

A Kitchen with a View – Proposal for a Book in Translation

Original Title (Slovene): *Kuhinja z razgledom (Eseji iz antropologije hrane)*

Author: Svetlana Slapšak

Title in Translation: *A Kitchen with a View (Essays in the Anthropology of Food)*

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Owner of Foreign Rights (World): Goga Publishing House (Založba Goga, Slovenia), Katja Urbanija:
rights@goga.si

First Published: 2016

Pages: 358

Layout: Hardcover 23,5 x 17 cm
Paperback 23 x 16 cm

About the book

Plainly written essays about everything to do with food and nourishment are a contemporary version of the famous Roman cookbook by Apicius *The Art of Cooking* (*De re coquinaria*). Although the author's discourse is based on polyhistoric knowledge, it is presented in an accessible and humorous style. For this reason the book generated a lot of interest with very different readers; it is intended both for gourmets as well as anyone interested in our roots, for food is the foundation of life. The book is unique as it is hard to find anything comparable in the deluge of publications on food which normally almost never surpass very narrowly set out frameworks, let alone reach into the subject of the politicalness of food and the social function of various dishes.

About the author

Svetlana Slapšak (1948) is an anthropologist and Doctor of Ancient Studies whose academic career has taken her to numerous European and American universities. Her biography gives an insight into the intellectual scene of the latter years of Yugoslavia and the period of formation of new states, for she stood up to regimes and ideologies, persistently defending her humanist thought, something that

was especially important during the period of war in the Balkans when she was also included among the nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize. Lecturer and Dean at the Faculty of Postgraduate Humanist Studies in Ljubljana, she is author of over 50 books, around 400 scientific studies and over 1000 essays.

About the translator

Gregor Timothy Čeh was born and brought up in a bilingual family in Slovenia. After studying at UCL in London he taught English in Greece and then completed a Masters at Kent. He now lives in Cyprus and regularly translates contemporary Slovene literature for publishing houses and authors in Slovenia, with translations published in both the UK and US.

Reviews

“The author writes for the eater who might be, or even should be, completely engaged.”

Igor Bratož, book review in Slovenia’s leading daily newspaper *Delo*

“The work deliberates the politicalness of food and the social function of various foods, side dishes, spices and customs connected with nourishment in an extremely indulgent manner. Most fascinating are the explanations of mythological and religious views of individual kinds of fruit, vegetables, meats or drinks, and it is only such elucidations which definitively highlight food as an essential element of survival as well as a specific kind of illusion, reflected in numerous contemporary nutritional disorders.”

Žiga Valetič, in Slovenia’s main book review magazine *Bukla*

“Svetlana Slapšak’s essays are intended for those with an appetite for anthropological and sociological research, whose mouths water with good essay writing, for philosophical epicureans, as well as true gourmets.”

Tadej Čater, on RTV Slovenija's portal *MMC*

Marketing potential

The book is intended for gourmets as well as all who are interested in our roots, for food is the substance of life, either in a tribe living in the jungle or at the sophisticated French court of Catherine de’ Medici. Although the author’s discourse is based on polyhistoric knowledge, it is conveyed in an

accessible, pleasant style, enriched by an exceptional sense of humour – this is also the reason that the book generated a great deal of interest with a variety of readers and has already been reprinted three times within its first year of publication.

The Slovenian Book Agency financially supports translations and the promotion of Slovene literature abroad. With Slovenia's candidacy for Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Slovenian Book Agency has increased its financing for translations of Slovene books into major European languages. Also available is the Trubar Fund (operating under the auspices of the Slovene Writers' Association) which finances the printing costs for foreign publishers (calls for applications twice yearly).

Short Summary

The introductory essay in which the author thinks about food as a text is followed by four extensive chapters:

Chapter I: Fruits and Vegetables

Short essayistic notes, five pages long at the most, on the mythological and religious views of various kinds of fruit and vegetables, from the artichoke and avocado to the walnut and watermelon.

Chapter II: Spices and Additions

In a similar way, the author discusses basil, cinnamon, elder, lime tree, pomanders and saffron.

Chapter III: Foods and Customs

Thoughts on the politicalness of food and the social function of various dishes and customs connected to nutrition. Examples of essays *Baklava and Strudel*, *Bees and Democracy*, *Halva and Turkish Delight*, *Yugoslav Cooking...*

Chapter IV: Celebration Menus

Specific cases with recipes for, for example, The Laid-off Worker's Sunday Lunch, Ramadan Late Dinner or Early Breakfast, Yugoslav Republic Day Celebrations...

Sample Chapters

The Apricot (from the chapter *Fruits and Vegetables*)

Apricots are rarely available outside their very short season in the month of July. Beside this they are not particularly suited to freezing; basically they do not want to adapt to our new consumer habits, specifically to our overindulgence. In other words, we could say that the apricot reminds us of natural cycles of growth, of our remarkable luck for having survived yet another year and lived to experience another season of one of the most enticing smells found in nature.

Apricots originate in the Far East, in parts of what is today China and India. From there they spread to Persia where they were especially highly regarded and were, in their dried form, considered (and still are) an important export product. Legend has it that apricots were brought to Europe by Alexander the Great. The Ancient Greeks and Romans knew them as 'Armenian' apple or plum, but the connection to Armenia is not proven. In describing this fruit, the Roman encyclopaedic author Pliny the Elder mentioned an early-fruiting variety, *praecocia* in Latin, but did not name the fruit. Less educated authors took the adjective to be the name of the fruit and it then underwent different adaptations in various languages – *apricot* in English, *abricot* in French, *verikoko* (βερίκοκο) in Greek and *albicocca* in Italian. The word then passed into Arabic and from there back into Spanish. Apart from the inaccurate translation, the made-up Armenian variant of the name also survives in the Italian version *armellino*, the German *Marille* (though the version *Aprikose* also exists in German), the Slovene *marelica*. In the market Greeks often also refer to the apricot by its Turkish name *kaysi* (καϊσί, orig. Turkish *kaysı*) even though the signs most often say *verikoko*. There is a Turkish idiom which refers to the essence of the apricot with which we can conclude the total confusion in relation to its name, denoting something of exceptional quality, meaning 'it doesn't get any better than this': *bundan iyisi Şam'da kayısı* (literally, the only thing better than this is an apricot in Damascus). In Egypt the term *filmishmish* 'in the time of apricots' is used as a response for unfounded promises or predictions, probably based on the fact that the apricot season is so short...

In many ways the apricot is a perfect fruit – it has a sunny colour, is pleasant to the touch, with a stone that can also be eaten, though this should not be exaggerated because, like almonds, apricot stones contain small amounts of cyanide. Until the nineteenth century it was believed that ground apricot stones cured tumours. Modern medical research has not confirmed this belief.

In Roman mythology the apricot is a fruit associated with Venus, and there are numerous

superstitions connecting it with seduction, as well as a belief that it helps in childbirth. Shakespeare mentions the apricot as an aphrodisiac in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. One of the many folk legends connecting it with the power of seduction was created in Spain where women used to place apricot flowers and leaves under their skirts: during the period of Napoleon's occupation of Spain, high-class women – patriots - dressed up as gypsies, placing apricot flowers and leaves under their skirts and went to the French military camps. They lead away their seduced victim, but not for an encounter of love; the sign that the French soldier had been 'dealt with' was the heavy stinking smoke rolling from the chimney of a house. Beside the political division into liberals and conservatives (both on the pro- and anti-French sides), Napoleon's occupation of Spain (1808-1814) also created the phenomenon and the name for guerrilla warfare, irregular popular armed revolt against occupation. Thus, for example, Goya who painted and drew probably some of the most shocking testimonies to the horrors of war and resistance, was forced to flee to France after the end of the Peninsular War because he was considered an *afrancescado* – a sympathiser of the French or rather the ideas of the French Revolution. The story of the use of the apricot is a typical urban legend which brings into a political context two key popularity factors, sex and horror.

But let us return to the amusing apricot and its basic characteristic – taste. In the only surviving cook book from antiquity, the legendary Roman cook Apicius much praises the fruit; in Roman cuisine fruit, fresh and dried, was included in numerous recipes, not only for sweets. Apricots were thus served with various kinds of meat, pork shoulder, for example – the apricots were added towards the end, when the meat was almost cooked or steamed just before the final ingredient *tracta*, a kind of dough used as a thickener, was added. Apricots cooked with wine, pepper and *garum* (a condiment made of tiny fish left to ferment in seawater left in the sun) were a popular appetiser. These too were thickened just before serving, probably with a little flour.

Apricots are still widely used in savoury dishes in Middle and Far Eastern cuisine as well as North African recipes, less often in European and North American dishes. The French have a recipe for rabbit with dried apricots. Apricots are often used in cakes, especially pies, tortes and tarts, and of course in compotes and jam. Apricot jam and apricot preserve are without doubt among the best. The secret of the light colour and taste is simple – during the last boil a little pure alcohol should be added and the jam immediately removed from the heat. In the past housekeepers would use the simplest way of preserving jam by sprinkling a thin layer of sugar onto the jam once the jar had cooled down. If you wanted to experiment with tastes, you should try apricot jam with basil. In Central Europe apricots are also used to make brandy, such as the Hungarian *pálinka* and numerous other varieties in surrounding countries. In Turkey they prepare a natural alcohol-free refreshment from apricots. Considering modern health concerns, it is hard to imagine a fruit with so many vitamins, antioxidants and so much fibre.

Our preoccupation with health and nature has also engulfed cosmetics, so the apricot ever more often also appears as an ingredient in skin products (stone) and lotions, as well as an aroma in shampoos and bubble baths. The success of many of today's 'natural' cosmetics companies, such as The Body Shop for example, is not in utilizing the natural aromas but in creating aromas which have the effect of natural ones and are promoted as nature-friendly, among other things eliminating all kinds of animal testing. Such a policy in certain cases also extends to fair trade – buying ingredients directly from the producer who thus also directly benefit from a return of part of the profits. The Body Shop products, especially 'apricot', are so successful that the company had to add a warning to its usual labelling that the product is not intended for consumption. Even as a marketing joke, it is a good one, especially if it calms your conscience. It is also much easier to take a bath in apricot bubbles than sew flowers and leaves under your skirt.

The world's largest apricot producers are Turkey and Iran. Greece too has extensive production; their secret is in utilizing orange groves where they plant apricot trees in between the orange trees. The end of the orange season (oranges are stored after being picked and sold throughout the year) marks the beginning of the brief apricot season and the landscape is once again covered in the sunshine-coloured fruit. It also seems that the citrus trees work well as protection against pests, parasites and diseases to which the apricot tree is very susceptible. With its early flowering season, it is also sensitive to late frosts. Everything in relation to the apricot teaches us about the attention, respect, care and love which is the beginning and the end result of what has been said. If its simply irresistible aroma stimulates erotic desire, looking after the apricot tree and its short life remind us of the responsibility of love.

Saffron (from the chapter *Spices and Additions*)

The crocus, a humble spring flower, has a stamen which is the source of a yellow colouring used as a medicine and as a spice. The crocus probably originated in Asia but has been known around the Mediterranean since the third millennium BC. Wall paintings in palaces in Crete and houses in Santorini show the saffron harvest, the flowers being collected by both men and women. The saffron/crocus flower is one of the most common features on the complicated Cretan depictions of landscape. Unfortunately the precise meaning of saffron for ceremonial purposes has been lost. It was also known to the Ancient Egyptians who used it as a dye and in make-up; the yellow colour in tombs helped the soul survive until its final journey. With its three basic functions, dye, medicine and ceremony, saffron was clearly an important part of ancient Mediterranean cultures.

There was no end to the admiration of saffron; in Antiquity it was respected and highly

regarded, not least because a lot of effort went into collecting very small quantities. Ancient authors considered it an aphrodisiac and related to this is the myth of Crocus who was unhappy with his affair with the nymph Smilax and was turned by the gods into the flower. In the *Iliad*, Hera briefly seduces her husband Zeus in order to distract him from the events happening outside Troy; the divine couple make love on the ground, their bodies rolling on a bed of – crocuses. This is also a metaphor related to the beauty of hair, both men's and women's, and the beauty of youth in general. It was believed that, apart from stimulating love, the crocus also a cure for various ailments connected to the head, memory, headaches and similar troubles. In Antiquity it was used for medicine as well as a food and cosmetics colouring and a textile dye. The colour of saffron also had a particular meaning; it was worn by women who were preparing themselves for seduction or professional ladies of pleasure. At certain times it was even a forbidden a status of luxury so that women who wore clothes the colour of saffron and gold risked punishment. When the women in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* declare a sexual strike in order to achieve peace, their leader Lysistrata advises them to walk around the home in saffron-coloured robes, seduce their husbands and then withdraw... Saffron was dedicated to the Roman goddess of fertility Ceres. The Roman encyclopaedist Pliny recommended saffron as a mild sedative and in his opinion a wreath of saffron helped prevent a person from getting drunk. The Romans held saffron in such high esteem that they took it into newly-conquered territories; this was how saffron spread to Gallic tribes and to Britain. It is still a mystery why saffron disappeared with the Romans and only reappeared much later in eastern and central Europe. With the arrival of Christianity Saffron was not blacklisted as were certain other plants, in fact it retained its privileged status. The colour of saffron is, together with white, acknowledged as the colour of holiness. The Vatican's pale yellow colouring is a cultural memory of the livelier saffron equivalent. Saffron became particularly important in Europe during the period of the plague pandemic because it was believed it cured the terrible disease. Competition and piracy even led to the brief 'Saffron Wars'. Fighting between Venetian and Genoan merchants who brought saffron into Europe from the southern Mediterranean ended when saffron began to be cultivated in Europe, especially around Basel. Later Nuremberg also became a centre of saffron production. Boats which brought the saffron to cure the plague sometimes also brought the plague, or rather plague-infested rats with them... After the success in Basel, saffron cultivation became more widespread but its price was not significantly reduced. Little changed in the way of collecting saffron and the quantities it was realistically possible to produce. There is truth in the saying that saffron is more expensive than gold. Unlike pepper, which was in Ancient Rome paid for by its weight in gold and is today one of the most common and inexpensive spices, even though it is only produced in a rather limited number of countries, saffron, which is grown and found everywhere, remains expensive. It is mainly produced in Southern Europe but is used everywhere. The world's largest

saffron producer is Iran.

Modern medicine also acknowledges the anticarcinogenic and antioxidant properties of saffron. In cooking its role is not prominent, it is mostly used as a food colouring, particularly in soups, rice and certain sweets. In Spanish cuisine *paella* without saffron is unimaginable. Apart from very few places, saffron is no longer used as a textile dye. In some cultures we can still encounter traces of magic associated with saffron; popular healers in the Mediterranean area wash their hands in saffron water before setting broken bones and other chiropractic processes. It is also believed that patients with jaundice or other liver diseases should drink saffron dyed water, a nice example of magic by analogy. In India a saffron bulb is placed on a woman's belly during childbirth to ease the process. Women, especially pregnant women, were not supposed to participate in the saffron harvest, instead it was left to young girls and adult men. Things are even more serious in some beliefs in Mauritius where a woman is not allowed to plant crocuses in order not to give birth to a child with more than ten fingers or toes. A saffron pouch tied around the waste brings not only lovers but also luck with money. As well as this, saffron is considered a cure for seasickness so all sailors and sea travellers should use it. It is also supposed to help in cases of consciousness failure, either due to unconsciousness or mental illness.

Saffron is also considered the flower of St Valentine. If a girl wore saffron yellow on St Valentine's Day it meant she would meet her chosen man. Production for the needs of a consumer society has replaced this, mainly Anglo-American custom and the yellow colour with red, the colour of all the dreary 'hearts' which are for sale everywhere for St Valentine's. Ancient beliefs have been replaced with an absurd new demand. Instead of celebrating the joyful yellow colour of birds and flowers before the end of winter, we are force fed all the remnants of 'red' Christmas chocolates that went unsold.

Apart from the case of the Black Death, which it was without doubt unable to cure, there is little else on the dark side to the history of saffron; beliefs or ceremonies; everything related to the colour of sunshine is positive. Yellow was always considered a healthy, inspiring colour, the colour of wisdom and good decision-making, love and sympathy as well as jealousy and envy which appear due to a lack of love. One of the most interesting superstitions connected with the colour yellow is related to a belief in theatre circles in France that yellow should not be included in costumes or the set. One of the explanations is that yellow brought bad luck because it was the colour which symbolized Satan in medieval mortality plays. In Chinese opera, particularly Peking opera, yellow is the colour both of bullies and of representatives of the authorities. The use of saffron in ceremonies in Asia even today far exceeds anything that is done with it in Europe; statues of Buddha are anointed with saffron, saffron is obligatory in ceremonial flowers, still used as a dye for textiles, food, cosmetics, in everyday life. It is a colour recognisable everywhere.

Yugoslav Cooking (from the chapter *Foods and Customs*)

I have a book written in Macedonian on my bookshelf entitled *Yugoslavian Cuisine*, a volume of cultural-historical significance. It is a representative, balanced and politically correct collection, presenting the highest achievements of regional cuisine in the former Yugoslavia. To put it in another way; the book was utopian even when it was published (1983) for it did not correspond to either the political or social conditions of the time. Fake nostalgia for amateurs.

Then a few days ago, I was surprised to see a cooking programme on one of our minor TV channels where they were preparing something called a “*Moto-biscuit cake*.” The entire recipe was, even if we ignore the ghastly biscuits which were a socialist version of the more famous Austrian Linzer with a hole at the centre of the top biscuit which shows the filling in the middle, a graphic example of shortage, resourcefulness, tricks used in Albanian confectioneries and a general disrespect for taste: powdered milk, powdered cream, instant blancmange and a piece of advice that the orange juice in which you are supposed to soak the suspicious biscuits when preparing this cake, should not be ‘carbonated’. In fact, what kept me watching this chance programme in the end was this finally exposed naivety; in a deluge of self-adoring, over rich, hot-blooded and babbling chefs, male and female, within the framework of both domestic and foreign TV-culinary offerings, here was clearly a case of an unplanned influx of representatives of some other social and cultural classes who also cook but also go hungry more often than not. Even if it sounds like a culinary horror, the said cake is cheap. It is a treat, a substitute luxury to the impoverished. For fun I then compared a few other recipes, low-cost at least in name, e.g. ‘Gypsy’ cake, ‘student’ cake, ‘bachelor’ cake and figured out that every one of them is some tens of Euros more expensive than the *Moto-biscuit cake*. This cake, however, other than the fact that it satisfies a hunger for a dessert, in itself a banal presumption, has a higher objective: it satisfies the need for representation, of serving food at a celebratory table, a birthday or wedding/feast for example. Deception and social pretentiousness are at a very low level in this case, but they ensure a temporary, rather brief therapy, similar to nostalgia, indulging in watching a story on television, or reading a romance novel bought at a news stand.

Outside the forgotten world of the representative history of Yugoslav cuisine, there is something else which has a truly Yugoslav cultural stamp and is today not only a nostalgic but also actual means of survival – consumption of cheap, unhealthy, filling food. Those who would most need a variety, vitamin-rich food, namely physical workers who carry out the heaviest of tasks, possibly have access only to the worse kind of food, one which causes them to put on weight and die young. With those working in physically inactive jobs, this recipe is even more devastating. There is

no appropriate social care, the poor are not only not informed about healthy nutrition, there is also no cultural matrix or occasion in which the impoverished and/or informed elites and those people in outright poverty would actually share a table. This is a model known in almost all Mediterranean and also some Balkan cultures/states. At the same time in all post-Yugoslav surroundings there also exists something which seems characteristic of all post-socialist states – the preservation of the memory of the tastes of the past, whatever they might have been. Each individual decides whether they will buy and consume Gavrilović liver pâté, Buko cheese, Cedevida instant vitamin drinks, the abovementioned Moto biscuits, Argo soups, Kiki fruit toffees, Vegeta stock powder, Bajadera pralines and other tasty things that we would probably need to avoid if we wanted a longer and better life and considering the fact that these products are today certainly no cheaper than others. This decision assumes identity processes, collective memory and personal acceptance of these memories, ideological registration, reluctance and finally also a political affiliation of the individual. Such a person is generally relatively poor, in the best of cases an active alternative type. These differences disappear in the diaspora where even rich descendants and even the youngest generation of former Yugoslav war emigrants melt at the sight of a gift from a utopian past, a tin of liver pâté, a kilo packet of Cedevida.

In his book *The Physiology of Taste* (1825), the famous theorist of taste Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin about whom Roland Barthes wrote extensively, revived the view of ancient physicians that a person is what they enjoy. He knew them well enough to preserve the basic meaning of the Greek term diet: 'a way of life'. On numerous occasions in his book, Brillat-Savarin discusses the complicated relationship between culture, memory and food, using the terminology of his time, of course. He understood that in the preparation of food, what is more important than anything else is the interplay of what our brain knows about food and what we do with it. For the case of relating Yugoslav food, new poverty, nostalgia and resistance, Brillat-Savarin's epicurean deliberations are very pertinent, after all the author lived as an emigrant in America for a long time where he made a living in various ways, among others by playing the violin, and was able, without prejudice, to research colonial cuisine. Modern readers will be more familiar with the French writer Marcel Proust and his memory of the taste of *madeleine* sponge cakes. There is a version of this kind of cake with a less tempting name *financier* which, however, has never become the object of artistic contemplation and has not made a name for itself in world literature.

If we thus tie in the elegant deliberations on the links between identity, memory and food with the almost 'guerrilla-style' invasion of the *Moto*-biscuit cake into the media, both burdened with an unpleasantly aggressive and intrusively elitist attitude towards food as a source of prestige for the privileged, then we have got onto the tracks of an important social and cultural phenomenon. It is very possible that someone has come up with the idea of manipulating the habits of the poor and

include them into the consumerist offer of a variety of things; perhaps also as a way of something uncontrolled, subversive, something that would benefit the consciousness of the poor, penetrating though social and especially consumer filters. Outside the only matrix for the poor acceptable to the media, modesty and their infinite gratitude for everything, usually accompanied by a tear or two, and beyond the straightforward threats and warnings about how one should behave (and thus also enjoy their food) if you are poor or a labourer – spread through the media by offended employers whenever their democratic freedom of exploitation is hindered – our daily routine still remains the basic space in which our identity is formed; everything else is definitively closed.

The appearance of the *Moto*-biscuit cake is thus of course not yet the strong social-political signal which would duly point to an appropriate, less obvious, initial response to the crisis. An ethically-orientated thinker could, on the basis of this example, develop their thought on whether to demand better nutritional education and with this also contain budding bad habits such as this cheap and amateur carbohydrate bomb, or conceal this aspect, threatening public health, while at the same time supporting indirect revolutionarity, hidden in the layers of low-quality ingredients and the very much high-quality ideological significance of the *Moto*-biscuit cake. When during the bread shortage Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, suggested citizens should eat cake, she most certainly did not anticipate what a powerful social force lurked within food. The message of the *Moto*-biscuit cake has a similar charge in terms of meaning.

Svetlana Slapšak (*A Kitchen with a View*, 2016)

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh