

(Almost) Too Good to Eat: Marking Life Transitions with Food

July 14-December 8, 2013



CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY



Tea ceremony to honor visiting dignitaries celebrating the 50th anniversary of Buffalo's relationship with its sister city, Kanazawa, Japan, 2012.



Detail of Atsuko Mitchell, assisted by Takako Michii, performing tea ceremony, 2012.



Earka Luzecky, in her kitchen, rolling out long cords of dough to braid into a wreath for a *korovai*, an elaborate Ukrainian wedding bread, 2013. The braid represents the couple joined together by God.

(Almost) Too Good to Eat: Marking Life Transitions with Food

July 14-December 8, 2013

In the study of folklore, a good portion of the research process involves spending time listening, asking questions, and observing people go about their daily lives. Folklorists joke that sitting around kitchen tables is one of their main professional activities. This detail is never truer than when studying traditional foodways. Sitting at Earka Luzecky's kitchen table in Rochester, she served me a heaping plate of Ukrainian-style stuffed cabbage, a dish she considers representative of her ethnic identity. She told me, "If you're going to come to my house, I'm going to cook you Ukrainian food!" I was spending the day with Earka to document the lengthy process of making *korovai*, a decorative sweet bread displayed and eaten at weddings. To garnish our lunch, she laid out a bowl of sour cream—the customary choice, as well as her preference—a bottle of ketchup; the two options reflect her blended experiences as an immigrant whose family was displaced from the Ukraine during World War II. Before we ate, Earka bowed her head to say grace, asking God to bless our meal, our new friendship,



Korovai in the Peremyshl regional style created by Earka Luzecky for exhibition.

and to guide her hand in making beautiful *korovai*.

Food is a meaningful part of our daily lives. By preparing and serving food, we can demonstrate our hospitality to guests while also revealing important insights into our personal histories, beliefs, and tastes. For Earka, as for people everywhere, familiar foods provide a sense of continuity and wellbeing, a way to bridge time, a reminder of home. A shared meal—as in this instance of stuffed

cabbage—reaffirms her feelings of family cohesion, ethnic identity, and spiritual union.

Food is also a potential media for everyday artistry, one that appeals to all senses of perception. Master cooks know how to perfect common recipes to signal their understanding of good taste and to create stunning culinary presentations. Elaborate displays of abundance, like a table set for Easter dinner or an altar piled with *pan de muerto* for Day of the Dead, simultaneously celebrate life, community, and aesthetic excellence.



Wedding guest applying a blessing of *tika* (a sticky mixture made of cooked rice, yogurt, and vermillion powder) to bride Bishnu Dhungana's forehead, 2013.

As integral components of holidays and ceremonies, particular ingredients, dishes, or meals are singled out as significant. Traditional foods possess symbolic associations that can be creatively harnessed to express a variety of ideas. In some cases, their ability to communicate complicated concepts and beliefs outweigh their nutritional properties; some traditional foods are not meant to be eaten. A piece of fruit at a Hindu wedding may be adorned with money and flower petals, then presented as a sacred offering, enabling relations between humans and the divine. A plate of foodstuffs arranged at Passover may serve as a reminder of shared religious principles, as well as past events in Jewish history.

(Almost) Too Good to Eat explores some of the cross-cultural ways that food nourishes not just our bodies, but also our social and spiritual lives, feeding our human needs for comfort and communion. Focusing on a sampling of ritual foods connected to transitional moments—from daily acts of prayer and hospitality, to cyclical celebrations, to the singular experience of migration—this show demonstrates the universal role

of food as a mediator within human, spiritual, spatial, and temporal relationships.

What we eat identifies us, uniting humanity as the animals that cook, while simultaneously dividing us into smaller social categories influenced by communal tastes and habits, as well as geography and history. School children are commonly introduced to the world's cultural diversity by comparing how different populations address basic human needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Foodways are key to understanding what a group of people value, believe, and savor. Possible examples of ritual food, even in a small corner of the world, are countless. The case studies included in this exhibition represent recent fieldwork conducted in Western New York, from the intimate viewpoint of a family kitchen, to the commercial realm of a bakery counter, to the civic and educational sphere of public events. We hope that visitors can draw many parallels from their own experiences, discerning the cultural in the edible, and appreciating traditional foods for their multifaceted role as a daily tool and an everyday art.



Bishnu and Narayan Dhungana on their wedding day, their foreheads covered in *tika*, 2013.



Helen Gebrmariam performing a coffee ceremony for guests to an Ethiopian feast organized by Journey's End Refugee Services, 2013.

Acknowledgments

Curator of Folk Arts

Carrie Hertz

Photography

Carrie Hertz
Lukia Costello

Special Artworks Created
for Exhibition:

Todos Santos Ofrenda

Leonel Rosario
Dolores Rosario
Galilea Rosario
Leonel Rosario, Jr.

Polish Easter Lamb Cakes

Melanie I. Krygier-Lamastra
of Melanie's Sweets
Unlimited

European-American "Dummy" Wedding Cakes

The Design Team led by
David Muscoreil of
Muscoreil's Fine Desserts
and Gourmet Bistro

Ukrainian Korovai

Earka Luzecky

Bhutanese-Nepali Hindu

Wedding Altar
Padma Khanal
Khem Khanal
Tika Nirola
Bishnu Adhikari

Japanese Tea Ceremony

Arrangement
Dr. Takako Michii

The Folk Arts Program of the Castellani Art Museum would like to thank the following organizations and individuals for making this exhibition and its programming possible: Lukia Costello who contributed beautiful photography and an infectious enthusiasm to this project; Journey's End Refugee Services, especially Andy Cammarata and Brian Brown-Cashdollar; Abba and Naima Tesfu of Lucy Ethiopian Cuisine; Helen Gebrmariam; Bishnu and Chitra Adhikari for their continued generosity and support; Hindu priests Padma Khanal, Khem Khanal, and Tika Nirola for their patient explanations and beautiful rice flour drawings; members of the Buffalo Bhutanese-Nepali community who allowed me to attend and photograph their wedding ceremonies—Narayan and Bishnu Dhungana, Lokesh and Karma Rai, and Meena Siwakoti, as well as their families who kept me well-fed; the Rosario Family, owners of Mariachi de Oro Mexican Grill in Medina, and folklorist Karen Canning who introduced me to them; Dr. Takako Michii for her profound knowledge and goodwill; Atsuko Mitchell; Earka Luzecky and Melanie I. Krygier-Lamastra for presenting me with delicious treats; Irene Grassman; David Muscoreil and his design team at Muscoreil's including Lauren Dickerson, Mallory Battistoni, Samantha Payne, Lindsay Gregg, Melissa Brophy, Karen Stevens, Lauren Briand, and Vanessa Sullivan; Karla Wiseman and the Getzville Jewish Community Center.



This project is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew Cuomo and the New York State Legislature. Sponsored, in part, by Muscoreil's Fine Desserts and Gourmet Cakes (3960 Niagara Falls Blvd, North Tonawanda, NY); and Melanie's Sweets Unlimited (The Broadway Market, Buffalo, NY). Programming sponsored, in part, by Tops Friendly Markets.

Photography by Carrie Hertz



**CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM**
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY
castellaniartmuseum.org

Museum and Shop

Niagara University, NY 14109-1938
716.286.8200 fax: 716.286.8289
Tuesday to Saturday 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, 1:00-5:00 p.m.
Docent tours available upon request. Call
716.286.8200 for additional information.

Castellani Art Museum at the Falls

Conference Center Niagara Falls
101 Old Falls Street Niagara Falls, NY 14303
716.286.8200 fax: 716.286.8289
Monday to Friday, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.