

A review of *The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past* [Book review]

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Book Review

The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past

By Taras Grescoe

Greystone Books, 2023: 312 pages

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Can you find the secrets of the future of humanity in forgotten flavours? *The Lost Supper: Searching for the Future of Food in the Flavors of the Past*, by Canadian journalist Taras Grescoe, talks about diversity as resilience, be it in human cultures, natural ecosystems, bodies' microorganisms, or food systems. He “makes the case that the future of food lies in the past, including lost, forgotten, or nearly vanished foods” (p. 6). The chapters are standalone essays about flavours lost to history, interlinked with the author's exploration of contemporary food systems. With a journalistic eye, he tackles the challenges by dialoguing with experts and biting into lucky findings. “To save it, you've got to eat it” (p. 12) but you also have to know what to eat, and Grescoe's purpose is to share food's cultural, and

ecological origins through his engaging and inquisitive writing.

The prologue, first chapter, and the epilogue are set in the author's kitchen, where he and family members give entomophagy, the practice of eating insects, a try. Leaving his kitchen behind, Grescoe sets out on a hunt for other tasty food items. Geographically, we move from Grescoe's home in Montreal to cities (Mexico City, Cádiz, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu), regions (Puglia, Cappadocia), national parks (Yorkshire Dales), and islands (Ossabaw Island, Mi'Wer'La). The chapter titles provide the location while the subtitles indicate the foodstuff to be examined. From straightforward “Some Pig”, “Bread Alone” and “Hard Cheese”, to the more evocative “The Quintessential of Putrescence” and “The

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Death of the Immortals”, these subtitles make you wonder what you are in for taste wise.

He is generally positive about the future of food, although he admits in the first chapter: “It was hard not to see edible bugs as just another downward step in the industrialization of appetites” (p. 22). We then fly to Mexico for egg entomophagy in Chapter two, between market detours, and histories of colonization. Sometimes the lively, rich, and detailed chronicles build great expectation of the final encounter, leaving the reader with a dry mouth when the taste experience is limited to one short paragraph.

Chapter three is centered on “Some Pig” on “Ossabaw Island”. The author navigates between small island farms and the pork industry, highlighting the struggles and strengths of one, and the dark side(s) of the other. Putrescence makes its entrance in Chapter four, where from the port of Cádiz, we sail around the Mediterranean sea from an ancient Roman perspective, looking at the fish preservation practices and flavour enhancer: garum. A different type of spiciness takes over in Chapter five, crumbling “Hard Cheese” in the heart of England. Between dry stone walls, Grescoe reminds himself that “cheese is so changeable that [...] it may be impossible to recreate what it tasted like in the past” (p. 123), reminding us of the book’s aim.

With Chapter six we reach the heel of the Italian peninsula, contemplating “The Death of the Immortals”, by way of Xylella, a bacteria rotting the roots of century-old trees. Like cheese, olives change every season, every year, and an oil from the past that talks about the future leaves a bitter taste on the tongue. Chapter seven is the strength of the book, the story of a lost plant, and spice, that has many look-alikes but that, thanks to genetic comparison, could be found again. “Silphium [...] represents the first recorded instance of species extinction” caused by humans, writes Grescoe, being “also the first instance of such extinctions induced

primarily by climate change of any cause or scale” (p. 197). In Chapter eight grains and bread are protagonists. The hybrid, high-yielding wheat that started the green revolution was developed only thanks to the “[...] access to thousands of different landraces that farmers had preserved in their fields for centuries [...]” (p. 232). The irony is that biodiversity itself became the very first victim of the green revolution.

The closing chapter “Mi’Wer’La - The Cooked and the Raw”, introduces international readers to the Kwak’waka name for Vancouver Island. Camas, the mysterious protagonist, was a widely consumed tuber on the Northwest Coast of North America, before European colonisation. To talk about camas, is to talk about Indigenous food staples, and in this piece Grescoe exposes the oppressions Indigenous peoples have lived through, and how forced dislocation of families and communities weigh heavily on the loss of food knowledge and practice.

The target audience seems to be Northern American given the supermarket chains and cities referenced. It is a fitting choice for students seeking an introduction to food history, as they try to piece together the connections between human appetite and its consequences. To satiate curious readers, a selected bibliography organized by chapter, gives further literature suggestions, situating the book somewhere between academic publication and non-fiction. *The Lost Supper* is a rich introduction to the complex world of food stories with its descriptive vocabulary and its appeal to the senses.

This book’s missing ingredient, however, is the lack of narrative that threads the chapters together. Indeed, it is a work in progress, since the author explores other stories of forgotten flavour on the ongoing blog by the same name, extending the potential of the limited publication. It is a pandemic-born project, and the travel restrictions reverberate in the areas touched by the quest,

as Grescoe states in the acknowledgements. Nevertheless, the limited geographic selection is made weaker because of the absence of a cohesive project. The reader is left

with a longing for lost flavours from other parts of the world.

Penelope Volinia is a culinary environmental humanities PhD researcher at the University of Augsburg, where she is part of the “Off The Menu: Appetites, Culture, and Environment” research group, led by L. Sasha Gora. Penelope’s research focuses on how cuisines adopt or reject “invasive” species, and reflects how the shifts in human appetites shape cultural and gastronomic sensibilities. Although she is currently diving deep into the (culinary) Blue Humanities, she jumps from a background that spans between design (BA in Graphic Design and Communication, IUAV) and ethnobotany (MA in Food Innovation and Management, UNISG).