

Books in Review

Get Jiro!

Anthony Bourdain and Joel Rose

Illustrations by Langdon Foss and Jose Villarrubia

New York: Vertigo, 2012

160 pp, \$24.95 (hardcover)

Chef and sustainable agriculture pundit Dan Barber is fond of starting his talks by boasting that “the future belongs to the foodies.” Barber means that big agribusiness is destroying the very natural resources upon which it depends. It will fail soon, he promises, leaving “the foodies” in charge. Anthony Bourdain’s graphic novel *Get Jiro!* turns Barber’s statement of hope into a forecast of imminent doom, mocking the idea that “the foodies” will be better shepherds of the planet they inherit. Bourdain, along with coauthor Joel Rose and artists Langdon Foss and Jose Villarrubia, presents a vision of a post-apocalyptic, near-future Los Angeles, a walled megacity on a planet with soil and oceans that are nearly depleted and with traditional foodways that are undermined—but where the chefs, by some inexplicable twist of history, stand at the top of every social hierarchy. However, they are far from pillars of virtue, and their base desires for money, power, and fame rise to the surface. Like kung fu movie antagonists refracted by the lens of gastronomic pop culture, they attack one another with boning knives, meat tenderizing mallets, and *maguro bōchō*, the long knives used to cut tuna for sushi.

Two foodie gangs dominate this Los Angeles. One is led by Bob, a slick, power-hungry figure interested in technique and technology and who makes no bones about sourcing his ingredients from all over the world. The other is led by Rose, who preaches the gospel of local and organic ingredients so dear to present-day Bay Area restaurants such as *Chez Panisse*. However, she turns out to be no less ruthless than Bob, and Bourdain (an outspoken critic of the Bay Area foodie scene) delights in presenting her as an hypocrite: she will call ingredients “local” as long as they are local to their

place of origin and integral to its cuisine. All restaurants are controlled by the slicksters or the neo-agrarians, and all of LA’s denizens spend their days phoning, texting, and surfing the Web in a desperate bid for reservations. In the world of *Get Jiro!* “sports, film, the recording industry have all fragmented and died,” leaving no desires save for food and sex (p.2). As in so many post-apocalyptic tales, those who control a precious resource—water, power, information, or in this case, high-end cuisine—control everything.

Into this cesspool, comes Jiro, an enigmatic ex-Yakuza foot soldier and sushi chef who runs a *sushi-ya* in one of the dingy corner minimalls typical of LA’s urban landscape, where much of the best ethnic food in LA can be found. Jiro’s technique is impeccable, but it is his temper that brings him to the attention of the gangs: he kills with impunity the first patron to insult his sushi by eating it the wrong way, dunking it rice-first in wasabi-saturated *shoyu*. Because the customer is a produce importer, the supply chains of the fancy restaurants are disrupted. Notably, the police who record the incident seem to be on Jiro’s side, shaking their heads at the lack of respect. The plot, from here on, is predictable to someone with even a passing familiarity with the last few decades of Hong Kong cinema—perhaps especially Stephen Chow’s *God of Cookery*—or with Japanese samurai films. Jiro is courted by both gangs, and they fight a bloody battle over him. When he refuses to join them, they kill his best friend, a Frenchman who runs a kind of culinary underground. Jiro then reveals his own Yakuza-trained muscles and fighting skills and decimates their ranks. There is, however, a logic to all this rather adolescent comic-book bloodshed. Bourdain loves to style himself the bad boy, and he is true to his punk roots in using violence to satirize the pretensions of our culinary establishment.

More importantly, *Get Jiro!* pokes fun at contemporary visions of the future of food—most prominently, the one promoted by pundits such as Dan Barber, Alice Waters, and

their followers: a future of organic, community-driven farming will somehow save both our food system and the planet, from utter devastation, as if the small scale can overcome the truly massive scales on which Big Ag operates. Not that Big Ag and its infrastructure is unrepresented: Bourdain's LA is an island of relative affluence (there is a rich inner ring in the city, surrounded by increasingly immiserated rings) in the world Big Ag destroyed. In one fight sequence, Jiro, wielding his *maguro bōchō*, faces off against his antagonists in a high-rise building devoted to "vertical farming," floors devoted to grain and pigs. This vision of the future of food, celebrated by many, clearly does not produce enough to meet demand. However, the point of *Get Jiro!* is not to present a more constructive vision of how we might eat in years to come, rather, it is to show that "foodie" culture is often its own deadliest foe.

—Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft

Aesthetic Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Women's Food Writing

Alice L. McLean

New York: Routledge, 2013

195 pp, \$49.95 (paper)

Aesthetic Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Women's Food Writing examines the gender politics of gastronomic writing and culinary experience in England and America. Focusing on M.F.K. Fisher, Alice B. Toklas, Elizabeth David, and, more briefly, the contemporary writers Patience Gray, Vertamae Smart Grosvenor, and Monique Truong; McLean brings into focus these authors' contributions to women's food writing in the framework of a literary history of the gendered genres of domestic cookbooks, traditionally penned by women, and professional cookbooks and gastronomic literature, the domain of male gastronomes. Beginning with the nineteenth century, McLean explores how women writers came to exercise their right to articulate the pleasures begotten by gastronomic and literary practices in ways that simultaneously transformed the very genre of food writing. In McLean's words, "Creating a language that configures female desire, Fisher, Toklas, and David expanded women's food writing beyond the domestic realm to establish a tradition of English and American literature that celebrates female appetite for pleasure and for gastronomic adventure" (p.1).

Chapter 1 charts the male tradition of gastronomic literature that began in post-Revolutionary France and migrated to England and America. The chapter thereby sets the historical stage for the emergence of the female gastronome from the ideologically segregated space of domestic cookbook

writing, a genre devoted to instructing women about nourishing male appetite and ideologically serving to regulating female desire. From the shadows of domestic cookbook writing, the female gastronome appears as a literary pleasure-seeker attuned to "the power of gastronomy to transform the satisfaction of a physical need into nourishment for the soul" (p.33).

Chapter 2 focuses on M.F.K. Fisher in the context of changes within the genre of women's food writing. The image of Fisher that comes to the fore is of a literary innovator through whose writings the female appetite came into focus as a motor of action and as a legitimate object of literary reflection. Because Fisher's gastronomic sensibility is intertwined with her literary talent, it is impossible to talk about her food writing without addressing the quality and characteristics of the prose itself. To this end, the chapter conceptualizes "gastronomical satisfaction" as an experience of dynamic border crossing, "when eater and eaten converge, instances when the boundaries between inside and outside, self and other are temporarily dissolved" (p.83). This understanding of gastronomic pleasure serves as a recurring leitmotif throughout the study. Chapter 3 approaches *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* as a "queer text" in order to make two kinds of arguments: the first about its intervention into the history of the heteronormative food writing tradition; the second about the "power of genre-bending food writing to transgress and reconfigure conventional gender ideologies" (p.93). One of the most interesting parts of the chapter—which also illustrates its reach beyond its expressed intention—is its reading of the unstable power relations among Toklas, her partner Gertrude Stein, and their household employees. McLean argues that the instability in the distribution of power between employers and employees was not only a reflection of the domestic labor shortage in the households of the privileged, hastened by the World Wars, it also indicated Toklas's openness to the multicultural influences of her French, Martiniquean, and Vietnamese cooks.

Chapter 4 focuses on Elizabeth David, whose writings revolutionized British home cooking in the aftermath of WWII by introducing the food cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle East into the domestic kitchen. McLean emphasizes how the cosmopolitan influences on David had an enlivening effect on domestic cookery, gastronomic writing, and, more broadly, the British cultural imaginary: McLean writes, "David foregrounds food as a medium through which the self can be constructed in relation to other nations, other cultures and other individuals" (p.144). Chapter 5 considers three contemporary texts: Gray's *Honey from a Weed* (1986), Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking* (1979), and Truong's *Book of Salt*