



The CFS Choux Questionnaire: Lisa Heldke, food philosopher

A riff on [the well-riffed Proust Questionnaire](#), the *Canadian Food Studies* Choux Questionnaire is meant to elicit a tasty and perhaps surprising experience, framed within a seemingly humble exterior. (And yes, some questions have a bit more *craquelin* than others.) Straightforward on their own, the queries combined start to form a celebratory pyramid of extravagance. How that composite croquembouche is assembled and taken apart, however, is up to the respondents and readers to determine. Respondents are invited to answer as many questions as they choose. The final question posed—*What question would you add to this questionnaire?*—prompts each respondent to incorporate their own inquisitive biome into the mix, feeding a forever renewed starter culture for future participants.

Our inaugural Choux Questionnaire respondent is [Lisa Heldke](#), food philosopher and professor at Gustavus Adolphus College.

What is your idea of a perfect food?

Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep were in a wonderful movie called “Defending Your Life,” which is about this way station to which you go when you die to sort out some of the details about the rest of forever. One feature of the place is that you can eat whatever you want, and it will be good for you. Meryl Streep’s character continues to eat whatever the heck is good for you on Earth. (I don’t even remember what she ate, but it was probably salad). When she runs into Albert Brooks, he is carrying a stack of like ten pie boxes. I am Albert Brooks. My idea of a perfect food would be something that had all the features of a potato chip or a warm chocolate chip cookie, but that provided me with pretty much all the nutrients I’d need on an average day. I wouldn’t want to

eat all and only chips and cookies, mind you, but it would be lovely if I could do that and know I still had myself covered.

Of what food or food context are you afraid?

I’ve been thinking about this a lot, for a couple reasons. One is that I’ve been working on disgust: What’s the relationship between disgust and fear when we encounter a food that discomfits us? The other reason is that I’m organizing a scientific conference on insects, in which insect eating will be involved. It’s been fascinating to see how much fear is generated by the idea of putting an insect in your mouth on purpose. Just mentioning it can make us Northern (non-insect-eating) people extremely uncomfortable. Have I stalled long enough?

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Theorized enough? Okay, now I'll answer your question. I'm afraid of the parts of animals that really remind me that I'm eating an animal: gristle, fat, parts near bones, organs. I'm also really, really scared to put an insect pupa in my mouth. Or a mealworm. Anything squishy. Now, having said that, I'll report, oddly, that, during the pandemic, I ate a lobster with considerable relish and quite surprised myself with the ease with which I tore it apart.

What word or concept describes an admirable food system?

Could we imagine an entire food and agriculture system—the whole system—that embodies the principles embodied in closed-loop agriculture?

What word or concept prevents many food systems from becoming admirable?

vertical integration

Which food innovation do you try to ignore?

Single-use plastic containers with single-serve foods inside of them.

What is your greatest gastronomic extravagance?

I don't know if this is my greatest, but every year I buy several two-pound bags of dried Wisconsin tart cherries, for baking and granola and like that. But sometimes I just go in the pantry and eat a handful of them.

What is your current state of hunger?

At this very moment, I'm pretty hungry. It's an extremely cold, rainy, early Saturday evening here in my yurt in Maine, and the last thing I ate was French toast at

about 9:00 a.m. My "kitchen" (such as it is) is in a shed about 15 feet from the yurt, and the thought of getting on my rain gear to go across that chasm to rustle up something on my ratty little two-burner stove or in my cheap toaster-oven is just too much.

On what occasion do you feign satiety?

I don't have many situations in life where I have to feign satiety. But thinking about, say, international travel when I find myself in someone else's house encountering unfamiliar food, I suppose I'd be most likely to say "couldn't hold another bite" in the presence of meat, especially unusual meat or meat-in-something-where-I-can't-suss-it-out. That and bad baked goods.

What do you most dislike about dinner tables?

What I dislike about *mine* is that it's too narrow to have placemats on both sides *and* have food in the center of it. On the other hand, it's incredibly long and has about eleven chairs so it holds lots of people—AND I got it third-hand, so I can feel less guilty about the fact that it's teak. This next story isn't directly related to what the question asks, but it's not the sort of story I normally have a chance to tell, so I'm going to take the opportunity. My *last* dining room table belonged to my parents (now dead). They'd gotten it when they got married in 1950 and didn't have much money so it was nothing special, but, well, it was theirs. Anyway, one year, during the (mostly) annual Feast of St. Cholesteria party I hold at Christmastime (butter cookies), the upstairs toilet overflowed, and in the morning, we came down to find water dripping out of the ceiling light fixture onto the table. Big scare. We asked an electrician friend to assess the situation and repair it. The morning he was at the house fixing it, I got a call from him at school. I answered the phone and said, "Hi, Tim, how are you?" "Well, I'm okay, I guess." Turns out that he

stood on the table to do the repair job and ALL SIX OF ITS LEGS BROKE OUT FROM UNDER HIM. That is how I came to own a long narrow third-hand teak table with a million chairs.

What is the quality you most like in a fruit?

Tartness. Absolutely. And the raspberry is the most perfect berry.

What is the quality you most like in a cut of meat?

That it is still attached to the animal, functioning as a muscle.

Which condiments do you most overuse?

This prompts another story that you didn't ask about. One time in a food class, when I sent students the requisite questionnaire about the foods they can't or don't eat, one student reported that he doesn't eat condiments. It was such an odd category of foods to write off. I mean, mayonnaise, ketchup, mustard: what do these things have in common? But which do I overuse? Well, if it's French fries you're talking about, I slather each one in mustard and mayo. If you tell me butter is a condiment, then I overuse butter.

What kinds of gardens make you happiest?

Profuse vegetable gardens that are clearly being well harvested.

Which culinary skill would you most like to have?

The whole set possessed by Kate Goodpaster, my former philosophy student, and member of Team USA at the 2020 Coupe du Monde! Kate was the Viennoiserie

member of the team. I wish I could do what she can do with laminated pastry. I'd also love to be a really skillful baguette shaper. Okay, I'd love to be a brilliant bread maker. Okay, I want to be a skilled gluten worker.

If you could change one thing about nutrition, what would it be?

Everyone would have access to adequate forms of it as a matter of course, just because they are alive.

What do you consider your greatest edible achievement?

I go dogsled camping every winter with a different group of total strangers, and I always bring partially baked pizza crusts from my own sourdough and pre-mixed pizza toppings. I can tell you that I never feel so much like a television chef as when I make pizzas in a cast iron skillet over an open fire at -30°F. People bow down and worship me, so grateful are they for melted cheese and hot bread.

If you were to die and come back as an (edible) animal, vegetable, or mineral, what would you like it to be?

I'm pretty committed to "coming back" as compost. I just learned this week that there is a cemetery in my town that allows you to be buried in a shroud. I honestly can't think of anything better.

Where (and/or when) would you most like to dine?

Thinking about that question tonight, I'd say I can't wait to dine at the home of my friends Amy and Andy. In the summertime, we live about 12 minutes apart from each other, and Amy is a tremendous cook. She says, "come for dinner" A LOT. We usually drink beer or

wine and eat cheese and crackers on their deck, which overlooks the Deer Isle bridge over Eggmoggin Reach. Then we go inside for some delicious dish she's found in the *NY Times* or *Cook's Illustrated* or somewhere else. They're basically a vegetarian household, so I don't feel like that pain in the neck dinner guest who doesn't eat meat. During the pandemic, I was in their "pod." I turned 60 the first summer of the pandemic, and Amy made me the most deluxe macaroni and cheese of my life.

When do you have no appetite?

When I'm afraid or extremely sad. It's happened to me a couple of times, for periods of a couple months each. It's scary. I turned to protein power, and switched to thinking of food as medicine I was required to take.

What is your most treasured kitchen implement?

I'm really attached to having a mixer. I don't "treasure" the one I have right now, but I sure love having it. I use it more than most normal people, I think; it sits on my counter, ready to be put to use at the drop of a hat. This year, after years of longing, I got a tabletop convection oven, which I'd wanted for a long time. It has changed my life. I now eat baked potatoes a couple times a week. And make three chocolate chip cookies. And have a Dutch baby for breakfast every Saturday morning.

What do you consider to be the most processed kind of food?

It's an easy mark, I suppose, but something like the Lunchable, that extruded plastic tray filled with extruded food chopped into bite-size bits. Un crustables are up there, too. I guess anything that has "able" in its name is kind of telling you all you need to know.

What is your favorite aroma?

So many to choose from, but I guess I'd say bread baking. I will say, however, that I spent quite a bit of time wandering around the town of Alba, Italy, looking for the bakery that I was sure must be responsible for that delicious smell, before someone informed me that it was the smell of Nutella being made. I suppose one could get sick of the smell of chocolate and hazelnuts roasting together, but it would take me a while.

What spice, kitchen implement, or cookbook do you use most rarely?

The krumkake iron I inherited from Elsie Mlejnek. I last made krumkake in about 2003.

What do you most value in your friends?

Their willingness to be honest with me about myself. I know someone loves me when they are willing to tell me I'm full of beans.

Who are your favourite food scholars?

I'm grateful for the work of so many people I've gotten to know through the societies of which I am a member: the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, and the Association for the Study of Food and Society. Having said that, the work I keep recommending to people (because it has influenced me so much in my recent work) is Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

With which cuisine do you most identify?

A bunch of years ago, I attended a week-long silent meditation retreat at the Insight Meditation Society. It was an intense experience in a million ways, but one tremendous source of comfort was the food, which was

all vegetarian, abundant and delicious. I decided then that my home cuisine was “meditation retreat.” Beyond that, I would say that my kitchen always contains butter, flour, sugar, lemons, olive oil, cheese, capers, onions, garlic, and toasted sesame oil.

What is your most powerful sense?

It is hearing. I have terrible vision, and my senses of smell and taste are just *meh*. On the other hand, I can hear a pin drop in the next county.

What are your favorite agricultural, culinary, or gastronomic words?

Cream. The noun and the verb.

What is it about composting that you most dislike?

Other people’s judgment about the fact that I don’t care about what the inside of my compost bucket looks like. Oh, and I suppose the fact that I have to walk out to the pile and I usually remember at ten at night.

What would be your best last meal?

Either perfectly toasted bread slathered with butter or a cheese course. (My most recent best meal, however, was a week ago at a Mexican-inspired takeout place here in Maine called El El Frijoles. Halibut with some seared tomatoes, served in a bowl with rice and black beans, and a side salad and homemade tortillas. I would never have put those things together... and it was perfect. I certainly wish someone would hand me such a thing right this minute as I sit here in the rain.)

What foodish epitaph would you assign to yourself?

“She thought about food. A lot. And she made a decent loaf of bread.”

What question would you add to this questionnaire?

Something like, “What now-gone historical food would you most like to be able to taste?” Or maybe, “If you had to cook a meal for a stranger using the contents of your refrigerator and cupboard right now, what would you make?”