



THE INSATIABLE PALETTE

Garden of earthly delights, indeed

By GEORGETTE GOUVEIA

IN A 2009 NANCY MEYERS MOVIE, Meryl Streep plays a baker who has a fling with her ex (Alec Baldwin), just as her interest in an architect (Steve Martin) is heating up. Like all Meyers' films, this one is pure Martha Stewart porn. Though everyone seems to have a demanding career, the characters spend most of their time luxuriating in splendid surroundings – houses, hotels, glass-filled offices – and eating. Streep's baker bonds with the architect over homemade chocolate croissants. Later, the ex-hubby shows up at her gracious home for a night of rapture, informing their suitably bemused adult kids at the breakfast table the next morning that their mother is a wonderful cook.

The movie is titled "It's Complicated," which just about sums up our – and the arts' – attitude toward what we eat.

"Food is the most profound relationship we have with nature," says Mia Brownell, a New Rochelle-based painter, and professor of art at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven, who specializes in scientifically inspired still lifes. "It's the intersection of our bodies and agriculture."

And of our needs and desires. We have to eat. We want to eat. But we also want to eat whatever, whenever we want and still remain miraculously thin, toned, youthful and beautiful – to have our cake and eat it, too, as it were. No wonder artistic depictions of food are more layered than a sandwich at the Carnegie Deli.

It has been thus ever since the 16th century when Dutch painter Pieter Aertsen and his nephew, Flemish painter Joachim Beuckelaer, pioneered the still life with a helping of both spirit and flesh.

"These first images have a moralizing dimension," says Peter C. Sutton, executive director of the Bruce Museum in Greenwich and one of the foremost authorities on northern Baroque art.

Often these Old Masters paintings juxtaposed huge piles of meat with such biblical stories as Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary, a parable of the virtues of contemplation.

Mia Brownell's "Still Life with Bird and Bee" (2011), oil on canvas, private collection, New York City, courtesy of Sloan Fine Art, New York City.

"Here food is a symbol of *vita carnali*," says Sutton, curator of "Brueghel, Rubens, Jordaens... Masterpieces of European Painting From the Hohenbuchau Collection" (through Sept. 20 at the Liechtenstein Museum in Vienna), which contains many still lifes and banquet scenes. "It's food as temporal, food as carnal."

It wasn't long, however, before artists loosened earthly food from its biblical moorings and went straight for the sensuous and sensual. The gleaming grapes, spotted apples and striped figs in the paintings of Caravaggio (1571-1610) are as ripe as the heavy-lidded, full-lipped boy toys who offer them to the viewers.

Amid the Impressionist and Postimpressionist foodies, Sutton points to Manet's brioches, Renoir's strawberries and Cézanne's peaches and pears, all caressed in color. (Not one to miss a beat, or a buck, the publishing world has a whole series of books on the Impressionists' and Postimpressionists' relationship to food – "The Impressionists' Table," "Monet's Table," "Van Gogh's Table," among them.)

Certainly, Manet's "Le déjeuner sur l'herbe" (1863) made blatant food's connection to sex with its nude female subject – picnicking with two fully clothed dandies – as part of a still life that includes bread, fruit, an overturned basket and her discarded clothes.



Paul Cézanne's "Dish of Apples" (circa 1875-77), oil on canvas, explores the sensuous link between food and art. Copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

CATERING

TASTEFULLY YOURS



Elegant catering for any occasion

South Salem, NY • Briarcliff Manor, NY

(914) 762 0299

www.tastefullyyourscatering.com

tastefullyyours@optonline.net



A century later, Hollywood – which never met an orgy scene it didn't like ("The Ten Commandments," "Cleopatra," "Caligula," "Perfume") – presented one of its wittiest depictions of food and sex in the Oscar-winning adaptation of Henry Fielding's ribald novel "Tom Jones." Here happy-go-lucky Tom (Albert Finney) and Mrs. Waters (Joyce Redman) share a little culinary foreplay at an inn. As the camera cuts back and forth between the two, they sink their teeth and fingers into moist, juicy (chicken) breasts and thighs, leaving little doubt in the viewer's mind as to what will be served for dessert.

Lust and gluttony are two of the seven deadly sins and no sin can go unpunished for long, can it? In the vanitas paintings of the Baroque, such as the "Still Life" by Johann Friedrich Gruber (1662-1681), the wine jar lies empty on its side, the cantaloupe has been cut, the orange peel unspooled. The vanitas still lifes take their theme from Ecclesiastes ("vanity of vanities, all is vanity"). Food is perishable, and so are we.

"To look at the way a society treats food," Mia Brownell says, "is to reveal how it treats itself."

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE ARTISTS LOOSENED EARTHLY FOOD FROM ITS BIBLICAL MOORINGS AND WENT STRAIGHT FOR THE SENSUOUS AND SENSUAL.

In the 20th and 21st centuries – in which war and technology have combined to create a segmented, mechanized world – food has become a metaphor for the divided self. The joyless performer in Franz Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist" (1922) can never be satisfied – neither by any sustenance nor by the attention he receives.

Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's contemporary performances, which involve nudity, bondage, raw meat, rotting sugar cane and redolent tea bags, suggest not only the oppressiveness of the Castro regime but women's ambivalent responses to their own bodies.

Even Mia Brownell's elegant still lifes – with their opalescent grapes, protein strands and chicken carcasses – remind us of science's uneasy relationship with nature.

But it isn't all spilled milk and spoiled goods. Sometimes, to rewrite Freud, a cookie is only a cookie. Or in the case of the madeleine delectably crumbling in a cup of tea in Marcel Proust's "Remembrance of Things Past," sometimes a cookie is the floodgate of memory.

Think of Lucy and Ethel trying to keep up with the bonbons on the assembly line – and consuming more than they box – in the classic "I Love Lucy" episode; Paul Newman's Cool Hand Luke defiantly downing those 50 eggs; Juliette Binoche playfully whipping up confections and joie de vivre in "Chocolat."

And for every Hollywood movie or TV series in which the dinner table is a battleground ("Ordinary People," "American Beauty," CBS' "Bluebloods") there is one in which it is a foretaste of heaven. Food, like art, is transcendent.

In the 1987 Oscar winner "Babette's Feast," the title character – a French maid to two pious spinster-sisters in 19th-century Jutland – uses all her lottery winnings to create a sumptuous repast for them and their pastor-father's strict congregation. At first, the guests resist the epicurean delights placed before them. But gradually, they – and we – are plunged into an experience of color and life that heals old wounds, revives past loves and replenishes the spirit.

At the end, however, one of the sisters regrets that Babette has spent all her money on the feast.

"An artist," she responds, "is never poor."

It is, you see, that complicated.

And that simple. 🍷

Mia Brownell's "Still Life with Double Helix" (2007), oil on canvas, private collection, Boston.