OAXACA

Maize, Mole, Mezcal

There is a moment in preparing Oaxaca's famed mole negro when things shoot up in flames—*la quemada de semillas*, "the burning of seeds."

Like a priestess at a ritual pyre, the petite dignified woman with raven-black hair stood by her comal, a pre-Hispanic earthenware griddle big as the lid of a village well. Fire leapt toward the ceiling beams of the patio kitchen. I began coughing from the smoke.

In alarm I wondered if someone shouldn't call the *bomberos*.

"We're not talking charred," the woman intoned, "we want *ceniza absoluta*, total ash! Burnt!"

Whereupon chef Celia Florián of celebrated Las Quince Letras restaurant in Oaxaca de Juárez, the pastel-hued colonial capital of Mexico's most Indigenous state, flashed me a self-satisfied smile. She was well accustomed to wide-eyed journalists and their cell phone cameras.

Flames having subsided, Celia now scooped the black pile of tortilla and chili seed ash into a beat-up zinc bucket with other, less

carbonized ingredients, and handed the load to her obedient husband, Fidel, to take away to the molino, the mill, for grinding.

The quemado is the sensational step in making black mole, the syncretic Ibero-Amerindian showstopper that has fascinated me since I first tasted it here decades ago. The arduously laborious step is the tatemada, the slow toasting on the comal of some three dozen ingredients. "Patience, *infinite patience*" was required, said Celia. She wasn't kidding. For several hours, I'd hovered by her comal as she coaxed out—from Mesoamerican cacao, tortillas and chilies, from Spanish colonial wheat bread, from Islamic Al-Andalus almonds, raisins, and sesame seeds—the multicultural universe of flavor-layers demanded by black mole.

An ethnographic still life of chilies was already laid out for the tatemada when I'd arrived early that morning, my first back in this city in its high-valley cradle in the mountains of southern Mexico. Here were bell-shaped chilhuacles negros—"sour-citrusy with an elegant indirect heat"—grown by a handful of Indigenous farmers in Oaxaca's humid Cañada region, and so disease-prone and finicky they were on the brink of extinction. Here, for their smoky meatiness, were pasillas Mixes, cultivated in the rugged Sierra Norte highlands by the Mixe people, the self-titled Ayüükjä'äy ("they who speak the mountain language"). Besides these Celia had thrown in more mundane chipotles and anchos, to roast their already dark crinkly skins, then shake out the seeds for burning.

Toasting cacao pods and cinnamon sticks had filled the patio kitchen with the chocolaty aromas of a Oaxacan breakfast. A whole spice chest then met the comal: ginger, oregano, avocado and bay leaves—plus the peppercorns, nutmeg, and cloves that historically would have arrived in colonial Mexico on the Manila Galleons, the Spanish vessels that initiated the world's first globalized commerce.

A pantry's worth of dried fruit and nuts followed, all adding lushness to Celia's mole, along with yellow bread rolls called molletes (fried in oil) and plantains in their skins (roasted in embers). There might have been charred tomatoes and onions, too, but I'd completely lost track.

Her face haloed in spice haze, Celia slowly maneuvered ingredients around the comal with a palm leaf broomlet called an *escobeta*. I flapped at the smoke—and marveled, as I always did in Oaxaca, at the absurdly backbreaking difficulty of a dish that remained an enigma to me still.

What was mole, really? That's what I wanted to learn, beyond the prodigious literalness of a copious, aromatic sauce, ladled over bits of protein (classically turkey), which always seemed like an afterthought. Why was mole such a community ritual? How were Mexico's myriad moles, from grass green to tar black to mahogany red, even related? "*Tan mexicana como el mole*," they say—equivalent to our "as American as apple pie." But how did mole's special status as a *símbolo de la Mexicanidad*—"often read as a proxy for the cultural origins of the national character," as one scholar noted—reflect Mexico's complicated racial identity politics? In this age of globalization and decolonization, of the multiculturalism that Oaxaca has grown famous for, what did mole represent today?

Celia's father is Zapotec, a member of Oaxaca's dominant Indigenous group. Her mother is mestiza, mixed race, which is Mexico's official identity. She grew up in a pueblo about fifteen miles from Oaxaca City, the sort of place where girls got to play with their dolls after a long day of kitchen chores. She made her first atole (a pre-Hispanic maize drink) at eight, her first hand-made

tortilla (that pre-Hispanic maize flatbread) at ten. The tortilla made her feel grown-up and important, she told me, like a proper woman of her community. When almost three decades ago she opened Las Quince Letras a few blocks from the luridly syncretic Baroque of the grand seventeenth-century temple of Santo Domingo de Guzmán with its gold leaf and beheaded saints, it was the only *restaurante* in the vicinity. The early 1990s was also when I first came to Oaxaca. It struck me then as enchantingly remote and dusty-provincial, a folkloricized remnant visited mostly for its Indigenous markets and the majestic ruins of Monte Albán, the grand capital built by the Zapotecs 2,500 years before. Like Andalusia or Naples, Oaxaca long embraced its own myth of exceptionalism—a Oaxaqueñismo centered around the state's prodigious diversity. But unlike those iconic European locales, Oaxaca has remained until quite recently on the periphery of Mexico's official national narrative, one that belonged to Mexico City and its glorified Aztec history.

"And now we're *el nuevo centro gastronómico del mundo!*" Celia laughed on her color-splashed kitchen patio, as she garnished a blue corn tortilla for me with chapulines, or grasshoppers—"herbaceous this time of year," salty, crunchy, not remotely repugnant. "Like you, dear Anya, everyone wants to learn the secret of our moles," she said. Indeed. Her street and the entire self-consciously prettified centro were buzzing with restaurants, with hipster mezcalerías everywhere you trod. As if on cue, a trio of very tall young Nordic chefs, burned red by the winter sun, wandered in from the street. They announced they wanted to learn about Celia's moles.

And here was a further delightful development. On my last visit to Oaxaca a few years back, I wrote about its male chefs and their liquid-nitrogenizing of arroz con leche or alchemizing avocado-leaf-scented vapors—the influence of Spain's flashy nueva

cocina. Now cocineras tradicionales, traditional women cooks, some Indigenous, were claiming the spotlight. This made Celia extremely happy. After the Conquest, she told me and the Danes, Spanish women were scarce, so the colonizers took Indigenous wives, or at least employed them as cooks. For centuries Mexico's women had been the uncelebrated carriers of traditional cooking. Now their craft was being valued at long last.

"So that's my *meal* in Oaxaca!" I cried out to Celia. "Mole and maize masa [tortillas, tamales], prepared by women!"

Mole, I began to elaborate, representing the complicated hybridity of Mexican culture—

"—And masa," Celia completed my sentence, "*nuestras raíces indígenas!*" Our Indigenous roots.

To celebrate my *proyecto* Celia trotted out bottles of exquisite Real Minero mezcal made by our mutual friend, Graciela, a chingona (badass) and a fiery feminist.

"A nuestra querida Oaxaca," she said, lifting her glass.

"Stigibeu?" I attempted the traditional Zapotec toast.

"Skal," grinned the Danes, their eyes locking gleefully on the midday mezcal.

Was *that* what had really brought them to Oaxaca?

OAXACA STATE SITS at the convergence of two major mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre del Sur. Its over 4 million inhabitants live amid such a wealth of cultural heritage and biodiversity that one important archeologist called Oaxaca "a virtual laboratory for human designs for living." Archeobotanists tout it as the probable birthplace of Mesoamerican

plant domestication based on a local cave called Guilá Naquitz with its ten-millennia-old squash seeds and the earliest known examples of domesticated maize—teensy cobs from about 4,300 BCE. Of Mexico's sixty-four current landraces of maize (that is, unique cultivars), thirty-five are native to Oaxaca, as are some two dozen species of chilies and beans—all of them harvested together on small Indigenous farm plots called milpas, rain fed and ultrasustainable.

Linguists, meanwhile, bubble about how a state barely larger than Portugal has more tongues than the whole of Europe. Often promoted/branded as Mexico's "cradle of diversity," Oaxaca is home to sixteen ethnic groups—Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Zoques, Chatinos, Triques, and the like—all speaking unique languages. Zapotec alone boasts sixty known variants, so that stigibeu, or "cheers," the toast I tried not to mangle, might sound totally different in the high Central Valleys around Oaxaca City and in the tropical lowland of Tehuantepec Isthmus.

That's the sunny PR angle.

Beyond it, political scientists study Oaxaca's intense protest movements as sociologists research the effects of stark economic inequality, NAFTA, and climate change. Remittance from emigrants constitutes the second-biggest source of Oaxaca's income after tourism. Of the state's 570 municipalities, 356 (largely Indigenous) are nationally classified in the "extreme poverty" category.

In consequence, everything one eats here resonates with social issues: Indigenous rights, environmental justice, gender equality.

I WAS ROUSED from my mole and mezcal–induced slumber by the afternoon sun tatemadaing me through the tall bare windows. The

house we had rented was in Barrio de Jalatlaco—"sandbank" in Nahuatl, once the lingua franca of the dominant Aztec empire. Lying just east of the centro histórico, this was originally a Zapotec settlement, then a Spanish colonial enclave, then a working-class tanners' quarter. Now the Mexican press touted it as *el barrio más chido del mundo*—the world's coolest hood. Sure enough, third-wave coffee joints and organic mini-tiendas stood along the harsh cobblestones beside rickety tables where families vended their memelas, thick maize cakes. In the mornings shy Zapotec women went door to door bearing forty-pound baskets of hand-made tortillas, trudging past Instagrammers scoping out the indigo- and fuchsia-saturated facades.

Our rental was in startling contrast to all such color-mad folkloricism. It was a newish compound, conceived in ruthlessly Nordic-minimalist style by Danish textile artist Trine Ellitsgaard, the widow of Francisco Toledo—Mexico's most prominent artist, who had passed away a few months earlier and was still passionately mourned by the city. On arrival in evening darkness, we looked around in shock. It would be like camping in a vacated art gallery—for an entire month?

But daylight revealed an inner-courtyard ziggurat-style staircase flanked by a glowing golden wall and another of lush cerise—a sudden, sumptuous homage to the colored planes of Mexico's great modernist architect Luis Barragán. Under the sky of intense desert blue waited a roof terrace flooded with pink bougainvillea, with vistas of palm trees, church domes, and off beyond, the shadow play of mountains.

Francisco Toledo designed the low terrace table where we'd finish our breakfast coffees. Around town he was simply known as El Maestro, a charismatically modest celebrity in a campesino blouse,

hair and beard bushy and wild. From a Zapotec family rooted in the jungly Isthmus de Tehuantepec, he was an art-scene veteran of Paris, New York, and L.A., and not just a multitalent in the mold of Picasso but also an inexhaustible social activist and philanthropist. It was hard to move in Oaxaca without coming across something El Maestro helped create and fund: the Museum of Contemporary Arts, the Graphic Arts Institute. In 2002 he led a celebrated protest against a McDonald's planned for the arcades of the sixteenth-century zocalo—threatening to stand naked in front of it.

Tamales, sí! McDonald's, no! his supporters chanted, handing out Oaxacan tamales and atole. The Golden Arches backed down.

AFTER MY FIERY MOLE tutorial, Celia left town on some extended promotional tour of Oaxaca. So I found my way to a cocinera named Olga Cabrera Oropeza. Olga was vivaciously lovely, with a heart-shaped cherubic face and a style that paired saucy movie-star eyeliner with the artisanal embroidered huipiles (traditional tunics) currently fashionable among local belles. We became instant friends.

Oaxaca being famed as the "Land of Seven Moles," I informed her that as part of my *gran proyecto* I intended to master all seven.

She couldn't stop laughing.

"Only seven? Oh, my dear Anyita. *Only seven?* Por qué?"

She began enumerating the canonical siete, including negro, rojo, amarillo, verde—black, red, yellow, and green. But these were just from the Central Valleys! All over the state? Two hundred moles at least. "You'll need a lifetime just to understand them, Anyita!"

Take only negro, for instance. In Cuicatlán in the north, the origin of chile chilhuacle, black mole has zero cacao, with no tatemada—and is thickened with galletas de animalitos, animal crackers. In Tlaxiaco nearby there, negro comes with sides of sweet-sour fruit picadillo and a hash of lamb innards and eggs.

Olga herself hailed from a dynasty of magnificent cooks in Mixteca, the rugged northwest region shared by Oaxaca and the states of Guerrero and Puebla. And so distinctive were some of her native moles that when twenty years ago she moved to Oaxaca City and opened a *comedor* (lunch canteen) to showcase Mixtecan cuisine, the urbanites here, accustomed to oversweet rich colonial flavors, snapped up her breaded chicken and meatballs but left her chileajos and pipianes untouched. Olga was heartbroken. Were her Mixteca flavors just too direct, too *picoso*? she wondered.

Olga tended to my mole education with a maternal zeal I found truly touching. Every few days I'd stroll a summer-hot winter mile across the centro's colonial grid, past ragtag taquerías and bright new mezcalerías, past gaudy juice stalls overflowing with cherimoyas and carambolas; past peeling stucco facades with doorways hung with colored-bead curtains, behind which grandmothers sat in the blare of telenovelas. Olga would be waiting on the upper terrace kitchen of her current restaurant, Tierra del Sol. It was a glorious place to learn about moles. The vista swept across the looming mauve ridges of the Sierra Madre del Sur, while right below us rose the imposing entrance to Oaxaca's famous Jardín Etnobotánico, in what was the old monastery garden of the temple of Santo Domingo. Like so much else hereabouts, the jardín began as a social-cultural project conceived by Francisco Toledo, who sparked fellow local artists to rescue the space from its fate as a convention

center and parking lot. El Maestro and his compadres envisioned instead a botanical garden cum landscape-art installation, one that narrated Oaxaca's prodigious wealth of indigenous plants.

Olga's signature mole, called guaximole, was itself extremely etnobotánico. It featured peas from the pod of her native guaje tree (also spelled guaxe or huaje) blended with a puree of Mixteca's slender chiles costeños and simmered (nonindigenously) with pork ribs. Direct and picoso indeed.

Guaje made Olga hometown-nostalgic and patriotic—"*tan nuestro, tan lindo*," so ours, so lovely. She was born in the small city of Huajuapan de León, which means something like "guaje trees by a river" in Nahuatl (though oddly its Mixtec name is Nudeem, "land of the brave"). When the Spanish first reached this whole region in the sixteenth century, they found it called Huāxyacac—Nahuatl for "where the guaje tree grows"—which they dimly approximated as "Oaxaca." In California, Olga informed me, Mixtecan migrants plant guaje trees in their yards as an identity symbol. Mixteca, incidentally, is a prime exporter of human labor to the US.

Back in Huajuapan, Olga's mother is a celebrated panadera, a baker. While we extracted seeds from long, sticky, tightly closed guaje pods—Olga deftly using a hairpin, me tearing my nails—Olga spoke with great feeling about waking up as a kid to the comforting scent of her mom's pan de pulque and cinnamony pan de canela . . . eating these sweet bread rolls with ice cream and fruit and chocolate de agua.

I told her I was fascinated by Mexico's difference in attitude toward wheat and maize, bread and tortillas. It roughly reflected that of colonizer and colonized. Even in the mid-twentieth century, as maize was beginning to lose its "Indigenous" stigma, domestic

reformers promoted wheat bread and cakes as paths to modernity, civilization, and better nutrition. In Oaxaca I kept noticing how bread halls at markets were airy and attractive, while tortilla vendors shyly skulked in dark passageways. But Olga didn't see it that way, as a racial or colonizer/colonized issue. Eating both bread and tortillas seemed to her like a great privilege of her mestizo identity.

That identity, of course, was complicated. And nowhere more than in Oaxaca. Olga had creamy bronze skin and softly Indigenous features; she often wore her hair in a long, traditional ribbon-laced braid.

Didn't she identify as Mixteca? I wondered.

"I couldn't," she began to explain. Until very recently, the Mexican census categorized race *culturally*. Identifying as *indígena* required you to be able to speak one of the country's Indigenous languages. "But where I'm from," Olga sighed, "we lost Mixteco generations ago . . . social pressure, discrimination. Anyway, we're a mixture," she said. "We look mestizo, we dress mestizo, we identify as mestizo. It's who we are. And our moles?"

She ladled out guaximole. It looked ruddy-red from the chilies, tasted sappy-green from the guajes, and had the rich fatty Catholic heft of Spanish costillas de puerco.

"*Puro mestizaje,* " she smiled.

I'VE REFLECTED MUCH ALONG my journey how certain dishes get recruited to express their country's glorified inclusive identity—literal recipes for national unity. And mole, so I'd heard a thousand times, is the great symbol of Mexico because it represents mestizaje, the biocultural fusion of white colonizing Europeans and Amerindian natives.

Mexico is a nation where, in the most recent census, between half and two-thirds of its citizens claimed mestizo identity. Mestizaje has been variously described as an official narrative of national integration, as an idealized *esencia de la Mexicanidad*, and, crucially, as "a lived process," embraced and internalized.

From Late Latin mixticĭus ("mixed"), the term mestizo first began appearing in local church records in the late 1530s, around two decades after Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés came ashore on Mexico's Gulf Coast and, aided by Indigenous allies, managed to topple the powerful Mexica (Aztec) empire of Moctezuma II. Mexican schoolchildren learn that their mestizo race descends from the union of Cortés and his Indigenous concubine/translator/enabler, Malintzin (La Malinche in Spanish), a character so controversial and fascinating as to inspire a whole subbranch of studies wherein she's variously portrayed as the symbolic mom of mestizos and a feminist icon; as a traitor-whore of her race; or, per Octavio Paz, as a passive rape victim (*la chingada*, the fucked one) who passed on her existential victimhood to the entire nation.

Historically, however, mestizos were illegitimate, marginal outcasts in an early colonial apartheid society, a society legally segregated into a república de españoles and a república de indios. Independence from Spain in 1821 failed to bring any cathartic decolonization. As food historian Jeffrey Pichler reminds us, Mexico's Creole (local-born) urban elites might have proclaimed themselves heirs to Aztec aristocracy, but they continued to define national culture in European terms and dismiss "Indians" and "brown" rural mestizos as a national "problem." It was only in the decades after the ground-shifting 1910 Revolution, when a badly fragmented Mexico needed a unifying vision of patriotic common citizenship,

that mestizaje was given its full-throttled promotion, elevated to an official state-building project.

Which is how the mestizo bastard of a caste-obsessed colonial society emerged, in the words of one scholar, as "the nation's archetypal hero." Manuel Gamio, father of modern Mexican anthropology, proclaimed mestizaje an "advanced and happy fusion of races, [that] constitutes the first and most solid basis of nationalism." José Vasconcelos, Oaxacan-born philosopher and a post-Revolution secretary of education—the champion and patron of Diego Rivera—raised mestizaje to all-transfiguring heights in his wacky but hugely influential 1925 pamphlet *La Raza Cósmica*, The Cosmic Race. In Vasconcelos's postracist utopia (his rebuke to the attitudes from the US and Europe), the birth in the Americas of a fifth human race, the superhuman bronze race, heralded "the moral and material basis for the union of all men . . . the fruit of all the previous ones and amelioration of everything past." (Even now Mexico celebrates Día de la Raza, or Race Day, every October 12.)

By the end of the twentieth century, however, this triumphalist narrative began to show cracks. In *México Profundo* (1987), his appraisal of deep, Mesoamerican Mexico, pensador (grand thinker) Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argued that the post-Revolution "mestizo" concept still followed a dominant European model, where a nation shared a common culture, language, and history. For Mexico, this required a highly *selective* history—one that, for example, elevated and glorified the Aztec past while ignoring the accomplishments and contributions of its numerous other pre-Columbian peoples.

For Bonfil Batalla, mestizaje ultimately meant the "de-Indianization" of Mexico. And more recent critics agree that the

official narrative of a supposedly inclusive and color-blind nation has consistently denigrated Indigenous people—and completely erased Afro-Mexicans. Anthropologist Ronald Stutzman calls mestizaje "an all-inclusive ideology of exclusion," fraught with the racial hierarchies of colonial times. To its harshest critics, mestizaje is complicit with white supremacy.

The more I read, the more I wondered if mestizaje was about to be canceled. And I wondered how some 80 million Mexicans who proudly identify as mestizo, like Olga, would greet such a turn of events.

But back to the food: Was there, in fact, one specific foundational pre-Hispanic dish known as mole?

I wrangled with this issue on a Oaxacan restaurant trail that veered from a coastal-style mole amarillo of incendiary chiles costeños thickened with masa and starring (gulp) black iguana (tasted like chicken) to a luscious almendrado nutty with almonds and sweet-tart with raisins, capers, and olives (straight out of medieval Al-Andalus) back to a smoky ritualistic mole chichilo of remote Sierra Sur highlands, a version hauntingly bitter and burnt because traditionally women made it for funerals while the coffin still sat in the house.

I probed the matter further on Trine's ascetic couch at our austerely beautiful rental, munching *nísperos*, loquats (tasted like tropical apricots), as I peered through a hefty scholarly roundup on mole, and discovered an extensive *family* of dishes etymologically derived from *molli* or *mulli* in Nahuatl. Broadly the term means sauce, mix, or stew, or even more broadly, food. (Guacamole? *Ahuaca-mulli* in Nahuatl.) And these diverse preparations were

only loosely related—perhaps by the common use of chilies and likewise a particular kitchen technology. Contemporary historian José Monteagudo suggests mulli's story began more than five thousand years ago with the appearance of the first metates, the grinding stones "whose presence marked a change between nomadic and sedentary man."

We know about pre-Contact moles chiefly from one principal source. Bernardino de Sahagún was a Spanish Franciscan missionary, a *fray* (friar) cum proto–field anthropologist, who between 1529 and 1579 compiled a prodigious two-thousand-page encyclopedia of Aztec life, known as the Florentine Codex. "*Comían muchas maneras de cazuelas de chiles*," the friar informs us: they ate many manners of chili stews. One served to Moctezuma supposedly was called totolin patzcalmollo, a fowl cazuela with red chili, tomatoes, and ground squash seeds—today's pipián. As I read the friar's descriptions, I had a sudden urge to taste the pre-Hispanic unripe plum mulli with little white fish. Or the amaranth leaf mulli with yellow chilies—"very good to eat," we're promised.

And yet despite all this history, mole's canonization as a symbol of Mexicanness dates only from the country's post-Revolution "mestizo nation" push. What's more, its nationalist ur–origin myth still skews—yet again—pretty Euro-colonial-Catholic. It enshrines mole poblano, a super-baroque version with chocolate, supposedly concocted in Puebla, today Mexico's fourth-largest city—one founded in 1531 as a planned European-style settlement *for* Europeans.

First floated in the mid-1920s in Mexican newspapers, the legend of mole poblano stars a late-seventeenth-century nun named Sor Andrea de la Asunción, mother superior of Puebla's wealthy Convent of Santa Rosa de Lima. (Nowadays, it houses a striking

museum of folklore replete with a grand vaulted and tiled kitchen.) Anxious to dazzle the visiting viceroy of New Spain with a wowza sauce for her chestnut-fed guajolote (Mesoamerican turkey), our good sister dipped into her various chili pots, then her spice and nuts chests—whereupon divine inspiration guided her to a jar where the brides of Christ kept their chocolate tablets. With this mestizaje of ingredients, Sor Andrea knelt at a metate, grinding away as another sister exclaimed: "*Qué bien mole, su reverencia!*" How well you grind, your reverence! It's *muele*, not *mole*, Sor Andrea corrected her screwy grammar. But no use: this bad Spanish (misconjugated from *moler*, to grind) became the moniker that overrode the Nahuatl original, mulli. (How ironic, how purely Mexican this accidental linguistic syncretism.)

Naturally, there's no record of this Sor Andrea. Nor any mention of her divinely inspired chocolate in any mole recipe for yet another two centuries. (As it happens, one of Mexico's first written mole recipes, from the late 1600s, did come from a nun, the celebrated poet and feminist Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. A spiced cazuela of pork, chorizo, and chicken laced with some chilies, it's actually closer to the Spanish olla podrida than any moles we know now.) But again, as the éminence grise of Mexican food history, Jeffrey Pichler, insists, the glorifying of colonial moles as "mestizo" cuisine served the reconfigured nationalist sentiments of early-modern Mexico. Mole poblano offered a perfect culinary metaphor for the vision of indigenismo, an ideology which celebrated *selective* aspects of the pre-Columbian past, while aiming to whiten and acculturate living Indigenous people into mestizo society. "Mole poblano's glossy surface," writes Pilcher, "obscured the conflicted history of race mixture in Mexico."

Absent from the legend, I noted to myself: any mention of

African slaves owned by Mexican colonial nuns, who were usually the daughters of wealthy white families. Or of their Indigenous helpers, prohibited from becoming nuns until the mid-1700s despite making up the majority of Mexico's convent servants.

But as racial views of the nation changed and evolved, so, too, did the story of mole. Come the late twentieth century, competition erupted between Puebla and Oaxaca for the figurehead role in Mexico's gastronomy. The two states served more broadly, notes Pichler, as "proxies for Mexico's European and Indigenous heritage." Oaxacan cuisine, with its showcasing of folkloric native communities, proved better suited—more useful—to the country's turn to neoliberalism, as Mexico's ruling elites took Indigenous demands for self-determination as a pretense for abandoning Revolutionary welfare programs and adopting globalized market policies. Campesinos were recast as individual entrepreneurs/owners of their own cultural patrimony—while being left out in the cold economically. So mole poblano found itself eclipsed as a national symbol by the Indigenous diversity of the "seven moles" of Oaxaca. And Oaxaca, the country's most multicultural state, became a pilgrimage site for Mexican and international foodies seeking out a supposedly more authentic, pre-Hispanic cuisine with its heirloom agriculture and, in Pilcher's phrase, the "exoticized labor of Indigenous women."

UNLIKE MOLES, SO ELABORATE, so complex, the other edible symbol of *lo Mexicano* requires just three ingredients: maize, water, and, crucially, *cal*, lime slack in English. Mole is fiesta fare, a ceremonial community feast. The tortilla, on the other hand, is a daily essential,

basic as running water, though even more accessible since plenty of remote Oaxacan comunidades don't have running water.

An average Mexican consumes over 150 pounds of tortillas a year, most of it edible cardboard these days, machine-pressed from Maseca, the national megabrand of dehydrated instant corn flour. Maseca's parent company, Gruma, achieved a near monopoly on Mexico's tortilla market through blatant political favoritism during the early-1990s neoliberal reign of president Carlos Salinas de Gortari. It's now a multibillion-dollar multinational behemoth pushing its products in over one hundred countries and fueling the international taste for burritos, quesadillas, and tacos.

But in Oaxaca, people spit on Maseca tortillas. Here, rural women make them by hand from fresh masa over live fire, while urban professionals buy them from such rural women who sell them for a living—at about twenty pesos, one buck, a kilo.

It was hard in Oaxaca to eat a tortilla or a tamale or a tlayuda (pizza-sized griddled tortilla) without someone patriotically blurting: *Somos gente de maíz*. We're people of corn. Or *Sin maíz no hay país*. Without corn there is no country. Or *Con maíz soy feliz*. With corn I am happy.

Corn = country = happiness.

Clearly, I needed to better understand Mexico's identity crop, to see how it was cultivated and processed. So on yet another bright morning, Barry and I headed out to visit maize farmers in Santa Ana Zegache, a Central Valleys comunidad an hour south of the city.

A new amigo, Julio César, accompanied us. Tall and bronze of face, with a gray man-bun under his flashy Stetson, JC displayed a

lofty dignity to match his imperial name. Originally from Chiapas, the land of Zapatista insurgents, he had in fact a Marxist past of some kind, and a present as an anthropologist of Indigenous diets and occasional tour guide. He was also a restaurateur, dishing up very un-Marxist American Angus steaks to the Oaxacan bourgeoisie. My casual questions spurred him to extensive disquisitions.

Somewhere en route, we pulled over by an ordinary-looking modest field of maize. Still six months from harvest, its silky pink tassels stirred gently in the high-altitude sun against a backdrop of close foothills. JC pointed out the young vines of frijoles curling up the cornstalks, and closer to the ground, flowering squash vines. This field was in fact a roadside example of a milpa, the iconic local intercropped plot I'd been dying to see.

"The milpa," JC launched his exposition, "expresses the genius of our early Mesoamerican agriculture—the symbiotic complex where everything is beautifully, logically interconnected." So beans supply the soil with nitrogen, corn provides columns for climbing, low-growing squash vines trap moisture and inhibit weeds, while chilies additionally ward off pests. All their roots intertwine for mutual nourishment and reinforce the soil against erosion. Nutritionally, the beans-squash-maize triad makes a complete and brilliant package. What's more, a milpa holds a wealth of quelites, those wild edible greens long dismissed as indigenous weeds but now finally celebrated. JC plucked a grassy, antioxidant-rich quintonil (flowering amaranth). He pointed out tender round-leafed papalo, a natural laxative with the taste of super-sappy cilantro.

"La milpa is an *ecocultural construct*!" he proclaimed, now running his hands through the corn leaves. "A sacral space, to which campesinos will pray, reenacting millennial rites!"

It felt humid and tropical suddenly amid the maize. I walked out

along its edge to the rasping of insects, wondering how a roadside cornfield could pack so much ecological and nutritional wisdom.

JC emerged holding a skinny green stalk.

"Teocintle," he announced, and I gasped.

So *that's* what it looked like. *Zea mays mexicana*, or teosinte in English. The wild grassy ur-ancestor of modern corn, the world's current number one grain crop.

I examined the plant. Long and pencil-thin, twisted like the braid of a baby Zapotec girl. Impossible, almost, to connect it to the fat, husk-swaddled, juicy corncobs we know—let alone with corn-based ethanol or laundry detergent.

JC took back the stalk and sucked it. "*Dulce*," he said. "Sweet."

Maize was domesticated around nine thousand years ago in the Balsas River valley of central Mexico, about four hundred miles from our milpa stop. For a good part of the twentieth century, its exact biological genesis was hotly debated, for reasons beyond just academic: identifying its genetic stock could boost the modern plant's productivity. Some scientists proposed that maize evolved from teosinte, transforming eventually via genetic mutations and human selection into primitive corn. Others argued that modern maize's ancestor must have been some archaic wild maize, either extinct or as yet unidentified. Then in the nineties, the teosinte hypothesis was confirmed through space-age genetic analysis and archeological findings.

But a question still nagged. Why *would* early Mesoamericans bother domesticating a puny stalk with so little nutritional promise? Was teosinte valued as a sweetener rather than a grain—appreciated raw, as by JC in the milpa, or fermented into an alcoholic tipple, perhaps? Or was teosinte simply different some nine thousand years ago?

Whatever the answer, the transformation of a grassy stalk into a

corncob as we know it was, as JC put it, a *creación humana*, a human creation. Corn doesn't grow in the wild. Its husk prevents natural seed dispersion. Thousands of years ago, ancestors of the campesinos we were on our way to visit must have noticed teosinte's genetic mutation, stored the best-looking seeds, and bred them for desirable traits. As our milpa farmers *still* do, JC noted triumphantly.

Commercial corn (from hybrid or GMO seeds) is an international agro-industrial leviathan; its more than a billion tons of annual harvest account for over 20 percent of all human nutrition. Here in Mexico, maíz criollo or nativo—terms for the locally grown landrace varieties—was the source of the toasty hand-made tortillas I'd been obsessing over in Oaxaca. In central and southern Mexico—JC was expounding again now; we were back in the car, bumping along a small road surrounded by ferric-red soil—such carefully evolved and nurtured criollo landraces were grown on rain-fed milpas by roughly 2.5 million smallhold farmers, mostly for *autoconsumo*. This kind of subsistence agriculture was something successive Mexican governments have long wanted gone, because it could never properly fit into any national market economy. Meanwhile, commercial domestic corn for "crappy supermercado tortillas"—JC practically sneered—was grown on high-yield, mechanized, chemically fertilized, and artificially irrigated farms, primarily in Mexico's flat northern states—from hybrid seeds "improved" through cross-pollination, sold by the likes of Monsanto.

ON THE SUN-BAKED ZOCALO of Santa Ana Zegache—Zapotec for "seven hills"—kids were chasing around an old plastic soccer ball. Goats roamed the drowsy unpaved streets past cactuses and

electric-pink flowers. The local population, around three thousand, scraped by on small subsistence farming and remittances from Zegacheños gone north, to Mexico City, to California, to Oregon.

Elmer Gaspar Guerra, the fizzy young presidente municipal, greeted us at the bright, bare-bones ayuntamiento with a bag of huge empanadas stained yellow with mole amarillo. A political wunderkind who won his first term aged twenty-two and still resembled a pudgy college sophomore, Elmer brimmed with initiatives for improving life in his destitute municipio. Many of his schemes were gastronomic, to capitalize on Oaxaca's newfound status as Mexico's foodie cradle.

"Food has a power to transform our life here," he declared, taking us for a quick peek into the spanking new mercado nearby, where Zapotec women were aerating atole and chocolate.

Tiny Zegache had even made it into a *New York Times* article headlined "Oaxaca's Native Maize Embraced by Top Chefs in U.S. and Europe." Elmer was now organizing a women's collective to produce colored tortilla flour—rojo, morado, negro—that enjoyed great prestige at Oaxaca's *restaurantes gourmet*.

"The yuppies from Oaxaca City and CDMX [Mexico City]," he quipped, "come here pretending they're the ones who discovered maíz criollo tortillas. When it's our impoverished campesinos who've kept maize culture alive! Because if we don't, the community dies. *Maseca no entra aquí!*" he cried, raising a clenched fist to the corporate Godzilla. Then he led us out to the farmers we came for, and dashed off on some urgent municipal business.

Nati (Natividad) and Cayetano, the maize campesinos, were a middle-aged Zapotec couple. Their small compound on Zegache's outskirts

held rudimentary living quarters, some service sheds, and a cluttered, ramshackle outdoor kitchen area, its sides loosely fenced with bamboo. Nati, in a *mandil*, the ubiquitous Zapotec apron, was making fiesta tamales with a chatty elderly neighbor, Elena. Chicken pecked about at corn kernels; giant squashes lay half-rotten by a gnarled tree.

Hospitable Cayetano showed us their earthen-floor living room, its pride of place occupied by the family altar with its colorized ancestral photos, bright oilcloths, and figurines of the Juquila Virgin with her long black lifelike hair. The Christmas manger was still up in February.

In the adjoining sparse bedroom, ears of corn lay heaped by the spartan bed. Corn was everywhere in the compound—mazorcas (ears) drying on straw mats, shucked kernels in blue plastic buckets, baled husks for tamales and chicken feed, dried-up scraped cobs to feed fires, zacate (dried maize plant leaves) to be mixed with animal dung for fertilizing the milpa.

And not even in Oaxaca City had I ever seen maize so gorgeous, so *baroque*: glowing orange, wine-burgundy, purplish black, some ears speckled. Their giant irregular kernels glimmered like multihued amber or polished pearl.

"*El maíz de Zegache tiene otro sabor*—has another flavor," Cayetano said dreamily, stroking his mazorcas as if they were kittens. He named the landraces: "Amarillo, negrito, pinto (speckled), bolita belatove"—the last a rare variety, recently on a brink of extinction, which produced a nutty purple-tinged masa.

Wiry and short, clad in a T-shirt, jeans, and a tall straw cowboy hat, his graying goatee trim and his grin gap-toothed, Cayetano had eyes that were both canny and gleeful. His Mexican sweet tooth for cozy diminutives was on full display when JC asked, anthropologically, about what he and Nati usually ate.

Atolito and *cafecito* (atole and coffee) for breakfast. *Un huevito criollo* (a free-range egg) with a *tostadita*, *frijolitos*, and *nopalitos* for lunch in the milpa; more of the same in the evening. For *fiestecitas* there were *tamalitos* and *molito*—tamales and mole for fiesta, the mole being amarillo or verde or a pipián from seeds of a calabaza called chompa. And then of course the quelites: *verdolaga* (lamb's lettuce), *quintoniles*, purple *alache*—all boiled *sin grasita*, without fat.

"A beautiful milpa diet," lauded JC. "Millenniums old, perfect nutrition."

(Was he, were we both, I suddenly wondered, perhaps romanticizing the idea of "Indigenous primitivity"?)

Puro, natural, auténtico, todo orgánico, Caetano chimed in, fluent apparently in the globalized language of liberal foodism.

Cayetano learned the "orgánico" way ten years ago from Amado Leyva, a Oaxacan agricultural engineer, corn curator, and hyperpassionate apostle of biodiversity, much praised by foreign media. To Nati and Cayetano he was a beloved benefactor, the one who gave them their biodigester, which converts organic waste into fertilizer, and taught them how to sell extra seeds.

Amado also introduced them to chefs. "Once they came from thirty countries right here to learn about our maize!" Nati said proudly.

One important chef client was a certain chingón in Mexico City, the celebrity prophet of contemporary Mexican cooking, renowned for postmodern riffs on moles and maize. This same chingón chef, I learned now, paid Cayetano and Nati fifteen pesos (80¢) for a kilo of corn—which he then sold for eighty pesos (I noted mentally) at his chichi artisanal tortillería in Mexico City.

For the tortillería's much-publicized launch, Nati was invited to

CDMX to demonstrate her tortillas and her chepil tamales. She was paid five hundred pesos a day.

Twenty-two bucks.

How much did they think the chingón chef charged for a meal at his restaurants?

Cayetano laughed like a kid. "The kind of money I can't even *imagine*!"

Cayetano and Nati's seven-and-a-half-acre milpa a few miles away produced more than four tons of maize with good weather and a good harvest—an excellent yield, gracias, biodigester—which earned them about forty thousand pesos (under $2,000), in cash, per farming season. Again, weather permitting. Meanwhile, a regular family milpa could be just two and a half acres, producing less than a ton. With Oaxacan consumption of two hundred kilos yearly per capita, this kind of yield barely provided food for a subsistence household of six, and left nothing to sell. Which was why people were abandoning farms, Cayetano said sadly, especially now that the rainy season had become so unpredictable. This campesino outmigration, clarified JC, had already begun in the mid-twentieth-century. It reached epidemic proportions with NAFTA and was now driven by climate change.

Elena, the elderly neighbor, meanwhile, who sometimes made tortillas for sale, enlightened me on rural tortillanomics. Two hundred tortillas took a grueling day to make and then sell in the city for two pesos apiece, less than a dime. Deducting the cost of the maize, the lime slack for nixtamal, the molino and firewood, the minibus to the market, that left her a profit of 140 pesos a day. About seven bucks—less than the price of a bowl of ramen in Tokyo or a pizza in Naples.

. . .

Would they want this life for their daughters? I asked the two women.

Both shook their heads vehemently.

As for Cayetano, he declared himself a *campesino feliz*. He loved arriving by six a.m. at the milpa, walking barefoot, bathing in the nearby river, having his early lunch there of tostadas and beans and nopales to the chirping of birds. (Was *he* romanticizing his life?)

"A happy farmer?" Nati snapped dourly. "It's *me* who gets up before five, hauls water from the well, makes his damn breakfast and delivers it to him on the moto!"

Come fall and the corn harvest, the couple could easily gather five hundred kilos a day just with baskets, sometimes hiring help. The dehusking and shucking took several days.

For firsthand experience, Cayetano had us try the *olotera*. This was a home-spun shucking contraption of shortened dry corncobs pressed together inside a metal ring, like a coarse tambourine against which one scraped two corn ears, up and down. "*Todo a mano,* all by hand," proclaimed Cayetano, "if you want delicious tortillas!"

That was how they shucked four tons of maize.

By now Nati and Elena had produced a vast pile of mole verde tamales, wrists flicking, fingers a blur as they ensconced spoonfuls of mole and chicken in discs of masa, and used a big leaf called hoja San Pablo to flip these into the corn husk *totomoxtles*.

"Tamales . . ." intoned JC. "From Nahuatl *tamalli* meaning 'wrapped.' Likely predating *even* tortillas." He tasted a spoonful of the verdant green mole filling—tomatillos, serrano chilies, epazote,

and hojasanta leaf with a faintly liquorish scent, all ground on Nati's massive metate—and pronounced it *muy prehispánico*. "*If* you took away the onion, garlic, and cumin," he added, "and swapped the chicken for, say, iguana."

At lunch featuring these enormously labor-intensive Zapotec-style Central Valleys tamales, the verde filling had a direct, grassy intensity—so startlingly different from the opulent mestizaje colonial moles, an altogether different narrative of Mexican cuisine was evoked. Meanwhile, the steamed tamale masa, lacking mestizo lard or baking soda to render it fluffy, was jarringly gummy. Struggling in surprise, Barry and I desperately helped ourselves from the gallon of Coke enthroned on the table's dusty floral oilcloth.

Coca-Cola in a milpa kitchen?

"*Una maravilla!*" Cayetano exclaimed, his face almost rapturous. "*Mejor que mezcal!*"

I remembered reading about the Coca-colonization of Indigenous Mexican life. How the soft drink had penetrated even communities without drinking water or milk—to be integrated into native rituals, fiestas, and church services.

Before leaving Zegache, we paid our respects to its Baroque jewel, the seventeenth-century church restored a few decades ago by the late, great local muralist-activist Rodolfo Morales. The eye-candy facade blazed like a vast 3-D tablecloth, riotous with marzipan-colored plaster flowers, seashells, polychrome plaster saints. Women in festive huipiles, their heads draped in rebozos, were streaming out of the church cradling life-size baby dolls. The dolls wore shimmery satin, brocaded velvets, tiaras, gold halos. They were *Niños Jesús*, baby Jesuses.

"Día de la Candelaria," explained Julio César. "The day when the Virgin presented her Holy Child at the temple."

Barry noticed one woman whose Niño featured denim overalls and a huge sparkling cross on its neck—and a backpack.

"*Niño emigrante*," she told us shyly. Her husband and brother had left for Los Angeles twenty years ago, and had never returned.

IN *THE STORY of Corn*, Betty Fussell makes an illuminating distinction between "corn" and "maize." The different "symbolic freight" of each term is profound. Capitalist North America built an industrial kingdom and a global empire on the economic power of corn. Whereas a thousand years before Christ, the Olmecs, oldest of Mesoamerican civilizations, founded a complete universe—language, calendar, mythos, and cosmos—on the symbolic power of maize. "If the one culture diminished a staple food to merchandise," wrote Fussell, "the other sanctified it as divine."

Commodity versus cosmogony.

The Aztecs (Mexica), the Maya, and the Zapotecs similarly venerated maize as the ur–stuff of existence, flesh and spirit both. Back in the car returning from Zegache, JC had quoted the most famous of Mesoamerica's maize origin stories, from the *Popol Vuh*, the creation epic of the K'iche' Maya: First *los dioses* created animals (useless, unable to praise their creators), then they tried shaping humans from mud (sad, sodden mush), then wood (dry, bloodless, soulless). Finally four men and four women were molded from maize.

"*From yellow corn and white corn was made their flesh . . .*" The words were known to every Mexican schoolkid. "*From masa were made their arms and legs*."

. . .

Clearly, for campesinos like Cayetano and Nati, corn was a way of life, a quotidian cosmogony. Yet amazingly, given all the *sin maíz no hay país* current corn patriotism, from the arrival of Spaniards until well on into the twentieth-century maize "bore the stigma of defeat," as critical theorist Gabriela Méndez Cota puts it in her book *Disrupting Maize*—whose post-structuralisms I was now untangling mornings in Trine's courtyard, where the birds warbled cozily and pooped on our laundry line, and fallen bougainvillea petals made pink drifts on the ziggurat staircase. *The stigma of defeat* . . . the phrase stuck with me. In a society which until so recently equated whiteness and wheat with civilization and progress, maize represented indigenousness, backwardness, and underdevelopment.

The first Iberian colonists, notes Méndez Cota, took the prime agricultural terrain and left the natives the margins. Then, forced labor on Spanish wheat farms not only served as "the foundation for colonial usurpation of Indigenous lands in Mesoamerica" but, compounded by a series of imported epidemics, decimated the native population—by as much as 80 percent, according to the most drastic estimates.

Wheat was central to the Spanish colonial enterprise, and not least because wheat bread represented the body of Christ in the Catholic mass. But it wasn't simply religion, economics, or even nostalgia that drove the colonists to the massive trouble of supplying themselves with Iberian staples like wheat, wine, olive oil, red meat, dried fruit, and spices.

According to Rebecca Earle's *The Body of the Conquistador*, "food played a fundamental role in structuring the European categories of 'Spaniard' and 'Indian,'" in an era when the notion of

race as biologically fixed hadn't yet emerged. Guided by Galenic-Hippocratic humoral theories, the colonizers viewed corporal identity as malleable by external forces—diet especially. Race, Earle argues provocatively, was in part a question of digestion. For transplanted Spaniards who'd used food to root out false converts back home, the phrase "You are what you eat" now carried an anxious *bodily* urgency. If new foods could generate new blood and humors, wouldn't a New World diet turn a vigorous, proud, bearded Spaniard into a timid, phlegmatic, dark-skinned, beardless Indian? And the reverse. Fray Sahagún, that great encyclopedist of pre-Conquest life, delivered a sermon in Nahuatl imploring the natives to eat "that which the Castilian people eat . . . You will become the same way if you eat their food."

Maize did unavoidably form the bulk of the settlers' diet, but often uneasily. Meanwhile, natives thought wheat bread tasted "like famine food . . like dried maize stalks."

And there was that other hotly debated issue. Was a maize tortilla suitable for Holy Communion? Some missionaries did say yes. Other churchmen dismissed all maize products as a demonic anti-bread, incapable of sacramental transubstantiation.

Colonial society would change, dietary theories shift. But maize still kept its stigma. Under the dictatorship of Oaxacan-born presidente Porfirio Díaz from 1876 until 1911, nutritional racialism took a social Darwinist turn. Don Porfirio—who was part Mixtec but reportedly fancied himself "Latin" and powdered his skin to appear more white—bent Mexican culture toward Europe, and dogmatically embraced industrial monopoly capitalism and foreign investment. His oligarchical banquets sometimes included moles, but mostly featured the *paupiettes de veau* and *glace dame blanche* of a Parisian chef. Meanwhile los científicos, as his brain trust of

technocrats were dubbed, pushed French "scientific politics" and Herbert Spencer's racial ideology, in which Darwinian metrics were applied to society to declare white Europeans as evolution's obvious victors. The Porfiristas invoked the credo eternally dear to Mexico's elites: Indigenous campesinos hindered national progress. Some thought the solution was to whiten Mexico by bringing in Europeans. Others held "the social problem of the Indian race" to be solvable through acculturation, education—and the right nutrition.

"Let them eat more beef and less chile," admonished Justo Sierra, the most prominent Porfirian influencer.

And less maize, naturally.

"The most vicious anti-corn haranguer was Porfirian senator Francisco Bulnes," I informed Barry, as we strolled back one evening from the zocalo, where couples would slow-step old-style danzón to marimba bands weekly by the frilly bandstand, donated by Porfirio Díaz himself. The zocalo was also shared by the tent encampments of teachers protesting here since 2006—a long-standing, controversial reminder of Oaxaca's tumultuous political conflicts. Bulnes, I continued over street-table tlayudas, called maize the "eternal pacifier" of the Indigenous, that "lazy, evil, and intellectually inferior race." In an infamous treatise, the senator divided humanity into wheat, rice, and maize eaters, concluding that wheat eaters were the only "truly progressive" ones. After all, hadn't a small band of wheat-nourished Spanish bandoleros toppled the empires of the maize-fed Aztecs and Incas?

More and more, it seemed to me a miracle how corn tortillas had survived over five centuries of this negative onslaught. Even the Mexican Revolution with its slogan of Land and Liberty didn't produce any nationalist embrace of maize such as the one of today, though it brought land redistribution, farm subsidies, and regulated

tortilla prices. Manuel Gamio, for instance, the great theorist of indigenismo who extolled the Aztec roots of Mexican food, insisted nevertheless that a diet of corn "victimized" Mexicans. He campaigned for soybeans instead (imagine a soybean tortilla).

And even as corn did begin losing its stigma, reformers continued to promote wheat, along with animal protein. By 1950 over half of Mexico consumed bread daily. "Eating bread, particularly manufactured bread," historian Sandra Aguilar writes, "became an act of cultural transformation through which a person stopped being part of the peasant or Indigenous population and became a mestizo." And began suffering from obesity and resulting ailments that exploded with NAFTA.

By the mid-twentieth century, a Mexican newspaper did feel able to trumpet "the end of antagonism between corn and wheat." Food scholar Jeffrey Pichler quotes the "simple equation" for this rapprochement, supplied by one of Mexico's leading nutritionists: "people who ate only corn were Indians, those who only ate wheat were Spaniards, while Mexicans were fortunate enough to eat both grains."

Which was exactly, it occurred to me, what I'd been hearing from Olga.

ONE DAY OLGA announced it was time. Time for me to master tortillas.

"*Somos gente de maíz*," she declared, affirming the hoary mantra from the heart. Despite her affection for bread, Olga was such a lady of maize, she never took off her gold corncob-shaped earrings, and signed off her WhatsApps with a cute corn emoji.

The long mornings of tortilla making, I was already aware, required the labor of nixtamalization the day before. Water and *cal*—calcium hydroxide, 1 percent of the corn's weight—are mixed in a vast plastic tub, then maize is combined with this nejayote (alkaline water) to cook for an hour, and then sit overnight. Around five a.m., the slightly gelatinous glop must be carried to the molino for grinding—wet—into masa, that basic stuff of tortillas, tamales, tostadas, tlayudas, totopos, etc.

Olga, svelte in a brilliantly corn-yellow huipil, showed me the pre-molino part in the airy open breakfast kitchen on Tierra del Sol's ground floor.

"The process seems *basico*," she said, lifting a swollen soaked grano of Mixtecan white corn out of its chalky water. "But *cuidado*!" She squinted, assessing mysteriously. "Too much cal, the tortilla's too picante and yellow . . . too little, it's tough . . . Nixtamal takes years to truly master."

Why, how, and exactly when Mesoamericans discovered nixtamalization remains a great mystery. The only hint comes from traces of carbonized lime in 3,500-year-old Olmec cooking pots found in modern-day Guatemala. Did a corn cook accidently spill ashes or seashells into the pot? Were hot lime rocks used for heating liquids? Did people feel healthier after eating this alkaline maize, stop having certain diseases? How indeed does an ancient culture discover the nutritional value of something—which in nixtamalization's case was so transformative? Untreated mature corn is a dud, its goodness molecularly trapped inside each grain's hard casing. But the alkali process makes corn's niacin (a.k.a. B_3), six amino acids, and calcium readily accessible for human digestion, plus the

softened hull is easier to grind into masa. More amazingly still: this corn + beans makes a complete protein.

"So superior is nixtamalized maize to the unprocessed kind," argues anthropologist Sophie Coe, "that it is tempting to see the rise of Mesoamerican civilization as a consequence of this invention."

And yet, I mused there in Olga's airy restaurant kitchen, for all of nixtamalization's miraculous power, it turned Mesoamerican women into ever-toiling Eves, cursed at birth to serve and preserve the hearth—to slave away producing the daily family quota of tortillas. I glanced over at Olga's enormous metate, which suggested a slightly sinister ritual bench. Historian Arnold Bauer notes that images from five thousand years ago showed both Ancient Egyptian and Teotihuacan women bent over such saddlestone manual grinders. Europe eventually replaced this primitive device with mills. Mexico? Astoundingly, the stone-age metate remained. But why?

Well, for one thing, the wheel wasn't known in the pre-Hispanic Americas. More crucially, even when grain mills arrived with the colonists, they didn't work for the sticky soaked nixtamal. Yet Mexico didn't lack other engineering developments, such as sophisticated silver processing. Was it because tortillas were low-priority female Indigenous labor that not until 1859 did Mexico patent its first nixtamal mill—and it wasn't until much later that steam, gasoline-powered, and electric molinos become fully widespread, especially to rural communities?

"*Bendita invención!*" Blessed invention! cried the Mexican newspaper *El Faro* in 1902, about the nixtamal mill. "It comes to liberate the female sex of our land." Meanwhile, in the countryside, suspicious males were accusing it of being the "revolution of the women against the authority of the men."

The invention and diffusion of nixtamal mills was followed by tortilla-making machines, and eventually by that industrialized horror, instant Maseca.

"But rural Oaxacan women never gave up the metate!" exclaimed Olga. "It's part of our identity."

And so during Tierra del Sol's mad breakfast rush, she was patiently trying to teach me how to give the molino-ground masa its crucial *segunda pasada*, the second hard press and roll on the metate, for ultimate smoothness.

Ever knelt at a metate? Any idea what handling its massively heavy mano (stone cylindrical roller) does to your shoulders and back? Ever attempted the wrist rotation, rolling the mano forward while at the same time pressing down *hard* with your palms? Twenty repetitive minutes of all this sent pain shooting through my wrists and fingers—can carpal tunnel syndrome set in immediately?—through my shoulders and knees.

Then it was time for Olga's comal, so treacherously pleasant-looking amid the azure tiles atop the artfully rústico cooking station.

I'm a wheat person. I've learned how to slap lavash on the sides of a tonir oven; I can stretch strudel dough paper-thin. The tortilla de maíz defeated me.

An hour passed, laboring and sweating, as sweet Olga murmured encouragements, as morning customers stared from their memelas, tetelas, eggs in gusano worm salsa, and frothy chocolate de agua. I glowed red and redder with embarrassment.

I kept getting overmatched by the basic sequence: roll out my masa ball; flatten it, leaning really hard on the lever of the blue

tortilladora press; smooth my resulting mutant tortilla by hand three times between sheets of plastic, flipping it once; unpeel the sheets of plastic; swiftly drape them over the tortilladora with one hand while with the other holding my "tortilla" (torn-edged, ugly) without crinkling it, then lay it gently—slap too hard, air bubbles will form—on the comal so it lands perfectly straight. (Sure!) Wait about forty-five seconds, then flip it while avoiding (how?) burning myself on the 700°F clay surface. For professional tortilleras, this vuelta, the flip, is the trickiest. Too soon and the inside will be raw; too late and it's too dry. And of course, the masa needs constant hydration or your tortillas won't inflate.

When it does, what a beautiful moment, a tiny miracle really, the steam trapped inside swelling from the heat, so the tortilla breathes and undulates and balloons like a delicate primeval life form. When one of mine actually managed to do this, I watched in awe. With a sigh of relief Olga snatched it up, deftly slit it, slipped a whole raw egg inside, and tossed it back on the comal—a breakfast of champions. Then she showed me the most elemental and most beloved local snack, *taquito de sal*, a tortilla sprinkled with salt and rolled into a tight tube with an earthy primordial taste of . . .

And I paused, sweating and sore.

How easy it was to idealize a hand-made tortilla of native heirloom corn. So artisanal, so deeply rooted in pre-Hispanic identity, a rebuke to colonialism and industrial agriculture that has—improbably, how?—survived for millennia in its pretty original form.

Yes, wasn't this tortilla the bedrock of family life and pride, the very essence of Indigenous Mexicanness?

But then, my God . . . for many, many women, what endless daily grueling toil . . .

OAXACA

I FOUND MYSELF OBSESSED with this issue of tortilla and female Indigenous labor—so essential, yet so often ignored in the current consumerist adulation of heirloom maize on both sides of the border.

Is the tortilla *empoderamiento o esclavitud*? Empowerment or slavery?

Olga, startled by the question at first, thought for a while, then declared, Yes, slavery—despite all the special power, domestic and cultural, that the tortilla conferred on a woman. She herself was a liberated modern cook, after all, who ultimately valued her licuadora (blender) more than any metate ("La licuadora helped moles survive!"). She welcomed any innovation or shortcut that helped local women be "feliz con maíz"—happy with corn.

Slavery, agreed sociologist Dr. Gloria Zafra, author of the influential study *Mujer, Trabajo y Salud en Oaxaca* (Women, Labor, and Health in Oaxaca). And what's more, a chronic health hazard, causing metate-related shoulder and knee injuries and lung damage from inhaling comal wood smoke. But then, without opportunities, Zafra countered, without education, what were our Indigenous women to do? Consider Oaxaca's professional tortilla vendors, those "living tortilla machines" enduring brutal work, terrible pay, three to four hours a day just in colectivo taxis. Yet theirs were usually family businesses with cousins, aunts, sisters all chipping in. Ultimately, such a model offered more freedom, and yes, empowerment even, than slaving as *empleadas* (employees), abused and discriminated against, for more or less the same pay.

. . .

To my surprise, even Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza seemed of two minds in answering my "Empowerment or slavery?" question. And hers was the opinion I especially sought.

Eufrosina, as she's simply known, is one of Mexico's most dynamic Indigenous politicians and women's rights activists. What they call a super-chingona. I felt extremely lucky she found an hour to meet at the jazzy mezcal-bar patio of a just-opened design hotel in Oaxaca. Where I had to strain to imagine how this intimidatingly glamorous, powerful woman, urgent and polished, a wine-colored rebozo draped stylishly over her little black dress, had grown up in a village seven long hours from here by steep winding roads—speaking only Zapotec, sleeping on a dirt floor, being lectured by her father that women were only good for making tortillas and babies.

"That life was my supposed destiny," she began after a cursory sip of mezcal. "The destiny of every Indigenous woman in such a comunidad. Being indígena, female, and poor in Mexico—*cabrón*, you're triply screwed."

That life. Fetching water predawn . . . waiting for the nixtamal mill to open . . . kneeling for hours at the metate . . . slapping tortillas on the comal . . . boiling nixtamal for next day. "I'm forty," she said. "My son Diego is six. Back home every woman my age is a grandma, married at twelve."

At eleven, Eufrosina heard of her dad's plans to marry her off and ran away from this destiny. She moved in with relatives in a bigger pueblo and learned Spanish, supporting herself selling fruit and chewing gum on the street. Aged twenty-seven, with a college degree from Oaxaca City, she returned to her comunidad to enter political life—still haunted by "the sadness, the injustice on the faces

of our women, their hands hardened by nixtamal and scarred by comal."

In the 1990s, Oaxaca became the first Mexican state to be granted the right for its Indigenous communities to elect their leaders through usos y costumbres (literally, "uses and customs"), whereby both voters and candidates "earn" their right to take part through public service activities. Of Oaxaca's 570 municipios, 418 elect leaders this way. And in most municipalities, women were excluded from participating.

"Usos y costumbres," scoffed Eufrosina. "Usos y abusos of women!"

In 2007 she ran for presidente municipal of her comunidad, and apparently won. Whereupon the incumbent declared that "women are created to assist men," to prepare meals and raise kids, not govern. Ballots marked for her were destroyed. Her supporters were harassed, slandered as idiots, drunkards, and gays. "I'm not a crier," said Eufrosina, "but those words made me weep. Zapotec insults sting." Appealing to Oaxaca's state congress, she received death threats. But her plight made national news and her story was heard by Mexico's then president Felipe Calderón. Suddenly a celebrity, she found herself becoming the first-ever Indigenous woman elected to the Oaxacan state congress, and then to Mexico's national Chamber of Deputies. Her major achievement so far? A federal constitutional amendment recognizing the right of Indigenous women to vote—later replicated globally by the UN.

At the time of our meeting Eufrosina headed SEPIA, the Secretariat for Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples, in Oaxaca's state government. One of her debut actions was to change the name of her office, formerly the Oficina de Asuntos Indígenas. "Asuntos?" she snorted. "Indigenous Affairs—a term so bureaucratic, so passive."

She waved a hand. "Even our well-meaning mestizo liberals still treat los indígenas as sweet helpless dolls . . . *los vulnerables*, a 'national problem.' Oaxaca's Central Valleys with their markets and crafts, they're seen as some sort of open-air living museum. But we are people, not an 'affair' or folkloric artifacts waiting for handouts. We've just been denied opportunities!"

She leaned forward. "Write this down, Anya! '*La mujer indígena* can be *empoderada*, *chingona*, *y valiente*'—empowered, badass, and brave!"

All of which brought on my next question: How to reconcile hard-won Indigenous rights of cultural and political autonomy with a feminist vision?

Contesting traditional laws wasn't the answer, Eufrosina responded impatiently. Changes had to come through community conversation, education, transparency. "Our pueblos have many virtues," she said. "Beautiful fiestas, tamales for Christmas, sharing, planting, and eating together. These are my values, too, I fight to defend them."

And the tortilla issue? I pressed.

"Look," she replied, "I don't cook. I refuse to touch nixtamal."

Given who I'd been spending time with in Oaxaca—women all drawing their power from food making—these were distinctive words.

"But in my village," Eufrosina continued, "I do it! To show my respect for community life. But I draw the line at human rights violations. Indigenous rights and human rights need not be incompatible. And we keep making progress." There were many more women municipal presidents now, and a female quota in cabildos, the state's local assemblies.

"But you ask me, Anya," she pondered further, "if tortilla is slavery . . ."

Her answer was that it was not. Maize was and is the alimentary base of Indigenous comunidades, their subsistence and culture. Machine-made tortillas are scorned, Maseca regarded as contaminated.

"What needs changing," Eufrosina insisted emphatically, "is the prejudice that the tortilla is solely women's work. We try to educate villagers to involve the whole family. The señor can fetch firewood for the comal—why can't he?" She tapped through her cell phone to show photos of her delivering family-size nixtamal mills to small groups of village women, a program she launched called Mujeres de Maíz, so women don't have to wait at dawn for men to open the communal molino whenever they want, another form of abuse. "Through these small molinos, sisterhoods are created."

Rising to leave, she said she was still mulling my tortilla question. She herself had made a life choice involving zero tortillas. But if a woman chose that life, she needed to be respected for it. "And ultimately," she added, smiling coolly, adjusting her rebozo, "the tortilla *is* power. A woman can tell her dude, If you don't respect me I will deprive you, I will go on strike. Nixtamal is our strength. Sin maíz no hay país, as they say!"

And with that she hurried off.

POSSIBLY THE WORST HISTORIC assault on Mesoamerican maize culture was dealt by NAFTA, the 1994 free trade agreement between the US, Canada—and Mexico, where a majority lived and still live in poverty. For its Mexican champion, president Carlos

Salinas, an economist, NAFTA marked the triumph of the neoliberalism embraced after the country's crippling 1982 debt crisis. Salinas and his free market evangelists abandoned the Revolutionary promise of a welfare state and turned instead toward manufacturing, privatization, and large agribusinesses.

The countryside suffered particularly. By most estimates, Mexico cut agricultural support by 90 percent over NAFTA's first seven years. Worse, the government reduced protective tariffs on maize almost immediately, sending farmers into shock. American agribusinesses meanwhile began dumping industrial corn here (mostly for animal feed) at *below* production cost, even as the US government continued to heavily subsidize its own corn producers. In the first decade of NAFTA, the price of Mexico's domestic corn crashed by nearly 70 percent. Farm laborers' income plummeted. (It's one-third of its pre-NAFTA level even today.) Consumer tortilla prices shot up nearly 300 percent. Despairing campesinos sold or abandoned their land, setting in motion a mass exodus now estimated at anywhere between 2 million and 5 million people.

The last straw from NAFTA's injuries and indignities—and paradoxically, the catalyst of today's nationalist celebration of maize—was the so-called corn scandal of 2001. That year a pair of University of California, Berkeley scientists doing fieldwork in Oaxaca discovered a high level of gene flow from industrial GMO corn into local criollo crops.

Meaning NAFTA, having flooded Mexico with cut-rate US corn, was now tainting the national gene pool?

Published in *Nature*, the Berkeley scientists' findings set off an international uproar and a furious counterattack funded by the

likes of Monsanto. A subsequent exhaustive study from the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) confirmed the gene flow—adding that its "impact on landraces has become entwined with historical issues and grievances affecting rural Mexicans."

To say the least.

"We thought we were facing an apocalypse—a possible extinction event!" the prominent Oaxacan maize scientist Flavio Aragón Cuevas emphasized as he showed me the germoplasm bank at the National Institute for Research in Forestry, Farming and Animal Husbandry north of Oaxaca City. Here seeds of some two hundred local species of maize were being preserved. "*El nuestro Arca de Noé*," he joked.

The corn scandal spread its panic through farming communities already savaged by NAFTA. "Maize is *el centro de Mexicanidad*," Aragón repeated the mantra, and the unique landraces selectively bred for millennia were being threatened by transgenes that could cross-pollinate so easily as to overrun them completely.

"And what's at stake?" Aragón asked somberly. "Our genetic treasure, our biodiversity—our cuisine, culture, and patrimony!"

Mercifully, no long-term damage to Oaxacan maize has been observed following the 2001 alarm. But the maize issue went to Mexico's soul, to the fabric of its rural communities, the livelihood of its Indigenous farmers—those campesinos marginalized for so long but now touted as stewards of the nation's foundational heritage.

Sin Maíz No Hay País was the title of the 2003 exhibition at the National Museum of Popular Cultures in Mexico City, accompanied by odes and paeans to the grain from top intellectuals. That

same year some 100,000 protestors flooded the capital demanding a renegotiation of NAFTA, as farmers marched naked through the streets or formed "tractorcades." *Sin Maíz* was also the slogan of La Red en Defensa del Maíz, an influential anti-GMO network founded in 2002 with some three hundred mostly Mexican activists and still important today.

And so it's been going. Over the past two decades, over five hundred organizations have taken part in the various campaigns. Against the backdrop of the anti-neoliberal Zapatista insurgency, such grassroots movements have brought together campesinos, urban chefs and consumers, Indigenous activists, NGOs, and fancy international scientists. The response from Mexican governments? The usual evasions and half measures, primarily, though currently transgenics are being phased out, and López Obrador, Mexico's populist president, has loudly promised campesino support. But public awareness and consumer patriotism have been created; small-scale farmers and producers have been educating themselves; the media have been roused to the cause.

Mexico even got its Día Nacional del Maíz. The twenty-ninth of September.

Leaving the maize scientist and his germoplasmic Ark, I strolled through the mercado in the small nearby town of Etla, where campesinos stood stoically by their crates of multicolored maize in the fierce sun and narrow shadows. How, I wondered, did this new corn patriotism affect national attitudes toward such farmers? Were they still seen as "nostalgically folkloric remnants of underdevelopment," in the words of one scholar? Or were the likes of Cayetano

and Nati amid their rough-jewel maize in Zegache now considered independent proprietors of culture and patrimony? Or were they tiny cogs in the neoliberal marketing machine, promotional props of heritage tourism? And what did the future hold for them? The global explosion of eco-conscious consumerism has created a demand for heirloom corn that could easily overpower production capacities—as has happened with mezcal. And if social and educational programs championed by the likes of Eufrosina succeeded—what would restrain campesinos from quitting their milpas and integrating into mestizo society?

High in the hills above Etla, Francisco Toledo refashioned a textile mill into an ecological art center. There I bought a few striking anti-GMO posters of El Maestro's design. The one that now hangs in my office in New York depicts Benito Juárez—the nineteenth-century Zapotec from Oaxaca who became a revered, liberalizing president of Mexico—asleep on a pile of criollo corncobs. "*Despierta Benito!*" ("Wake Up, Benito!") urges a caption. "*Y di no al maíz transgénico!*" ("And say no to GMO maize!")

INEVITABLY, ANY FOOD STORY set in Oaxaca will turn for its crowning scene to a mole-lavished fiesta of one kind or another. Many delightful dichos (sayings) invoke mole's deep-woven role in Mexican social life. For instance: "*Para cuándo el mole?*" When's the mole for? As in: When's the boda (wedding)?

Never in a million years did I dream that such a boda fiesta would feature Barry and me, exchanging vows at a shamanic Zapotec ceremony on Olga's terraza.

And yet here was Olga excitedly drawing up guest lists and menu plans. "Imagine, Anyita!" she cooed. "You'll make your own wedding moles!"

This was to be my meal in Oaxaca, after all. My own wedding moles.

Olga had seven in mind, but nothing canonic or national. Together we'd make her family recipes, such as a clove-scented mole de clavo from her abuelita, Chonita, who runs a famous comedor in Huajuapan. The pièce de résistance would be a fruity bridal-white mole blanco of nearly thirty ingredients that Olga herself had invented after months of trial and error. It required, in part, alchemically blanching calabaza seeds with water and ash.

And who knows, maybe I'd even somehow manage to slap up some tortillas.

My unexpected marital plans were all the result of mezcal. More precisely, of a visit to the mezcal palenque (distillery) owned by Olga's business partner and our new friend, Jorge Vera, a London-trained former economist turned palenquero—very mestizo. His palenque, Convite, lay a long hour's drive southeast of Oaxaca City, some six thousand feet aloft in the Sierra Madre del Sur just outside the modest pueblo of San Baltazar Guelavila. This is the Zapotec heart of mezcal country, where Mexico's largest diversity of agave abounds.

Despite the high price of its product, the Convite facility consisted mainly of a large mostly open-air platform set into a slopeside, at whose rear a soil-and-stone roasting pit was loaded up, covered high with earth and log weights. Freshly cut agave hearts, *piñas*, sat heaped close by like pale monster pineapples awaiting

their turn roasting. Or more like monster asparagus stubs, since agave (maguey) is actually a member of the Asparagaceae family. Beside these stood the tahona, the traditional grinding wheel for crushing the cooked piñas, powered by a plodding circling burro. Big oaken vats of tepache (agave mash) bubbled and foamed nearby . . . slowly, spookily.

After a show-around, we tasted a 120-proof new distillate straight from the alambique (still) with Tucho Hernández, one of Convite's master distillers along with his older brother, Daniel. The Hernándezes are a well-known family dynasty in San Baltazar, where recent decades have made celebrities of Zapotec mezcaleros, as the best small-batch distilleries were being snapped up by multinationals like Pernod Ricard and Campari. Beyond us the wintry slopes rolled away in faded grays and browns, with their scattered wild agaves making spiky eruptions of green.

Tucho was especially proud of his *jabalí* (boar) mezcal—*muy difícil* because the jabalí maguey grows on steep cliffsides, takes twenty-five years to mature, and requires some one hundred kilos for a single distilled liter.

"But drinking it can fuck with your mind," he cautioned. "Give you moods."

"Tucho" means "wild" in Zapotec, and the nickname suited. Around forty, with fierce Emiliano Zapata good looks featuring a dashing wide mustache, Tucho seemed to have a shamanic relationship to agave and mezcal and the sierra. He could just eye a location, he told us, and know what maguey would grow there, how its mezcal would taste. Every now and then he'd disappear into the mountains for several days with only a bottle of distillate and some mushrooms, "and talk to the birds." He had his special way of doing things—a Tucho life-approach. For instance, how he got

himself married. He was kicking a ball around with some pals one day and it landed by a girl. "And I said to myself, she's the one," he recounted. It was love. "Will you be mine?" he asked—just like that. "Can I think about it?" replied the girl. "No, not really, but okay. I need your answer tomorrow," he said. Then he asked for her name.

For some reason Tucho seemed fascinated by Barry. "He's *old*," he declared, turning our scrutiny of him back the other direction. "But surprisingly *spry* . . . How long have you two been married?"

He was shocked to hear we weren't, after twenty-five years of "courtship."

"Our accountant said it was a terrible idea financially," I told him, with the frivolous chuckle I always produce when explaining our relationship status.

Tucho frowned.

"It is time you got married," he pronounced with solemn intensity. "Marriage will teach you new responsibilities."

"Tucho can marry you!" piped up Jorge, our host. He was grinning, but clearly a little dazed by what he might be setting in motion.

It turned out Tucho was a bona fide Zapotec shaman, entitled to preside over spiritual ceremonies. He'd married people before.

Barry and I looked at each other.

"Why not?" we gulped. Dazed, for real, by what the palenque and its 120-proof jabalí had wrought.

Before the marriage itself, though, there was a preliminary ceremony to be undergone: la pedida, the entreaty. A father figure for Barry had to formally petition my mother figure for my hand.

And before la pedida, there was the gauntlet of earthy folkloric

jesting to be run, which we brought on by announcing brightly to all and sundry that we planned to get married Zapotec-style.

Windburned, work-haggard faces immediately lit up with bawdy mirth. Ladies asked shrewdly how I was with the metate. Men asked lewdly how I was on the petate (straw mat).

"*Him?*" a couple of Mixteca abuelas cackled at the Friday market at Ocotlán, referring to Barry. "Better the other, *he* looks like a rich gringo!" Meaning our tall regal amigo Julio César. The Ocotlán market, famous for its live turkey trade, was where I bought my white wedding huipil.

Barry's entreaty for my hand took place early one evening at the same jazzy hotel mezcal bar where I'd met Eufrosina. Olga's friend Mari Paz, the hotel's genial general manager, accompanied me as stand-in mother. I sat beside her, silently as required, a crimson rebozo modestly covering my head while Barry's father stand-in, Jorge Vera, the instigator, launched with surprising eloquence into the spousal virtues—and deficiencies, granted—of the long-in-the-tooth "son" beside him (some twenty years older than his "father"). Mari Paz eyed the pair with protective suspicion. Barry was accoutered in a debonair, but odd, outfit: a pseudo-campesino blouse, a bright purple bandana, and a large floppy black hat. Once Jorge was done, Barry stood and squawked out a mariachi classic he'd revised especially for me, to applause from the ten friends gathered as witnesses. Then he went down on one knee and asked for my hand after presenting his requisite pedida offerings of chocolate, cigarettes, mezcal, pan de yema, and a mini-metate—plus the fattest virility-suggestive *vela* (candle) he could find in Oaxaca. By local tradition, the groom's worth and quality is measured by the price and weight of this vela. My hand was granted. We kissed.

We toasted our mezcal-wrought betrothal and impending

marriage. It was a process we had embraced, to be honest, as sort of playful folkloric cosplay, a lark. But now, raising our vasos veladoras, the traditional squat church-candle glasses, for mezcal, we found ourselves filled with emotion. Our betrothal was, in truth, a salute to the Oaxacan community web that had so richly and generously gathered us in these past weeks. That's what we toasted most deeply and sincerely. Even if one of us resembled an escapee from an operetta.

TEOTITLÁN DEL VALLE, a prosperous Zapotec weaving village, lies under El Picacho, a starkly peaked sacred hill in the Sierra Juárez near Oaxaca. A few days before our boda zapoteca was to take place, I came here to call on Abigail Mendoza, and, among other things, invite her to our wedding.

In Oaxaca, Doña Abigail is less a cook than a Zapotec cultural treasure. Diana Kennedy borrowed her recipes, Anthony Bourdain came to pay his respects. Mexican *Vogue* put her on its cover. When she was still a young cocidera (a traditional cook for fiestas and weddings), unmarried Teotitlán women such as her weren't allowed to shop at the market or drink mezcal (she still doesn't). With much anguish and shame, she defied village traditions, and then defied the contractors who built Tlamanalli—the restaurant, named for the Zapotec kitchen god, she founded with her five sisters thirty years ago—who refused to take orders from a woman. Now she sat on the village council and presided over Teotitlán's new Community Cultural Center.

In her sturdy fifties, with a round laughing face and red-ribboned braids coiled on her head like a rumpled tiara, Doña

Abigail waited for me at the rambling magical-realist house she shares with her two likewise unwed sisters, Adelina and Rufina. The huge central courtyard presented a realm of exotic blossoms, comals galore, bubbling pots over live fire—a happy Camelot of women, which made me momentarily reconsider my marriage plans. On the arcaded porch, though, among the looms, straw baskets, and pottery, I counted seven daunting presences: metates. Separate ones, Abigail noted, for chilies and chocolate, spices and beans, so flavor didn't mix.

When Abigail was five, her dad made her a practice mini-metate from river stone. At six she made her first real tortillas, tiny misshapen ones, and when her mom tossed them to the chickens, she wept. At nine, she had to drop out of school because it was all getting too much, the weaving, helping with younger siblings, scrambling to deliver nixtamal to the molino at recess, dashing back to her mother with the masa, then back to class.

"Aha!" I jumped in with my irrepressible "So tortilla equals slavery?"

"Part of me thinks, yes," Abigail allowed, after the inevitable bemused pause. "But if we all went instead to school and got jobs, who'd make the tortillas? *Sin tortillas*, family as we know it will end!"

We sat around a long table now in the lush shady calm of the patio, dabbing the ur-local mole cegueza which I'd been so wanting to try onto giant tlayudas, stiff charred discs of maize cratered like moons.

"*El primer mole de nosotros*, our number one mole," Abigail said of cegueza.

"*De nuestros ancestros prehispánicos!*" chimed in Rufina.

Indeed, there was something truly archaic about this cegueza.

No Iberian onions, no garlic, no imported spices. No sweetness. Large frijolones (beans) were its main content for everyday eating, while pork innards and neck featured for fiestas, the Catholic porker replacing native deer or wild hare. But ultimately, it occurred to me, cegueza was a *mole of maize*. Thickened with maíz quebrado (comal-toasted dried corn kernels coarsely ground on metate), it was the closest I'd come in my quest for a pre-Conquest mulli: less a sauce than a haunting pre-Hispanic polenta alive with tomatoes, ruddy chilcostle chilies, and the licorice hit of fresh yerba santa.

I told the sisters that my mole journey had taken me in a reverse historic chronology—from the Baroque-colonial mestizaje of my first negro with Celia, to this austere Zapotec mulli of their ancient ancestors here.

I further explained about my wedding, noting some of the moles Olga and I were making, and extending my invitation.

Abigail chuckled, nodding along as I spoke. Then she spoke herself. She spoke of how in the life of a Zapotec woman, moles represented something deep, something profoundly personal. Moles were the book of a woman's days, of the cycle of life with its community fiestas, its joys, its intimate sorrows. There were the gentle chili-less moles verdes local mothers fed to their babies. The mole zapoteco of chiles chilcostles and toasted breadcrumbs, unique to Teotitlán, that she'd prepared for her siblings' fandangos (grand wedding feasts). The ritual mole amarillo of beef served nine days after the death of her father.

And none of this, I thought to myself as I listened, featured in any mestizaje national narratives.

Then Abigail announced that she had a surprise for me.

Chocolate-atole.

Apparently, news of my boda zapoteca had already reached

Teotitlán. And though Abigail and her sisters, alas, couldn't attend, this was their gift: a foamy fiesta potion Abigail had branded with entrepreneurial savvy as "Zapotec cappuccino."

"Not having married," she declared, her smile wide and contented, "I am very happy no man is bothering us. But if it is your sincere decision to wed, you shall have our bebida de dioses. Drink of the gods!"

Atole—from Nahuatl *atl*, "water," and *ollin*, "movement"—is the daily breakfast of campesinos, part maize gruel, part drink. *Chocolate*, on the other hand, was the potion pre-Hispanic elites served in beautiful vessels, flavored with chilies or agave honey or cinnamon, and frothy. "Chocolate-atole marries luxury (chocolate) and daily sustenance (maíz)," Abigail said. "And for us here, frothy drinks are as important as tamales and moles."

Certain recipes are epic narratives of conquest and battle; certain others are fleeting haikus. Chocolate-atole, I thought, as Abigail commenced a recitation, is an incantation, a spell.

"Chocolate-atole has many pasos, or steps," she began, "of which the first and most difficult is the fermentation of cacao pataxte, white cacao we call it. Nothing to do with brown chocolate.

"You buy pataxte from mujeres de Sierra de Chiapas," she chanted now, "from a trusted seller, paying whatever she asks—never stint—and soak the pods for two weeks. Meanwhile on rocky land make a square pit, fill it with water. Then wait. When the water stagnates, add the cacao. Close the pit with wood, straw, and earth, leaving a hole; every day check how much water is absorbed, and refill; every week take out all the cacao, wash it—bury it again. Six months will pass, maybe eight, the water will rot and develop maggots and worms, the cacao skins darken. When the stench and worms disappear, dry the pods—not in the sun, but *not* in shade or

the cacao will rot. You will know when the pataxte is ready *only* if you are one of the chosen women who knows . . . In my comunidad there are just five such women."

Here she paused to show me the already fermented pataxte pods, chalky and lightweight inside fragile black shells. I took a taste. There was the faint savor of earth, not entirely pleasant.

I couldn't hide my astonishment. Nine months for *this*? Just like pregnancy. *Why?*

"Because chocolate-atole is sacral magic," answered Abigail, suddenly grave. "Through chocolate-atole for special fiestas and weddings, we preserve sacred rites. Now listen and don't interrupt."

The recipe unfurled onward for almost an hour, involving toasting and soaking the pods, and having a small army of helpers peel them with very clean hands—no grease or cream. All this could take up to a week. At long last, the pataxte was ground and blended with comal-toasted wheat, corn, rice, cinnamon sticks, and brown cacao, and this *pasta* was set out to dry in the sun until hard as a rock.

"And now comes the last paso, *día de fiesta*," Abigail announced, her voice swelling with the drama. "Your wedding day, dear Anya! The house is full, you've killed chickens and turkeys and pigs, made your bizcochos and regular chocolate de agua for arriving guests. Now in this crowded chaotic house you find a special corner for you and your eight metates and your twelve helpers: six to grind, and six to do the *batida*, the foam beating, in special ollas that have never touched meat or sugar or grasa—or the espuma is ruined!"

Abigail now hurried over to kneel before the metate and start smashing the rock-hard cacao pasta with the metate's mano, splashing on water, grinding away with the expertise perfected across the decades since childhood. Her forearms, I noticed, were those of a weightlifter.

Rufina and Adelina meanwhile simmered the liquid base: milky atole blanco of white maize tiziahual, a special un-nixtamalized masa.

"So they're grinding and grinding, and other girls are beating and beating espuma," Abigail narrated away, working faster and faster, approaching a ritual climax. "They scoop the espumas finally into *jícaras* [gourds], always terrified of the evil eye, *mal de ojo*."

Now she was up again, beating the pasta herself in an earthenware olla, rubbing and turning her wooden ridged molinillo with a dervish dance of the hands.

And there I finally saw it, a pale foam slowly emerging. Big frail bubbles at first, then a dense lather that gleamed and glinted like oxygenated jewelry.

Ancient Zapotecs had a concept of vital living force, *pi*, meaning "breath" or "spirit" or "wind." According to archeologists Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, anything with pi—a flooding river, a rain cloud, the foam on top of a cup of chocolate—"was considered alive and therefore sacred, addressed with special respect during ritual."

One consumes chocolate-atole by spooning the sweetened espuma over a cup of still-warm atole. The world prizes Mexican food for its bold, spicy energy. But chocolate-atole, the vital elixir from so much grueling fairy-tale labor, was exactly the opposite. Ephemeral . . . faint. It was something, I had to sigh to myself, I guess I'd never understand as an outsider.

"You're a lucky bride," said Rufina, "to have such a gift."

"And your *novio*, your boyfriend," Abigail added graciously, "is most lucky to wed you."

ISTANBUL

The Ottoman Potluck

In 1459, six years after realizing his dream of seizing Constantinople, the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II, "the Conqueror," commissioned a palace on the site of an ancient Byzantine citadel overlooking three waters and two continents. For the next four centuries, until a new palace supplanted it, Topkapi ("cannon gate") Palace would serve as the command center of an enormous empire that stretched at its zenith from Algeria east to the Persian Gulf, from Crimea westward to Hungary.

In the mid-1960s, four decades after the empire's moth-eaten collapse, a sloppy six-story apartment building went up on a steep street in a fairly raffish district on Istanbul's European shore. Since 2007 Barry and I have owned a pied-à-terre walk-up at the top of that building, a slapdash place but with a drop-dead view of the Bosporus, the strait that both separates and joins Europe and Asia. My neighborhood, Cihangir, takes its name from Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent's sad hunchback son, whose circumcision feast in 1539 lasted fifty-two days and depleted the imperial treasury. Over

two hundred dishes were served, some of which—soups and pilafs and such simple stuff—I'd been taste-testing now for a while in my kitchen. I was trying to pin down a perfect historical (but still vital) menu for an Ottoman-inspired dinner I'd been plotting with my friend Gamze, a compulsively hospitable modern dancer turned chef.

In Topkapi's Second Courtyard, entered through the castle-like Gate of Salutation, visitors behold the Matbah-i Amire, the Imperial Kitchen complex that occupies the courtyard's entire south flank. In a palace whose intimate scale subverts Western expectations of grandeur, the kitchen is a strikingly monumental sight. The expansive many-domed silhouette is even visible from the Marmara Sea. It was meant to project to arrivals an image: the image of the empire's largesse and its Koranic commitment to feeding the hungry.

The Matbah-i Amire fed up to five thousand people a day. Foreign envoys, humble petitioners, even pet monkeys, *anyone* who entered Topkapi got a free lunch on the sultan. There were feasts for the Sultan's Sadness (taziye) or Sultan's Joy (isar-I urs); feasts for reaching legal decisions; "helvah socials" to relieve the boredom of winter, illuminated by candles attached to live turtles. For royal weddings and circumcisions, the Matbah borrowed pots from nearby mosques and staged citywide extravaganzas over at the Hippodrome, where the Byzantines once raced their chariots. At these feasts, pashas and commoners, Greek wine tavern owners and Jewish poll tax collectors, Armenian silk merchants and Sufi dervishes, all shared the same yogurt soups, pilafs, peacock and partridge kebabs, dolmas, and mastic-scented puddings. It was as if the sultan's soup was the social glue that held together the complicated layers of his multicultural, multiconfessional capital.

Now, on a pretty June day following our early spring in Oaxaca,

I was browsing Ottoman cookbooks, still frustrated over the perfect menu for my symbolic Istanbul meal. Putting my reading aside, I reached into a cupboard and tugged out a large tray. It was plastic, from the global empire of today called IKEA, but manufactured here in Turkey. I fell to pondering its Ottomanesque blue-white-and-red pattern. And then it dawned on me.

I rushed to text Gamze.

"Let's do a çilingir sofrası *potluck*!"

Çilingir sofrası is Turkish for a tray laden with meze (small plates) to accompany the anisey liquor called raki. It would be like a Spanish tapeo, with each tiny taste telling a story, but without the manic shuffling from bar to bar.

"*Harika canim!* Fantastic, my dear!" Gamze texted back. "It shall be OUR celebration of OUR Istanbul."

OUR ISTANBUL. Ex-Constantinople, ex-capital of Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman empires.

Whenever people ask why I bought an apartment here—busted elevator, leaky roof—I mention the Bosporus view, of course, and the food. On my first visit here back in the mid-1980s, I prowled the city in a kind of lyrical, ravenous daze, taking in the oily perfume of mackerel sandwiches grilled by the ferry docks, inhaling the dime-sized dumpling called manti at homey, tattered esnaf lokantas, the tradesmen's eateries of the bazaar quarters. I still remember the exact taste of the ambrosial peach, one I devoured on the Galata Bridge over the Golden Horn while gaping at the grand domes and minarets of Aya Sofia and the imperial mosques. The city seemed like one never-ending orientalist cliché, but a cliché made poignant

by what I now recognize as hüzün, that free-floating tristesse of depletion and loss of a cosmopolitan texture, which Orhan Pamuk has turned into a kind of official city emotion.

Visiting the year before me, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky misanthropically kvetched about Istanbul's "crooked, filthy streets," which reminded him of Astrakhan and Samarkand, then still Soviet. I was reminded of Soviet places as well—but in a bittersweet way. Even the food, for all its exoticism, seemed completely familiar from my travels through the USSR's own creaking empirium, in eastern Europe, and other places where the Ottomans passed. In Turkish köfte (grilled meatballs), I recognized the cevapcici I'd tasted in Skopje. Versions of dolma (stuffed vegetables) I'd eaten in Ukraine and Armenia, pahlava (baklava) in Azerbaijan, guvetch (claypot vegetable stew) in Moldova. For me, someone raised and fed on the hoary Soviet myth of the "friendship of nations" of its numerous subject realms, Istanbul's edible fusion made perfect sense—a Pan-Eurasian melting pot formed by conquests, migrations, and trade. Given the Ottoman empire's sheer geographic scope, was its cuisine arguably among the world's most influential, though in a totally different manner than French?

Nowadays, over three decades later, neo-Ottomanism is decidedly in fashion in Turkey, relentlessly stoked by the ruling Islamicist party and its main man, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a humbly born devout Muslim with sultanic ambitions. But back then, in the 1980s, hardly anyone mentioned the Ottomans. Memories of the dynasty, founded in 1281 by an Anatolian Turcoman warlord called Osman, hovered wanly about Istanbul like a dishonored ghost, exiled by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—"Father Turk," an officially

awarded honorific—the creator of a secular modern nation from the ruins of the Islamic empire after its humiliating defeat in World War I, followed by the Turkish War of Independence, which he brilliantly led. Upon establishing the Republic of Turkey, with new borders officially recognized by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, Mustafa Kemal wasted no time forcing through his vision for the nation-state and its citizenry, based on the French republican ideals of ethnic nationalism, positivism, and laicism. The caliphate was dissolved, fez and harem abolished. From water-lapped Constantinople—now officially Istanbul—with its ideologically suspect imperial hodgepodge of cultures, the capital was transferred to Ankara, off in the Anatolian plains. The Ottoman language, rich in Persian and Arabic borrowings and written in Arabic script, was discarded for a modernized Turkish written in the Latin alphabet. Even clocks were reset to the Western Gregorian calendar. For decades, former Ottoman subjects could barely read a book or tell time. Meanwhile, writes historian Charles King, new generations of Turkish students would be taught "to see their distant ancestors as Turkic tribesmen, even if their grandfathers had actually been Salonican greengrocers or Sarajevan tailors."

It goes without saying that the elaborate palace cuisine of the shunned empire was barely mentioned.

Istanbul looked different to me when I began returning in the nineties and aughts.

Cleaner now, more prosperous, economically opened up to the world by successive neoliberal governments. Tourism was surging. There were malls now and McDonald's and pizza—even restaurants promising the "treasures and mysteries of the Ottoman kitchen."

My favorite evenings, though, involved raki and meze at meyhane, the dark smoky taverns clustered around newly pedestrianized Istiklal Avenue in the European Beyoğlu district, the former Pera of earlier times. An inebriated historian once explained that meyhane dated back to the city's Byzantine past. They were portside dens where sailors could get a drink, a dame, and a haircut to boot. Wine houses at first (mey is Persian for wine, hane for house), they were run in Ottoman times by non-Muslim minorities allowed to sell alcohol, and were only precariously legal. Under hard-drinking Atatürk, however, meyhane flourished as symbols of secularism. Raki, the "lion's milk" dear to "Father Turk," flowed as the *milli içki*, the "national drink." Atatürk's portraits gazed down from meyhane walls, often with glass in hand.

The original meyhane served only rudimentary snacks—pickled cabbage, bowls of leblebi (roasted chickpeas), and the like. But with neoliberal prosperity, the meze trays of çilingir sofrası (çilingir means lock; sofra is the round, low Ottoman tray table) morphed into fantastical edible memoryscapes that now gathered together the strands of Istanbul's multicultural heritage. At a Beyoğlu meyhane, one ate Arnavut ciğeri, fried cubes of "Albanian liver," tossed with wisps of raw onion, and the mayonnaise-laden "Russian salad" I knew as Salat Olivier from my Moscow childhood. Greek—Byzantine?—taramasalata and dried fish called çiroz shared the tray with yogurt dips harking back to the Anatolian nomadic past, alongside distinctly Armenian topik, a compound of mashed chickpeas and richly caramelized onions.

How enchantingly nostalgic, I thought it all was . . . Small fleeting tastes of an imperial polyglot past mosaicked in front of me, as chain-smoking bohemians brooded over their raki and a bespectacled Armenian busker called Madame Anahit rendered "La Vie

en Rose" on her battered accordion. She was so painfully out of tune regulars paid her not to play.

And so, I bought an apartment in Istanbul.

"*POTLUCK*—I LOVE IT, canim!"

Gamze was practically jumping off her rickety red plastic stool in excitement. We were in a murky alley near the Balik Pazari, Beyoğlu's produce and fish market, indulging in a hard-core Istanbul ritual: kelle söğüş sandviç. A sheep's-head sandwich.

I was feeling delighted myself. Here in Istanbul, the idea of an imperial mingling of cultures at table persisted even through republican "Turkification." Cultural polyphony remains one of this city's particular and most enduring foundational myths.

Gamze, for her part, kept on repeating, *Potluck!* The term that to me evoked tuna casseroles was to her the perfect metaphor for a cuisine whose benevolent subtext was that everyone was welcome at table. And so here was the plan—a gastronomic homage to Istanbul's melting-pot legacy by means of each guest contributing a dish.

On a paper napkin Gamze scribbled an invite list. Takuhi Tovmasyan, an Armenian memoirist, would bring her famous topik. Deniz Alphan, our Jewish friend, would contribute a Sephardic eggplant börek . Zeynep "the Albanian" would bring the Albanian liver. I volunteered Russian salad, and since I've actually *been* to the Caucasus, a Circassian chicken in walnut sauce, by legend prepared by the fair-haired favorites of the harem. Gamze, with her Ottoman DNA—her great-grandfather was an honest-to-god Ottoman pasha, assassinated while serving at the court of that degenerate defeatist Abdülhamīd II, the penultimate sultan—promised one of her family recipes.

. . .

I'd met Gamze a few years before, after I'd been half living in Istanbul for almost a decade, and Erdoğan's mounting Islamicist authoritarianism was battering the once-surging optimism about Turkey's democracy. A refined curly-haired beauty, Gamze was a part of my ever-expanding circle of friends from the food scene: women mostly, all worldly and elegant, all proud Istanbullus heartbroken at *our* city's ongoing ruination by toxic political forces, and ever nostalgic for that past—that hazy, mythical past—where Armenians, Greeks, Muslims, and Jews exchanged food during holidays. This city, *our* city, with its memory of a thousand and one palace-born dishes and its rich minority foodways, was utterly special, I was repeatedly told.

"Istanbul cuisine has a particular *savor*," Gamze repeated again, as we ambled past Balik Pazari's early June bounty of mulberries, favas, and artichoke hearts, bobbing in blue plastic tubs of vinegared water. "Mild, seasonal, delicate . . ."

And that savor, I said with a loud, poignant sigh, just kept eluding me in my own kitchen.

"But then, canim, I have an idea!" Gamze exclaimed. She insisted that we go right now to her house nearby, and together make kelek dolma, stuffing unripe green striped melons the size of a tennis ball with an Ottoman filling of meat, rice, and nuts. Gamze even offered a quick tutorial on *zeytinyağlı* ("with olive oil" literally)—seasonal veggies such as artichokes, leeks, or green beans slowly braised in rivers of oil. A preparation, she insisted, "fundamental to Istanbul."

At her house we sat scooping out pale-green cucumber-like flesh from the kelek, while Gamze reminisced about her childhood, a magical one, in a yali, a wooden waterside villa on the city's Asian

shore. There she fished in the Bosporus and swam with packs of neighborhood kids in the cold treacherous currents. During full moons local families threw parties on *sandals* (traditional fishing boats) illuminated by kerosene lanterns; singalongs echoed across the dark oily waters. Gamze's paternal grandmother, daughter of that assassinated Ottoman pasha, was a marvelous cook, precise and refined. She braised eggplants with sour cherries until the lot was luscious as pudding, and she prepared Istanbul's best *iç pilav*, rice studded with nuggets of chicken livers and currants, delicately aromatic with allspice and cinnamon and threaded with succulent shreds of roast poultry. On Saturdays there were *puf börek* parties featuring ethereal puffs of meat-filled fried dough. During the fleeting unripe fig season in April, the fruit was blanched and dry-toasted with sugar, then wrapped in crescents of yuffka pastry so thin one could almost see through it.

Later, as a young woman, Gamze shuttled between Paris and New York, dancing in Robert Wilson's experimental productions. All the while she spent fortunes on phone calls to Grandma to record and recapture her flavors as the genteel Istanbul of her youth was becoming unrecognizable. In 1994 she moved back to the city, started entertaining like crazy and then consulting for restaurants. These days, she was famous for the exquisitely choreographed meals she organized at international food festivals.

It was from her grandmother that Gamze learned the "sautéing ceremony" she was showing to me now: slowly, meticulously melting down masses of onions in fat—the cornerstone of most Ottoman dishes. For our zeytinyağlı (zey-thin-yah-lih), a wondrous silken veggie confit eaten at room temperature, Gamze transformed the onions into a translucent jam before adding favas and artichokes. The whole were to braise with secret pinches of sugar in

olive oil to a texture Istanbullus call "helmelenmek," meaning something like "perfectly melting." For the kelek dolma filling, we sautéed onions to a particular shade of pale golden. To these Gamze added blanched almonds and pine nuts and kıyma (minced meat), and we spooned the allspice-scented filling into the melon globes, after meticulously rubbing the cavities with plenty of butter—as Gamze's grandmother had done.

The finished dishes had a restrained but voluptuous elegance, worlds apart from the bold spicy tastes brought to the city by Eastern Anatolian migrants.

Which reminded me suddenly . . . "Wait, shouldn't our potluck feature meze like hummus?" I wondered. Or maybe muhammara—the chili-laced dip of red peppers, walnuts, and pomegranate molasses?

Gamze frowned. An elegantly complicated frown.

Despite foreigners' stereotypes of Turkish cuisine, such dishes, along with kebabs and bulgur and pizzalike lahmacun, were considered "arabesk" specialties—in no way natural to Istanbul.

"Canim, when I was growing up," Gamze declared, "we'd *never* had these."

Indeed. Until the migrations from Eastern Anatolia and the Black Sea that started in the 1950s, exploding the city from a million-plus souls to the current almost 15 million, most secular westernized Istanbullus had never set foot in a *kebapçı* (kebab house). Hummus? It was something utterly alien. Ara Guler, the grand old Armenian photographer of world-famous Istanbul images from the mid-twentieth century, expressed a lament about migrants quite savagely in a 1997 interview: "We have been overrun by villagers from Anatolia who don't understand the poetry or the

romance of Istanbul. They don't even know the great pleasures of civilization, like how to eat well."

My friends were more liberally spoken. They loved hummus, actually, and tirelessly researched Eastern Anatolian foodways. The problem was Erdoğan and the identity politics tearing the city, and the country, apart. Conservative Anatolian Muslims with their bulgur balls and kebabs and their headscarves had gone from being Kara Türkler ("Black Turks"), marginalized by the haughty Kemalism of Atatürk's legacy, to being the domineering powers-that-be. They were Erdoğan people; now it was the "secular elites" who were feeling—rightly?—oppressed.

I told Gamze I understood.

Back at home, I sat with the windows open wide on the Bosporus view. Tankers inched north and south in the last light, dwarfing the ferries that would glow like paper lanterns come nightfall. Barry and I grazed from my inspirational IKEA tray; I'd loaded it with the Balik Pazari's fresh milky-fleshed almonds, Aegean olives the size of a baby's fist, and stinky tulum cheese aged in goatskins in Turkey's northeastern province of Erzincan.

The cries of the muezzins seemed particularly urgent in the evening air, rising and falling, stopping, then resuming at an almost anguished pitch. Across on the Asian shore loomed, like an enormous plaster souvenir, the imitation-Ottoman megamosque erected by Erdoğan on Istanbul's highest hill—a not-so-gentle reminder of this city's and country's jarring transformation over my time here. So, for that matter, was the cloudy raki in our glasses; taxes on it had gone up 665 percent since 2003, the year after Erdoğan came to

power. All mention of alcohol was now banned from the media. These days meyhane, those palimpsests of Byzantine, Ottoman, and republican drinking cultures, felt like an endangered species, hunching under the shadows.

It had been so hopeful for a while. Early on in his ascension, after decades of army interventions and Kemalism's heavy hand, Erdoğan seemed to offer the path to Turkey's democratization and tolerance—a breakthrough model of moderate Islam. And "Istancool," as this city of West and East was dubbed by the international press, was reveling in a hedonistic heyday. I felt smug: *living* in a place everyone was dying to visit. But then the politics darkened. "*Get out! Now!*" my mother pleaded after the 2016 coup attempt rocked the country and the sonic booms of low-flying fighter jets shattered my stairwell's big window. Then came the crackdown on all opposition, purges on a scale that seemed almost Stalinist, the relentless assault on the rights of the Kurds in the country's southeast. But I couldn't abandon this city, its watery poetry and the friendships that were like family here, even if the politics felt so wounding and personal.

I stared again at my IKEA tray, would-be symbol of bygone diversity, now strewn with olive pits and clumps of uneaten cheese. What then of Istanbul's long and often anguished ethnic-religious complexity, under the Byzantines, the Ottomans, Kemalism, and Erdoğan? You could, it occurred to me, find entirely different resonances in the very çilingir meze mosaic I was planning. Tasting the Armenian topik, for example, could summon the cries of women and children as they were being hauled off to the death marches of 1915. Greek taramasalata could evoke the infamous September weekend in 1955 when a whirlwind pogrom drove the last age-old worldly breath out of the city. No, I resolved to myself: we wouldn't

just cook lovely meze and celebrate Istanbul's erstwhile cosmopolitan soul. I would seek out members from the dwindling Rum (Greek), Jewish, Albanian, and Armenian communities, to draw out the stories and histories that came with the recipes.

And there was a question that lurked behind it all:

What happens to the cuisine of a multicultural empire, when it becomes an aggressively nationalist state?

ON CONQUERING Constantinople in 1453, twenty-year-old sultan Mehmed II faced the stark challenge of reviving an emaciated "city of the world's desire." Europe's largest and grandest metropolis over many centuries had shrunk to a mere 50,000 inhabitants. Mehmed's solution was radical and far-reaching. Diverse populations and their skills were brought in, by command if necessary, from across the Ottoman lands. "Like the spices which arrived in the city's markets from every corner of the empire," writes historian Heath Lowry, "the new arrivals brought with them their own flavors and aromas."

To handle its enormous patchwork of subject ethnicities, the officially Muslim empire developed a distinctive administrative system of millets (from Arabic, meaning "nation"), which divided the various followers of religions—Muslims, Jews, Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Apostolic Christians—into self-governing units. The millets were left to their own rules and infrastructures in spiritual and social matters, and were allowed their own languages. A sense of local identity, then, was fitted into an overarching identification as an Ottoman subject. In the fantastically polyglot imperial capital, to be a "Turk" was to be just one of its over seventy

nationalities, and by no means the highest in status. Ara Guler's harsh words weren't new. Until the mid-nineteenth century, "Turk" described country bumpkins from the Anatolian outback "more comfortable astride a donkey," wrote one historian, "than in the sophisticated environs of Istanbul."

By Mehmed's death in 1481, 40 percent of his prized city was non-Muslim, a ratio that prevailed into the early twentieth century—then shrank to 36 percent by the late 1920s, now withered to a fraction of 1 percent.

And there was nothing called "Turkish" cuisine. Until Atatürk willed into being a country called Türkiye, borrowing Turchia, the name, from Medieval Latin.

THESE DAYS OTTOMAN TOLERANCE toward its minorities is often exaggerated, in reaction no doubt to the early republican nationalist fervor for homogenizing the hell out of its diverse population. In reality, until the Ottoman citizenship reforms of 1869, members of non-Islamic millets paid higher taxes and couldn't serve in the army. Their houses couldn't be as large as Muslim houses. They weren't allowed to ride saddled horses. Their meyhane could be closed down in a flash if a Muslim neighbor complained of, say, an imam being dragged in and forced to drink gavur (infidel) wine. Such complaints were common, apparently.

On my way now to talk with our potluck's Sephardic Jewish representative, Deniz Alphan, I recalled a story about Yeni Cami, or New Mosque, whose somber gray bulk dominates the Spice Bazaar neighborhood. Before New Mosque's construction in the early seventeenth century—supposedly to Islamize a commercially

valuable Golden Horn port area—this was a dense Jewish merchant quarter replete with a synagogue.

"And not only did Jews not get compensated for their expropriated property," I exclaimed to Deniz when I arrived, "they were *charged rent* on their demolished temple while the mosque was being constructed!"

"A very contemporary situation, my dear," she replied tartly.

In her sixties, vivid of feature and easy to laugh, Deniz, an old dear friend, was hosting me in her airy flat in the very Parisian-looking Nisantasi district. We'd be preparing "some Jewish dishes," she promised. A legendary former newspaper editor, Deniz had written an influential book about Sephardic Turkish cuisine and more recently produced a documentary about Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language that Turkish Jews had miraculously preserved for five centuries—until today.

Deniz's ancestors came to the Ottoman territories under Sultan Bayezid II, the scholarly son of Mehmed the Conqueror. When Ferdinand and Isabella kicked out Spanish Jews the year Columbus sailed off, Bayezid sent a fleet to their rescue. "You venture to call Ferdinand a wise ruler," the sultan famously quipped, "he who has impoverished his own country and enriched mine!" Indeed. Jews, for example, established Constantinople's first printing press.

"And upon arriving," said Deniz, sounding tickled, "the Jews got a tasty surprise!" Much of Ottoman food must have tasted very familiar. Both fifteenth-century Judeo-Arabic-Spanish cuisine and Ottoman cuisine were heavily influenced by Persian and Arab court cooking. Both had countless eggplant preparations—"Ladino has a poem about 'thirty-six ways to cook eggplant'!"—along with tart flavors from pomegranates and sour plums, loads of savory pastries, and the medieval habit of adding sugar to savory dishes.

"What were Ottoman börek s," exclaimed Deniz, "but Spanish empanadas?"

"Or what are Turkish köfte," I added, "but Spanish albóndigas [meatballs, from Arabic al-bunduq, hazelnut, as I'd learned back in Spain]?"

So was it language, then, I wondered, as Deniz led me into her kitchen, that saved Sephardic cuisine from totally blending in with Ottoman (and later Turkish) cooking? Was language a key, a home, and identity? Did a coiled pie Turks know as *gül* (rose) börek taste different when you called it bulemas de carne?

Deniz was showing me now how to make a kind of called almodrote de berencena, the dish she'd be bringing to our potluck. It was a fluffy bake of mashed eggplant, eggs, and plenty of kashkaval—a.k.a. "Jewish cheese"—a dish that already shows up in a slightly different version in *Llibre de Sent Soví*, the medieval Catalan cookbook. As Deniz sautéed the creamy pale baked eggplant flesh with pounded garlic and onion, I had a sudden feeling of falling down some culinary historical rabbit hole and emerging in the land of Isabella and Ferdinand. In Catholic Spain, as I'd learned in Seville, eggplant was stereotypically identified as Jewish or Muslim; it even featured in the Inquisition's ethnic profiling of infidels. Most likely almodrote was a Shabbas dish, Deniz confirmed, cooked on Friday to be eaten on Saturday, clandestinely. "The Inquisition," she chortled, "supposedly they could find secret Jews by the sound of the berencena frying in oil."

Almodrote now in the oven, Deniz offered me lakerda, the fatty salt-cured bonito common to all Istanbul meze trays. "Turkish Jews think it's from Ladino for *la kerida*, or dear one," she noted. "Maybe because they love it so much!"

Then we sat on Deniz's white couch in the living room to watch some of her documentary about Ladino. It was poignantly subtitled: "A Fading Language, a Fading Cuisine."

Deniz's mother spoke Ladino at home but French with her sister, Deniz's aunt. Both women had been educated at Alliance Israelite Universelle, one of the schools established in the empire in the 1860s by Jews living in France, with the idea that their backward Ottoman coreligionists were in need of Gallic enlightenment. Deniz was proud of her mom's beautiful French—and embarrassed by her godawful Turkish. Most Jewish women spoke Turkish badly. For centuries their female progenitors had just stayed at home in their Jewish quarters of Ottoman cities while the men ventured out.

"But those French schools, they weakened Ladino!" Deniz exclaimed. "The Alliance-educated Jews began to snub Ladino speakers."

A worse blow than Francophone snobbery came from Atatürk's insistence on a revamped Turkish—its new Latin script developed, incidentally, by an Armenian—as this long-polyglot land's sole official language. (Nationalistic self-exaltation would reach heights in the 1930s with the republican pseudoscientific Sun Language Theory, which asserted that all tongues derived from Turkish.) With the "Citizens, Speak Turkish" campaign of 1928, speakers of minority languages now faced harassment or fines or even arrest. "They even Turkified Jewish names," said Deniz. "Cohen became Oz-kohen or Guzel-kohen or Er-kohen."

And the Turkification continued.

In 1934 Deniz's grandparents were forced out of their city, Kirklareli in eastern Turkey, by an organized pogrom known as the Thrace Incidents. Some fifteen thousand Jews fled to Istanbul.

And then came the *varlık vergisi*—the notorious 1942 wealth tax dividing taxpayers into groups by religion, hitting Jews and Armenian and Greek Christians so heavily and disproportionately that fortunes and businesses collapsed overnight. Deniz's grandfather lost almost everything.

"Still," said Deniz, with a smile nevertheless, "there were lots of bright days." Despite all, her parents, like those of so many people I knew here, remained ardent Kemalists, followers and admirers of Atatürk's new vision. "They loved loved loved Atatürk. Myself, I was raised feeling Turkish. My mom, like all Turkish moms, made dolma and pilaf."

We watched more of the Ladino documentary. There were sepia-toned family photo stills, footage of old women preparing labor-intensive holiday dishes—and children lamenting not learning about the food and the language, until it was too late.

Deniz sighed. "For the younger generation, who barely speak Ladino at all, the names of the food are their only tangible link to the culture."

A fading culture. Turkish Jews numbered some 81,500 at the birth of the Turkish Republic; today, they're a scant 15,000. After 1948, many people moved to Israel. Even more moved with the fresh political troubles of the seventies.

And now . . . now *everyone* wanted to move.

"Ladino? I guess it's a useless language," said Deniz, with a resigned little grin. "Not even like Yiddish, which has real literature." As for the food, the few remaining kosher butchers in Istanbul were actually Muslim, and for bar mitzvahs Jewish boys insisted on kosher sujuk sausage on their pizza, and kosher kebabs and kosher lahmacun.

"Almodrote de berencena . . ." She nodded at the eggplant bake

puffy-hot from the oven. Another rueful grin. "Who even remembers?"

"WHAT'S IN THE NAME of a dish?" I mused, as the taxi home swung past the leafy slopes and late-Ottoman pavilions of Yildiz Park, where that penultimate sultan, the paranoid Abdülhamīd II, retreated behind high walls as his empire went bust. Down on the Bosporus road, traffic crawled past the outsize photographs of Atatürk fixed to the park's street-side wall, like billboards for a grand silent-movie star, part Valentino, part Bela Lugosi.

The driver meanwhile had turned up the volume on an Erdoğan speech on his crackly radio.

"*Memleket neresi, kaptan?*" I shouted over Erdoğan's usual bombastic harangue. "Where're you from, captain?"

It's a question you ask all Istanbul taxi drivers (as opposed to asking if there are seat belts, the answer always being no). This kaptan's father, I learned, was from Hatay, a partly Arabic-speaking region on Turkey's Syrian border known for its brilliant, spicy cuisine; his mother hailed from Gaziantep, a rival southeastern food mecca where Turkish is spoken.

"Which food's better?" I shouted.

"Food kinda the same," the driver yelled back. "In Hatay, dishes have Arabic names, in Gaziantep, Turkish."

"BUT," I yelled louder, "does that change the taste *AT ALL*, depending on which language is used?"

The driver threw up his hands from the wheel so the taxi almost swerved into oncoming traffic. "BİLMİYORUM, ABLA? How would I know, sister?" he bellowed, and turned up his radio.

My question wasn't preposterous, though. Taste is not only deeply subjective but also associative, as psycho-linguists inform us; hence, advertisers spend millions devising the catchiest labels for sodas or sweets. Names of foods influence flavor perception, so to me a *kebap* (Turkish) will never taste the same as *shashlik* (Russian): the words conjure up different associations and cultural memories.

And so we get gastronationalist food fights.

Recently I'd been to Armenia. In Yerevan I met a middle-aged chef named Sedrak Mamulyan, who, with his starched toque, gregarious mustache, and insistence that even medieval Armenian dishes taste better with Slavic sour cream, was a classic old-school Soviet type. Except he now ran an NGO called Development and Preservation of Armenian Culinary Traditions.

Upon hearing of my Turkish connection, Mamulyan launched into a speech about dolma, stuffed vegetables, a name which most people believe derives from the Turkish *dolmak*, to "fill up." (On my very first visit to Istanbul, I'd found it delightful that dolma shared an etymology with dolmuş, or shared taxi, the battered vintage Chevys and Studebakers stuffed full with sweaty lovers of dolmas.) Mamulyan wagged an angry finger at me. The correct pronunciation, he insisted, was *tolma*. From *toli* ("grape leaf") and *ma*, meaning something like "wrapped" in Urartu, the ancient language of Lake Van proto-Armenians.

I protested meekly that in Turkish stuffed grape leaves, as opposed to, say, tomatoes or peppers, are called sarma—from Turkic for "wrap."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mamulyan, then he diverted to a tirade

against UNESCO's decision to add *keshkek*—a chicken and pounded wheat stew—to its list of *Turkey's* intangible cultural heritage. "It's *completely* Armenian!!" he thundered, eyes hot with rage. "*Kashi* means to 'pull' and *ka* to 'take out'—and when the whole porridge is cooked and then stirred we call it harissa. From *harel* or 'stir.'"

"Yes, but—but—" I protested again, lost in this etymological mush and remembering faintly that the word harissa was actually Persian. "Wheat porridges like keshkek—and harissa—are extremely ancient, Mesopotamian possibly. Cooked long before Armenia as a country even existed."

"*Armenia*," corrected Mamulyan, with great dignity, "has *always* existed."

Of course for UNESCO's designation of lavash bread as *Armenia's* intangible heritage, he had nothing but praise. Never mind that Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan instantly launched a joint nomination request to register lavash as *their* common heritage. "We Lost Lavash to Armenia," and "They Appropriated Our National Bread," ran the Turkish press headlines.

But who owns a recipe, really?

I thought once again about the "problematic obviousness" of national food cultures. Perhaps it was easy enough to define one in Mexico with its unique singular moles, or France, which pretty much invented this very idea. And who'd ever dispute pizza's Neapolitan origins? But modern Turkey belonged to a vast geographical region where people cooked similar foods centuries before nation-states came into being. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and

Ottoman empires, and more recently the USSR, created over four dozen new nations; some had nothing remotely resembling a previous national consciousness, let alone a distinct cuisine. So whose hummus was it? Whose baklava or dolma? Whose demitasse of dark sugary coffee: Türk, Bosanska (Bosnian), Kypriakos (Cypriot), or Elliniko (Greek)? The current storms in a coffee cup over ownership of keshkek or lavash—weren't they serving as fledgling proxies for deeper, much stormier geopolitical conflicts?

So really, UNESCO, what were you thinking when recently awarding dolma to *Azerbaijan*, Armenia's formerly friendly fellow Soviet republic turned mortal enemy after the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted in the nineties (and reerupted just recently). Upon learning the dolma news I could just imagine the glee on the face of my Azeri acquaintance Tahir Amiraslanov, author of a book charmingly titled *Culinary Kleptomania: How Armenians Plagiarized Azeri Cuisine* with a preface by Azerbaijan's kleptocratic president, Ilham Aliyev.

"National food cultures," anthropologist Mary Douglas once wrote, "become a blinding fetish which, if disregarded, may be as dangerous as an explosion."

BUT THEN WHAT *DOES* happen to the cuisine of a multiethnic, wide-spanning entity with no use for nationalism, when it becomes a *national* food culture?

Given the intensive social engineering of the Turkish Republic's early decades, I expected a feast of ideological policy details—the ingredients for a grand theory, maybe. *Food as a mirror of post-Ottoman Turkish identity.*

"So what happened to cuisine in the republican era?"

I shot my eager question at Zafer Yenal, an important sociologist who writes about such matters.

"Umm . . . umm . . ." mumbled Zafer. My question had caught him with his mouth full of Gamze's tart yogurt dip flourished with burnt sheep's butter and walnuts. We were on her terrace with its sweeping Bosporus–meets–Golden Horn vista; she was throwing a kind of pre–potluck rehearsal dinner.

Zafer swallowed. "Nothing really," he said.

"*Nothing?*"

"National cuisines . . ." He shrugged, glancing longingly at Gamze's majestic whole sea bass. "Ever read Sidney Mintz on the subject?"

I had. Mintz, an American anthropologist and author of the seminal book *Sugar as Power*, argued that a national cuisine is a "holistic artifice"—a construct, essentially, as I knew so well from my own journey, based on food found within the scope of a particular political system and defined by a specific community characterized by common cultural features.

"But that's my point," I said. "What happened to Turkey's cuisine after the huge change in *its* political system?"

"I read your book about Soviet food," Zafer replied. "Crazy how those Soviets turned even food into a top-down political project. But here in Turkey?"

Nothing like that happened in Turkey.

"I'm afraid, dear Anya," concluded Zafer, whose grandly Ottomanesque mustache gave him the look of a kindly intellectual janissary. "I'm afraid you're chasing a phantom." He said it very gently, as if breaking some terrible news.

Meanwhile a different conversation was taking place on Gamze's

terrace, between Zafer's wife, Biray, herself a sociologist, and our dear friends Armine and Ihsan, a young Armenian-Kurdish couple. Armine and Ihsan were leaving Turkey for an extended while—such were the chilling effects of Turkey's *current* political system. Armine's boss, an internationally known "Red Millionaire" who ran a number of progressive NGOs, had been arrested on preposterous charges. The human rights journalist from whom I'd bought my apartment had spent months in jail. With tears in her eyes, Biray talked of the existential dilemma she and people in our liberal circle were facing. Stay and risk prison, or forsake all *this*. She gestured at the panorama beyond us. The last of the sun cast a gold-orange gloss on the Bosporus and the mouth of the Golden Horn; Aya Sofia loomed in profile next to Topkapi's Ottoman turret. Northward up the Bosporus, fairy lights lit up the bridge linking continents. "All this, and for what? An exile in some German or American university town?"

Our terrace table fell silent.

The next day Zafer emailed me some of his articles. Does baklava have a national identity? wondered one. Answer: "Such a question is utter nonsense."

But another article, titled "'Cooking' the Nation," offered a partial response to my particular question. In it Zafer examined the Girls' Institutes established at the beginning of the republic and popular still well into the 1970s. These vocational schools were a part of the radical Kemalist reforms replacing Sharia law with the Swiss civil code, outlawing polygamy, banning headscarves at public institutions, granting women equal rights in divorce, in voting, in property—all meant to turn young Turkish women into members of the contemporary "Western world." Or into "educated housewives" at least. By midcentury the institutes' home economics

and cooking curriculum was extremely westernized: chocolate pudding, fish with mayonnaise, schnitzel, roast beef with spinach pasta, along with nifty tricks to Europeanize and lighten up Turkish dishes.

To Zafer this showed that for Turkey's republican ideologues the modernizing of women meant westernization of the *domestic* as well as public sphere. In contrast, new postcolonial nationalisms, such as India's, were faulted by feminist scholars for treating home and hearth as principal venues of a national culture's traditional qualities—with women as keepers of the "inner spirituality of Indigenous life."

But none of the schnitzels and tarts taught at the institutes to upper- and middle-class ladies made it into any "national" food canon. How come?

So what happened to food in the republican era?"

Professor Özge Samancı, considered the world's foremost expert in nineteenth-century Ottoman cuisine, looked up from her manti. We were eating these teensy dumplings, cloaked with rich, creamy buffalo yogurt, at a hip New Anatolian spot at the very Dubaiesque Kanyon shopping mall.

"*Nothing* much happened . . ." came the answer again.

By the end of the empire, Özge explained, the cuisine of the Ottoman elites was already pretty westernized—or was a fusion at least of *alafranga* (foreign and modern) and *alaturka* (Eastern old-fashioned). "The menus of Atatürk's state banquets and the late-Ottoman court banquets were surprisingly similar!"

This sort of made sense . . . Atatürk's sweeping westernization appeared less revolutionary when you considered the Ottoman

modernizing reforms known as the Tanzimat (Reorganization), enacted between the 1830s and 1870s to counter the empire's alarming military and economic decline—and formulated, as with Atatürk, on European models.

Culturally, Özge e went on, the Tanzimat ushered in an appetite for all things *alafranga*—"in clothing, food, art, interior decorating." Exhibit A: In 1856 the Ottoman dynasty abandoned its low-slung palace of Topkapi for Dolmabahçe, an insanely expensive alafranga-heavy lollapalooza on the Bosporus shore right by my house. For centuries the Ottomans sat cross-legged, eating with their hands around moveable sofra trays. Now they showed off dining tables, cutlery, and white Dresden-ware porcelain—and *frenk aşçıbaşı* (foreign chefs) alongside traditional Ottoman cooks. The new palace's first official banquet—to celebrate the Crimean war victory—was an alafranga-alaturka mashup: börek and dainty French pastries, baklava and *croustade d'ananas*, pilafs and *foie gras à la Lucullus*. Among the dishes, I noted excitedly, was *suprême de faisan à la circassian*—a fancy pheasant version of the Circassian chicken on my çilingir potluck menu.

Dolmabahce's foodways trickled down to wealthy homes and to the patisseries, cafés and restaurants of Istanbul's longtime European district of Pera (now Beyoğlu). Late-Ottoman cookbooks brimmed with pâtés, crèmes (krema), biscuits (biskuvi), and grilled cutlets—like so many nineteenth-century cookbooks, from Mexico to Poland to Egypt, all products of the worldwide Frenchification at table.

Suddenly I noticed that Özge seemed distracted by something. "Weird, come to think of it," she puzzled over her sour cherry–soaked bread pudding. "How *no one* here works on republican-period cuisine . . . I know this because I supervise all the dissertations . . ."

. . .

But how could it be, I kept on puzzling for my part, that a radical young republic that dictated to New Turks as to religion, language, music, hygiene, hats, calendar, clocks, how could it have left food out of its social-engineering agenda? Stalin had a food commissar, Mikoyan, an Armenian who sponsored a socialist-realist kitchen bible and established a centralized recipe system called GOST. Mussolini, no foodie, staged his famous *Battaglia del Grano* campaign, the Battle for Grain, to liberate Italians from foreign wheat slavery. Il Duce even penned a terrible poem, "Amate il Pane" ("Love Bread"), and urged Italian women to cook cheaply and locally.

And yet any Google digging into "Ataturk + food" mostly yielded descriptions of dining facilities at the erstwhile Atatürk Airport. (Which filled me with sadness: that old ramshackle hub had just been replaced with Erdoğan's new faraway megacolossus, which had required the destruction of a forest.) Indeed, the venerated and beloved Father Turk, who personally modeled Western ways to set an example, himself "took no interest in food, eating what came," according to one biographer, "with a preference for such plain peasant dishes as dried beans and pilaf."

True, Atatürk's preferred plain *kuru fasulye* bean stew came as close as Turkey has to a national dish, served at schools and cooked at many homes on his death day, November 10. But did Atatürk ever *promote* it in his writings and speeches? Where were republican food policies on school lunches or army rations, the kind of details that seem insignificant but actually help forge a national food consciousness? Unlike most other countries, Turkey didn't even have anything resembling a foundational cookbook that created "imagined communities"—perhaps because the contenders, those popular

late-Ottoman kitchen bibles full of alafranga-alaturca recipe tips, weren't translated into modern Turkish until the 1980s. Amazingly, there wasn't a cookbook with "Turkish" in its title until the 1970s.

Was there *no* history, then? Or no historiography? Why *weren't* Turkish scholars, as Özge attested, writing about the cuisine of the hugely transformative republican era?

The main obstacle, it turned out?

There were no archives.

"*No archives?*"

I sat in astonishment under the slow-stirring fans of a battered, historic meyhane festooned with Atatürk paraphernalia and old-timey raki bottles, in the company of a young professor named Işıl Çokuğraş. Işıl had spent a fruitless year chasing documents for a book about republican-era beer halls, which she finally abandoned to write a study of eighteenth-century meyhane instead. "Because where taxes on alcohol were concerned," she explained, "the Ottomans at least kept their accounting ledgers in order. Very taxation-centric, those Ottomans."

"*But no republican archives?*" I muttered on, gripping my head. "*None?*"

"Look, Anya!" said Işıl. "Turks have a different, non-Occidental, relationship to written knowledge."

I thought of France and its relentless abundance of gastroencyclopedic treatises and literary gastrophilosophizing . . .

Using a VPN that evening—the current Turkish relationship to knowledge includes banning Wikipedia; and more darkly, leading

the world in jailed journalists—I reeled at the combination I found of censorship, erasure of history, and sheer neglect. It wasn't just the destruction of archives relating to the Armenian genocide. It was the fifty tons of Ottoman documents sold as scrap paper in 1931—to Bulgaria. The "confidential documents" of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs discovered in the late nineties at a scrap-paper dealer in Ankara. The "accidental destruction" of state senate archives from 1960 to 1980. The Directorate of Republican Archives? Established only in 1976—over half a century after the republic's founding. No wonder, the liberal *Radikal* newspaper once wrote, professors couldn't find graduate students willing to research the twentieth century overall. *Radikal* itself? Shut down in 2016, along with numerous other liberal media outlets—and now almost forgotten.

A CHEERILY AEGEAN RESTAURANT named Mezedaki sat between SushiCo and BurgerLab in a flashy mall complex called Uniq, which sat in turn in a leafy zone by the construction-boom skyscrapers clogging Maslak, one of Istanbul's prime new business areas on the European side. It wasn't exactly a site to inspire postempire *hüzün*.

But it was in the spirit of recovering memory—and collecting some Greek meze recipes to feature in my potluck project—that I came here to meet Mezedaki's proprietor, Meri Çevik Simyonidis.

In her fifties, self-assured and auburn haired, a journalist as well as a restaurateur, Meri is a member of Istanbul's tiny Rum (Greek) community, the so-called Polites, short for Konstantinoupolites. Less than 2,000 remained from the more than 300,000 who made up a quarter of Istanbul's population before World War I—and accounted for the vast majority of the city's commerce.

Meri became immersed in the food and history of the Polites while working at the Greek consulate here back in the aughts. People approached her spontaneously with their recipes and reminiscences—to "transfer the food and the memories to the next generation," as she put it, "and talk about the tragedy of forced migrations." She had published two books of interviews and profiles of Rum taverna, meyhane, and patisserie owners. That is to say, the *entire* restaurant culture of Istanbul before 1955, which was 90 percent Greek.

At Mezedaki now, she'd brought along her nephew, Ari, an earnest NYU student home for the holidays. Between them they'd start a sentence in Demotic Greek—the language of Polites—and finish in Turkish, or vice versa. Then Ari would laboriously translate to English for me.

Meri followed her first book with a volume of interviews with the Rums who left after 1955 and settled in Greece. Baylan, Inci, Savoy, Bahar . . . she tossed off names of pastry shops I patronized almost daily for their dainty *alafranga* cookies, sponge cakes, and chocolate bonbons.

"All Greek?" I exclaimed.

"They *were*, before the *katastrofi*."

Meri and Ari repeated that word a lot: katastrofí. Also known in Greek as Septemvriana or Exodus, it meant Turkey's Kristallnacht, the pogrom against Istanbul's Rums that exploded on the night of September 6–7, 1955. Nationalist Turkish mobs ran amok pillaging and terrorizing Greek-owned businesses, churches, schools, houses. More than thirty people were killed, hundreds raped. By daylight, Beyoğlu's bustling thoroughfare, Istiklal Avenue, a ten-minute climb from my apartment, was a smashed, acrid sea of devastation.

The rioting was an apparently spontaneous frenzy at the news (false) of a bombing at Atatürk's birthplace in Thessaloníki (part of Greece since 1913). Tensions were already raw between Turkey and Greece over competing claims regarding the island of Cyprus. But it became clear the mobs were at least partly organized and that Prime Minister Adnan Menderes was complicit, to what extent is still debated. At any rate, Menderes and two ministers were hanged in 1960. Thirty years later, Turkey's parliament absolved the three of all guilt and gave them a ceremonial state reinterment.

The katastrofi's most lasting damage, according to Aykan Erdemir, a Turkish commentator, was to the ideal of equal citizenship in Turkey—"not only for the *Polites* but also for the country's other non-Muslim minorities."

Istanbul's Rums began to leave. In 1923 they'd been exempted from the population exchange between Greece and the brand-new nation-state of Turkey mandated by the Treaty of Lausanne. Based solely on religion, 1.5 million Greeks were expelled from Turkey; half a million Turks likewise from Greece. All were sent to "home" countries entirely foreign to them.

In Athens, I'd heard this forced resettling described as a foundational twentieth-century trauma: a first katastrofi. Besides the great suffering, the transfer swelled Greece's population by over 20 percent, as cosmopolitan people from cities like Smyrna (Izmir), with their bourgeois culture and cooking, flooded into a then-backward land. Turks hardly mentioned the population exchange, however. To them it was another migration in an era of mass migrations. Atatürk's legacy has constructed a triumphalist narrative of the nation's foundation. Meanwhile, the Greek view of history: a litany of grievances and historic injustices.

"*Sent away from Turkey like Greeks and received in Greece*

like Turks . . ." At Mezedaki, Meri repeated this well-worn summary of forced shifts. Only she was referring to a multiplicity of migrations, post-1955, and then post-1964, when more Greeks had left after another dispute over Cyprus. What broke Meri's heart, Ari translated awkwardly, was interviewing Rums in exile in Athens. "Always strangers. Doubly alienated." This "second trauma" startled Meri the most. "Often there were such tears of joy," she recalled, "when people talked about their beautiful childhoods in Konstantinoupoli." (That's how Greeks still call Istanbul, the former Byzantium that got taken away in 1453—but remains the seat of the nominal head of Eastern Orthodox Christianity and retains an everlasting hold on the whole Hellenic psyche.)

More than anything there were the *whys*.

Giati? in Greek. *Neden?* in Turkish. *Why??*

Why did heartbroken Istanbul Polites have to abandon their seat of great empires, to leave behind the Aya Sofia for a former cowtown dominated by a strange alien ruin?

Our meze arrived. "A cultural mosaic of Istanbul!" declared Meri, of the familiar constellation of tastes encoded in Istanbul's DNA—the very same meze from our own potluck çilingir tray. Here were sarmdakia, a Rum rendition of sarma, stuffed grape leaves, bright with lemon and herbs. Here were several types of zeytinyağlı, the "olive oil vegetables"—classically Lenten specialties of Christian millets. Armenian topik showed up beside Albanian liver and Circassian chicken. Meri pointed to the "possibly Byzantine" tarama, the "probably Jewish" lakerda, the "definitely Hellenic-Aegean" fava bean mash.

Could one even begin, I asked, shaking my head, to truly untangle the origins?

"*Hepsi karışık*." Meri smiled in agreement. "All mixed up." The

identity markers, if any, were religious. The abundant meatless dishes such as yalanci (liar's) dolma stuffed with grain, were Lenten fare; Muslims used meat. The insistence on olive oil was non-Muslim, as opposed to clarified butter. The traditional profusion of un-halal shellfish was from the tables of Rums and Armenians.

"But wait—was there even such a *thing* then as distinctive 'Rum cooking'?"

I had the sudden anxious feeling I might be chasing another phantom.

Meri shrugged introspectively. "A subtle savor, perhaps. A somewhat distinct table culture . . ." Rums covered their tables at home with meze, whereas Armenians ate meze at meyhane. Armenians, maybe they favored spices where Greeks might prefer a little more herbs. But then again: "Cinnamon, sugar, lemon, those were the three pillars of Istanbul Rum cooking—plus rivers of olive oil."

"And the Rums who left, were they angry?" I asked, going back to that topic. "Did they hate Turks?"

"No, no, they were *nostalgic*!" Meri insisted. "Filled with a terrible longing that overwhelmed them!"

Her books were not meant to assign blame or to point fingers. Rather, she wanted to heal: "To show how much Istanbullus, too, suffered from this rupture."

When the katastrofi occurred, Meri's mother and her uncle were young; a Turkish neighbor hid them and Meri's grandmother in her attic "à la Anne Frank." I'd heard many such stories, stories of the "good Turks" standing up to the angry mobs with "There are no Rums. We are all Turks here." Many Istanbullus still believed the rioters were mostly bused in. When the Greek exodus began, Meri's grandmother was too poor to leave. She waited things out and gradually life went back to normal. Except that it hadn't. Come

1964, thousands of remaining Greeks were outright deported with "twenty dollars and twenty kilos of luggage." More left in 1974 after the Turkish army entered northern Cyprus.

Istanbul's Greeks were the public face of the city: its florists and tailors, its hoteliers and waiters and restaurateurs. They were Istanbul's cultural bridge between East and West, importers of alafranga fashions and food mores—the creators of *atmósfaira*, the cosmopolitan atmosphere. They fished in the Bosporus, filled the street with the twang of bouzouki, presided over glamorous displays of profiteroles and éclairs at patisseries. Since early Ottoman days, they were also Istanbul's chief meyhaneci, or tavern keepers.

Without Rums, it suddenly occurred to me, there *would* be no çilingir meze trays.

"Come, let's go visit my elderly Turkish friend Fistik Ahmet," Meri proposed. "A day doesn't pass still that he doesn't talk of the trauma. How his neighborhood was suddenly emptied of laughter. How overnight all his childhood friends were gone. He's never stopped mourning."

Giritli in Sultanahmet; Zorba Taverna in Gayrettepe . . . just a handful of the old Rum places remained. They, and the memories of beautiful waitresses named Eleni or Zoe, and gregarious chefs named Kostas or Giorgos roasting aromatic spring lamb for Easter.

Giati? Neden? repeated Meri. Why? echoed young Ari.

AS DAYS went by and summer thunderstorms threw wild curtains of rain over the Bosporus and my roof began to leak yet again, my own whys kept piling up—a cascading series of them. My potluck had started out as a clever tactic, really, to throw a nice get-together

and probe the deeper narratives of various Istanbul dishes. But it had plunged me into a landscape of longing and cultural cleansing, a terrain shadowed with dark and darker memories.

On a muggy late afternoon, I decided to ride the tram across the Galata Bridge to Topkapi Palace—for respite, and perhaps to glean some fresh insights from the gilded vestiges of the Ottoman past.

The abode of sultans looked nothing like the melancholy sprawl I'd encountered on my first visit to Istanbul. Its pavilions and jasmine-scented gardens now sparkled with restored beauty. Thanks to a wildly popular Turkish telenovela, *The Magnificent Century*, about Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent and his scheming wife, Roxelana, the grounds were mobbed with Roxelanaphiles from Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. I entered the ten-domed Matbah-i Amire, the Imperial Kitchen. After a long renovation it had reopened with much neo-Ottoman pomp and now resembled a very expensive dinnerware showroom: lustrous celadonware, goblets scooped from whole pieces of turquoise, the jeweled hoşaf (compote) bowls adored by the ladies of the imperial harem. How graceful they looked compared to the neo-rococo alafranga stuff transferred here from the Dolmabahce Palace.

I found a bit of space for myself amid the Second Courtyard's flowerbeds, and gazed at the restored Matbah's tall rhythmic chimneys, designed by the Michelangelo of Ottoman architects, Mimar Sinan. What does a palace kitchen tell us about power? Why was this particular kitchen such a strikingly monumental facility, in a palace whose squat pavilions and kiosks resembled, fancifully, a series of stony encampments—a nod to the Ottomans' nomadic past. Why did the sultans, who completely secluded themselves after conquering Constantinople to express the new absolutism of their power—who ate alone but for deafened and muted servants

with whom they communicated in sign language—why did these secluded sultans put on some of the world's most lavish and efficient spectacles of hospitality?

And it wasn't just the feasts the Matbah threw in the capital. From Belgrade to Bagdad the Ottomans set up vast purpose-built soup kitchens called imarets, which were savvily bureaucratized charity food institutions often feeding five hundred comers a day. In newly conquered lands the imarets showed, and showed off, the benevolent face of Ottoman colonization. The menus were pretty much identical: rice soup for breakfast, bulgur wheat soup for supper, always chickpeas and bread, honeycombs as a welcome, mutton on Friday, zerde rice pudding for dessert. All was distributed free to "fire-worshippers and heathens, Christians, Jews, Copts, Europeans . . . even Gypsies and the destitute," as the famous seventeenth-century Ottoman traveler Evliya Çelebi observed.

There is, of course, no such thing as a truly free lunch; hospitality ensnares recipients in a spider's web of obligation and gratitude. The Ottomans knew this. They conquered by the sword, but legitimized and manipulated their power through soup.

I drifted out through the Imperial Gate in the purple-pink twilight. It was the last days of Ramadan. Banners proclaiming "Ramadan Is Sharing" twinkled between the minarets of the Blue Mosque. On the main square of the historic Sultanahmet district, the AKP, Erdoğan's party, had set up long iftar (fast-breaking) tables. A few years ago, a government-sponsored public iftar would have utterly scandalized Atatürk's secularist republic; even in Ottoman days iftars were hosted by private individuals or by mosques. Now the AKP was showing Istanbullus who exactly buttered their bread—neo-Ottoman style—except that the wrong half of the city was no longer invited. Maybe the early republican leaders failed to

exploit the power of food. But Erdoğan—he who sold simit bread rings as a boy, and had now revived the sultanic practice of having his meals tested for poison—doesn't miss any such opportunity. He lectures on the merits of köy ekmek (country bread), and declares that Turkey's national drink is no longer raki but rather the salty thin yogurt-based ayran (a declaration causing a huge spike in Turkish dairy stocks). During election rallies, he promises to build cafés serving free tea and cake.

As I approached it now, I realized that the AKP iftar was in fact an *invitation-only* affair, completely violating the "sharing" Ramadan principle. Curious, I mumbled *gazeteci* ("journalist") and slipped inside a VIP tent. Fleshy AKP matrons in shiny polyester hijabs fixed unbenevolent gazes on my uncovered head. Feeling doubly a gate-crasher, I picked at the Ramadan dates and bread, skipped the lentil soup, chickpeas, and pilaf, then found my way to another, more populist iftar, where large trucks unloaded mountains of boxed Ramadan meals with conspicuous efficiency.

Soup, bread, pilaf, beans, rice pudding, cheese, olives . . . Was *this* it, then? The *milli yemek*, the national meal, all shrink-wrapped in plastic?

National for half the nation, that is.

You ate Erdoğan's dates and bread?"

At a cocktail gathering of fooderati the following evening, my friends were howling at me as I recounted my iftar adventures. So much for that idea of food as a binding benevolence between people.

I wanted to understand something about *türk mutfagi*, Turkish cuisine, I bleated.

Türk mutfagi? Civan Er, a young chef known for his smart

modern meze, winced at my words. The adjective "Turk," he informed me, was politically incorrect, reactionarily Kemalist, leaving out Laz, Armenians, Abkhazians, Bosnians, Jews—*especially* Kurds.

I blinked hard at the handsome, thoughtful Civan, incredulous but somehow not surprised. Yes, this was Turkey, where even an obvious term could harbor a witches' brew of identity politics.

"So how would you call the cuisine of this country where you live?"

"*Türkiyeli*," replied Civan. "*Of* Turkey."

This adjective, I later discovered, was already proposed to describe citizenship during the republic's foundation, but then lost out to the more aggressively nationalist "Türk." Türkiyeli resurfaced again—as a political statement among young progressives—in the liberalizing nineties, when conversation around identity was opening up and multiculturalism became à la mode.

"Me, I prefer *Anadolu*, 'of Anatolian,'" put in another young chef. "Actually," he added, "*New Anatolian*."

An older, imperious cookbook author drew me aside. She's the kind of hard-core nationalist who calls Kurds "Mountain Turks" and bristles at any mention of the "Armenian issue." "Don't listen to them," she instructed. "*All* our dishes are *Turkish*. And I get so *angry*," she moaned fiercely, "that Chobani—owned by a Turk!—markets *our* yogurt as *Greek* all over America!"

I thought it best not to point out that Hamdi Ulukaya, Chobani's founder, is Kurdish.

FOR EVERY GASTRONATIONALIST claim of *my* yogurt, *my* baklava, there's a universalist counterclaim that all foods belong to all

people. Both arguments are in their way fictions, as I'd learned, mythologies created by the different imagined communities. In Istanbul my liberal friends, the tribe of the Türkiyeli persuasion, often repeated an identical phrase: *There are no nations in food, only geographies*. Where did this oft-repeated homily come from? I kept wondering. Then one day Gamze told me.

"It's from my Armenian friend Takuhi Tovmasyan," she said, "the one who'll be bringing topik to our potluck."

The one who in 2004 had written a slim, much-loved book called *Sofranız Şen Olsun*—May Your Table Be Jolly.

I do not know, begins Takuhi's fairy tale–like food memoir, *to what extent these dishes are Armenian, to what extent Greek, to what extent Turkish, to what extent Albanian, to what extent Circassian, to what extent Patriyot, to what extent Gypsy. But there is one thing I know and it is that I have learned these recipes from my Akabi and Takuhi yayas . . . my grandmothers.*

Takuhi's yayas both hailed from Çorlu, a small city west of Istanbul, where Armenians cooked food strikingly different, nevertheless, from their great-city brethren, and more different still from the foods of what eventually became the post-Soviet Republic of Armenia on the other side of Turkey. Takuhi herself grew up in Istanbul, in Yedikule (Seven Towers), an ancient neighborhood on the city's southern Marmara Sea shore, dominated by the crumbling fifth-century Theodosian walls that once protected Byzantine Constantinople. Today Yedikule is poor and deeply Muslim, but back in Takuhi's mid-twentieth-century childhood, it was a thriving place resounding with Greek and Armenian voices. Before the new year its sloping streets would reek of onions from Armenian

matriarchs caramelizing mountains of them, a key ingredient for topik, the sine qua non of their holiday tables. Summers, Yedikule turned smoky from barbecued mackerel; çiroz (air-cured fish) drying on lines by fishermen's houses. The midye (mussels) were so abundant in the Marmara Sea, you gathered them just by sticking your hands in the water—then made midye dolma filled with sweetly spiced rice, raisins, and pine nuts.

Slowly cooked onions, mackerel, the aroma of allspice . . . the old Armenian households of Istanbul.

In her book, which I devoured in an evening, Takuhi writes of the priests who shared recipe tips with the ladies during Armenian potlucks called "Can/Sevgi Yemekleri" (Soul/Love Dinners). Of her father, Bedros—a real Yedikuleleli, a Yedikule gentleman—grating big bars of soap into water on laundry days while the women prepared fasulye paçası, a "bean trotter" stew. For the Virgin's Assumption, Akabi Yaya decorated the "petaluda" cookies with grapes that children were forbidden to touch until the last Sunday in August. Come Christmas the Tovmasyans sent anuşabur, their cinnamon-scented ritual wheat pudding, to their Greek neighbors, the Apostolakis. The Rums returned the plate, as tradition dictated, with their own Christmas sweet, ayvasil pida, while the families exchanged *bereket* (blessings) for wealth and abundance.

Then suddenly the Apostolakis went away. And nothing ever tasted the same. "Not the dried apricots or figs or jujubes . . . Not the Olimpos brand lemonade they'd spike with vermouth . . ."

Behind Takuhi's charming fairy-tale evocations of a world that will never return, there hover—purposefully elliptical but vivid to the right readers—the crimes of actual history.

Just beyond the Byzantine gates of Yedikule, Takuhi's grandfather Gazaros Efendi ran a meyhane where the whole neighborhood

gathered for raki and meze prepared by Takuhi Yaya, his wife. The wealth tax of 1942 led to such crushing debt that he was forced to sell his beloved meyhane after the Second World War. From heartbreak and stress, he suffered a stroke, eventually dying paralyzed and bedridden.

And then deeper and darker: When Takuhi Yaya had accepted the marriage proposal of Gazaros Efendi, a widower, he told her of his two children. Only on their wedding night did she learn of a third, a toddler boy named Mardik. Takuhi Yaya was livid. "You said you had two children and I accepted them," she told her new husband. "If you'd said three, I'd have accepted that, too. But I wish you didn't trick me!" And so little toddler Mardik, the trick one, the undisclosed third child, was sent off to live with his grandparents in Çorlu.

It was 1915. The Ottoman tehcir (deportations) were about to begin.

That year, amid the upheaval of World War I, leaders of the collapsing Ottoman state unleashed an ethnic cleansing campaign against Armenians, everywhere except for Constantinople. Accusation: traitorous Armenians planned to join enemy Russia in destroying the empire. Armenians were tortured, drowned, executed in mass graves. During death marches into the Syrian desert, they perished in unspeakable numbers. By war's end, close to a million Armenians had died in one of the first mass atrocities of the twentieth century, widely recognized as the "Armenian genocide." Recognized everywhere, that is, but in Turkey, where it's been deleted from official history: made mute.

How do you talk about such a traumatic past in a society that denies that past's existence? A society where schoolkids are taught that Armenians betrayed their generous Ottoman hosts? Where

Armenian schools and churches have been systematically destroyed, parents too scared to reveal to their children their Armenian heritage?

I met Takuhi, finally, at the farewell party for our departing Kurdish-Armenian friends, Ihsan and Armine. Green eyed, her gray hair styled short, she radiated a kind of regally modest grace. I admired the Armenian anuşabur ritual wheat pudding she'd brought. "It's Armenian only in name," she corrected me gently. "Turks call it aşure, Greeks kolliva, Georgians gorgot." I asked about the memoir, and she told me she'd never set out to write a heartbreaking book, or even to publish one at all. "I intended a scrapbook of stories and family recipes," she said very softly, "to pass down to my children." But as she wrote, the tears came, the words turned into something else.

"They turned into a mevlet, a prayer, for the souls of those who departed."

Around Takuhi's family table, even without explicit design, those who had passed on were commemorated through their favorite foods. And so her memoir's little recipe chapters are eulogies: to Gazaros Efendi and his favorite bean pilaki, to Uncle Yeğya who loved çullama (chicken pastry), to Uncle Krikor, fancier of eggplant kebab with garlicky yogurt.

And having endured the tribulations of 1915, Takuhi wrote, "some forgot what had happened on the roads of exile. Some never talked about it, came to terms with it, or pretended to come to terms with it." And some, like her uncle Yeğya, "had never forgotten it, never came to terms with it, and left this world just like that."

Little Mardik, the toddler who was sent away, vanished in

the deportations of 1915. Haunted by grief and remorse, Takuhi Yaya searched for him for the rest of her life. When she died at eighty, still brokenhearted, her quest and trauma were passed on to Takuhi's parents, Bedros and Maria. All *their* lives they looked in vain for Mardik, for news of him. The voices and recipes in the book, Takuhi told me now, were not hers: "I just channeled my relatives."

But the very last recipe in the book belongs to Takuhi herself. It's the recipe for imrik helva, the semolina sweet that one roasts for the souls of the dead. "Refusing to accept he was truly gone, my older family members never made imrik helva for little Mardik," she said to me, her sad, serene words almost drowned out by the party chatter.

"I finally made the helva myself and said a prayer for him. I put little Mardik to rest. So I don't have to pass on the trauma of loss and guilt to my children."

TAKUHI'S MEMOIR ENDS with helva, but it begins with topik.

In Turkish, topik means "little ball": a mashed chickpea dumpling filled with sweetly spiced onions and pine nuts then boiled in a muslin cloth that, by legend, every Armenian girl had in her dowry. But, as Takuhi noted to me, topik's original Armenian name is more noble: vardapet ("priest"). Before migrating to Istanbul as a meze, it was a Lenten main course at Armenian monasteries in Eastern Anatolia.

I still remember my own first topik encounter in the mid-1990s. It was at Boncuk, a raucous Beyoğlu meyhane that proudly advertised itself as Armenian. Back then I hadn't a clue that a fashion for

those nostalgically inclusive meze trays, along with a new interest in minorities' cultures, along with a revival of Ottoman cooking and heritage—all were products of the political and social liberalization kick-started the previous decade by a man named Turgut Özal.

A devout, at least partly Kurdish Muslim and an ardent evangelist of free markets, the portly, exuberant Özal led Turkey as prime minister and then president from 1983 until his unexpected death in 1993—a death variously ascribed to poisoning (by the Kemalist "deep state"?) or a heart attack from consuming an entire roast lamb during a tour of Central Asia. Gluttony is an apt metaphor for the neoliberal Özalist era. But he is remembered for more profound doings: bringing Islam back into public life, privatizing Turkey's lumbering state-owned industries to unleash the floodgate of global commodity capitalism (and massive corruption). Another turning point was a full-blown reassessment of Ottoman history, though unlike Erdoğan's narrow and aggressive Islamicist vision, Özal's Ottomania was more pragmatic and inclusive by far. More Ottoman. Which is how a whole bouquet of previously repressed identities was readmitted as part of Turkey's vibrant new openness in the age of globalization—readmitted and packaged, as sociologist Yael Navaro puts it, "to assume a commodity form." (That familiar refrain of commodification . . .)

After decades of forced amnesia and taboos (on religion, ethnicity, imperial history), young urban types began feverishly pulling family photos from attics, or rummaging through antique shops of newly gentrified Christian enclaves for mementoes left behind by those purged and exiled. Albanian and Circassian cultural associations sprang up, along with Greek and Armenian publishing houses. Now the very minorities formerly branded as betrayers of the Turkish nation-state were being celebrated—up to a point—as a nostalgic

cultural asset, part of Brand Istanbul, vital to its new global image as a tolerant, pluralistic neo-Ottoman paradise.

Which brings us back to topik.

The dish was featured on those "mosaic of Istanbul" meze trays of Beyoğlu meyhane that so enchanted me in the newly *nostaljik* nineties, as all around me mansions, covered arcades, and cafés were being restored to show off the Beyoğlu belle epoque glamour of yore.

"Topik . . ."

Takuhi the memoirist smiled warily. Apparently topik became such a hit among the young cosmopolitans that a local Armenian artist published an irreverent little book of cartoons called *Ben Topik Değilim*—I Am Not Topik. It summed up the Armenian sentiment, said Takuhi. About all those nice newly liberal yuppies showing their open-mindedness by praising Armenian food, and by insisting that their aunts always drank cherry liqueur with Armenian neighbors—here in a country where the mention of genocide still remained a transgression, and the history of discrimination was never officially acknowledged.

"Topik and cherry liqueur . . ." Takuhi repeated quietly. "An entire culture, a past, reduced to this pair of stereotypes . . ."

AS THE EVENING of our potluck drew near, I found myself thinking more and more about the cosmopolitan nostalgia cult, that particular form of Istanbul mythmaking reanimated in the neoliberal nineties. It was all part of a worldwide boom in what scholars call "nostalgic consumption"—from Mexico's vogue for Indigenous campesino cuisine to Italian Slow Food evocations of a rural

utopian past to Japan's consumerist obsession with furusato ("old village," literally), the idealized "native home." All these movements were a reaction, of course, to the onrush of globalization and homogenization. But they were also products of a late-capitalist cultural logic that treats identities, belonging, heritage, and origin myths as commodities subject to the rule of the marketplace.

And wasn't such consumerism a privilege of white urban classes? Had Istanbullus *really* always treasured the days when Greeks and Armenians and Jews exchanged foods on holidays? How inclusive, really, were these Beyoğlu meze trays? Where were the dishes of the Kurds and the Roma, displaced by the nineties gentrification? Of the Alevis, with their disrespected non-Sunni faith? Of the rural Eastern Anatolian migrants whose very presence in Istanbul inspired, in large part, the sighing for the "civilized" past before their arrival?

I began to wonder if we shouldn't just bag the whole nostalgia exercise, and book a restaurant table in Aksaray. Aksaray, just beyond the Grand Bazaar in the historic peninsula, was the neighborhood where Mehmed II settled some of his forced immigrants for repopulating Constantinople. Now it was Istanbul's *current* multicultural heart. Arabic signs touted falafel franchises from Beirut and bakery chains from Damascus; Moroccans and Uyghurs, Syrians and escapees from ex-Soviet republics flocked here looking for quick work and cheap housing. Aksaray harbored its own version of postimperial nostalgia, too—but of a different flavor. This was where I came to buy faux-USSR chocolates and chacha, the homemade Georgian grappa snuck in by bus from the ex-Soviet Caucasus. At Aksaray's dodgy makeshift cafés, my former compatriots noshed fatty kolbasa, our socialist madeleine, and complained

about exile in Russian, that "great language of Stalin and Brezhnev," as one refugee from Turkmenistan once put to me.

But I didn't raise any of this with Gamze. Gamze was having literal potluck struggles.

Last-minute cancellations, for one thing, which is how we lost Meri and her Rum taramasalata, and Zeynep, an Albanian friend, and her Arnavut ciğeri, the fried cubes of "Albanian liver" tossed with red onion. Then a gas cut at Gamze's on the morning of the party sent us scrambling off for emergency takeout. Off Istiklal Avenue, at Balik Pazari, we stopped at Gamze's favorite fishmonger for blobs of glistening mullet roe for taramasalata and for the Jewish (Byzantine?) lakerda, that buttery cured bonito. Next door sat our main destination, the worn narrow shopfront of a pristine old ciğerci (Ottoman for offal shop), where two ancient gents with identical gray curly hair presided over garlands of small intestines, lacy folds of honeycomb tripe, and sheep trotters resembling squeaky-clean babies. The men, Orhan bey and Kamil bey, were Albanian—cousins.

I asked about Arnavut ciğeri, the liver. "A famous Albanian recipe, yes?"

Kamil bey, the older one, laughed. "Everyone thinks so," he said. Most Albanians, he explained, arrived here after the Balkan wars—yet more wars that rearranged people's destinies early last century—and established themselves as the dying empire's best cattle breeders, offal butchers, and slaughterhouse owners. "You wanted *best* liver? You bought it from Albanians. And so this name, 'Albanian liver'—for a recipe unknown in Albania!"

We arranged to have this unknown-in-Albania liver cooked and delivered, and suddenly Orhan bey, the younger one, turned

nostalgic. "Our customers used to be *civilized* . . . Men in suits, ladies in beautiful dresses. All the vendors hereabouts, even the Turks, spoke Greek and some French. But then came 1955 . . ." He trailed off with a sigh, his old hands spread. Sensitive Gamze sighed, too, almost in tears. We all knew how *that* story ended. "And now?" Kamil bey gestured at a group of sullen guys sitting outside, hunched over plastic plates of kokoreç, roasted intestines. Their bloodied, shaved scalps were wrapped in sinister black bandages.

"Gang members?" I whispered, alarmed.

"Worse! *Hair transplant tourists* from the Gulf States!"

Gamze headed home, and I left the market through Çiçek Pasajı, or "Flower Passage," next door. This ostentatious Parisian-style covered arcade, packed these days with unloved touristic meyhane, was commissioned in 1876 by a Greek banker and originally called Cité de Pera. Its renaming derived from its White Russian flower sellers, the destitute aristocrats who fled to Constantinople from the Bolshevik Revolution. And the Russian salad that came with those refugees, that I'd be bringing to our potluck? With America's Marshall Plan and virulent anticommunism post-WWII, the salad was renamed Amerikan salatasi. "American salad."

Istanbul: a capital of renamings.

Slowly I drifted home along Istiklal (which means Republic), taking in this former Grande Rue de Pera, the bygone Champs-Élysées of alafranga late-Ottoman aspirations, of embassies, music halls, *bon marché* shops and *cafés chantants*—an astounding thoroughfare, wrote an English traveler in 1893, "of no land and all lands . . . a place of dancing dervishes, water sellers and sedan bearers . . . Albanian wood-cutters from Asia Minor, Persian donkey drivers, Croats and native Turks from a polyglot population unparalleled in the world."

I paused by the site of the former Inci Pastanesi (now moved), founded by an Albanian Greek, and recalled the guilty pleasures of its lethally caloric profiteroles from my own early Istanbul days. And here was Markiz, another sweet mecca, once owned by a portly Armenian; Istanbul literati used to gather for Parisian chocolates under its famous Art Nouveau ceramic panels of half the seasons, L'Automne and Le Printemps. These days, still paneled but emptied of all cultural memory, it existed as a fast-food joint called Yemek Kulübü (Meal Club), its graceful windows plastered with posters for daily burger-and-fries specials. And here were the sahaflar, used-books passages, living relics of Walter Benjamin's Parisian arcades. Living, but how fading and ghostly they seemed, mustily awaiting the arrival of developers' sledgehammers.

In Orhan Pamuk's 1990 novel, *Black Book*, Istanbul appears as a kind of Borgesian double city: a surface one of ersatz imitation and an underground one of ruins that gathers the "old, discarded objects that . . . make us who we are." *Black Book* is Pamuk's familiar, hüzün-filled meditation on the erasure of the Ottoman texture of the former capital by Kemalist westernization. Except that today, just ahead in Taksim Square, a new mosque was rising in triumph across the wide expanse from a former sixties modernist landmark, a cultural center demolished and just replaced by a flashy updated replica of . . . itself. While in the narrow alleys around Istiklal, boozy dens of "Istancool" times were being edged out by faux-oriental narghilleh cafés for abstemious Saudi tourists.

Nostalji . . . This city, *our* city—it was a kind of water-lapped nostalgia factory, forever generating and regenerating endless cycles of loss. That sense of an overcrowded but depleted metropolis was especially acute now, when layers of past civilizations—Byzantine, Ottoman, Kemalist, even neoliberal globalist—were being submerged

under the wave of a slick and censorious Islamist autocracy, one with its own neoliberal economics. I had the image of vast archives being cast away again, drowned into oblivion. So who was I, then, I thought, as just a doting part-timer here, to doubt my friends' melancholy about their past, their stubborn attachment to the rose-colored myth of a cosmopolitan, *civilized* city.

Turning downslope finally toward my apartment, I saw that our courtly neighborhood tailor had put yet another portrait of Atatürk in his window. How oddly reassuring it was, that steely, elegant figure: a rallying symbol of our endangered secular lifestyle, of women's emancipation. Until one remembered, of course, the hypernationalism, the anti-Kurdish repressions, Atatürk's own erasures of history and heterogeneity. These days they seemed like a lesser evil, I guess. I trudged up my six flights of ramshackle stairs, heartbroken at having to choose between two such heavy-handed modes, religious and secular. Then I peeled the potatoes and started dicing them for my Russian—American?—salad. Out my window, the Bosporus rippled like coarse silk in the afternoon breeze.

IT WAS WELL PAST midnight when Barry and I left Gamze's apartment. Outside on the cobblestones, the massive stony column of the fourteenth-century Galata Tower, built by Genovese traders, thrust its pointed cap at the almost-full moon. Old as Constantinople itself, Galata had always been a foreigners' enclave—and a red-light district, one of infidel "vice and depravity." Latifi a fifteenth-century Ottoman poet, called it the biggest meyhane in the world.

Upholding Galata's reputation, we were finely drunk on Gamze's

hundred-proof raki, on the strange inky Süryani wines produced in Turkey's southeast by Christian-Orthodox Assyrians who still speak a form of Aramaic—the language of Christ.

Our çilingir sofrasi turned out to be one of the loveliest parties in memory, not a stage-managed show of diversity out of an ESL class of my Philadelphia childhood but a celebration of friendship and a shared devotion to Istanbul. Everyone circled Gamze's artfully laden table in awe. On my IKEA tray, she had arranged a formal raki service attended by rosy-skinned plump pistachios and dark curls of basturma, the Ottoman precursor of pastrami, which even back in the seventeenth century was cured by Armenians. A salty cloud of Greek taramasalata glistened with a topping of fish eggs: "Sultan Mahmud II, the Tanzimat reformer, loved caviar!" Gamze noted. She'd sprinkled intricate cinnamon patterns on Takuhi's topik, and scattered fried pine nuts and dill fronds on Deniz's puffy Sephardic eggplant almadrote.

Unexpectedly, our Kurdish friend Ihsan showed up, bearing a huge aromatic pile of midye dolma, stuffed mussels. Armine, his wife, had already begun her graduate studies in Boston. Ihsan should have left, too, but here he was, procrastinating, inventing every excuse to stay on and guzzle raki with friends.

"*So whose dish is it?*" Ihsan philosophized tipsily, scooping cinnamon-scented rice out of the mussel shells. Stuffed mussels, he answered himself, were a great specialty of Christian meyhane before Greeks and Armenians disappeared from Istanbul's restaurants. The dish might have vanished with them, but it was adopted as a street food by Istanbul's Kurdish migrants from the southeastern region of Mardin, who'd been fleeing poverty and the unspoken civil war against Kurds since the eighties. And so for economic

reasons inevitably entwined with politics, Mardin Kurds became the city's *midye dolmacılar*, streetside stuffed-mussel sellers. Their mussels were modest totems of a new cultural fusion.

Hepsi karışık, all mixed up, I thought to myself, echoing the phrase of Meri the Rum chronicler. Yes: *Whose food?* At some stops along my journey, the answer appeared refreshingly obvious. But now, way past midnight, here in this crossroads-palimpsest of civilizations over millennia, the quest to assign ur-identities to particular dishes and disentangle their complicated entwinings seemed like sheer absurdity.

We'd smoked too much on Gamze's balcony, watching fireworks for some rich people's wedding shimmering over the Bosporus, along with the raki and Assyrian wine. Arda, Gamze's husband, an amateur DJ with a PhD from the Sorbonne, blasted Roza Eskenazi—a Jewish singer born in Constantinople who became the Queen of Greek Rebetiko, the blues music of Turks exiled to Greece in the population exchange. Roza wailed so loudly some new neighbors called the police.

"Well, canim," Gamze concluded, kissing us good night, "I guess this means the party is a success!"

EPILOGUE

National Dish

On February 25, 2022, I woke up after a turbulent night checking news updates about Putin's invasion of Ukraine, and amid the shock and bouts of crying and adrenalized doom scrolling, a seemingly trivial yet intimately unsettling thought entered my mind. I realized that after these years of investigating national cuisines and identities, I no longer knew how to think or talk about borsch, a beet soup that both Ukraine and Russia claimed as their own. I grew up in Soviet Moscow eating borsch—борщ in Cyrillic, no "t" at the end, that's a Yiddish addition—at least twice a week; for better or worse it always signified for me the despotic difficult home we had left. Here in Queens a big pot my mother just made sat in my fridge. But who *did* have the right to claim it as heritage? That tangled question of cultural ownership I'd been reflecting on for so long had landed on my own table with an intensity that suddenly felt viscerally, searingly personal.

Back in Moscow at the height of Brezhnev's "stagnation," I never regarded borsch as any people's "national dish." It was just

there, a piece of our shared Soviet reality like the brown winter snow or the buses filled with hangover breath or my scratchy wool school uniform. Our socialist borsch came in different guises. Institutional borsch with its reek of stale cabbage was to be endured indistinguishably at kindergartens, hospitals, and workers' canteens across the eleven time zones of our vast Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Personal borsch, on the other hand, brought out every Soviet mother's and grandmother's sweet ingenuity—although to me it all tasted kind of the same in the end. My mom was inordinately proud of her hot, super-quick vegetarian version. I still have an image of her in our trim Moscow kitchen, phone tucked under her chin, shredding the carrots, cabbage, and beets on a clunky box grater right into our chipped enamel family pot. It was *her* recipe, she always insisted, a miracle of a shortage economy conjured from a can of tomato paste and some withered root veggies. In the fall she'd add a tart Antonovka apple; in winter maybe a glob of alien American ketchup for a piquant, faintly dissident non-Soviet touch. I never had the heart to tell her that I preferred her make-believe pot-au-feu, or her cold borsch that came with the dacha season, a salad inside a magenta chilled liquid, alive with the cucumber-scallion-radish crunch of the fleeting short northern summer.

Ukraine became an independent state in 1991, having been an original republic of the USSR, and part of the Russian empire since the late 1700s. The earliest known mention of borsch dates from 1584, in the diary of a German merchant who traveled to Kyiv when most of present-day Ukraine belonged to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—well before Ukraine *or* Russia developed any

modern-style national consciousness. For that matter, the Slavic word borsch most likely referred to hogweed back then, a common plant thereabouts that was often fermented and used for a sour green potage. The deep-red soup we all know must have developed toward the eighteenth century as the cultivation of beetroot in Eastern Europe took off. From then on, mentions of borsch in Russian cookbooks became fairly common, although often referencing "Malorossiya" (Little Russia)—the imperial term for Ukraine.

The Soviets themselves never denied borsch its Ukrainian origins. In fact parallel to our frugal quotidian beet soup was a dish the propaganda-puffed recipe books about the diverse cuisines of our Soviet republics presented as the *real* Ukrainian borsch. A baroque meal in a bowl, thick enough to stand a spoon in, it brimmed with all kinds of meats—meats!—nobody ever saw at a store. Although that borsch supposedly celebrated Ukrainianness, it was a socialist-realist fiction, of course, a Sovietized folkloric-kitsch rebranding of Ukraine as our scarlet empire's happy wholesome breadbasket and sugar bowl—a Ukraine scrubbed of the horrors of Stalin's collectivization and Holodomor (state-induced famines), of the repressions of its language, culture, and any authentic expressions of nationalism. In a political system that dictated and socially engineered ethno-identities and assigned cultural heritage, that borsch was an imperial possession of almighty Moscow—as was Ukraine itself, implicitly always a lesser nation than Russia, or perhaps not even a nation at all, as Putin now would have us believe.

I'd never thought much about that "real" Ukrainian borsch until 1989, fifteen years after my mom and I immigrated to the U.S., when I wrote my first cookbook, *Please to the Table*. My book, too, meant to celebrate the culinary diversity of the Soviet republics—an imperialist-tainted project, perhaps?, as I now uneasily ponder in

retrospect. A deeply ironic one, for sure, because Gorbachev's creaking imperium was coming apart at the seams as my book went into print and the Soviet republics kept asserting their independence. Researching borsch in Western Ukraine those twilight days of the USSR, I was shocked to discover versions I never suspected existed: borsch with white sugar beets and porcini mushrooms; with fermented beet kvass; with smoky dried pears and wild game shot by a hunter we'd met on the road. Returning to New York I interviewed the Ukrainian diaspora here, generous people who fed me fragrant honey cakes and Christmas borsch with tiny dumplings called vushki. And then wrote angry letters when my publisher decided to subtitle *Please to the Table*: the *Russian* cookbook.

MY MOM'S "super-quick vegetarian" borsch featured in *Please to the Table*, along with a handful of other borsch recipes. And by some strange twist of fate almost three decades later, it became for her a kind of salvation. After her darkest, hopeless days under Trump and the pandemic, early in 2021 she miraculously sprang back to life when she started teaching cooking on Zoom for a wonderful multicultural school called the League of Kitchens. For her class, Mom plumped for her Moscow veggie borsch accompanied by herb-and garlic-smothered dinner rolls called pampushky. And as soon as her menu promising "iconic Russian dishes" went up on LOK's website, an angry email arrived from a Ukrainian-American journalist.

"To say borsch is a Russian dish is not accurate and could be seen as offensive to a lot of people," said the email. "There has been

an ongoing fight over borsch in recent years as part of the backdrop to the continuing very real war between Russia and Ukraine."

Indeed. The first real political flare-up over borsch broke out in 2019, five years after Putin annexed Crimea and started a war in Eastern Ukraine. That year the Russian Federation's ministry of foreign affairs provocatively tweeted: "A timeless classic! #Borsch is one of Russia's most famous & beloved #dishes & a symbol of traditional cuisine." Ukrainian social media responded with outrage and scorn at this weaponizing of soup as part of Russia's wartime propaganda. "As if stealing Crimea wasn't enough," seethed one commentator, "you had to go and steal borsch from Ukraine as well." "Cultural appropriation!" cried Ukrainians interviewed on the subject. "[The Russians] will not take our borsch," vowed a young activist chef in Kyiv, Ievgen Klopotenko, as he launched a crusade to have it inscribed into UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

"Like the food fight between the Arabs and Israelis over who owns hummus," *The New York Times* opined, "the dispute sadly divides two neighboring cultures over traditions that might have united them."

For her part, my passionately anti-Putin anti-imperialist mom was much pained by the Ukrainian journalist's email. Cooking for her was always politically conscious. She garnished her LOK classes with memories of Soviet repressions and the endless, humiliating food queues. She told of fleeing the hated Soviet regime at age forty with only me and two suitcases and no right of return, of how she made her borsch in our new still-bare apartment in alien far-away Philadelphia. But she refused to assign a single identity to a dish that she, along with vast myriads of people across multiple borders,

have been cooking for generations, have internalized as their own. "There are *many* types of borsch," she would insist, grating her carrots and beetroots: "Russian, Polish, Lithuanian, Moldovan, Karelian, diaspora Jewish—and, yes, yes, Ukrainian." Across the giant span of the USSR, she'd further insist, borsch was a comfort food that connected people who shared not just the dishes but also the tragedies of Soviet fate—Stalin's gulags, for instance, which didn't spare a single group or ethnicity. Anyway, it was *her*, *Larisa's*, recipe, full of her personal touches, resonant with so many memories.

I wasn't about to argue with Mom about whose dish it "really" was. My years of work on this issue had left me wary of essentialist gastronationalist claims, where knee-jerk nationalism was inevitably entangled with nation-branding and profit. Similarly, the overused concept of cultural appropriation. I agreed with philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah on his insistence that it casts cultural practices as something like corporate intellectual property. Whereas in reality, as he put it, "All cultural practices and objects are mobile; they like to spread, and almost all are themselves creations of intermixture."

THEN FEBRUARY 24, 2022 happened.

That night, my mom, Barry, and I sat in silence gripped by grief, rage, despair—and utter disbelief—watching live CNN footage of Putin launching his full-scale invasion. There were air-raid sirens blaring in Kyiv that night, missile strikes, explosions rocking several other major Ukrainian cities. My mom was ashen-faced. She barely spoke, but I'm pretty sure she was flashing back to the sunny day of June 22, 1941, when she was seven and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union was unleashed.

EPILOGUE

Over the following weeks the news brought a surreal split screen of two countries collapsing in different ways: Ukraine all smoke, haze, and wreckage from Putin's missiles and artillery; Russia ominously freezing itself back to the cold war USSR of my childhood—extreme censorship, toxic state-sponsored patriotism. As if one needed any further reminder that allegiances and identities can shift overnight, Soviet émigrés from our circles who considered themselves culturally Jewish-Russian-American started acutely remembering all the family members they had in Ukraine. So did we. My mom's dad was from Dnepropetrovsk (now Dnipro); her entire maternal clan was from Odesa, the city of our sunburned summer vacations. Now in that Black Sea port where she herself was born and lived very briefly, acquaintances who used to grimace at Ukrainian nationalism switched their social media feeds to Ukrainian and railed against Moscow's brutality. Meanwhile close friends of ours here, worldly people born in Soviet Ukraine, were posting diatribes savaging "Great Russian Culture" on Facebook. Some gloated over images of dead Russian soldiers, just boys, splayed in the snow. It was shocking to see; but deep down I shared in their naked rage. Every Russian—including myself—seemed somehow complicit to me. I felt guilty for thinking in the imperialist language of Putin's aggression, for the volumes by Pushkin and Tolstoy on my bookshelves. And yes, for my previous thoughts about borsch.

And if I started my national dish project comfortable with my own globalized cosmopolitanism, I felt existentially bereft now, a gaping emptiness where my mental safe happy places should be. Turkey, the country I loved, was being strangled by authoritarianism. In the U.S., years of Trump and Trumpism were poisoning the country that opened its doors to my mom and myself back in 1974. My ancestral homeland? A genocidal terrorist state where my younger

brother and my father had died the previous year. I couldn't imagine now ever returning to Moscow to visit their graves.

It's an evergreen cliché that in times of crisis the foods we grew up with provide a comforting sense of home and security, reconnect us to who we are, where we come from. But just thinking of borsch brought more heartache. *Who owns borsch?* The question hung in the air like an accusatory pall. The soup of my childhood had become a symbol of Putin's assault on Ukrainian land, culture, and heritage, of his drive to plunder Ukraine—to obliterate even the very concept of it.

By April Russia's atrocities in Bucha were being uncovered, millions of Ukrainians had turned into refugees, and entire towns and cities lay in ruin. Meanwhile Russia's foreign ministry spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, a ferociously Putinist blonde, delivered a bizarre drunken tirade about borsch. "It had to belong to just one people, just one nationality," she ranted about Ukrainian insistence that borsch was their national dish. "But for it to be shared? . . . No! They didn't want to compromise. This is exactly what we are talking about, xenophobia, Nazism, extremism in all forms!" In the service of an unprovoked horrific invasion she was grotesquely co-opting the universalist notion that food should be shared.

By then my mom, who'd been so traumatized by the early days of the war, had found in her borsch an emotional anchor and a new political meaning. Together with LOK she was using her Zoom classes to raise money for Ukraine, to speak out in our local media, even on Japanese television, against Putin's horror show. The struggle transformed her. At eighty-eight years of age she became a modest, heartfelt part of the global "stand with Ukraine" movement

where borsch was no longer just soup but a fundraising force and a solidarity symbol. "Anyone who cooks borsch today gets closer to us," declared Ievgen Klopotenko, the young Kyiv chef who petitioned for the dish's inscription in the UNESCO ICH list. In London, my friend Olia Hercules, a brilliant Ukrainian food-writer-turned-crusader, started the "cookforukraine" drive with her Russian émigré colleague Alissa Timoshkina, raising nearly two million pounds and the profiles of Ukrainian culture and food. In New York, iconic East Village restaurant Veselka became an activism hub, with all its borsch profits going to Ukrainian charities. Soon the social media of my food friends all over the world was a tide of blue-yellow flags, of photos of varenyky dumplings and stuffed cabbage—and the same borsch and pampushky my mom made for her class.

My mother now spoke about borsch with a newfound authority and moral clarity. It didn't matter who exactly "invented" the soup, she insisted; it mattered even less which exact territory it first appeared in. What was crucial was how borsch figured in a *national narrative*. And for Ukrainians under an unspeakably brutal assault from their neighbors, it was a powerful symbol of unity. "Borsch," she told one radio interviewer, "stands for home, generosity, the richness of land, and family ties. . . . And all these things are being now taken away from Ukrainians."

This was pretty much UNESCO's justification for an unprecedented emergency move to fast-track the ICH application for Ukraine submitted back in 2019. On July 1, day 128 of the invasion—as Russian missiles killed more than twenty people near Odesa—UNESCO declared the Culture of Ukrainian Borsch an "intangible cultural heritage in need of safeguarding."

"The victory in the war for borsch is ours!" Ukraine's culture

minister Oleksandr Dyachenko posted on Telegram: "Remember and be sure: We will win this war like we did the war for borsch."

LATE THAT SUMMER, six months into Russia's assault, I called Aurora Ogorodnyk, a food researcher in L'viv, who is writing a book about borsch with an anthropologist named Marianna Dushar.

I wanted to ask her thoughts on the dish as a Ukrainian national symbol, a role supercharged by Putin's invasion.

"But borsch has long been symbolically important for us," Aurora responded. "We cook it for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, we serve it in public communal pots during political protests—we even prepare it in dried form as rations for our soldiers since 2014." She paused, then added simply: "It's who we are, our DNA. Red like our blood. And now Ukrainians eat it when they return to their ruined cities and villages."

I'd met Aurora in the sunny Before era, at an international food conference. These days she was mostly homebound in L'viv in western Ukraine, well away from the major fighting in the country's south and east, yet always under threat of a missile strike. "Daily life goes on here," she told me, sounding eerily calm, "but with the ever-present backdrop of a sudden air raid . . . the realization that any moment you, too, can be killed."

I wondered to her if perhaps now wasn't the right moment to talk so much about soup, while civilians were being slaughtered and cities destroyed?

"No, now *is* the moment!" Aurora insisted forcefully. "To finally banish those Russian/Soviet colonialist optics. Because it was fine having us as funny folksy Ukrainians with our borsch and our salo

[lard] when we were part of the USSR, which Russia controlled. But once we began to assert our independence, they decided to remind us, no, borsch *doesn't* belong to you, actually.

"So borsch," she said, "is also an emblem of separation for us. A red line—red as borsch—where we cut them off and say *enough to colonialism*."

There were a thousand things more I planned to ask Aurora. But instead I suddenly found myself profusely apologizing. Then apologizing for narcissistically going on about the guilt I was feeling, my own rage at the Russians, my loss of identity, my sheepishness for not yet learning Ukrainian and having to speak Russian to her.

With the quiet authority of a trauma counselor, Aurora offered me a way forward in my dilemma. "I understand your rage, I share it, Anya. And when you're far away it's easy to get engulfed by despair. But all you need is a moment of reflection—just one. Then stop dwelling on hatred and guilt. Spread love and compassion through your cooking and writing. Do what you can to support us.

"And really," she added. "How is any of this your personal fault?"

At the end I asked Aurora if she believed Russians and Ukrainians would ever eat borsch together again. There was a long silence. Finally she replied, "Not until the Ukrainians who win this war and the Russians who lose it are long gone." Recently she'd driven to Tallinn, Estonia's capital, where for the first time in months she saw lots of Russians. "And everything inside of me just froze," she confessed.

So where then *was* my guilt in all this? Hanging up with Aurora, I thought again of a poem, the savagely offensive verse lamenting Ukraine's independence by Joseph Brodsky, exiled Jewish–Russian Soviet dissident and Nobel laureate poet. The one where he promises

that on their deathbeds, Ukrainians will forsake the "bullshit" of their national nineteenth-century poet Taras Shevchenko for Pushkin; the one where he wants to go spit in Ukraine's great river, the Dnieper. Brodsky wrote this in 1992, deeply embittered by Ukraine's splitting away from Russia. He never published it, though he read it in public, but just twice. Recently, however, it had been resurfacing in various conversations about Russian imperialist arrogance, an arrogance that taints other anti-Soviet humanist dissidents; that towering moralizer, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for instance, another Nobel laureate, was skeptical about the very idea of Ukrainian nationhood.

"I think I need to *decolonize* borsch from myself," I texted Aurora. "To stop thinking of *owning* it because of my Soviet-Russian personal history." Aurora texted back a smiley emoji. I wrote back in Google-translated Ukrainian. . . . As she replied in Ukrainian, the tension I felt during our conversation lifted a little.

ON A stormy evening in August, two old friends arrive at my apartment in Jackson Heights with an unruly armful of sumptuous marigolds.

"*Chornobryvtsi*—dark-browed, meaning beautiful." Andrei explicates the Ukrainian name for these sun-gold floral pompoms. "On the drive over," his wife, Toma, exclaims, "they perfumed our car with the scent of Ukrainian summer." Later I learn that Ukrainians plant marigolds by their houses to ward off the evil eye and misfortune.

Toma and Andrei are from Kyiv and live in New Jersey, and we haven't seen them for months. Since the invasion, Andrei—a

documentary filmmaker whose works include an account of Ukraine's Orange Revolution of 2004—has been posting on Facebook with such all-encompassing raw anti-Russian passion, I wasn't sure if they'd want to see me again. In one post he talked about how his hatred, at first an "acute disease with fever, curses, and wishes for a painful death to you know who," had become "a chronic condition, always with me, day, morning, evening. And, of course, in my dreams."

Deeply worried about them, sheepishly I emailed my sympathies, kept suggesting getting together. Andrei would thank me for "reaching out" and leave it at that.

But now they're here, looking festive with their Ukrainian flowers and bottles and blue-yellow Ukraine solidarity bracelets. My mom, Barry, and I are overjoyed to see them. My anxiety about how the evening might go fades away in the hubbub of our greetings and chatter.

I thought long and hard about exactly what borsch I would serve for this occasion, this unexpected last national dish in my journey, a dish so familiar and yet so conflicted, my making of it here brought about by such wrenching circumstances. To decolonize borsch for and from myself as I promised Aurora, to make it truly Ukrainian, I purged all the recipes I knew as a Soviet and post-Soviet Russian. For days I researched the soup in Ukrainian, struggling with Google's translations at first, then eventually easing into this language so close to mine but now never more apart. What I found was a trove of regional recipes, recipes that would have once seemed merely ethnographic and curious but now read like an atlas of violence. Here was borsch ("prunes obligatory") from Vinnytsia,

the west-central city with a long Jewish history where on a sunny July day Russian rockets killed twenty-three civilians going about their daily routines. There was a borsch based on dried fish from Mykolaiv, an industrial port city bombarded by Russians for months on end; there was a Tatar borsch with lamb, quince, and corn from Crimea. I discovered borsch aphorisms and cartoons, borsch proverbs and jokes, borsch poems newly composed in the noise of this war, personal borsch recipes triumphantly named for places where Ukrainians repelled Russian aggressors.

Sifting through all these, I would think of something Marianna Dushar, Aurora's co-author, told me. "Borsch isn't so much a recipe as a national idea," she said, "an idea that all Ukrainians carry inside them. Borsch develops and changes—and it changes us in the process." In my own way, I felt that myself . . . that borsch was changing me, too.

Toma's and Andrei's eyes grow wide at my opening dish: a chilled borsch, for which I'd fermented the beet kvass myself, as it was done centuries ago, then added sour cherries and rhubarb for a classic fruity-tart flavor, per one of the L'viv recipes of Marianna Dushar. "In Kyiv," says Toma, "we'd use fresh gooseberries for that sour effect." "But we can never find them here," Andrei adds.

Just six months ago we were the same people, I reflect sadly, as my mom passes around her chopped liver, herring pâté, and a garlicky eggplant dip—Jewish appetizers iconic to her native Odesa. We were all former Soviets turned émigrés, Russian speakers of mixed ethnic backgrounds who'd read Pushkin, had the same cultural compass. "And now the invasion has divided us," Andrei

continues my thought, his voice going quietly somber, "into those living in a daily personal hell, and the compassionate bystanders . . . who'll never truly understand our trauma."

Toma and Andrei have spent the past six months living and breathing nothing but Ukraine, waking up and going to bed checking the news and any updates from their Kyiv families. A fragile fatigue shades their bonhomie this evening. Toma has two sisters back home. Andrei's sister suffered such severe depression and panic attacks she was in Germany receiving treatment. "It's helped as well to get a break from the air raids," says Andrei. "But she can't wait to get back to her kids and grandkids."

I go and bring out my second borsch now, to the table my mom has decorated with sunflowers and a mini Ukrainian flag. It's shocking pink, with blended-in sour cream, dusky with broth infused with smoked pork. It has no potatoes or cabbage and is meant to be sipped from cups at weddings. Nobody at the table has tasted anything like it. The recipe was taught to me by Maria, a recent refugee from Ivano-Frankivsk in the west of the country. "It will de-Russify you!" Maria promised only half-jokingly, as if casting a benevolent spell.

Inevitably the conversation turns back to our changed identities. Andrei—of Jewish-Polish-Ukrainian background, just like borsch, I note to myself—went to a Ukrainian school but now deeply regrets not doing a better job reading Ukrainian literature in its original language. Toma was born in Dresden (ex–German Democratic Republic) but lived in Kyiv since childhood. Though her entire family is ethnically Russian, her sister back home can't bear the sound of Russian anymore, can't look at Russians.

As they talk I think of the dream I've been having for weeks, one where I sit in my childhood Moscow apartment drinking sugary tea

with my departed father and brother—and wake up feeling so homeless, sundered from my past. I want to tell them about it, but now Toma is proposing a toast.

To borsch," she offers. "It's the color of pomegranate, bright as Ukrainian folk song."

"To eating it often with people we love," my mother puts in.

Andrei raises his shot glass of Polish vodka. "Borsch is a generous dish," he declares, "a *Ukrainian* dish even if other people might claim it. I say: Leave it to Ukrainians, please, and after they win this war they'll invite the rest of the world to the table."

"But *not* members of the Russian Federation," Toma adds tartly.

And we drink.