
“Strange” Foods, Taboos, and German Tastes

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Food plays an important role in intercultural encounters, both literally and metaphorically. As Warren Belasco remarks in his introduction to *Food Nations: Selling Tastes in Consumer Societies*, “Food choices establish boundaries and borders” (2). Food identifies who we are, as individuals and as nations, and our tastes are as telling as our distastes (Belasco, *Food* 1). Globalization has made diverse cuisines more available, both abroad and at home, and the barriers to food migration seem to be falling. But, as John Feffer asserts in “The Politics of Dog,” “not all foods are equal” (32). The consumers of unusual food may become ostracized, or the previously unfamiliar food may become part of the national diet.¹ This process of incorporation of previously unfamiliar foods sometimes results in new culinary creations, like the Turkish-German invention Döner Kebab that has become the quintessential German snack food, surpassing both hamburgers and sausages in popularity.²

Investigating contemporary German reports of encounters with “strange” and “taboo” food, we consider the cultural specificity of taste and the challenges one faces when trying to venture outside of the established culinary system. We can also examine the tensions between nationally engrained prescriptions and prohibitions concerning food and the multifaceted impact of culinary globalization.³ Three different types of texts from the early 2000s, a time of heightened awareness regarding the widespread effects of globalization, highlight these topics. First, a newspaper article about the perils of eating in China, Lena Corell’s “Chinesisch Essen—schwer gemacht,” introduces and relies on the concepts of taste, taboos, and disgust. It thus sets the stage for the ensuing examination of two non-fictional texts by contemporary German novelist Birgit Vanderbeke. In her biographical essay “Billiges Fleisch,” Vanderbeke “outs” herself as a willing consumer of horsemeat. Beyond a discussion of her personal food preferences, Vanderbeke provides an insightful account of historical changes in the culinary habits and taboos of postwar West Germany. This leads to an analysis of a rather unusual cookbook by the same author, *Schmeckt’s? Kochen ohne Tabu*. In this collection of recipes and food philosophy, written in the same easy-going conversational tone that forms the basis for Vanderbeke’s literary success, the author argues for a

return to a traditional method of cooking from scratch and using non-industrially processed ingredients like offal that once used to be commonplace and are now largely absent from most Germans' dinner table.

All of these texts concern culinary taboos while giving voice to personal and cultural expressions of taste. These texts thus provide a snapshot of contemporary German sensibilities regarding food, and they allow us to gain insights about the cultural specificity of taste, historical changes in our culinary value judgments, and the impact of culinary globalization. They show the multiple entwinements between the local and the global, and how transgressions of culinary prescriptions test our national sensibilities. Corell's text exemplifies the explicit connection between food, identities, and globalization drawn by cultural critic Fabio Parasecoli: "Examining travelers' behaviors can shed a revealing light on the role of food in constituting and reinforcing personal and shared identities, a factor that acquires particular relevance at a time of globalization and swift technological changes" (128). Vanderbeke's texts are situated closer to home. She asks us to critically think about our culinary practices, taboos, and value judgments. Taken together, these texts tell a fascinating story about the role food plays in contemporary German society.

Taste, both in its figurative usage as a gauge of artistic value and in its literal meaning connected to the appreciation and evaluation of food and drink, is commonly regarded as a personal and highly subjective attribute. And yet taste informs our private and public lives in many demarcating and defining ways: "Taste creates group solidarity, whether the group in question is a world civilization, a nation-state, a class, a caste, an ethnic group, or a family" (Flammang 170). In her seminal work *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Carolyn Korsmeyer points out that of all the senses, taste requires the most intimate connection with the object of perception, as that what is to be tasted must enter the mouth (3). This, however, does not imply a "natural" connection: "If tastes were simply 'natural,' they should not vary any more than does binocular vision. But food practices and attendant taste preferences exhibit strikingly different patterns in different societies" (6). While there is a genetic component to taste,⁴ Korsmeyer concludes that much of the importance and valuation of food is cognitive: it "has a symbolic function that extends beyond even the most sophisticated savoring" (103).

Beyond any personal preferences and class distinctions, taste is culturally specific. The tasting body is socially embedded (Mol 278) and tastes are relational (Mol 279). Signs of good taste and refined manners in one culture might be signs of bad taste and poor judgment in another. While there are certainly culinary differences within one culture, the differences across cultures tend to be even bigger. Many culinary delicacies inspire fear or disgust within another cultural

framework. The cuisine of China, for example, is widely considered to be one of the best.⁵ China has a long-established and well-developed culinary tradition, and within Chinese culture a lot of interest and honor is given to food and its rituals.⁶ Nevertheless, many Western travelers are very apprehensive when they first encounter authentic Chinese cuisine.⁷ Stereotypes and preconceptions cause them to approach the “unknown” with a curious mix of excitement, bravado, and disgust. Not surprisingly, this mix of emotional responses also informs many Westerners’ reports of culinary adventures in the “Far East.”

A prime example for this type of travel writing is Lena Corell’s account of eating in China: “Chinesisch Essen—schwer gemacht. Gepeitschte Gurken: Von den Widrigkeiten des Restaurantbesuchs in China.” This article appeared in 2002 in the German weekly *Freitag*, a newspaper that takes great pride in its critical stance towards contemporary politics and culture. Its intended audience is Germans interested in and open to cross-cultural experiences. Already the title of Corell’s essay, however, evokes none of the pleasures, but only the “difficulty” and “adversities” of eating in a “strange” and unfamiliar country. The reader is invited to identify and sympathize with the writer who bravely subjects herself to, and of course heroically overcomes, these challenges.

Despite proclaiming her love for the varied Chinese cuisine, Corell’s article mainly informs us of her attempts to conquer, and at the same time justify, her own feelings of distaste and disgust. Disgust, while it has its origins in distaste, is not restricted to the sensory properties (taste, smell, visual) of a substance. It can be caused by anticipated consequences, or by what we know about the nature or origin of this substance (Rozin et al. 67).⁸ One of the reasons for Corell’s disgust is the supposed lack of taboos concerning the edibility of animals: “In China muss man bei Essensexperimenten mit dem Außergewöhnlichsten rechnen, denn alles Lebendige gilt als essbar.” Corell describes seeing grilled sparrows and even cockroaches on a stick at Beijing’s outdoor markets, and wonders what people in the south, who are rumored to be more adventurous, are eating: “Affenhirn und Adler wahrscheinlich.” The cause for her distaste is both conceptual (her “große Tierliebe,” which supposedly does not extend to chickens and cows), and visceral: “Wenn am Nebentisch eine Mutter und ihr neunjähriger Sohn durchsichtige Plastikhandschuhe tragen, damit große blutige Knochen umfassen und mit dem Strohalm das Knochenmark austrinken, hilft es nicht einmal wegzuschauen, das schmatzende Sauggeräusch schwingt einem den Rest der Mahlzeit in den Ohren.” It also extends to the places where it is served:

Um auf den kleinen Holz- oder Plastikschemeln einer Garküche Platz zu nehmen, muss ich über die Spuckflecken, Plastikfetzen, Essensreste, benutzten Stäbchen

und Zahnstocher auf dem Boden hinwegsehen, die klebrigen Tische nicht berühren und am besten meinen Blick nicht auf die Finger der Köche richten. Es gilt, meine anerzogenen Hygienevorstellungen kurzzeitig zu vergessen.

Although she recognizes that her ideas of hygiene are culturally specific, she still posits them as superior to the low level of cleanliness that she describes with so much attention to every detail. She does not explicitly elucidate why she ventures into locales that clearly are not used to coping with foreigners. One can only assume that she hopes to garner cultural respect with her German readers and raise her own status by venturing into areas most other Westerners do not dare to explore.

Despite her reservations about what is served, how it is served, and where it is served, Corell nevertheless forces herself to overcome her reluctance and venture beyond the typical “Ausländergerichte,” while at the same time making sure that her culinary explorations do not stray too far from her Western European norms. Corell’s text thus exemplifies the double-pronged approach to novelty that is evident in much culinary travel writing. On the one hand, “the search for new taste sensations and eating experiences is considered a means of improving oneself, adding ‘value’ and a sense of excitement to life” (Lupton 126). On the other hand, this exposure to the “unknown” quite often serves to re-confirm one’s own culturally specific tastes and culinary boundaries. Views about food delineate an “us” versus “them”; they become a marker of identity and boundaries. After all, as cultural geographers David Bell and Gill Valentine point out, “communities are about exclusion as well as inclusion; and food is one way in which boundaries get drawn, and insiders and outsiders distinguished” (91).

Lena Corell’s account gives a good example of a writer trying to reaffirm her own culinary belief system by exposing herself to the foods of “others.” She consumes the unknown not in an attempt to broaden her own horizons, but to confirm cultural taboos, tastes, and prejudices. There is never any doubt that she considers her culturally specific tastes as superior to those of the Chinese. Despite having very limited knowledge of Chinese cuisine, she feels justified to judge what is eaten (the unpalatable), how it is eaten (loudly), and where it is eaten (in an unhygienic environment). She passes judgment on the others and their habits, and she simultaneously tries to raise her own status by subjecting herself to these “deplorable” conditions and even copying some of the behaviors that she previously complained about: “Schon sehr ‘sinisiert’ spuckte ich ohne Scham die dunklen Bröckchen, die sich bei jedem Schluck in meinem Mund sammelten, auf den Tisch.”

Lucy M. Long, in her analysis of culinary tourism, lists the following reasons for consuming an “Other”: curiosity, boredom with the familiar, and the wish to

belong to a specific community of eaters (195). All of these reasons are evident in Corell's account. The willingness to try new and unusual foods is commonly understood as a sign of sophistication and distinction; "eating unusual foods is part of what generates foodie status" (Johnston and Baumann 120). An important component of this project is the perceived transgression of the edible-inedible divide: "A good deal of recondite and sophisticated eating actually seems to be built upon (or even to be a variation of) that which disgusts, endangers, or repels" (Korsmeyer, "Delightful" 148). This trend in food consumption continues to hold and seems to have even grown in recent years.¹⁰

While ostensibly a first-person narrative, Corell invites her German readers to accompany her on her adventures, sympathize with her predicament, and agree with her attempts to make sense of her experiences. Food is thus being used to strengthen cultural ties within the "imagined community" of Germans who are supposedly cosmopolitan and open to new adventures while still applying their own culturally determined value judgments.¹¹ The Chinese are constructed as an inferior other against which the more discerning and sophisticated food tastes of the Germans are defined. Not coincidentally, Corell's account of eating in China ends with the evocation of her culinary homeland: "Ein morgendlicher Magen weiß genau, wo die kulinarische Heimat anfängt und wo sie aufhört." Despite admitting to being slightly ashamed about her own "Globalisierungswunsch" when faced with Chinese breakfast (wishing for a standard continental breakfast of coffee, toast, and jam, instead of broth, fried dough, and pickled vegetables), she never seems to question the cultural assumptions that influence her "tastes." With a mix of voyeurism, revulsion, and xenophobia, she re-establishes a gastronomical order that is at the core of her own cultural belief system.

Corell's text exemplifies how food plays an important role in boundary crossings and maintenance processes. Contrary to our common belief that travel always expands the culinary horizons, sometimes the opposite is true. Sociological studies confirm this observation. Bardhi, Ostberg, and Bengtsson conducted a study based on interviews with 28 Americans after a ten-day trip to China. The informants attempted to make sense of their travel experience through a constant process of categorization and comparison of foods (139). For many of the interviewed travelers, food consumption was less influenced by a desire for new experiences, and became a symbolic project of maintaining boundaries instead (151). There is evidence of this dynamic in Corell's text as well. While Corell was willing to expose herself to new experiences, she still longed to maintain and reaffirm culinary boundaries.

Corell's text shows how neophilic lust and titillation are intrinsically connected with the fear of transgressing culturally engrained boundaries. Consuming the

unknown is a frightening and at the same time exciting escape from the constraints of order, from the restrictions and limitations of our “civilized” society. “Norm-breaking” foods violate norms of the culinary and cultural mainstream, and there is a history of celebrating these transgressions in food writing. As Johnston and Baumann have pointed out, eating and writing about norm-breaking food provides a “way for food writing to confer distinction and status though the quest for exoticism” (119). Westerners quite often are considered sophisticated food adventurers when they dare to eat the same kind of food that the local population eats. And yet, as Lisa Heldke, a renowned feminist philosopher and food critic, points out, we “like our exoticism somewhat familiar, recognizable, *controllable*” (*Exotic Appetites* 19). What Corell presents as an individual endeavor thus becomes an exploration of cultural conventions; adventure is tied in with commodification, and crossing boundaries reaffirms their existence.

Heldke examines how food writing often “creates and encourages a quest for the exotic, a zest for authenticity, and a tendency to treat the ethnic Other as a commodity I may exploit as I choose” (*Exotic Appetites* 62). While many “adventure eaters” have good intentions and are genuinely interested in learning about other cultures, not just eating their food, it is hard to avoid what Heldke calls “cultural food colonialism” (“Let’s Eat Chinese” 78). This becomes especially relevant in consideration of the continuing effects of globalization. The obsession with “global cuisine” is certainly one of the most dominant trends in Western culinary culture of the 1990s and early 2000s.¹² While consumer interest in global cuisine continues to rise,¹³ some food writers now complain that global cuisine leads to increased sameness and implore chefs to focus on local cuisine instead of trying to incorporate global ingredients and techniques. In her article “The Insidious Rise of Cosmo-Cuisine,” Salma Abdelnour laments the “hodgepodge of ingredients, techniques and cultural references from pretty much anywhere on earth” that causes the cuisines of the world to merge “into one giant, amorphous mass.” In a similar vein, Lawrence Osborne coined the term “whereverness” for the sense that cultural experiences become interchangeable all over the world (8).

Recent calls to think globally and act locally attempt to counter the negative impact of global homogenization.¹⁴ These efforts to connect the growing global market with localized life are known as “glocalization,” a newly coined word that combines global and local, and they are especially relevant in regard to food. By focusing on the local while being mindful of global implications of food choices, Birgit Vanderbeke follows this call to glocalization. Although Vanderbeke is best known for her fictional texts, two of her non-fictional works—a biographical essay and a cookbook¹⁵—both written in the same irreverent conversational style that

Vanderbeke is famous for, offer new perspectives on German tastes and trends in German food consumption. They also affirm the central role food plays in our lives, both as individuals and as a society. An analysis of the role of food, as Vanderbeke portrays it, thus leads to a deeper understanding of contemporary German society.

Vanderbeke's insightful and poignant essay "Billiges Fleisch," part of a collection of texts by and about Vanderbeke,¹⁶ highlights Germany's culinary habits and taboos. The title of her text already raises questions about the connotations of the adjective cheap in regard to meat. It also underlines the economic and class associations of food choices. A particular type or cut of meat tends to be cheap not necessarily because it is of inferior quality, but due to its lack in popularity. These valuations differ between cultures and have shifted over time. In "Billiges Fleisch," the author "outs" herself as somebody who enjoys eating horsemeat and other stigmatized cuts of meat like lamb feet and brain.¹⁷ Growing up in the 1960s, Vanderbeke was exposed to a wide variety of innards like tripe that used to be ubiquitous but that are now almost completely banned from most families' dinner tables. Already in the 1960s her mother's trips to the horse butcher, however, were as clandestine as her father's visits with prostitutes. As Vanderbeke points out, a "proper" West German family of the sixties ate pork roast, not horsemeat. The consumption of horsemeat had more than gustatory implications: it was considered the ultimate transgression, "der Sündenfall schlechthin" (49).

Vanderbeke's history of food consumption is a personal one, and at the same time it is a history of West Germany. This correlation of public and private history is typical for Vanderbeke's style. Richard Wagner describes her method as follows: "Birgit Vanderbeke setzt das Biographische als Denk- und Schreibfigur ein, die Biographie wird so zum Erzählkörper, und was dabei entsteht, ist gewissermaßen auch eine Geschichte der Bundesrepublik" (9). The red thread that connects Vanderbeke's culinary history of West Germany through the decades is her history of taboos. Taboos are related to class and race, and the assumed or real breaking of cultural taboos is often used as the basis for stereotypes and racist or classist othering. This correlation is established from the beginning of Vanderbeke's text: "Ein rassistisches Gerücht war: daß im chinesischen Restaurant in X Katzen im Essen wären. Ein Klassengerücht war es, daß die Familie H. Gulasch mit Kitekat machen würde" (48). These racist and classist rumors, that Chinese people eat cats and poor people eat cat food, form the basis for ostracizing the "other." It is against this backdrop that Vanderbeke situates her own family: poor, originally from East Germany, and desperately trying to fit in.¹⁸

Vanderbeke reminds us that there is a clear relationship between breaking taboos and being an outsider in a society. The determination which part comes

first is often less obvious: does breaking taboos turn somebody into an outsider, or is it one's position as an outsider that compels, and at times allows, one to break taboos in the first place?¹⁹ The problem with taboos is that, contrary to other laws and prohibitions, they need not even be spoken out loud to be effective. They are passed on through example and education, and within a society they are so prevalent that many people are not even aware of them. As Vanderbeke asserts, neither violence nor censorship is needed in order to enforce taboos: they are usually so internalized that they work psychologically through shame, disgust, and embarrassment (49-50). Vanderbeke's family was marginalized in West Germany because of their East German origin. Nevertheless, the parents attempted to socially situate themselves above uneducated factory workers, despite being poor themselves. This carefully erected façade required a wall of silence around their financial situation as well as their eating habits, which in turn reinforced the connection between the breaking of society's taboos and shame.

Vanderbeke's text offers an astute reading of Germany's history of food consumption. She gives a detailed timeline that chronicles the changes in West German culinary prescriptions and prohibitions. While in the 1960s pork roast was *de rigueur*, in the 1970s the culinary elites—that is, the taboo-setting classes—began to be ashamed of their pork roasts (50). Germans started to become “cosmopolitan,” a global trend that was reinforced by Germans' love of traveling and really took off during the 1980s. Germans also learned about foreign foods through increased immigration of foreigners, whose food is quite often accepted more readily than the people themselves. Germans consequently introduced many ethnic or pseudo-ethnic dishes into their homes and restaurants.²⁰ Of course, as Sneja Gunew contends, food “has long been the acceptable face of multiculturalism; indeed, there is a long tradition of food as a signifier for cultural difference” (146). This becomes problematic when cultural diversity translates into and is restricted to the enrichment of national cuisines. While exposure to new cuisines can mark “a transition from a parochial, Eurocentric lifeworld, to a new kind of cosmopolitan sensibility” (Johnston and Baumann 104), more cosmopolitan food does not necessarily make our world more global in regard to tolerance and respect of other cultures.

There is also another political component in regard to Germans' embrace of cosmopolitan cuisine. In her analysis of transnational food migration in the postwar German context, Maren Möhring speculates that “eating out in ethnic restaurants might have been instilled by the desire to become cosmopolitan, to internationalize German identity after 1945” (141). This leads to the question whether Germans consciously or subconsciously have tried to become cosmopolitan to get away from

an unsavory history. Vanderbeke ironically insinuates as much with the following statement: “In den siebziger und achtziger Jahren wurde Deutschland allmählich kosmopolitisch, weil die Leute mit dem Exschweinebraten endlich den Krieg vom Hals haben ... wollten” (50). Pork roast, a traditional German food, stands for a German past that is better forgotten or, if that’s not possible, repressed.

The 1980s were not only the beginning of a cosmopolitan era in German food, they also saw the rise of many fears related to food, fears about hormones and radiation, and insecurities about food’s fat content and nutritional value (“Billiges Fleisch” 55). Diet foods were en vogue, and the consumers started to be bombarded by ever-changing advisories and nutritional guidelines that have caused a still ongoing chain of fears “de jour.” Vanderbeke’s assessment of these nutritional and culinary fads is very sarcastic, and yet to the point. Despite a general increase in knowledge about foods and their nutritional values, most consumers started to rely more and more on convenience products. According to Warren Belasco, “people decide what to eat based on a rough negotiation ... between the dictates of identity and convenience, with somewhat lesser guidance from the considerations of responsibility” (“Food Matters” 8). By the end of the 20th century, the scale of food consumption in Germany, following a trend that in the United States has been in place for a long time, seemed to have tipped towards convenience. In a working report for the German parliament, Rolf Meyer and Arnold Sauter described frozen foods as a booming market.²¹

Contrary to the common reading of cosmopolitanism as expanding the nation’s food choices, Vanderbeke considers this expansion as temporary at best. According to Vanderbeke, there are only few differences between processed convenience food, often sold as cosmopolitan specialties, and food for pets. Vanderbeke laments that real butcher shops that slaughter locally raised animals have been taken over by large meat processing companies or, in Vanderbeke’s words, people who have contracts with a “Kitekatfirma für Menschen” that delivers ready-made cosmopolitan fare (51). Möhring also makes the observation that ethnic food, more often than not, becomes homogenized, watered down, and incorporated into the national diet.²² In her analysis of ethnic cuisine in West Germany, she describes how “exotic” dishes became assimilated to the German palate by substituting familiar ingredients for those that were not available or too expensive (137). These substitutions and modifications resulted in hybrid dishes that are neither purely foreign nor purely German. Redefinitions of taste were initiated by these transformation processes, but as Vanderbeke’s account shows, this does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a true expansion of available food choices. While it was suddenly possible to buy ready-made chili con carne or Nasi-goreng,

other traditional food choices like pig ears, lamb lungs, rind of bacon, and calf feet disappeared from the butcher shops (51).

Warren Belasco makes a similar point in regard to the United States. Analyzing the ethnic fast food boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, he sees this as a corporate response to the ethnic revival of the early 1970s:

Although the ethnic revival of the 1970s did expand opportunities for independent entrepreneurs who served discriminating customers seeking the ‘real thing’ in ethnic foods, the mass marketers scored more spectacular gains rolling out dishes that were only superficially different from the fast food that had been filling supermarket freezer cases and roadside menus since the 1950s. (Belasco, “Ethnic Fast Foods” 3)

Instead of being perceived as a threat, as in Corell’s account of eating Chinese food, this pseudo-ethnic food enters the mainstream. It is being adopted into the national cuisine through corporate conglomeration and cultural homogenization.

Vanderbeke’s critical stance towards corporate globalization is part of her general critique of a consumer society that is more interested in the bottom line than in an expansion of minds and palates.²³ Even more so, however, she assumes the perspective of a culinary connoisseur that longs for “real” taste.²⁴ Vanderbeke points to the industrialized production of ready-made “cosmopolitan” food, and laments its cost in flavor.²⁵ Instead of real taste, she claims, people are searching for the always new and yet the same exotic pseudo-taste of inventions like “indische Grünkernbratlinge” or “Teltower Rübchen in Sojamehlsauce ‘maniere Nostalgie” (56). The real has been replaced by ersatz, and artificial aromas compensate for the loss of flavor in processed foods.²⁶ Despite the fact that many of these artificial products contain very few natural ingredients, they quite often advertise with slogans that promise freshness, health, and safety. The replacement products are so tasteless, Vanderbeke argues, that people eat more in search of the ever-elusive gustatory satisfaction:

Bissen für Bissen wartet man tatsächlich nostalgisch auf den Geschmack, weil man sich vage erinnert, daß Lebensmittel irgenvann einmal nach etwas schmeckten, und wenn dann kein Geschmack kommt, beißt man wieder hinein und noch mal und noch mal, weil jeder mit Geschmacksorganen versehene Mensch nicht glauben kann, daß er hier etwas ißt, das nach gar nichts schmeckt. Und alles, was nach nichts schmeckt, macht süchtig, während man nach Kalbskopf mit Remouladensauce einfach befriedigt und also satt ist. (56-57)

In regard to gustatory appreciation of unusual foods, Vanderbeke makes the startling observation that most Germans’ level of tolerance towards food that is

not currently en vogue has actually decreased. The majority of Germans now considers many dishes that once used to be commonplace, like tripe, unpalatable. The presentation of food, especially meat, has also changed a lot over the last half century. Sociologist Deborah Lupton points out that meat is now mostly sold ready cut and “hygienically” packaged in plastic wrapping: “Such presentation effectively works to dissociate the flesh from the animal body from which it has been removed, so as to render it conceptually ‘clean’” (118). Studies have shown that “The closer animal flesh is to the living animal, the more likely it is to inspire disgust” (119).²⁷ In “Billiges Fleisch,” Vanderbeke recounts how after German butchers have stopped carrying such unpopular cuts of meat like innards and lamb feet, she was still able to find them for a while at the Turkish grocery store, but then even these stores, Vanderbeke sarcastically remarks, started to change and offer döner and other “cosmopolitan” food instead (52).

Vanderbeke re-addresses these issues surrounding taste, taboos, and convenience in her rather unconventional cookbook *Schmeckt's? Kochen ohne Tabu*. Although the index lists 125 recipes, *Schmeckt's?* is not a traditional cookbook. The “recipes” are built into the narrative without sub-headings, and Vanderbeke does not give exact measurements or directions, only general descriptions of what to do with certain ingredients. The style of *Schmeckt's?* is thus conversational and anecdotal rather than instructional. Vanderbeke explains how to make soup from scratch, innards, fish, seafood, little animals such as snails and frogs, and “Schweinskram” like pigs feet.²⁸ Vanderbeke’s aim is to re-introduce readers to natural, not industrially processed food items that used to be common fare. The recipes that Vanderbeke covers range from everyday to extraordinary, from basic vegetable soups (25) to haute cuisine entrees like escargot burgundy (77), sepia a la plancha (110), or brain of veal in morel cream (48).

In her introduction Vanderbeke states that, despite her subtitle “Cooking without Taboos,” she did not want to write a cultural history of taboos, but rather write about the transformations and magic inherent in the process of cooking that make food taste good (12). Her first chapter is therefore devoted to making soup from scratch. While this type of cooking takes some time, she assures her readers that it is not difficult and results in superior tastes and a smell that wafts through the house and reminds people of childhood and home (18).²⁹ By teaching people how to cook soup from scratch she attempts to counter the erroneous belief that it is hard to cook soup, a belief that, according to Vanderbeke, has been deliberately spread by the food industry: “Aber bekanntlich stehen Brühwürfel und Suppentüten in jedem Supermarktregal, und weil die verkauft werden wollen, ist der Irrglaube unter die Menschen gestreut worden, daß es Mühe macht, eine

Suppe zu kochen. Das ist Blödsinn”(16). She laments the loss of our traditional ways of preparing food, and challenges her readers to rediscover these ways. While this might go hand-in-hand with a loss of convenience, she assures us that the benefits are worth the price:

Was ich in diesem Kapitel erzählen wollte, ist, daß ich nicht ganz verstehe, warum man Wasser auf etwas schütten soll, das aus Mehl, 1,4 % Gemüse, pflanzlichen Fetten, teilweise gehärtet, Hefeextrakt, Zucker, Geschmacksverstärker E 621, E 627, E 631, Gemüséfonds mit Soja und irgendwelchen Extrakten und Gewürzen besteht und, egal, wie man es macht, weltweit immer nach genau diesen Zutaten schmeckt. (27)

Fröschl, who studied changes in culinary culture and their effect on architecture, points out that fast food goes hand-in-hand with alienation from experience and creativity: “Entfremdung—von der eigenen Erfahrung beim Kochen, der eigenen Kreativität beim Erfinden und Inszenieren der Gerichte, der praktischen sinnlichen Handlung von entwickelnden und transformierenden Prozessen im Alltag, von der Teilhabe an einer sozialen Gemeinschaft” (17). Cooking from scratch, living in accordance with nature, and being open to new taste experiences are Vanderbeke’s prescriptions to counter this alienation. These are ideas that play an important role in both her literary and non-fictional texts.

Vanderbeke’s second and longest chapter in *Schmeckt’s?* focuses on innards: liver, kidneys, tripe, heart, and testicles, to name just a few. In this chapter in particular, she challenges her readers to question which food they think of as “good to eat.” She wonders why many people find eating tongue disgusting while they consider the butt of a pig a delicacy (36). This once again points to the conceptual reason that is behind most food avoidances. In his classic text *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*, Marvin Harris extended the scope of a famous dictum proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss and declared that some foods are “good to think,” others are “bad to think” (15). Harris poses the question “which come first, the messages and meanings or the preferences and aversions?” (15). He then adds that in market economies such as the United States or Germany, “good to eat may mean good to sell” (16). Humans, as a species, can eat and digest almost everything. Yet we pass up many substances that are perfectly edible from a biological standpoint. In order to be willingly consumed, food has to be thought of as “good”—from a taste, health, or moral perspective.³⁰

According to Stephen Mennell, who studied the history of taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the present, “Offal is a good example of the changeability of objects of repugnance, and the interaction of ‘moral’ and social grounds for food avoidance” (310). Once a common food, one nowadays rarely

finds offal on the menus at most restaurants or private homes. Many people cite health reasons for this historical change in taste and food choices. Vanderbeke questions the validity of this reasoning, pointing out that these concerns do not stop most people from eating meat in general, including foods like frozen chickens that quite often pose a much larger health risk: “hier geht es um Innereien und die Tatsache, daß in der Regel kaum Ekel im Spiel ist, wenn salmonellen-belastete Hühner aus der Tiefkühltruhe verarbeitet werden ..., indes sich bei vielen Leuten die Haare sträuben, wenn sie an Innereien nur denken” (30). As discussion of Corell’s article has already shown, the reason for disgust is usually not rational. It is an emotional reaction that is based on learned behavior, and this is the point at which Vanderbeke tries to intervene. She offers alternatives and implores readers to rethink their food choices. She also points out that most people, albeit unknowingly, have already eaten many foods that they consider disgusting—in industrially processed foods: “Wer als erwachsener Mensch zum ersten Mal Hirn ißt, sollte sich vor dem Genuß klarmachen, daß er keinesfalls zum ersten Mal Hirn ißt, sondern schon unzählige Male in unkenntlicher Gestalt Hirn gegessen hat: in Würsten, in Pasteten und in etlichen anderen Produkten” (44). Vanderbeke urges us to make conscious, informed choices instead of letting convenience and stereotypes dictate what we put into our bodies.

With appeals like these to cook from scratch and eat more offal, Vanderbeke aligns herself with a “foodie” counter-movement to general trends in food consumption. While offal used to be associated with the poor, and with times of food rationing, “the consumption of offal has become largely the preserve of an affluent culinary cognoscenti” (Strong 30). Offal is appealing precisely because of its capacity to provoke the squeamish. Jeremy Strong argues that “the new offal eaters can be interpreted as an outcome at the margins, a by-product of a distinction-seeking culture in which fashions are prompted and impelled by trendsetters who revisit, modify, and commodify the tastes and practices of other times and places” (35). Eating offal and other “strange” foods thus guarantees participation and membership in an elite social stratum, in a culture of food awareness. “With majority tastes shepherded toward convenience and away from blood and guts, offal has acquired a new potential to signify discrimination” (Strong 38).

Gourmet cuisine has traditionally incorporated norm-breaking foods, such as frog legs and snails. These food items are another example of how culinary tastes in Germany have changed. While they are still available in some gourmet restaurants, they were once much more widely considered a delicacy and part of a fine dining experience. They used to be “good to think,” turning the diner into a gourmet,

whereas now for most Germans they are “bad to think.”³¹ Many Germans today, when invited to eat snails, frogs, or animal feet, react with revulsion and disgust. This, according to Vanderbeke, is a learned reaction. Although most parents are convinced that their children would never eat such things, Vanderbeke describes children’s innate curiosity, in contrast to their parents’ disgust, when confronted with non-standard children’s fare like beef tongue. She therefore urges us to introduce young children to a variety of food, before they develop taboos and inhibitions (11-13).

Vanderbeke thus not only gives instructions on how to prepare certain taboo-laden foods, she also re-evaluates standard Western scales of palatability. For Vanderbeke, fish sticks in their artificial, factory-made shape and consistency are disgusting, not a real fish that seems to look at you when you prepare it (119). While this puts her at odds with some parts of the population, those who don’t want to know too much about where their food is coming from and where it has been, the success of her book indicates that she has hit a nerve, especially with those who are concerned about the multitude of chemicals, additives, and growth hormones in our food. Vanderbeke invites her readers to rediscover foods that once used to be commonplace and that are now, after a period of being almost absent from the public eye, slowly making a comeback. Because of this “trendy” message, and also because of Vanderbeke’s status as an already well-known author, *Schmeckt’s?* has been very well received.³²

Like “Billiges Fleisch,” *Schmeckt’s?* combines the personal with the political. It successfully navigates the local/global divide, arguing in favor of local sustainability and “real” taste while being aware of the global consequences of our food choices. It also makes us reconsider our culinary prescriptions and national sensibilities. This cookbook is thus a practical application of Vanderbeke’s theoretical ideas, and its favorable reception can be seen as an example of Germans’ new willingness to cross-culinary boundaries, not only across, but also within cultures. In that respect, it is much more successful than Corell’s attempt to explore the unknown and introduce her readers to the strange and unfamiliar. While Corell’s article shows some of the positive aspects of globalization—many different cuisines are now available to the average German consumers, especially to those that are able and willing to travel internationally—it does not manage to move beyond a superficial marveling at “strange” foods and unfamiliar culinary habits. It is, of course, debatable whether gastro-global eclecticism indeed can ever function as an antidote to the homogenizing forces of globalization. At the very least it would require a true willingness to learn about other cultures *and* examine one’s own cultural perceptions. “Chinesisch Essen—schwer gemacht” falls short on both

accounts. The author does not attempt to go beyond sensationalist and superficial observations about the “strange” cuisine she encounters, and she also fails to critically examine her own cultural position in regard to the food she consumes. Corell neither questions her own stereotypes nor does she contextualize the food and eating habits that she encounters in China. Her culinary travel report is thus unsuccessful in overcoming any real or perceived boundaries.³³

As Vanderbeke has shown, both in “Billiges Fleisch” and in *Schmeckt’s?*, sometimes the most “unknown” can be what is right in front of us. In that vein, we end with one of Vanderbeke’s recipes. Here is her suggestion for an unusual but very tasty contribution to a barbecue party: grilled snail skewers. “Sie wickeln dazu die Schnecken einzeln in dünne Speckscheiben und spießen sie abwechselnd mit kleinen Champignons und Zitronenscheiben auf. Auf dem Grill brauchen sie genau so lange, bis der Speck leicht knusprig ist. Mit oder ohne Kräuterbutter originell” (*Schmeckt’s?* 83).

Notes

¹ As Uma Narayan has shown in regard to the Indian community in contemporary England, “England would no longer be England without its Indian restaurants and grocery stores” (76).

² For a further discussion of the incorporation of döner into the national German cuisine, see Çağlar, Henderson, and Seidel-Pielen.

³ Globalization requires the re-negotiation of national identities, and the global spread of an American fast food culture is one of the most obvious signs of what many lament as a continuing homogenization. There is another aspect of globalization, however: global differentiation, which consists of the spread of local products, for example ethnic foods, around the world. Both homogenization and differentiation proceed concurrently, making them parallel processes. George Ritzer, in *The McDonaldization of Society*, discusses this phenomenon in detail. On a local level, he differentiates global heterogeneity that predominates when local or indigenous practices are dominant in different geographic locations from the predominance of the global in different locales around the world, which is associated with greater homogenization (167-168).

⁴ Ethnobiologist and nutritional ecologist Gary Nabhan describes taste as “a murky realm in which biology, culture, and individual experience come together” (113).

⁵ See Jacqueline Newman, who contends that “Chinese food, the world’s largest uninterrupted food culture, garners great respect the world over. More people say that it is the best-tasting food in the world because it has the three needed requirements: geographic variety and use of all manner of food, a long-established elite, and very well-developed culinary practices” (22-23).

⁶ For a detailed description of Chinese culinary practices, see Newman. See also Andrew Zimmern, host of the Travel Channel’s hit series *Bizarre Foods*, who emphatically states, “Few people in the world have a more passionate relationship with food than the Chinese” (140).

⁷ It is, however, important to keep in mind that gastro-culture shock works in both directions. Many Chinese visitors to the U.S. or Germany have a difficult time with the prevalence of cheeses and raw foods in Western diets.

⁸ See also Miller: “Disgust undoubtedly involves taste, but it also involves—not just by extension but at its core—smell, touch, even at times sight and hearing. Above all, it is a moral and social sentiment” (2).

⁹ Food psychologists have pointed out that because of its origin in living animals, meat in general inspires the strongest feelings of revulsion and disgust (Lupton 117). Other foods that many Westerners find disgusting are slimy, sticky substances, which also abound in Chinese cooking.

¹⁰ See the recent *Spiegel* article “Grille statt Gulasch,” which also points to the ecological reasons for eating grasshoppers, ants, spiders, etc. (Schmundt 142-143).

¹¹ The concept of “imagined communities” of course goes back to Benedict Anderson. There have also been numerous treatises on the role of food in the formation of national identity. For some of the more comprehensive explorations, see Ashley et al., Bell and Valentine, and Narayan.

¹² Heldke describes it as “a world where entire cuisines can go in and out of vogue in a calendar year” (*Exotic Appetites* xii).

¹³ See the *Emerging Global Cuisines: Culinary Trend Mapping Report* from the Center for Culinary Development (<http://www.packagedfacts.com/Culinary-Trend-Global-2118698/>).

¹⁴ For an application of this appeal to food, see Jay Weinstein’s *The Ethical Gourmet*, which bills itself as a “combination lifestyle guide, shopper’s resource, and cookbook” (2).

¹⁵ Two of her more recent fictional texts, *Die sonderbare Karriere der Frau Choi* (2007) and *Das lässt sich ändern* (2011), also address these issues and confirm the importance of the local within a globalized world.

¹⁶ Edited by Richard Wagner: “*Ich hatte ein bißchen Kraft drüber*”: *Zum Werk von Birgit Vanderbeke*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 2001.

¹⁷ The German (and American) cultural prohibition against eating horsemeat is not as easily explained as most other prohibitions. Unlike most other taboo meats, horses are neither “disgusting crawlies” nor are they considered pets. Their meat is lean, tender, and high in protein. Proponents of eating horsemeat also attest to its health benefits, especially in comparison to beef. They further point out that horses usually are not “mass produced” and live under more appropriate (“artgerecht”) conditions than many other animals who are just raised for slaughter and consumption. For a detailed discussion of this topic see Harris (“Hippophagy” 88-108), Schwabe (“Horsemeat” 157-165), Simoons (“Horseflesh” 168-193), and Weinhold.

¹⁸ Vanderbeke was born in Dahme, Brandenburg in 1956 and, with her family, moved to West Germany in 1961. Her best-known literary work is the 1990 narrative *Das Muschelessen*, for excerpts of which she also received the Ingeborg-Bachmann-Preis. Since 1993 she has been living in Southern France. Another text that specifically explores an East-German family’s experiences in West Germany in the 1960s is her 1996 narrative *Friedliche Zeiten*. In this story, the cold war serves as a backdrop for private fears and familial conflicts.

¹⁹ It is important to keep in mind, however, that breaking taboos can be related to both freedom and shame.

²⁰ Möhring also comments on this correlation between traveling and dining out in ethnic restaurants (131).

²¹ See also Ward.

²² In their highly stimulating cultural analysis *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, Johnston and Baumann also assert that “foods that are at one time strongly-exotic ... can become only weakly-exotic over time” (124).

²³ See also Schmitz-Kunkel’s review of *Das lässt sich ändern*, “Wer sich nicht wehrt, lebt verkehrt.”

²⁴ In her newest book, *Das lässt sich ändern* (2011), Vanderbeke compares the “real” taste of “Zwiehühner,” chickens that produce both eggs and meat, with frozen chickens, which she describes as disgusting clumps of ice that don’t taste like anything (97-101).

²⁵ Popular journalist Ullrich Fichtner echoes this sentiment in his condemnation of pseudo-global fast food (172).

²⁶ See Klawitter, who points out that the use of artificial aromas has skyrocketed over the last 30 years. It is now a more than 20 billion dollar industry (20.5 billion dollars worldwide revenue in 2008).

²⁷ This, of course, is also culturally specific for Western cultures. In China, for example, presenting a chicken with its feathers still attached is not considered off-putting, but proof of the chicken’s freshness.

²⁸ In this context, the German term “Schweinskram” or “Schweinererei” plays with the double meaning of the word: odds and ends from the pig (i.e., pork) versus its figurative meaning of filth or obscenity.

²⁹ She re-addresses this topic in *Das lässt sich ändern* when she talks about how real homemade food, and the accompanying smell, turns a house into a home (110).

³⁰ For an extended discussion of the often contradictory myths and rituals that shape our eating habits see Rappoport.

³¹ There are also obvious class distinctions in regard to the perceived palatability of snails and frogs.

³² In today’s crowded market for cookbooks, it seems like the most successful ones are by authors who already enjoy a wide popularity and name recognition, be it as cooks, authors, or celebrities. The German women’s magazine *Brigitte*, after inviting Vanderbeke to cook in the *Brigitte* test kitchen and publishing the results in a special edition of *Brigitte Kultur*, even organized combined readings and three course menus based on Vanderbeke’s book: “Dieses Buch ist ein Fest—und wir laden Sie ein!” http://www.brigitte.de/kultur/buecher_cds/vanderbeke/index.html.

³³ For helpful suggestions on how to engage in anticolonialist eating see Part Four of Heldke’s *Exotic Appetites* (151-217).

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