination, men like meat and women like sweets. Dessert products are not only marketed to women as primary food purchasers, the desire for dessert itself is feminized—and has been for at least two centuries. Hence the boudoir-style presentation of dessert mentioned earlier. Bite-sized bits of chocolate-covered ice cream look like nipples; cake swirled with frosting seems an accessory to lingerie. And they're made for the girls to savor, alone, at peace, preferably amid the sheets.

Even though the girls aren't the only ones who demolish desserts, Andrew and Lou feel compelled to act sheepish—even apologetic—as they jump at any offer of seconds. Andrew admits ruefully that he "loses it" around dessert. And "Let's admit it," Giorgio Bert writes, "the word 'pleasure' still has a faintly dubious ring ... [A] man dedicated to pleasure—you never know. Would you want your daughter to marry someone like that?"<sup>8</sup> When Lou and Andrew blush and apologize, their emotions arise from a cultural source: they have internalized the notion that male pleasure (certainly the white, middle-class variety) emerges only with restraint. Researchers report that women watch porn because it's one of the few places they see men losing it in genuine surrender to sensuality. Hostesses also know it's titillating when men grimace and groan over strawberry pie. Even in my early teens such scenes gave me a rush. After tasting another kind of sensuality in the backs of cars, I'd learn that dessert offered a bonus: the dining table didn't require some weird contortion to see the men's faces.

Dessert service performs a cultural service: it recuperates and legitimizes pleasure, claiming it as a universal right of women and men. Still, the image of a woman sliding a fork laden with chocolate cake between her lips is more familiar. Clearly she's linked to the erotic/pornographic imagery where women's ecstasy pleases a male eye, but there is another equation at work. The languid woman is also present in an icon from the Renaissance, a scene where a male painter observes a woman or still life through a mesh grid. He's not indulging in the food or fleshly pleasures arrayed before him. He remains separate. With the scientific organizing lens of perspective, he divides and processes raw nature/the body/food, turning them into a representation.

If we feel an intuitive rightness about both the sensually enraptured woman and the controlled all-seeing man, it's due to that two-millennia-old hierarchy of the senses that ranks vision as the highest sense, followed closely by hearing. These 'distance senses' require, and so are most closely associated—conceptually, linguistically and metaphorically—with the mind. The painter's distance represents mastery over the body's messy clutter. And the gendering is no accident: the mind and the distance senses are 'masculine,' set in opposition to the 'feminine' body and body senses—taste, touch, and smell. These demand intimate congress with objects and tempt us to sink sensually into flesh. Beware the female hand offering the fruit of pleasure.

The perspective-generating scrim represents logical mental action and separates the painter from the seductively dangerous body. It also leads to another important distinction. In the Renaissance the category we know as the 'fine arts' was separated out from the crafts, with the arts emerging from conceptual labor and the crafts from manual effort. These cultural products are mapped over, and given value in accordance with, the gendered sensory hierarchy. Among the cerebral, 'high' products are painting, literature, sculpture, music—historically created by men and consumed through vision and/or hearing. The 'low' products emerge from manual labor, require contact with the body, and are also predominantly created or maintained by women: food and the functional arts—furniture, fabric, tableware, jewelry, clothing, ornament, etc. These are all "inferior terms," as Caroline Korsmeyer notes. They—and everything associated with them—suffer from "comparative theoretical neglect."<sup>9</sup> People—male or female—who do focus on, or abandon themselves to, things of the body risk being defined as the kind of hedonistic wastrels one does not bring home to meet Mom.

From one perspective, dessert frivolity serves this cultural scenario: our light mood insures that we won't settle too long or deeply into that pause-that-is-dessert. What transpires there is not really serious. We needn't consider the implications of dessert's sensual lure. Conventional assumptions about art, aesthetics, pleasure, and the body are safe. We are free, however, not only to feel dessert frivolity, but to embrace and even elevate it to a transformative attitude. After all, the signs that invite us into dessert's time and space overturn the hierarchy of the senses. (We might legitimately label dessert

'carnavalesque.')

Dessert disrupts formal aesthetic categories and constructs a bridge to a deep level of 'inferior,' intimate and forbidden body experience. Even as a youngster I noted that people relaxed with dessert. Dining room protocol loosened. Guests might change seats to share conversation with a new dinner partner. The sense of intimacy grew with confided pleasures.

And so we approach my favorite moment of a meal. The guests have completed the main courses. Candles flicker low and the company chats, toying with wine glasses and stray silverware. The *mise en scène* has the feel of disarray and suspension—the essence of the *desservie*. It's time for serious play.

When dessert arrives, we first relish the look of the object. The eggy yellow surface of a custard carries a sheet of caramel, shimmering like a stained glass window; a light and airy Bavarian blushes with strawberries. As a girl, when I produced creamy desserts like these, my father loved to shake the serving plate. The mound would quiver pathetically while he squeaked, "Don't eat me, don't eat me!" and my sister and I giggled in anticipation. No matter how fancy or complicated, we were going to cut that thing down to size. Dessert lives its full aesthetic life only when it is converted to a forkful, a spoonful, a *mouthful*.

"That cake," Joel gushed. He's a frustrated dessert addict, given a gluten allergy that forbids wheat. But I'd adapted one of my most extravagant tortes and delivered it earlier that day. "The chocolate and the cherries," he said. He held his fingers pinched together near his mouth to recall his taste buds' focus. "And the almonds." He shivered a little at the memory.

The fact that Joel is a minister adds to the satisfaction I take in his passion. We were both raised as humanist Unitarians, free from guilt about physical pleasures. But Joel's allergy has brought him near the brink of diabetes, so he's selective with indulgences. He wanted me to know he classed my cake with the best. Ordinarily, he is a very articulate man, yet he floundered once he'd listed the ingredients. So he changed tack. "I shared it with a few people," he confided, then told of a troubled man who had come to him after Sunday service.

I could imagine Joel inviting the man into his office. The man would have taken a seat near the half-circle window, slumping a little as he began to tell of his dilemma. Joel would have made some space for the cake among the piles of books and papers on his desk. Offering food is a generous, comforting gesture—in some cultures, intimate conversation is impossible without it. Joel would have listened intently as he scooped cake onto a paper plate, adding the inevitable plastic fork—another homey detail in an atmosphere that already invited confidences.

"He *really* needed to talk," Joel emphasized. I conjured images of loved ones in hospital beds, an enveloping existential storm. "But when he tasted the cake," Joel reported, "he just stopped and said, 'This is *amazing*.'"

As Joel emphasized that final word, I smiled to show I appreciated his compliment. I also thought it significant that, in the face of flavor, words failed, so Joel told of another person stopped short by dessert. The strategy links dessert's interruptive power to language.

"Fantastic," "Terrific," "Oh, yeah, baby," "Wonderful": on TV cooking shows, in magazine articles and among people I know, these are the compliments for desserts. But the term of highest praise for flavor is "Amazing." "Amazing Cookies and Brownies": that's the first chapter of *Pure Chocolate*. A local bakery owner renamed her most popular treat "The Amazing Cookie" to echo her customers' kudos.

"Amazingly wonderful," Joel wrote in his note thanking me for the torte. Etymology demonstrates the wisdom of this habit.

"Amazing," "to amaze," "amazement." These words describe a (generally positive) assault on our senses, minds and emotions. We are left stunned, bewildered, so overwhelmed with wonder, in fact, that we may feel temporarily crazed. A hint of timeshifting flickers through these meanings: an amazing something forces us into the 'now' of experience. History yields similar semantic resonances. The Old English verb was "amasian." By 1300 it gave rise to a noun, "mase," meaning a delusion, deception, or bewilderment. By 1365 the noun's spelling shifted to "maze," meaning a bewilderment that leaves one lost. By 1386 history records a usage in line with the contemporary meaning of "maze:" a puzzling network of paths or a labyrinth.

The step from the emotional state of amazement to an actual labyrinth is short and natural. When navigating a maze the body acts out the twists of emotion and mind we experience in amazement. We can be bombarded with brief, sequential bursts of emotions—just as we may try path after dead-end path in a maze. A deluge of conflicting emotions can flood in; we find ourselves at one of those dizzying points where multiple paths conjoin. The elastic terrain dilates the now, slowing temporal rhythms as the moment of experience swells, enriched with layers of emotions (panic or pleasant delirium).

Joel's troubled visitor was in a maze of a problem. And Joel was interested to see that, on eating the 'amazing' torte, "The problem lost its gravity," as he explained. "It had seemed unbearable before. Then it was as if he could get his arms around it." Amazement resonates between these senses of scale. We 'contain' amazement (or a problem) since we are its site; but phenomenally it contains us, as does a maze, since we are completely inside its grasp. For a troubled parishioner, the expanse of a torte's flavor brought a problem into perspective. This phenomenon of scale brings me to meringues.

A chocolate meringue is the palest of browns, a little larger than a chocolate kiss, one large or two small bites. But this modest dessert is a good reminder. Never underestimate the transformation dessert undergoes as it shifts from a visual to gustatory phenomenon.

A bite into the meringue breaks the crystalline structure of beaten egg white and sugar, releasing a shower of small crumbs onto the tongue along with a chip or two of bittersweet chocolate. The texture differences are key. Meringue crumbs collapse rapidly and their prickling bursts of pure sweet open one flavor path. Another takes shape as the chocolate liquefies in the heat of the mouth, evolving through earthy nuances as it lays a satiny coating on the tongue. Meringue crumbs continue to sparkle sweetly until one delivers a crystal of undissolved coffee powder. I like to add this bitter ingredient because it slices through the oily texture of chocolate while echoing its coffee hints. Coffee complicates the network of paths in the meringue's flavor maze and adds depth to the now of shifted time.

In the mouth, these flavors emerge and re-emerge in different intensities, sequences and combinations. The maze of sensations expands, endlessly re-configured. It can also be a site for games. Doran likes to pop a whole meringue into his mouth and let it sit. He likes to feel it scratch the roof of his mouth, he says, as the flat bottom slowly melts and turns chewy on his tongue. The textural transformation amalgamates the flavors, turning them more uniformly mocha, a different pattern of sensation.

Doran's game takes place secretly within the mouth. Others are more public. In the case of the torte I presented to Joel, for example, I've seen guests eat the mousse-like chocolate-cherry center first. Or they strip off the top layers of glaze and almond paste for a more candy-like experience of chocolate-coated marzipan. Others clean a sour cherry of chocolate crumbs and dip it into the dollop of heavy cream I serve with each slice: they want to taste the fruity acidity cutting through the unctuous cream.



These intentionally tailored experiences demonstrate how thoroughly a confection can redirect our attention. (Hence Emerson's gripe and the silences that Mary Ruth notes.) Dessert draws the diner into what Robert Farrar Capon calls "placiness," a meeting with an object where the person who tastes (or touches or sees) allows himself to be guided by the *object's* terms.<sup>10</sup> When we relinquish control in this way, each tiny mouthful of dessert reminds us that our bodies contain universes more experientially vast than our restricted skins would suggest. And so we are bewildered, stopped in our tracks in an experience made more intriguing by its maze-like complexity and by the breadth of a shifted now. In this phenomenology of taste we expand along with our sensual range. We lose our edges, blending symbiotically into the source of our pleasure, like warm cream and chocolate as they meld with one another (a process that yields ganache, by the way, the base for chocolate truffles).

This pleasure may have even more power because we lack of a full set of linguistic knives to divide it. Consider our expansive vocabulary for qualities of light: glitter, glisten, gleam, glimmer, glow, flicker, twinkle, sparkle, shine, shimmer. . . the list goes on (and not surprisingly, given light's metaphoric connection with the mind). But with a meringue in the mouth (or sorbet or a Zinger), no corresponding richness exists in English (or other Western languages) to describe the sensory waves arising from distinct tastes, textures, and fragrances, much less what happens in the areas of flavor-overlap and blending. Multi-sensory pyrotechnics explode into our awareness, but the cultural darkness persists: language for all the bodily senses is sadly undeveloped.

The area of taste has seen some elaboration, however. It began with the rise of foodism in the seventies and eighties. Instructions began to appear: how to hold tastings for small-batch beers, olive oils and, more recently, chocolate. Specialty food merchants, The Food Network, and food magazines have introduced new ingredients, tastes and textures. Academic and scientific studies unveil the chemistry of flavor and the secrets of ethnic foods and healthy cuisines. Granted, these sources load new cultural baggage onto food. Food advertising undoubtedly teaches us language for those features that make foods profitable. We also medicalize food as never before. Something now tastes "good" or "even better" because it contains fiber to bind "bad" cholesterol or delivers an army of anti-oxidants to battle pre-cancerous cells; producers are developing aggressive marketing strategies to capitalize on the enormous quantities of anti-oxidants contained in chocolate. We de-substantialize food each time we eat it for its meaning or the role it performs rather than for its sensory properties.

Yet researchers confirm that people can identify flavors and fragrances when they have language for them. So even while food takes on new facets because of nutrition and the market, trends to study and name flavor strengthen our perceptual acuity and open the body's forbidden interior for sensory experience. Instructions we absorb from popular culture, high culture—or from any experience—often communicate multiple and sometimes contradictory lessons.

I am constantly amazed that my father emerged from his Polish cabbage-and-potatoes upbringing believing that "The body is not a temple, but an amusement park," to paraphrase chef Anthony Bourdain. My father ate anything and everything, and he particularly enjoyed desserts. He was also a solid-state physicist, and despite the elevated status of his field he seemed unaware that there are 'inferior' subjects unworthy of attention. Dessert was as valid a medium for tinkering with substances, processes and properties as the ceramics and metals he transformed under GE Defense Department contracts. When I was four or five, I recall my mother hard at work perfecting a recipe for Tomato Soup Cake to meet my father's specifications. It was a relief when I grew old enough to join in. I'd ask, "Dad, what do you want for your birthday—Father's Day/Christmas?" No longer did I hear the deflating, "peace and quiet," mumbled from behind a newspaper.

One recipe came from a beat-up book of cookie recipes I found in the library. For several seasons I played with the proportions of chopped dates, walnuts, and maraschino cherries. The goal: a texture as soft as the dates yet firm enough that no splotches would fall on a tie. My father named the final experiment, "Daddies Delights" (sic), which I typed at the top of my recipe. Oatmeal cookies presented more challenging variables: the balance of sweet golden raisins to earthy dark; the ratio of dark to white sugar for a chewy texture; and cinnamon enough to satisfy my father's taste without tipping into bitterness. My father named these "Weismullers"—we were watching a lot of Tarzan movies at the time—and I entered another recipe in my notebook.

I did not tinker with recipes because my father was authoritarian. His enthusiasm for food created a common project. We sat and tasted each batch of cookies, analyzing and strategizing how to alter them. I took notes so I could execute the changes. A perfect sensual experience was the reward. My father taught me that was a worthy goal. Much later I also realized that, as we labored, he was in his element, fully immersed in the style of study and interaction of the research lab. By introducing me to that mode, my father did away with the major obstacle to defining food and eating as aesthetic experience: the belief that because taste is experienced inside the body, it only gives information about subjective states, yielding no common elements upon which to base an aesthetic system. My father's preferences inspired our discussions, but meeting those preferences demonstrated that manipulating ingredients creates measurable results.

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Culinary practice convinced me that there is an objective basis for food experience. Our dessert discourse also served as glue in our relationship. In eighth grade I brought home the A I'd earned on an exam on the Civil War. My father told me that he could never have written something like that. I puffed with pride, then felt stunned and a little frightened, as though a new breeze had lifted me and would sweep me away into independence. The air stayed still when I handed him a plateful of Daddies Delights. He closed his eyes as he took a bite. His "Mmmmmmm" and admission that he couldn't keep away from them pulled us back together. Swirling in our vortex of dessert I caught a whiff of the Family Romance. Handing my father a sweet something had to carry a sensual, even erotic tinge, especially since part of my pleasure came from my knowledge that I was becoming a better cook than my mother. Maybe Electra figured out the precise balance of wine, herbs, and honey that would delight and amaze her father. No mystery why *I* delight in watching men enjoy my desserts.

It's even better when they like to talk about them. The evening that Thor and Judy came to dinner, I knew that he and I would be able to share the kind of conversation I used to have with my father. Thor's made many a crème caramel. That's why I suggested we dive into dessert without waiting for our partners.

Thor believes, as do most cooks, that crème caramel is about texture. Some people prefer custards that just barely hold together, while others like a little resistance, but a silky mouthfeel is absolutely critical.

I dished out our wedges. The standard method never yields enough caramel sauce. Thor was delighted when I produced a pitcher of extra liquid gold. We both held our first mouthfuls briefly to let the textures and flavors begin their work. The custard will hold its shape briefly in the mouth, softly caressing the upper palate as it begins to settle flavors and textures upon the tongue. Caramel sauce washes around quickly, leaving the custard to collapse and stimulate taste buds with coffee (my choice for that evening) or vanilla or lime zest. Thor groaned. Elbows on table, we talked about water baths and low oven temperatures, consuming mouthful after melting mouthful, with stray droplets of caramel studding our lips. "Why not," Thor said to seconds. While Judy and Doran smoked in the next room, we compared favorite flavorings, our most successful ratios of egg yolks to cream and milk. Thor grinned and massaged his belly. He helped himself to thirds.

So unfolds gastronomic adultery. It's no surprise that a titillating frisson enlivens such discussions. Some guys I knew in college claimed they had invented the following equation: A Herm varies in inverse proportion to Firm, where a Herm equals the volume one can fit in one's mouth and Firm equals the density of female breast tissue. They recited it loudly. Then conspiratorial whispers let me know they were discussing which of their weekend dates had provided another variant of Firm. One guy always fixed critical eyes on my C cups and informed me that, "More than a mouthful is a waste." Too bad. The feminist in me was so annoyed I never asked whether they had run any real numbers through the equation. I might now have a quantitative tool to measure all kinds of orally-experienced textures beginning with crisp meringue and moving to pound cake, tortes, sponge cake, Bavarian cream, mousse, crème caramel, then going on to earlobes, and all manners of breasts, cheeks and lips.

If diners giggle when debating the merits of soft New York cheesecake vs. the firmer Philadelphia style, it's because they taste a soupçon of eroticism. It arises inevitably through a process that painter Wayne Thiebaud calls "object transference." Thiebaud's work is unmistakable and often graces posters and the covers of food magazines: cakes and pies, candy apples, ice cream sundaes—arranged in neat rows or precise grids. The goodies are gooey with paint. Thiebaud frosts and swirls his images onto canvas, as concerned with the substance of things as he is with space. Adam Gopnik notes that Thiebaud's desserts have "a double existence in the worlds of Euclid and Betty Crocker."<sup>11</sup> In fact Thiebaud's culinary sensibility (he worked in food service) spurs him to bend dimensions. His desserts burst from the canvas, thick with paint: they invite us into their space and set our fingers a-tingle with a yearning to touch.

Materiality, Thiebaud affirms, stimulates "our ability to transfer ourselves into things—such as paintings and prints—and to actually feel their physical properties. This is a particularly important kind of empathic vitality requiring an openness to experience ... a sense of exhilaration and freshness of spirit."<sup>12</sup>

The capacity for openness begins when we swipe frosting from a birthday cake, poke paste-covered fingers into our mouths, or even taste acrylic paint. I've read of kids who chew globs of 'sweet' tar gathered in parking lots softened in the hot Southern sun. I can imagine them, chewing drowsily in shifted time—as I still slow down to experience the texture while digging greasy, creamy filling from a Twinkie. The focused attention so natural to childhood imbeds a knowledge of sensory qualities into our bodies. It also binds the senses to one another, richly inflecting vision with touch and taste (however 'impure' and aberrant these bonds may seem when viewed from the heights of the sensory hierarchy). It builds the network of linkages that binds crème caramel to an earlobe; the same flexible tissue of associations that made me slip and ask Doran, "Do you want to make dessert?" when I invited him to bed.

I like to see Thiebaud's painting of *Valentine Cakes* next to his celebration of Yosemite's famous mountain, *Half Dome with Cloud*. He arranged the four cakes in a line extending directly away from

picture plane and he piped a heart on top of each. The tips point back toward the viewer and wherever the round cake edges come closest, Thiebaud has slathered on the paint. These cakes reach toward us. Half Dome's crown, too, has a paint-ridge along its upper edge, as does the round and otherwise flat cloud floating like a halo above the peak. It's as if wind whips over the crests of cloud and peak and thickens their substance. The cloud's crown juts over Half Dome. It sketches a non-Euclidian space where substance is dynamic, actively surging and circulating between our bodies and the paintings, and from painting to painting. Annealed by our empathy, the objects shift and infuse one another with the sensation of finger-paints and stolen frosting and handfuls and mouths full of snow and SnoCones until finally we can touch and taste the clouds.

This, of course, is the amazing labor of art as well as the work of metaphor shored up by the physics and chemistry of the world. When we move outside the frame of the fine arts, the special aesthetic labor of art-like objects is to imbed these transfers into a social context.

The evening that Mary Ruth and Lou came to dinner, silence fell as I dipped my knife in hot water and began to slice the raspberry mousse. I double and even triple the flavor base of frozen desserts, so my raspberry mousse bursts into view, incandescent pink with an explosion of flavor to match. The first person to make a recognizably articulate sound was Doran, who said (both delighted and serious), "This is like eating pink."

I love it when a guy's brain never entirely stops working: he was recalling Sartre.

"If I eat a pink cake," Sartre affirms, "the taste of it is pink; the light sugary perfume, the oiliness of the butter cream *are* the pink. Thus I eat the pink as I see the sugary."<sup>13</sup> Sartre is imagining the world much as Thiebaud does. Though language may splinter flavor from texture, color and fragrance, we experience these qualities as a unity, one that changes physical states—a synaesthetic morphing—when experienced in different conditions. For Sartre, as for Thiebaud, embracing this sensory manifold is part of the human project of "appropriating the world as a totality." Bodies, emotions and experience combine forces to make this happen. If wine has chocolate notes, that's because it actually contains some of the same organic molecules found in chocolate. If a lover tastes of cherry or apricot or herb-infused cream, the essential sap of that person undoubtedly shares chemical properties with the fruit or leaf.

Sartre says we eat to fill an emptiness. But I think, in another sense, we are already filled—with an undiscovered potential for experience that begins to unfold when we enter shifted time. Dessert is perhaps all the more startling, amazing and precious, because it stages an interiorized experience and then unfolds it in the company of others. Raspberry mousse melted on four tongues. A sparkle rippled around the table as we settled into a deep satisfaction at the rightness, the truth, that we were 'eating pink'—faces flushing in union with the mousse and with each other. A deep intimacy emerges in *revealing* sensual pleasure *with* others. Made public, that intimacy is sometimes giddy and slightly indecorous, with its moans of delight and admissions of addiction. At other times it is profoundly calming. Time slows. The charm works; perhaps we are filled by the god. We weep and laugh, interrupted and amazed. We are invited deep into the sweetness of our collective physical lives.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Yuriko Saito. "Everyday Aesthetics." *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1 (April 2001): 87-95, 87.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 312. (The implication of Visser's

relevant paragraph is that this event occurred during the Korean War. Other sources indicate that the *Lexington* sank during World War II.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Visser, *Much Depends on Dinner* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 312. American troops sank the torpedoed *Lexington* during World War II in the Coral Sea so Japanese would not be able to salvage it for scrap. The story of the ice cream is told in *Queen of the Flattops*.

<sup>4</sup> Stephan Rechtschaffen, "Timeshifting," *Sustainable Planet: Solutions for the Twenty-first Century*. Ed. Juliet. B. Schor and Betsy Taylor (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 175-192.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners* (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1991), 147-8.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis and Fred Feldencamp, *The Good Life...or What's Left of It* (NY: Harper's Magazine Press, 1977), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Kelly, *Cooking for Kings: The Life of Antonin Carême, the First Celebrity Chef* (New York: Walker and Company, 2003), 39-40.

<sup>8</sup> Carlo Petrini, *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, transl. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 20.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 30.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Entertainment* (New York: Pocket Books, 1970), 10.

<sup>11</sup> In Steven A. Nash and Adam Gopnik, *Wayne Thiebaud: A Paintings Retrospective* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Vision and Revision: Hand Colored Prints by Wayne Thiebaud* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1991), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Hole," in *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1993), 89.