The last course

L. Sasha Gora

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Gora, L. Sasha. 2024. "The last course." *Berlin Review*, no. 6 (Oct 2024).
https://blnreview.de/en/ausgaben/2024-09/gora-last-course-fine-dining.

N°6 Berlin Review Oct 2024

Memo

L. Sasha Gora
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Published on 10.09.2024

Even though my eyes were watching, it was my nose that noticed first. The flame unleashed a skinny stream of smoke. I inhaled the bitter fragrance of paper on fire and realized that the menu was ablaze. My breath, however, has always been weak. As a teenager, I quit smoking not long after picking up my first cigarette. And I've never been good at blowing out candles at birthdays, let alone being able to rely on my lungs to extinguish a small fire.

I summoned my deepest exhale, hoping it would kill the flame. A friend from London sat across the table in this nearly empty restaurant. We had just arrived in Oslo and were sharing our first meal, one too late to call lunch yet too early to count as dinner, even this far north. «Shit», she squealed. Huffing and puffing, together we blew the fire out as the waiter dashed to our table. He confiscated our candle and rescued the tarnished menu. As he left, I grabbed a tissue from my bag and swept the crumbs of ash onto the floor. In my hands, the menu had become a liability.

The Extreme Sport of Fine Dining

Historically, a menu is what made a restaurant, setting it apart from other places to grab a bite. There had been a myriad of ways cultures have sold and consumed food in public, from market stalls to taverns, but restaurants emerged in eighteenth-century Paris. Before it was a place to eat, it was something to eat, usually with a spoon. More

specifically, it was a *consommé*, a healthful and restorative broth. The first restaurants hosted eating that was not exactly what you would consider dining—customers, including those following doctors' orders, sipping bowls of soup. By the 1820s, restaurants in Paris had come to resemble what passes as a restaurant today, and in 1827, the first one opened stateside: *Delmonico's* in New York City.

Lost and Found I – Phuong Ngo: Like Life Imprisonment without a Jail, 2022. Pigment print, found postcard, 33 x 60 cm / courtesy of the artist

Seventy-one years later, in 1898, a *New York Times* article targeting middle-class female readers suggested most women were not fluent in eating out and had yet to learn fine dining's grammar. «Upon entering the hotel dining room you will be met and escorted to the seat which you are to occupy, by the head waiter», instructed the newspaper. «This official, having seen you seated, will hand you the menu and place you in the hands of the waiter, who will proceed to take your order.» Welcome to the politics of eating out where restaurants enact, police, and sometimes challenge social norms. As a cultural historian, I read menus as maps, running my eyes up and down their inventory of flora and fauna and the labour required to transform them into food.

Today, dining out has become an extreme sport, one less about physical need and more about high performance. Lunch plays in the minor leagues compared to dinner. Competition to claim a reservation is tough. «Discovering» an unknown gem or being able to confidently pronounce Basque words are assets in the bank of cultural

capital. Tasting menus have turned eating into an endurance test—a marathon that challenges you to stretch your appetite across hours so that no one dish will please it enough to dismiss it until the next morning.

In 1889, when France had fewer than 3,000 cars, André and Édouard Michelin founded a tyre company in Clermont-Ferrand. To fuel the demand for tyres, the brothers assembled a small guide for travellers, indexing the likes of maps and instructions on how to change a flat. In 1920, André put a seven-franc price tag on the blueprint of today's MICHELIN Guide, adding hotels and restaurants. As interest grew in a list that bosses you around and tells you where to eat, the brothers recruited a troop of «inspectors» to anonymously review and rank restaurants. In 1926, the MICHELIN Guide decorated fine dining establishments with a single star, and five years later, expanded its stars from zero to three.

The ingredient for tyres is rubber, and the trees that outfitted Michelin's came from France's colonies in Southeast Asia. In 1925, one year before it handed out its first star, the company established a 31,000-acre rubber plantation northwest of Saigon in Bình Dương Province, the largest in Vietnam. In French Indochina, rubber plantations relied on indentured labour, all breeding grounds for resistance.

Melbourne-based Phuong Ngo's series *Lost and Found*, which has been ongoing since 2020, is a cut-and-paste collage of the history of French colonialism, as well as a portrait of the artist as a Vietnamese-Australian and the ongoing legacies of bodies marked as colonised. It questions the equation that makes «good food» synonymous with «bad labour practices.» Some works pair quotes from Trần Tử Bình's *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* with the names of three-starred restaurants in Paris—once the capital of the French colonial empire and now the capital of the country with the most Michelin stars. Ngo layers historic black-and-white postcards and snapshots of rubber plantations on top of coloured photographs of handsome restaurant interiors, each table set and ready, standing on guard for the appetites to come.

Lost and Found II – Phuong Ngo: What a Mistake to Enter the Rubber Lands, 2022. Pigment print, found photograph, 70 x 50 cm / courtesy of the artist

In 2021, Noma finally received the highly coveted third star, eleven years after it was first crowned the world's best restaurant—a title it has won a record-breaking five times. But in January 2024, chef René Redzepi announced that Noma was closing and its Copenhagen dining room would cease its regular service at the end of the year. The brand, however, will live on, transitioning to a food laboratory feeding pop-ups and an online shop. Nonetheless, a headline sighed: «Welcome to the End of Fine Dining.»

The math just didn't work. *Stagiaires*—unpaid interns who trade their time and tweezer skills in exchange for the permission to flex a shiny address on their CVs—have long upheld the world's elite restaurants. Only three months before its farewell announcement, Noma had started paying its interns, feeding concerns about the labour required to fashion dishes as intricate as custom-made couture. Feeding questions about the costs of so much pleasure in a single meal, about the price of performative food consumption that picks at your emotions and holds you hostage to a menu that goes on and on and on, about the politics of who feeds, who is fed, and who feasts. Feeding questions about what's next. Feeding the fire.

When COVID-19 held up a match to the restaurant industry, the chef and artist Tunde Wey asked: «Can you renovate a burning house?» Is it possible to salvage a menu on fire?

Coffee, the Sister of Time

In Oslo, I didn't order dessert. Although I have a sweet tooth, I don't always make it all the way to the last course. I have a reputation for overdoing it on appetizers and going heavy on bread, especially when its crumb is as light as sand and its crust flirts with the rush of high heat. I accept a mint, a chocolate, or a handful of fennel seeds as the end of a meal, but rarely coffee—which fuels my mornings, afternoons, and writing.

But there is a reason why coffee often trails a long meal, serving at its final punctuation. Wine makes you near-sighted. It brings the immediate into focus, blurring the world around you—from the purr of a fan and the conversation at the table next to yours to the dishwasher hidden in the kitchen whose labour may or may not be considered a crime under national law. But caffeine, as Adam Gopnik writes in *The Table Comes First*, is «a far-sighted drug» and, therefore, alcohol's counterparty. «Wine takes us away from the world», Gopnik notes, «and coffee restores us to it again.»

My first year of university, I took a class about divided cities: a comparison between Montreal, where I was studying, enlisted as an example of a city separated by language, Berlin, cleaved by politics, Nairobi, fractured by race, and Beirut, split between religions. Representing the latter, Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness: August, Beirut, 1982*, one of the Palestinian poet's three major prose works, was on the syllabus. Last August, seventeen years later, I thought again of that book and its cover—thin clouds lapping through a sky as blue as the Mediterranean.

«Have you read it?» I asked an anthropologist I had just met at the conference that was my excuse for travelling to Oslo. He studies earthquakes, and so it is his job to survey what happens to people, to their homes, health, and hearts, to their buildings, cities, and communities when the earth below shakes, rattles, and rolls, softening the sturdiness of our worlds and the politics they tether their foundations to. The anthropologist shook his head. «Darwish writes about trying to reach his kitchen, wanting to make coffee,» I detail, «during the 1982 Israeli invasion and bombardment of Beirut.» So what happens when it is what's above and not below that pushes

buildings to crack and crumble?

Lost and Found III – Phuong Ngo: Men Leave Their Corpses, 2022. Pigment print, found photograph, 70 x 50 cm / courtesy of the artist

The poet's only wish is to make a cup of coffee. «All my senses are on their mark,» he writes, «ready at the call to propel my thirst in the direction of the one and only goal: coffee.» It wasn't just the gentle stream of coffee's warmth that Darwish wanted, but its smell and all the routines it accompanies. «The aroma of coffee so I can hold myself together, stand on my feet, and be transformed from something that crawls, into a human being.» He insists that coffee should not be drunk in a hurry because «it is the sister of time, and should be sipped slowly, slowly. Coffee is the sound of taste, a sound for the aroma.»

Even if I don't order coffee to mark a meal's end, I like it when someone else does. The aroma wakes me up, pulling the restaurant's curtains back to reveal the larger world and how appetites build and break it.

The Course after the Last

My sweet tooth obeys the reign of the culinary trinity—appetizer then main then dessert equals a meal. Sweetness is what sounds the end, and the silences in between are a measurement for rating a restaurant. Too long means the service is slow. Too short, and it's rushed. But this is based on the rarely disputed logic that one dish follows another, on a steady rhythm that repeats and varies, and varies and repeats. On

the cultural order that casts savory first—as beginning—and sweet last—as ending.

In 1810, two years into his posting in Paris, the Russian ambassador to France, Alexander Kurakin, introduced the practice of dining where courses come to the table sequentially, one by one, escorted by highly trained waiters—*service à la russe*. It contrasted with *service à la française*, where food comes out all at once, as with buffet tables, potlucks, or Georgian *supras*. The Russian style has since become the Western one, requiring quick-toed servers tasked with the responsibility of making sure that the food is still hot when forks and knives touch down.

More dishes mean more dashes from the kitchen to the table; and fine dining restaurants have further pulled, stretched, and lengthened the appetizer-main-dessert formula. Appetizers have multiplied. Dessert is no longer singular. Fine dining has turned every plate or bowl or spoon into what was once an «intermediate course», a *Zwischengang*, tasked with mediating between the main act and the final. Less of an intermission, and more of an infinity.

At another Copenhagen restaurant, the tally of courses is now 50. A number so high it is the culinary equivalent reminds me of an iconic scene in Walt Disney's 1940 *Fantasia*. In the third segment, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, Mickey Mouse gifts a broom a set of hands with which it must schlep water from a fountain to a basin. Mickey naps contently as the broom continues up and down the stairs. But then the water plunges him into a flood. He pleads with the broom to stop, but it won't, it can't. Mickey spots an axe, rolls up his sleeves, and thrusts his blade, slaughtering the broom's stick, its bristles, its new hands. The broom is broken, still. But then each fractured sliver pulses, turning into a new broom with two hands and two buckets, marching from the fountain with more water in tow. What was one is now many. On the via dolorosa of a fifty-course meal, as soon as the mouth makes one dish disappear, another one appears. And then another one, and another one.

With multiple dessert acts, when does a meal finally come to an end? And what comes after the purported end of fine dining? Like a chef who performs the same dish again and again, I keep asking the same

question: Where does a recipe, or in this case a dish, begin and end? Does it begin in the restaurant kitchen or in its R&D laboratory? In the wholesale market, in the garden, or the farm from which it orders? Does it begin in the soil, in the sand, or the sea? In the hands of the chef who plates it, the tip of the fingers of the worker who supervises the conveyer belt that sorts through produce, or who turns animals into meat? Does it begin in the tires that chaperone ingredients to the table? And why might it matter?

Food writer Helen Rosner titled her *New Yorker* interview with Tunde Wey *The Case for Letting the Restaurant Industry Die*. «I had never said those words explicitly—‹let it die,›» the artist clarified, «—but I don't think the sheer force of the idea is anything new.» He then calls for shifting the attention from apocalypse to prophecy, from letting things die to «what can rise from the rubble.»

Two weeks after I submitted my doctoral dissertation in 2019, the historian Jill Lepore passed through Munich on tour for the German translation of her book *These Truths: A History of the United States*. The Q&A ended with a request: «Could she predict the outcome of the 2020 US presidential election?» someone in the audience asked. «When I received my PhD,» Lepore answered, «I made an oath. A blood oath. I swore that I would never, ever predict the future.»

The past is, obviously, not a crystal ball, and the pages we write about it are not tarot cards. But human appetites shape the future, even if I might disobey my discipline by breaking that oath. One among many examples is a study from 2018 (https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.180325) , which crowned the humble broiler chicken a geological marker, «a signal of a human reconfigured biosphere.» The bones of the 65 billion broiler chickens eaten each year are now mummified records of appetites past, but also the material with which humans sculpt the worlds to come. Restaurants are but one venue for hosting, entertaining, and challenging appetites; and more chefs, like Wey, have shown a credible commitment to clean up the sorcerer's kitchen. By cooking in cultural centres, as part of collectives, and with communities, they've also been cooking toward the course that will follow the last one—a course that will last.

L. Sasha Gora is a cultural historian and leader of the research group Off the Menu: Appetites, Culture, and Environment at Augsburg...