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Exhibit Review

Savour: Food Culture in the Age of Enlightenment

Gardiner Museum, Toronto, ON

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[For more information about the companion book to this exhibition, *The King's Peas*, see David Szanto's review in this issue]

Review by Jennifer O'Connor*

Asparagus sautéed in olive oil with diced shallots, tarragon, and white wine vinegar. Pinched between the fingers. Soft crunch. Bitter earth. Hunger.

Asparagus, the kind at your grocery store or farmers' market (*Asparagus officinalis*), is a succulent spring vegetable. Plants take three years to mature and can be productive for fifteen years or more. The familiar woody green stalks with small scales (leaves) at the tips are in season for two to twelve weeks. They may be cooked and enjoyed either hot or cold. It is part of the *Asparagaceae* family, which includes up to 300 varieties native to lands from Siberia to southern Africa. Garden asparagus is now grown in many temperate and subtropical regions of the world.

Louis XIV had asparagus cultivated in hothouses at Versailles and is said to have called it the "king of vegetables" (Antonacci, 2014). Extravagant and imperious, the Sun King would inspire a new philosophical movement that forever changed Western politics—and art. A recent exhibition at the Gardiner Museum in Toronto, *Savour: Food Culture in the Age of Enlightenment*, explored how eating, cooking, and dining were reimagined in England and France from the 1650s to the 1790s. Drawing from the Gardiner's collection of ceramics and including works on loan from other museums and private collections, *Savour* combined the functional with the curious, and the historic with the contemporary.

The Enlightenment brought about a new way of thinking about many subjects. Philosophers such as Descartes, Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau rejected received beliefs and authority, and looked to knowledge and freedom as a means to improve the human condition.

In art there was a return to the classical traditions of Greece and Rome and their ideals of liberty, morality, and sacrifice. Neoclassism favoured the everydayness of things: domestic

*Corresponding author: jennifer.oconnor@rogers.com
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scenes, simple compositions, realistic stances, and current events. Other works celebrated the deceptive or mysterious to celebrate the human mind's ability to reason.

Much of this was on exhibit in *Savour*. For example, colonial expansion and increased trade brought new foods to England and France, such as tea, chocolate, and sugar. This is reflected in pieces such as "The Good Housewife," a porcelain model by Johann Joachim Kandler. A housewife is seen, surrounded by goods, pouring over her account books. A sugarloaf sits beneath her desk, wrapped in purple paper. The desire for such commodities, of course, bolstered the slave trade, and slavery was legal in French and British colonies until the mid-1800s.

Other foods were cultivated with the help of new technologies, such as hoes, spades, and the seed drill, as well as hothouses and walled enclosures. Indeed, another porcelain figure, "Delicate Cowcumbers to Pickle," shows a country woman with a basket of cucumbers on her head. Gardeners learned to grow cucumbers and melons out of season to supply their clients in London.

Savour also featured a number of tureens shaped as a cabbage, a cauliflower, pigeons, and a turkey. Another, "Boar's Head Tureen" is a tin-glazed earthenware piece, possibly by Johann Wilhelm Lanz. Life-sized and incredibly realistic, its pierced nostrils would allow steam from hot food to escape, appearing as the condensed breath of a living animal. Stag and boar hunting were popular among the nobility and royalty in France—the risk involved in killing a boar making it a worthy trophy.

There was also interest in new ways of eating. Rousseau, for example, advocated for a vegetarian diet. And Hannah Glasse, author of the immensely popular *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy*, advised: "All things that are green should have a little crispness, for if they are over-boiled they neither have any sweetness or beauty" (Glasse, 1802, p. 22).

Here, again, the asparagus has sprouted. Looking at John Atkinson's "Girl Bundling Asparagus" feels like spying. I see her, framed in an archway. She does not look up, but is focused on her everyday task. The only hint of vanity is a ribbon braided into her hair. Nearby are a spade and watering can, and she is surrounded by bounty: cabbages, carrots, leeks, and on a tabletop, some grapes, berries, and other fruit. She stands on a stone floor with baskets hanging above her. Yet despite all this detail, the light and her placement make her the centre of attention.

This scene of tranquil domesticity was juxtaposed with "Asparagus Box," a tin-glazed earthenware piece by Philippe Mombaers. Beneath the neatly sculpted stalks, what would have been hidden inside? In another *trompe l'oeil* piece, a pewter ice cream mould in the shape of a pineapple lay open. Sweet and savory ices were popular at the time, with flavours including violet and Parmesan—though not necessarily in the shape of a bouquet or a wedge of cheese.

Such dishes would have been served at a changing table. The 1700s saw the fabrication of matching dinner services, purpose-specific vessels (such as tureens, sauce boats, and sweetmeat baskets), and alcohol lamps to keep food hot.

In our time, questions about what we eat continue to fascinate. Inserted throughout *Savour* there were also works by contemporary fibre artist, Madame Tricot (Dominique Kaehler Schweizer). A serving piece piled with woolen chicken wings and thighs. A hare bleeding out. "A bundle of asparagus," also hand-knitted in wool, echoing the Atkinson painting with an ironic voice. What is it about these pieces that was so captivating? The detail of the stalks and scales? The use of a traditional crafting technique? The thought of all the labour required to create them? The delight in the unexpected? The everydayness of a common garden vegetable, re-rendered as art?

Having experienced the exhibition as a whole I came to see how we have imagined food over time—and how what we eat has molded our perception of ourselves. Looking closer at a setting for an intimate dinner for two, I see that the imitation Louis XVI chairs are decorated with images of an ice cream sundae and a fast food meal of burger, fries, and soda. All of these objects told a story that is comedic, tragic, and melodramatic, expressed across time and place. I can hear the bustling market and clanking dishes. I can smell the simmering stew. I can feel the knives and forks in my hands, slicing into a wedge of cheese or piercing a piece of meat. And I can taste the foods that nourish, please, and entice us. But this is only one story. How can we hear others? (I am sorry, for example, that I missed an event at the Gardiner, "The Enlightened Feast", an evening of feminist discussion and foods such as seal meat and pickled cattails, prepared by Indigenous and settler chefs.)

This exhibition offered a taste of Enlightenment art and the moment in time that helped create it. I left *Savour* feeling more connected to food and culture, enlightened as to how this history—a wide-ranging melange of the disturbing, curious, and charming—informs our lives today. And I was hungry for more.

Jennifer O'Connor is a graduate of the School of Policy Studies at Queen's University. Her research interests include feminist theory, food policy, population health, and social movements.

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