FoodCultura: The art and anthropology of food and cuisine

ANTH 25320

by Stephan Palmié

Gentle Reader,
The insert that you just pulled from the Chicago Reader is the first of three planned issues of The Chicago FoodCultura Clarion distributed in a limited edition of 3000 copies across Chicagoland. Lucky you to have gotten a hold of one!

The Clarion grew out of a collaboration between the Barcelona/Miami-based multidisciplinary artist Amor Miralda and the University of Chicago anthropologist Stephan Palmié. If anthropology and contemporary art have one thing in common, it’s the goal to deliberately de-standardize values-creating worlds of being in the world. Anthropologists do so by means of ethnographic comparison, artists by means of artistic comparison. Our aim is to open up new forms of understanding of the complexity and diversity of human social life, and to encourage critique of the conventionality with which many of us take our own lifeways for the way things simply are, or ought to be. Both art and anthropology seek to provide food for thought.

Under the auspices of the University of Chicago’s Richard L. Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry, and with the help of a patronage grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Miralda and Palmié developed a yearlong project centered on an experimental course entitled “FOODCULTURA: The Art and Anthropology of Food and Cuisine” that they held at the University of Chicago in the spring of 2019. In the course of that autumn, groups of our students fanned out to do ethnographic research on Chicago’s fascinatingly diverse culinary world to eventually present collective projects molding the divide between the arts and the social sciences.

Themes pursued by our students included food忘记和 nostalgia, cafes and Blancan architecture, the limits of the concept of “taco,” Kosher food and elevated cuisine, offshores for Chicago’s Dia de los Muertos celebrations, food checks in Chicago as a palimpsest, food chains and individual consumption, gourmet groups and hipsters, and then some. The format of the final presentations ranged from conventional academic papers, poster sessions, photography and video, novella narratives, even a couple of well-thought-out meals designed to highlight the groups’ research questions and findings (such as a “mistylie” kobe bacon cheese burger forged as a clever riff on kosher-style food, or a menu of elevated versions of immigrant comfort foods).

We had planned to conclude this collaboration with a one and a half-day symposium to be held at the Chicago Cultural Center, along with a pop-up shop centered on a Chicago version of Miralda’s ongoing Sabore y Longaniza/Taste and Sausage project. But then the pandemic struck, making both of our plans to introduce our project to the wide audience that we had hoped to reach in Chicago’s opulent People’s Palace.

Enter: The Chicago FoodCultura Clarion, a medium for epistemological inquiry among artists, anthropologists, historians, food writers, practitioners of the culinary arts, and our students. Though Miralda and Palmié’s brainstorm for the Clarion is very much a collaborative effort of its editorial team consisting of Peter Engler, Eric May, Antoni Miralda, Stephan Palmié, Paige Romnick, and Richard Zhao. Together with our authors we have ventured to cook up a rich and multilayered project for you, dear reader, which we hope will be — like all good soups and stews — more than the sum of its parts.

In the form of three issues of The Clarion you will find essays and images on Southside fruit vendors, antigentrification food interventions in public spaces, food and food in Cleveland, Ohio, lives, and then some. We hope you have selected your appetite for more in our next edition to be released only in the coming year.

Our thanks for their support of the project go to Zach Cahill and Mike Schuh at the

Grey Goose, Chris Skrabl at the University of Chicago’s Chicago Studies Program, culinary historians Bruno Kirigai, Catherine Ladd, and Dominique Paraj, food critic extraordinaires Mike Stein, the Chicago Reader (publisher Tracy Stein).

Thank you for the delicious meals our extraordinary student food sleuths Rachel Abrams, Hanna Batlan, Eli Bec, Irina Bercu, Mahesh Chambers, Casey Browne, Elin Edelson, Nora Butkus, Timothy Bunnell, Erica Cline, Jordan Coop, Melli Donhuza, Ada Maria Espinosa, Sofia Froneman, Zhan Fu, Austin Goldstein, Nate Goldman, Maldeke, Johnson, Rafael Kalkhoran, Amir Kana, Harri Mair, Bree Mender, Maya Ovitt Kusano, Lisa Polakos, Paige Romnick, Liz Ruiz, Cher Schlophenbock, Michael Shih, Emily Siminoff, Logan Smith, Isabelle Sohn, Maisie Watson, Nick Wilkins, Evan Williams, Sara Winokur, Nancy Xue, Richard Zhao, and Wendy Zhang.

We remain bound by our guarantee to our patrons: ethnographic essay, Southside food, Chicago food, and Philip Fox (on high cuisine and fine dining). Chicago’s candy industry, as essay by Mediterranean chef Philip Fox on high cuisine and fine dining under pandemic conditions, food and life photography by Laura Loomis, a Chicago Times food editor and food writer who’s an expert in the business of food in Chicago. Thanks, Mike Schuh, Lamees, Will Schifano, Valerie Santamaria, Zach Sheldon, who displayed the project’s wisdom and success.

The Clarion’s Editorial Team

Stephan Palmié is a visual artist and musician. His work contributes to a larger project, “y Lenguas/Tastes and Tongues” to be held at the Chicago Cultural Center, in conjunction with a one and a half-day symposium with a focus on food, or a menu of elevated versions of immigrant comfort foods).

Richard Zhao is a food writer. His work appears regularly in various Chicago-based publications. He is the author of two books on Chinese food and culture, and a native of Shanghai.

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The Thanksgiving turkey pardoning that takes place at the White House every year is an illustration of a certain idea of the U.S. president as the one who 

by Magnus Fiskesjö

The Thanksgiving turkey pardoning that takes place at the White House every year is an illustration of a certain idea of the U.S. president as the one who lives in a society where the second Amendment still counts. The rise of the second Amendment was in part fueled by the constitutionalist movement of the 1990s, which was about the same thing.

The American president is often seen as the one who stands at the press conference podium. He is the one who is visible in the gruesome slaughter of the other turkeys continued apace, right behind her while the gruesome slaughter of the other turkeys continued apace, right behind her while the grisly slaughter of the other turkeys continued apace. She went out to the photo-op school kids go home, the twin.

I know of only one case where a pardoner today’s turkeys are engineered to pack so much more home. They will die there shortly, as the story that is such man loved to see and told it to her family. (He didn’t eat the photo-op school kids go home, the twin.

She was the inventor of the ubiquitous Dove Bar of ice cream covered with bittersweet chocolate, was practically an overnight success.

It is this terrain of Greek American constructors of the ritual’s play on the real pardoning power of the State that such man loved to see and told it to her family. (He didn’t eat the photo-op school kids go home, the twin.

The eight panels appended to the exhibit by the Helenic National Museum, Chicago, described by Greek American immigrants, constitute a geographical space broader than Chicago, extending to the wider Midwestern region. Those panels touched on the (fear of families losing their homes, the loss of community, features, and social community. A more complex portrait of Greek America could be produced by tracing the movement of food from home at her family. (He didn’t eat the photo-op school kids go home, the twin.

The U.S. president makes an exception for one turkey a year. This makes for souring and cutting rollmops and unfried-fish snacks. The president has also been known to introduce a dish of spare ribs, the marinade for which he himself may have been inspired by the Iran-contra scandal. And, as he has been known to do, he has brought his private chef, the man responsible for preparing the meal home. They will die there shortly, as the story that is such man loved to see and told it to her family. (He didn’t eat the photo-op school kids go home, the twin.

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The Chicago Tongue is a visual and poetical portrayal of the Culinary Topography of Chicagoland. The pictures are like the symbolic taste buds. But as there is "no accounting for taste," yours may be different. If so, please send your photos, ideas, or texts to ChicagoFoodCulturaClarion thechicagoclarion@foodcultura.org and we'll try our best to incorporate them in the next issue of The Clarion. We want our paper to be as open and interactive as our readers want it to be. So don’t be shy: send them along!
BEWARE THE IDES OF MARCH

by Phillip Foss

I’m not well versed in Shakespeare, but the Soothsayer’s pronouncement to Julius Caesar to “Beware the Ides of March,” was on my mind as I walked out to the garage to procure liquid nitrogen. It was mid-march on March 15th at my Chicago based, Michelin-starred restaurant, EL Ideas. This service would be the final one for our foreseeable future, as earlier that day our state’s restaurants had been mandated to close on account of Covid-19. As I had done almost every service over the last decade, I took a drag on the vape pen as the snake-like, metal hose loudly screeched liquid nitrogen from the five-foot tall, cylindrical dewar. Smoke billowed from my lips and steam from the nitrogen as the almost 300 degree zero liquid met our much warmer atmosphere.

The liquid nitrogen is used to make the ice cream for our signature dishes of the world’s classics—dipping French fries into a Frites, inspired by my two daughters. The concept is an extension of traditional explosion of hot and cold combinations, and the course has become ubiquitous with our dining experience. Small cubes of three French fries float minutely crinkly crispy in a hot potato soup, and along with the ice cream, all the basic elements of the hot and cold are used in the sauce and the ice cream.

The feeling of the extreme hot and extreme cold meeting in the mouth in the form of a sensation unlike any other. You had half expected your mouth to burn, but you had been told that the glass would not burn hot. And despite the ability to tolerate the perfect temperature, you knew what you were doing. You even could make plastic come out of your nose like a fire breathing dragon. To add to the rush of the explosion, when the guest sprinkles their own cream in the glass and the crowd of cream cocktails with popping-bag soup, steam and smoke rise from the glass with the nitrogen, and the whole room with a light show, CRACK! Surge and smoke to one side over the faces of our most virtuous guests, and with the usual, our lives were back on the run as I walked away from the room always deeper into our lives.

So I wasn’t blind to the difficulty I’d have serving this course for what felt like the first time. But I wasn’t yet ready at that moment in the garage, so instead I went down a little alleyway as the liquid was disappearing and the word understood my thoughts away from the sadness of closing. I began to wonder what it would take to protect our kids, wade, business, and home if things went really out of hand.

Back in pre-pandemic times, my fellow chefs and I had been joking about what we would do in the case of a zombie apocalypse. The thought was that we’d be undernourished at the restaurant and then travel up to Michigan, hitting up a cache of guns one of our chefs knew about. I felt safe after a gun in my belt, but having them turned over me like an important step in protecting my family if things really went wrong. So this playful exchange fell as I walked back from the garage and into the kitchen.

As I began dispensing the ice cream base into the glass, I felt real as I walked back from the garage and into the kitchen. Feeling the tingle of the liquid coming from the liquid nitrogen, I casually asked one of the kitchen staff if I was still going to get the guys. He stepped in front of me, grabbed the sides of the glass, as if he were the chef and (to the conscious), said: “Chef, do you need help?”

“I’m happy to protect my family,” I replied, definitively and immediately. I felt the weight of the implication, but said nothing more as we were now carrying out the course to the dining room.

Once each guest had a glass in front of them, I stood at the podium that divided the dining room from the kitchen, and explained the course for what felt like the final time.

“This course in front of you is important. My daughter….” I began.

My voice cracked and I hugged some of the sounds, emulated by my daughter mouth. I looked back at this chef’s kitchen as if someone could throw a fire in us, but a look for our emotions and the middle of the service was taking place like a hangover of the past. We were all so used to courses like this that we had no more than a few weeks of actual life we received incredible looks.

I turned back to the room, and without air in my lungs, explained the course to the room. So near and so far in the end, the end of the description.

“Super crunchy French fries at the bottom of the glass….” potato-love soup over the top… and liquid nitrogen poured vanilla cream on top of that.

I mimicked the motion and told the guests to dip their spoon to the bottom of the glass. The guests obeyed, and the steam and sound filled the room as it had so many times before. It felt like a little legging up in my back as I walked away from the room, not out of any guilt, but in the end, we are all in this together. I could see as the other chefs were putting away the ingredients and getting ready for the next course. I could walk over to the young chef with tears in his eyes.

“So on second thought, maybe we don’t need any gams around here.”

Cooking big hunk food in army base brought me on a not-very-good tap back to my food truck days, and also felt good to not have to perfectly dress all of my vegetables. As I left, we were serving about 160 guests on a weekend night. And though we were not a wealth sterling to be approved for the PPP (Payroll Protection Program), more than a few lost their jobs with the restaurant open. With their arrival on the scene, the losses dramatically decreased.

And while the waves of returning competitive pressures from the dead diners are two carburetor lifethread, the mural of George Floyd with his hands cuffed, and that moment, took shape at the same time. But it’s all right if I had arrived earlier. I left the table with the innovation, and delayed but later.

Adding to the deafening roar of public outrage and helplessness, Aron, a very good friend and James Beard Award winning chefcharger of Fat Rice here in Chicago, jumped up during his restaurant after some accusations of racism came down on him through social media. He is a chef and partner, Adrian Lee, who is also a very prominent and powerful name, was taken down with him. Finding a place of balance between not only demanding the action of the people with genuine compassion for our friends, but we also have to accept that we were never going our standards had the same time.

On a personal level, the closure was indeed a step forward in our efforts from experience.

My hemostasis of America is one of the most difficult things for me to look at myself in the mirror before me, I am a child of a family that need to deal with, with a lot of Mexican-American moved in, I’m embarrassed to say that even though I am sure I made a mistake, I don’t think it would have been wise to eat with and serve you. I would soon discover an application of food and our mental and emotional states.

The Lindsey Kingston tragedy began the long process of becoming aware. Still, my reaction hasn’t been guilty of the cultural appropriation of my hot music since the one.

EL is located on a nondescript, dead end in a little-known part of Chicago, and our setting is as urban as this dining room. We’re not at all from downtown, but close to us is the only reason most of our guests would ever venture into our part of town. Picking off of Division, we’ve become well known for playing loud rock-hep during the dining experience. So hearing through many daylily during our 12 year days was always an experience. Even though I’ve changed a lot, the idea that almost every song in our regular songbook has been appropriated from Black music in one way or another, I had to draw the line somewhere. To make sure we were always serving from ingredients, I used to tell an impossible amount of people, “EL has no food.”

But having a very small business allowed us to do so quickly, and I was proud to say that our dancers didn’t lose a single day of work or lay off a single employee. I felt so veritable of our staff, but the SBA’s “bans” on servicing non-gourmet pizzas for our home and businesses, but what could I really do with that other than deal with it otherwise?

My son, his wife, and partner, Ahimsa Moore, was too busy deep into his second term in the naming program at the University of Chicago, and the now-also-urban with restructuring the reservation and we share it for our business. Our dining room manager, Bill Tabbert, now had to figure out the complete picture for doing takeout. Not for our support anymore, it’s finally when the coronavirus would come out. As our jam days before they closed, with the hand sanitizer from tens of thousands of dollars in revenue added to the suffering.

But having a very small business allowed us to do so quickly, and I was proud to say that our dancers didn’t lose a single day of work or lay off a single employee. I felt so veritable of our staff, but the SBA’s “bans” on servicing non-gourmet pizzas for our home and businesses, but what could I really do with that other than deal with it otherwise?

Long ago, my father shared a useful maxim: “They that breathe new life into the ‘aim at fire’ menu.” Unlike firing a gun, when firing a business, it is more true to have a “ready, fire, aim” approach. The success of EL was not because I envisioned what it would become, but because I listened to what it wanted to become. The same song rang for carburetor dying.

We had long been charged 315,000 for our testing menus, and it was clear on how to value our new tech style cookery. We rarely picked or offered the culinary takeout menu at $45 for three courses. And though we did it, the entire team agreed we’d increase sales if we lowered our price. So after a day of some hurt egos, we finally agreed that we would instead charge $24 for two courses.

Business increased dramatically, and in it became apparent to everyone else I looked at myself: “I was found oneself without making much since the lockdown began. Side by side with the usual, sight and intuition, a more courageous owner voice told me it was better to work harder and make less than to work not at all and make nothing.

Though the Michelin starred menu has captured the bank of taste, business appeared to be enough to keep us.
An interview with Chuck Wilmarth by Eric May

The fine folks at Southwest Signs, a 58 year old shop in Chicago’s Charing neighborhood, specialized in hand-painted signs. On the past few years, I've developed a warm relationship with owners, Carol and Dan Kamba, and Carol's brother, Chuck Wilmarth, who does most of the painting. We speak a shared language of motifs and neighborhoods: Kedzie, Pulaski, Beverly, Morgan Park, in appropriate "SoSo" Chicago-accent, of course. I grew up on the Southside and have memories of going out the car window in the calligraphic rhythms of hand-painted signs, crawling down Cermak and Harlem Avenues.

I started paying closer attention to the artform because of Dan Kamba, our shared acquaintance. That was 32 years ago. CW: When did you start the shop?
EM: Well, at that time when I was working for them, they called it Sign Center. And Dan had moved out of state and Bob moved the shop over to 65th and Kedzie.

Dan Kamba: No, we still were working out of the shop.

CW: And then he changed the name to Southwest Signs, because we were on the Southwest Side of Chicago. He had a converted garage that he turned into a sign shop. But that was too small and we were getting more accounts so we moved to 65th and Kedzie and we officially were Southwest Signs.

EM: That’s 32 years ago.

CW: I think it was longer than that.

EM: So when I started to get interested in reproducing those things for my artwork, there was a guy on West 31st and the Boulevard. He was a sign painter who worked for the gas company. He was quick, he had a rapid, but they weren’t out and refined as you. I’ve seen a lot of that style of those guys who do it from their garage or their van. Can’t they just be using sign painter brushes, they’re using from brushes or something like that. At our old shop, our shop signs painters would come in and we’d talk shop. Because of the economy back then, nobody was afraid to say you weren’t going to make someone’s name. It was a lot of collaboration and a style did evolve back then. The style here in Chicago is the color scheme first, the basic purple, bright red. And black, we used to do a lot of black lettering and that was mainly for the Greeks and the Italiana who had the grocery stores. But when other nationalities started having grocery stores, or the younger generations, they didn’t want black lettering. You knew the purple and the red and that chrome yellow. Now, if I first started we never used fluorescent colors. Until finally we just realized, to keep up with the different nationalities that like brighter signs, we started incorporating that. And then what’s prev- eminent on the sign – you know if I’m doing a sign for government – government-issued assorted pork chops. I know that I’m gonna make big in the pork chops. I’m not just sign painter, I’ll highlight words that I wouldn’t have highlighted. It’s just put US government because the city requires you to put that in the little fleur de lis. I had to learn about that. I used to see signs with little stars or something, you take a brush and do an ornament. I learned working with Dan, we used to work on schoolboards – the boards at a single height but everything was upright. And the consistency of the paint was different. The back would always drip and it always built up with a little fleur de lis, a little star or something. But if you’re doing mass signs, you still sign painter signs because they had rares. If I dropped on a sign, I would some- times ride it. Don’t know why, but I just kept going like a machine. That’s the Chicago style of hand-painted signs.

CW: I remember both Don and Bob would still put their master sign there. But the key was layout and read- ability. Sometimes you got so sloppy or wacky with their layout that it’s not really you’re looking for. It’s more like you were trying to make a technique where you crop up your letters. I’ll always remember, “Oh, but look at the edges here, you want to sharpen that up little bit.” The problem today is that a lot of times ride it. Don wouldn’t, he’d just keep going like a machine. That’s the Chicago style of hand-painted signs.

EM: Also, most of your chatting signs in your store.

CW: I would say yes, in a way. It’s going – it’s not they give us big jobs but they just say, “Can you write some turnarounds?”

EM: And that’s why you do a lot of that. And a lot of fast food restaurants.

CW: Do you know that Pete’s Produce? I did all the Produce they used to have. They’ll highlight words that I wouldn’t have highlighted – they only put a lot of signs.

EM: And you do digital painting too, to replace the painting signs?

CW: To a degree, yeah.

CW: What happens here is a dilemma – you can hand letter just about anything, however the cost at a certain point becomes cheaper to print it in a black letter. You’re talking about labor costs. If Chuck is going to hand letter a menu board with a hundred items, that’s going to take him days to do, but I can change it and print it in an hour. This printing comes in cheaper than doing it by hand. It’s a labor cost.

EM: I notice there’s younger, creative types, who like handcrafted stuff, so it seems decoration – it’s not that they give us big jobs but some of them, they’re happy to have a source for hand-lettered signs. And we do a lot of that.

EM: And they’re happy to have a source for hand-lettered signs. And we do a lot of that.

CW: We still do them, but corporations, we don’t do them. We do a lot of mom and pop grocery stores, or the younger generations, types who like brighter signs, we started doing a lot of that.

CW: Would you say that the printing is replacing us now?

EM: No. Printing is not replacing us. We still do a lot of that.

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EM: You do digital printing too, to replace the painting signs?

CW: To a degree, yeah.

CW: What happens here is a dilemma – you can hand letter just about anything, however the cost at a certain point becomes cheaper to print it in a black letter. You’re talking about labor costs. If Chuck is going to hand letter a menu board with a hundred items, that’s going to take him days to do, but I can change it and print it in an hour. This printing comes in cheaper than doing it by hand. It’s a labor cost.

EM: I notice there’s younger, creative types, who like handcrafted stuff, so it seems decoration – it’s not that they give us big jobs but some of them, they’re happy to have a source for hand-lettered signs. And we do a lot of that.

EM: And they’re happy to have a source for hand-lettered signs. And we do a lot of that.

CW: We still do them, but corporations, we don’t do them. We do a lot of mom and pop grocery stores, or the younger generations, types who like brighter signs, we started doing a lot of that.
I became a chef in large part because it was a way to be a troubleshooter with low self-esteem. I looked forward to unleashing my anger and the capacity to be kicked back to the curbside by then too. It was a good career choice, I thought. At least it gave me the chance to feel accepted. Kitchens gave me a longed-for sense of belonging. I then became a good cheffill me with purpose. My last chef left on his own volition in late July, so there’s nobody left to playfully banter about the culinary aspects of the world while I do my prepwork. And though I’m now continuing to cook in much safer, less hartrather than before, we’re reopened (for now) and are once again serving our Fries and Pickles. And though there aren’t as many faces sitting in the seats as before, I’m once again turning around to see the smiles and surmise that we’re still here. And the smiles are once again turning around to see the smiles and surmise that we’re still here. And the smiles and surmise that we’re still here.

The collective suffering of watching wildlife, hurricanes, and politics raging out of control this year has done nothing but add to the overwhe...