



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART



THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK PHOTOS

Above: A 1764 Sevres porcelain tea service. **Left:** Food-shaped tureens, like this French faience rooster, were popular in the 18th century. **Right:** This 1760s folding fan is painted with a scene of a lavish meal. All are part of the exhibit “Savor: A Revolution in Food Culture” at Wadsworth Atheneum.

A consuming passion

Wadsworth Atheneum explores food culture of 18th-century Europe

BY SUSAN DUNNE

The new exhibit at Wadsworth Atheneum, “Savor: A Revolution in Food Culture,” is as much a historical overview as it is an art exhibit. The show chronicles radical changes in the way food was cultivated, sold, cooked, served and eaten in pre-Revolutionary Europe. More than anything, the exhibit makes one fact clear: Everyone in the world – rich and poor, aristocrat and commoner – is obsessed with food.

Why else would a king lose his regal composure over a bowl of fresh peas? Why else would a monarch take to the kitchen to make omelets – burnt, but still edible – for his guests? Why would the ladies of great houses rent pineapples to show off their sophistication? Why else would a memoir by legendary womanizer Casanova lead to a frisky vogue in oysters and egg whites? Why else would a man publish a book, knowing few people would read it, to extol the joys of a meatless diet?

On the more tragic side, why else would a sinister worldwide phenomenon – the transatlantic slave trade – spring up as a result of, among other reasons, Europe’s addiction to sugar?

The exhibit originated at Gardiner Museum in Toronto. Meredith Chilton, curator emerita at the Gardiner, has been cooking it up for about 15 years.

The show is made up of about 250 artifacts: ceramic dinnerware, silver serving implements, paintings of food-related subjects, a delicate sugar sculpture like those popular at the time, pages from cookbooks and other food-oriented writings, Meissen porcelain figurines of people interacting with food, as well as delightful knit reproductions of foods by the contemporary fiber artist Madame Tricot.

Gardiner, an expert in European ceramics of the 1700s, also wrote the exhibit’s scrumptious catalog. The book includes 30 pre-Revolutionary era recipes – adjusted for 21st-century cooking – alongside the historical narrative and pictures of the exhibit’s delectable artifacts.

So go ahead, use the catalog to make stuffed veal escalopes, thatched house pie, lemon syllabub, bacchus sauce, brown bread ice cream. You might not have the exhibit’s fabulous waterfowl-shaped ceramic terrines to serve them, but you’ll still be able to savor a bit of the 18th century.

“Anyone who researches ceramics and the art of the table is not just researching those ceramics, but also what went into them,” Chilton said. “Food is such a consuming passion for people today. I was at a restaurant and the people next to me were photographing their food. There are so many similarities to what was going on 350 years ago. People had the same interests: fresh flavors, health, simple cooking.”

The exhibit itself, in the third-floor Austin gallery, illustrates the influence of 17th-century cookbook author François Pierre de la Varenne. Varenne had the unprecedented idea to abandon old cooking techniques – which emphasized multiple ingredients and spices to create intensely layered food flavors – in favor of local herbs and natural flavors, letting the meats, fish and vegetables speak for themselves.

“Varenne was at the same time simpler and more refined. He wanted to look at the flavors and the seasons,” Chilton said. “But that’s the way it is in the history of cooking and eating. There are waves of complex cooking and then a reaction toward simpler cooking, going from one extreme to another. Nothing is new in that. It all happens again and

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again and again.”

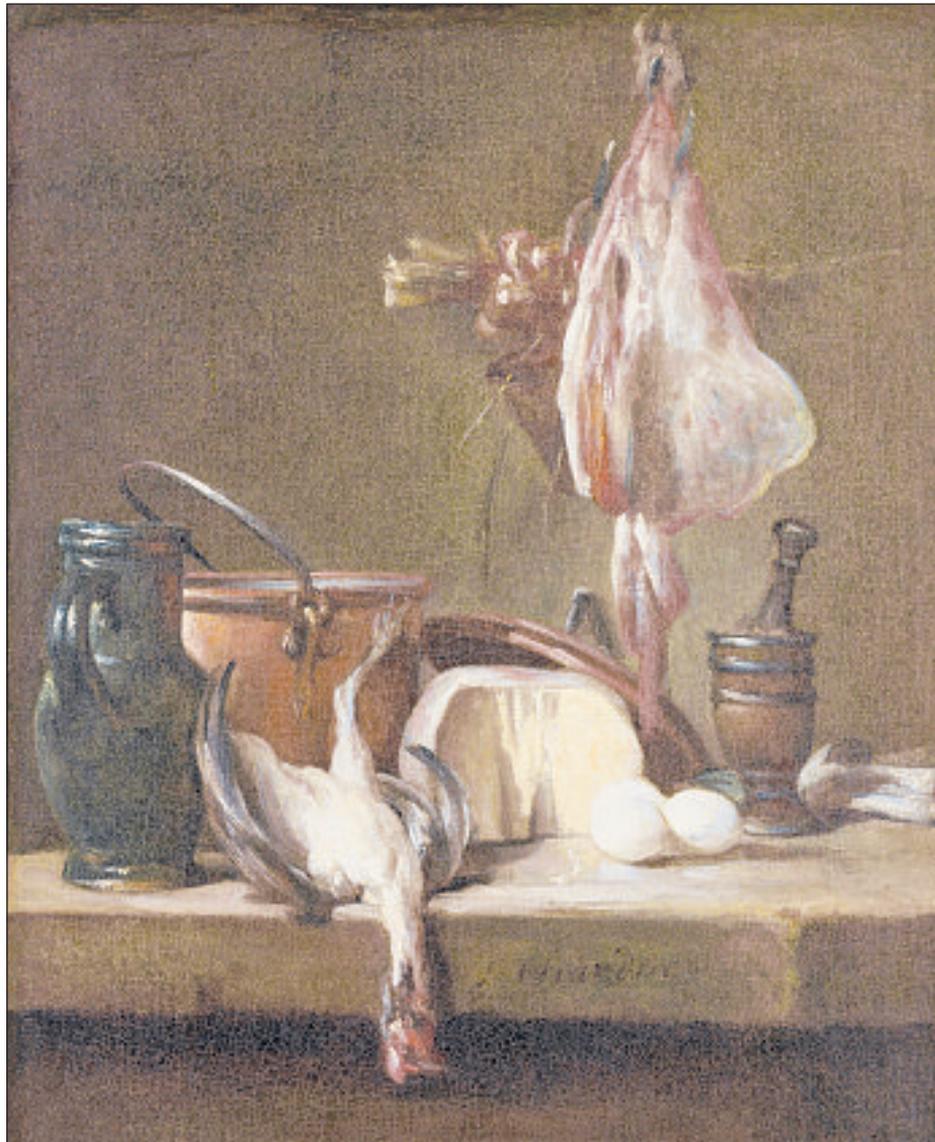
Elaborate tureens in the shape of foodstuffs were popular: cabbages, snails, woodcocks, turkey, duck, pigeons, boar. Pineapples, especially, were a craze that defied the chilly European climate.

“Citrus fruits were remarkable things in this era. If you put a pineapple on a ship in Barbados, by the time it got to Europe you can’t eat it,” Chilton said. “You could transport the small plants, not the fruit, but then how would you grow it? To fully grow they need two years of constant heat. So they had to use greenhouses with heating.”

The aura of inaccessibility led to the pineapple’s emergence as a symbol of wealth and taste. They made their way into kitchenware fashions, table and home décor and even architecture.

The vogue for citrus didn’t deter Europeans from focusing on meat as the center of meals. Try as he might, John Evelyn, whose diary gushed about the pleasure of eating salads every day, did not make much headway. Neither did philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed those who ate meat became savages.

Nonetheless, most people thought the idea of vegetarianism was out to lunch. Colonialism put Europe-



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Jean-Siméon Chardin’s 1732 “Still Life with Ray, Chicken, and Basket of Onions” is part of the exhibit “Savor: A Revolution in Food Culture” at Wadsworth Atheneum.

ans in contact with other cultures. What followed was exposure to new foods, such as spices from the far east and turkeys from

Mexico. Many of the new foods were cultivated with the use of slave labor. “We need to acknowledge elements of trade that are

despicable,” Chilton said.

Linda Roth, the museum’s curator of European decorative arts, has placed five different recipes on



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

This 18th-century porcelain figuring, “Boy and girl shelling peas,” is part of the exhibit “Savor: A Revolution in Food Culture” at Wadsworth Atheneum.

cards throughout the gallery. Visitors are challenged to take the recipes home, make the dishes, photograph them and post them on Twitter with the hashtag #savorthewadsworth.

A screen in the gallery will show a scrolling feed of those hashtagged tweets, letting the museum visitors become part of the exhibit. Will your Portugal cakes, asparagus and pea soup or chicken fricassee be the star of the show?

SAVOR: A REVOLUTION IN FOOD CULTURE is at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until May 25. A panel discussion, “The Dining Room Then and Now,” will be held March 25 at 5 p.m. On May 7 at 5:45 p.m., food historian Ivan Day will present a talk, “Ice Cream in the Age of Enlightenment.” [The-wadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).

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