



AN INTERNATIONAL
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE
INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
& FOOD SYSTEMS

/ Dili

/ Timor-Leste

Bumping Up Against Things in Dili, Timor-Leste

or

In which I encounter heat, dengue mosquitoes, and citronella patches . . . aged cocktails and air-conditioned expats . . . eggs benedict on the beach . . . complex thinking about development, localness, and food . . . a visualization map of Timor-Leste's agro-biodiversity . . . hero food . . . fresh coconut water, near the water . . . the Portuguese supermarket with a local food display . . . storytelling and crying, storytelling and laughing . . . Tetun and 44 other languages . . . coffee with an activist-educator-musician . . . U.S. dollars and Portuguese centavos . . . luhu . . . betel nut . . . budu . . . crocodiles . . . international development workers . . . cars breaking down, drivers paying for accidents . . . four new Burger Kings and duty-free Absolut . . . avocado juice with chocolate syrup . . . chickens, dogs, kids, potholes . . . and one, then three, then many more extraordinary connections . . .

Dili, the capital city of Timor-Leste, is an impossible place to Instagram. One photograph leads to the next, which then suggests others that should take its place. Super-wide, panoramic smart-phone shots immediately demonstrate that they don't show nearly enough: *Dili is vertical, too, you know!* they accuse. Clever captions and quippy hashtags fail to express the #OMG of the markets and traffic and humidity and expats, and all the Insta-Franken-filters do is unnecessarily re-animate the remarkable equatorial light. Were I a better photographer, a month of postings might start to evoke a few Timorese truths, but I'm not. And I was there for just three days. My truths can only be trite.

In this way, and many others, Dili was a great example of what's so complicated about representing foodscapes. Our gastronomic stories—in words, images, or bodily gestures—can only and always tell a partial piece of things. The rest of the picture is forever zooming out in front of us and behind us, changing as we describe it. Or it morphs into a wholly different shape when viewed from another person's perspective. This is the challenge to which eco-gastronomy attempts to respond: to acknowledge the limits of representation and the multiple morphologies of food's 'realities', while also taking meaningful action (like going places and telling stories about them). Eco-gastronomy tries to engage, participate, and perform *with* food, not just *upon* it.

The great social theorist [Bruno Latour](#) has said that to describe any system or network, one must describe the interactions of the things that it comprises. To Latour, the reality of a network is that it never pre-exists this process; the act of describing it brings it into being. Put simply, to show things bumping up against each other is to show how the world is.

I admire and believe in this idea, and it underpins a lot of what I think eco-gastronomy can and should do. As witnesses to gastronomic systems, we might be able to do them the best kind of justice simply by describing our interactions with the things they are made of. Some scholars might decry that kind of approach as too endogenous, too self-oriented, and unobjective. But when dealing with the incredible layerings of food, place, history, society, development, migration, biodiversity, emotions, war, cuisine, markets, oral narrative, elections, currencies, and dozens of other agencies, what stories are we really entitled to tell, other than our own?

So with a foodish acknowledgement to Latourian thinking, what follows is *not* a definitive portrait of Timorese food culture, but an attempt to tell of three days during which I bumped into Dili, interacting with its people and pasts and futures and food. There are some pictures, later, but always to be viewed within their framing and limits. None of them really tells much, but in each one a few more food things bumped up against me.

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I am still a bit stunned that I am actually arriving in Timor-Leste when the plane lands and does a 180 on the single airstrip that makes up the Dili airport. We taxi for a grand total of 30 seconds and park in front of two covered walkways—one for arrivals and one for departures. Both lead to the main building. It is just three and a half hours since we took off from Changi airport in Singapore, but I feel extremely far away from that oh-so-metropolitan place. My suitcase was deposited at the Easy Baggy left-luggage counter (just adjacent to a flash-from-my-past [Swensen's ice cream parlor](#)), along with my sense of the normal. I am now carrying my laptop case and a small cloth shopping bag containing a few clothes, my toothbrush, mosquito spray, and two kinds of sunblock. How did I get here?

Off the plane, down the left-hand walkway, pay my US\$30 visa fee, smile at immigration, X-ray my little luggage, and press through equally thick walls of humidity and taxi drivers. Then, beaming at me while finishing up a call on her mobile is Alva Lim, co-leader of Slow Food Dili. Ah, yes. *Alva* is how I got here.

Three months earlier, during the royal banquet at the [Slow Food Asia Pacific Festival](#) in Seoul, it was Alva who placed herself opposite me at the low table, as happy as I was to be sitting, reassuringly, on the floor. It was Alva who activated a lively conversation about the plenitude of mushroom varieties in front of us, and was ironic about the “male and female” rice with which we were eventually treated. And it was Alva who was the first person to chuckle at my accurate-but-odd UNISG title, *professor-at-large*. (I was glad someone had finally found it amusing.) We talked, but not for the entire time. Afterwards, though, and for the next couple of days of occasional encounters, I felt a growing sense of kinship with her. It was strong enough that when she Facebook messaged me a month later, saying “Hey, while you’re in Singapore, come to Dili—there are direct flights!”, I immediately thought it was a good idea.

Back in Dili, I shake off the remaining taxi drivers, and Alva leads me to her vehicle. She hands me a bottle of sun-heated water and reminds me to keep drinking. “I’m going to put you to work straight-away,” she says, “Hope you don’t mind.” As I learn to fiddle with the seatbelt receptacle to make the latch take hold, Alva navigates us slowly into the gentle parade of other cars, pedestrians, dogs, scooters, chickens, and potholes that make up the airport road. “Welcome to Timor!” We head towards her office at 35 kph to pick up some material for tomorrow night’s storytelling workshop and Slow Food gathering.

The road we are on was once called Banana Road because of the plantations that used to line either side. Now it is known as China Road. Where the banana trees grew, there is today a long line of Chinese-owned retailers: car parts, air-con shops, construction materials, housewares. This, as I will soon learn, is just one of the significant markers of the changes that Dili is going through. More obvious ones include the four Burger Kings that have arrived in town; less so are the subtle increases in fruit prices at the government-run market on the main road close to the waterfront.

At Alva’s office we pick up a stunning graphic visualization of Timor-Leste that is entirely made of seeds, beans, roots, flowers, and other plant parts. She tells me that it is the outcome of a collaborative exercise that her NGO organized, which brought together farmers, development workers, Timorese activists, and researchers. As the group talked about the extensive agro-biodiversity of Timor, they made a

map of the country using the food of each place to define borders and topography. I am awestruck to see the artifact, a kind of document of doing-and-knowing, but even more excited to think about those people who now embody the experience of having made it.

Having carefully navigated the visualization-sculpture past the office's double doors, in and out of the building's mirrored elevator, and into Alva's vehicle (pausing to let a sudden cloudburst wear itself out), we are off again. Alva wants to introduce me to Ego (Eugenio) Lemos, a Timorese musician, ecologist, education consultant, and food activist. He can't make it to the storytelling event tomorrow, but he has many stories to tell.

At the fluorescent-lit space of [Permatil](#), a permaculture NGO founded by Ego, I meet Herminia de Jesus Pinto, who will be translating during workshop tomorrow night. I suddenly realize that I hadn't thought about language here—why *would* I have expected the participants speak English and not Tetun or Portuguese? Oh, right: anglophone privilege, that's why.

After a few minutes, Ego joins us and we have an utterly great cup of Timorese coffee. (It has a flavor I have no desire or ability to describe. It's just *really, really good*.) Ego has recently been at a Ministry of Education meeting, and tells us about the new curriculum he has managed to get into the system—all focused on food. Local food. Growing and eating and loving local food. Food! Like so many colonized, occupied, warred-over, and 'developing' nations, there is huge gastronomic complexity here, including the increasing success of things like fast food and "super mee" (instant cup noodles). Ego is laboring to retain the rich agricultural and culinary diversity of Timor, and to turn it back into a source of local pride. His work is also about supporting human rights, gender equality, resistance to transnationals, and environmental health.

During the Indonesian occupation, Ego tells us, many of those who fought in the resistance lived for years in the jungle, surviving on whatever they could eat. This "hero food" includes things that didn't need cooking (you can't show your position with a plume of smoke), or that could be eaten on the go. But it also included whatever would keep you from starving to death. Small wild animals were on the list. So were the intensely hot local chiles. Ego remembers eating handfuls of them as a boy. They burned going in and going out, but they were food.

We look at a new booklet, written in Tetun, that has been produced to teach kids about permaculture. It is beautifully illustrated. It is beautifully conceived. It makes me want to stay here and become a youth permaculturist. We talk about food and philosophy, as well as the impossible history and possible futures of Timor. Ego is a huge celebrity here, both for his music and the energy he has poured into teaching and inspiring change. In contradiction to his nickname, he is incredibly giving—no trace of egotism.

Later, we go and have a coconut by the ocean, and Ego agrees to film a short intro video for the storytelling evening. He wanted to be there, but can't make it. Alva and her husband, Mark Notaras, however, want his presence to be felt by the participants. Ego's profile in Timor and his endorsement will go a long way to helping people understand the importance of telling food stories. As I hold my phone and try to block the wind from blasting the microphone, Ego welcomes the workshop participants in both English and Tetun. I feel naïve and glad and humble.

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The rain is now bucketing down, so loudly that I cannot hear what my dinner companions are saying. At a latitude of about 8.5°S, Dili is decidedly tropical. It has apparently been a strangely dry rainy season, however, although the last few days have been characterized by evening torrents like this. It is a fantastic reminder of the puniness of humanity.

Around the table are Alva and Mark and their friend Gobie Rajalingam (with whom I am staying), as well as Laura Ogden and Bernardo Ribeiro de Almeida, two anthropologists doing research here. We are at [L'Aubergine](#), the restaurant of Timorese chef Cesar Lourdes. Cesar keeps coming out with dish after dish and story after story. Cesar is also a Slow Food Dili founder, and has been part of Timor's complicated recent history, and is now helping shape part of its food future. At the present moment, however, all I can think about is the food. It is *so good*. One perfect steamed potato, followed by bean and corn soup, perfect fish with diced tomatoes and greens, and poached peaches topped with sago palm flour crumble.

Everything is intensely local, needless to say, but the clumsy words I have to describe it tend to deny that. The potato, the peach, the corn, the greens, the fish—they all need different, more wonderful naming to communicate how unfamiliar and meaningful they are to me. I recognize them on the plate, but in my mouth they just don't seem to align with the language I know. Is that what very situated food tastes like?

Later, we sit on cushions on Gobie's floor under the gentle hum of aircon and fans, and he makes us various evening drinks. Something bitey for Mark, a quieter libation for Alva, and for me, the visitor...? Hmm. Gobie suggests one of his mini-barrel-aged beverages. If a Manhattan is a square, he says, an aged Manhattan is a circle. I taste his offering, and quietly agree with him. The barman is always right, whatever your capacities for synesthesia might be.

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In the morning, Alva comes over from next door with yogurt, honey, granola, and coffee. We sit on Gobie's veranda (he has had to go to work already...) and talk and eat. The conversation wanders around: UNISG, Slow Food, studying food versus 'doing' food, studying food AND doing food, activism, Timor, and the crocodiles that have recently shown up in the water directly in front of where we are sitting.

At a certain moment in this oh-so-gentle start to the day, we both realize how late it is. There is much to do to get ready for tonight's storytelling workshop and Slow Food gathering. Back in Alva's car, I sip now-hot bottled water. The rear seats and trunk are filled with a massive number of bags and boards and boxes: all the foodish booty gathered from [a visit to the Taibessi market with Ego](#). (It was a slow visit through the massive space—every other vendor wanted to chat with him and shake his hand.)

We navigate our very gradual way through the labyrinthine streets of Dili, once again traveling at about 35 kph. Lunatic scooter drivers zoom towards us in the wrong lane, while pedestrians seem oblivious to the large machines careening towards them.

Alva explains the driving weirdnesses: If you are in an accident and you were driving a car, you are morally and financially responsible, whether or not it was your fault. If you are a *malai* (a foreigner), you are doubly sunk. Insurance, police, and witnesses don't matter. You just pay up. In any case, the lack of speed is beneficial in this glaring, humid place. I feel like I am seeing—sensing—things in greater detail. It is one of the reasons that my phone remains in my knapsack: I cannot bring myself to view Dili as a series of photographs. Yesterday at the market, I did try to 'capture' things in images. But despite the sequence of images I recorded, I didn't see things better. Instead I started realizing how futile it was. Today, it is more important just to be present to everything, so I leave it undigitized.

At the strikingly colonial Aru Café, we unload the car and bring our storytelling supplies upstairs to the space above the dining room. It is paneled in dark wood, quiet, a little hot. There are two areas, one right at the top of the main stairs, and one up a few more steps, open to the first space but a little more intimate. There was apparently a meeting there recently: tables have been arranged in a large rectangle. Three giant mirrors sit in the lower area, along with a poster for a tango class. This is a very polyvalent space.

As we load in the Timor-Leste food map, the giant Slow Food Dili 'poster' made of red and white and black soda bottle screw tops, and the various bags of fruits and décor, negotiations take place about moving the tables and chairs. There is enthusiasm to leave them where they are, but only on the part of Aru's staff. Alva's will wins out, and we move the furniture into a more accommodating arrangement. The turn-on time for the air-conditioning is also negotiated: a couple of hours in advance of the workshop time.

About the workshop, Alva says... *Let's be careful with our expectations*. She warns me that people might be a bit shy, that there's the language issue, that sometimes things start a bit late. (Welcome to Dili!) All this is fine with me: I'm here to catalyze, or participate, or lead, or learn. My storytelling talk can take 20 minutes or an hour and a half.

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Now we are driving to one more meeting, this time lunch with Florentino Sarmiento of [Timor Aid](#). He also can't make it to the gathering tonight, but is a great food fellow and someone I should meet. He has stories about distilling *tua sabu* (palm wine), using bamboo for food storage, and cooking *maek* (elephant foot

yam) and *koto moruk* (bitter beans). Mark is on the iPhone speaker, recommending what wine to pick up for tonight. Scooters whiz by. I sip my water. A moment later, Alva yanks the steering wheel to the left and parks under a tree. Her eyebrows are seriously furrowed and there are strange lights on the dashboard. The car is unhappy.

After a few phone calls, we lock up the car and leave it where it is. The lunch meeting with Florentino has been cancelled, a friend of a friend has been put on hold in case we need a ride, Mark has been alerted, and a message has been left with the backup mechanics. (The usual fix-it people are on holiday, it seems.) While we wait, Alva and I walk to a beachside set-up where food is being served. Flies buzz around, loud international pop music plays on a neon sound system, and the smells are outstanding. Despite the car troubles, we are relatively content to be here.

We order a plate of food each, along with avocado juice to drink. We sit at a table that has just opened up. All the other eaters, save two or three, are young women in business clothes—skirts, blouses, hose, heels. Much care for hair and makeup. I feel like a beach bum in my sandals and loose linen shirt.

There is soup and rice, spiced fish and *budu* (fermented tomato-chile-mint sauce), salad and sautéed eggplant. It is hot. Wonderful food. Alva laughs at the cheesy music and explains that this is quite new. Bootleg CDs are the way that such songs have arrived in Timor, but no one really knows the names or celeb-stories of the current stars. While the tunes are now here, the rest of the pop package is not, which makes it feel much more listenable.

Apologizing, Alva tells me to enjoy my food and dashes back to the car to meet the mechanic. Suddenly, finally, I feel pleasantly displaced and completely powerless to fix things, to control what happens, or to make a plan B. I do enjoy my food. I wave flies off of Alva's plate. I think about very little.

Two huge ice-cream parlor glasses arrive from the food counter window. They are filled with a thick green liquid that is striated with dark brown lines. A straw pokes up out of each glass. I detect the aroma of Hershey's. Indeed, it is our "avocado juice." The flesh of the fruit has been blended with water and poured into the glasses intermittently with squirts of chocolate syrup. I laugh, realizing what I am about to drink. I slurp up a glug through the straw, and delight in my new favorite drink. I cover Alva's with a napkin—apparently the flies find it equally delicious. When she eventually comes back to the table, she apologizes, saying that she meant to ask for it without the chocolate, but I demur: it is perfect as is. Without garlic, cumin, cilantro, lime, and salt, the avocado purée is hardly guacamole. It is fruity and thick—just like a banana frappé, or a green smoothie. Why not? Alva says that the first time she had avocado in a salad, she was horrified—it had always seemed so un-vegetable-like to her when she was young....

Amazingly, the car is going to be fine. Within 30 minutes (including one hilariously low-rider, two-dollar, seatbelt-free taxi ride), we have retrieved the vehicle from the garage. We had to walk a hundred meters or so along an open-air canal (sewer?) to get there, which was both normal and entirely outside my realm of experience. It cost \$35 for the part.

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It is now 4:30 pm and we are back at Aru Café. I had a semi-worthwhile shower and a five-minute lie-down at Gobie's. I also had to download the Ego video, trying first via bluetooth (failed), then with wifi (non-available), and finally using a USB cable. This resulted in success, but slowly, requiring 55 minutes and the careful placement of an open laptop, phone, and cable inside my nylon knapsack.

Sheets and mats have been arranged in the storytelling area—the upper area above the restaurant. A *luhu* (a woven straw basket) is placed at the speaker's position. A spread of food is arranged on the tables in the lower area: corn and beans, spicy croquettes, turmeric and lemongrass tea, fancy cookies, stewed pumpkin, Timorese honey, and a few other things that I don't recognize. Another table holds all the stunning market produce: breadfruit and three kinds of avocado (brown-red, green, and gooseneck—no Hershey's this time); sorghum and millet; two varieties of passionfruit; beans and greens and chiles; peaches, tamarind, cinnamon; bitter melons and Timorese cucumbers.

People gradually wander in, and at around 5:15 (...5:25 ...5:30!) we settle in to the workshop phase. A halting, laughing, rhythmic, patient, silly, and serious discussion ensues. I invoke the important

role that storytelling has in preserving and enacting culture, in claiming power back from the ‘official’ writers of history, in owning one’s identity, in teaching and learning, and in celebrating the intensely heterogeneous experience of making, sharing, and eating food. I tell a scrap of story about my grandfather’s *liptauer*, a Hungarian spread made of cream cheese, margarine, onion, anchovy, paprika, and cayenne. I talk about helping him make it when I was eight years old, standing eye-level at the kitchen counter in their Manchester, New Hampshire ranch house. I tell of putting it in a crock in the refrigerator, and sneaking some when no one is looking. Many of the words (and ideas) simply do not translate into Tetun, including the cultural significance that *liptauer* holds for me as a second-generation Jewish immigrant to North America. Yet much of the pleasure that the story gives me *does* seem to come across, including the silly-sweet memory of childhood indulgence and grandparental love. (Later, when I use a Woody Allen monologue to demonstrate the connections between rhythm and memory in oral narrative, a lot less is understood.) More people start arriving for the evening gathering, and so I wrap up. Time for listening.

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Afterwards, it seemingly takes forever to get out of the Aru parking lot. First, no one really wanted to leave after the last narrative wrapped up. Then, there was all that food to be eaten. And now, here, we linger a little longer. The evening air, if not cool, is more temperate than during the day, and there is a gorgeous moon glowing.

There were of course many stories told—from Cesar’s tearful memories of the Dili that was, to the clever toxins that plants produce, to a daughter’s jealously guarded snacks. Mark did a goofy imitation of his feeding-focused aunt, and Gobie gave a moving reflection about his own cyclical food journey(s). There were many treats eaten, and more informal exchanges, one-on-one. There was a strong feeling of continuity between the past from which the stories were drawn, the present in which they were shared, and the future *Luhu Nights* that might be activated. There was, ultimately, a sense of having done something *very good* that evening. We had honored each other and ourselves—the community of people who were there, both from Dili and further afield.

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After a deep and much-valued sleep, the next morning dawned bright. Alva went to a meeting with her *TEDx Dili* committee, and Mark showed up around 9:00 am to take me off for breakfast on the beach. Gobie had to pack for a trip to Bangkok, where he was going for a conference and to meet his partner.

I slather myself in sunblock and anti-mosquito spray, borrow a floppy hat from Gobie, and slap on a few citronella patches for good measure. The skin behind my ears has gone dry and is starting to peel—a chemical burn from the bug spray? I am convinced that, among the bites I have received so far, one of them will leave me with either dengue or malaria. Anxiety and the tropics are not a good mix.

Mark and I wander off down the beach, vaguely in the direction of the giant Cristo Rei statue perched on a small cliff east of Dili. Mark steers us clear of a garbage fire emanating fumes of burning plastic and rubber. I ask about the crocodiles that have been spotted recently. The sun pounds my protected head and bare legs, and I feel very white. We stop at a beachside restaurant with good breakfasts and order two plates of eggs benedict from the man at the bar. The menu also offers full British fry-ups, muesli and fruit, and muffins, among other international items.

Settling into a couple of chairs under some tree shade on the beach, Mark and I stare quietly out to see. Eventually, the mix of scenery, ex-pats, trash, dogs, and local fruit sellers triggers us into conversation. As much of the talk over the last couple of days has been, it wanders among privilege and power, *being of a place* versus trying to change it, feeling like an outsider, feeling belonging, and all the stuff in between. Mark seems to have a pretty clear-eyed perspective on himself and his role here in Timor, largely because he knows that his perspective really isn’t all that clear.

Later, Alva joins us, her meeting having wrapped up. She has some tasty Portuguese meat pastries with her, which she shares. When the fruit seller comes around again, she buys three plastic bagsful of spotty passionfruit from him, to the protests of her husband. After partially rinsing three of them with

bottled water, she cracks them open and hands two halves to Mark and me. The pulpy, slippery seeds inside are very tart and aromatic. Good, so good, but my outsider anxiousness about eating unsanitized fruit lingers. I tell my inner voice to just shut up.

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As all things do when one has a plane ticket, the ease of the day has transformed into urgency—albeit of a distinctly Timorese variety. We are back from the beach and loading up the car in order to get to the airport a full two hours early. Despite its diminutive size, Aeroporto Nicolau Lobato recommends checking in substantially in advance of one's departure time. Gobie's larger suitcase sits next to my shopping bag in the trunk, and the four of us pile into the car. He and I will be on the same flight back to Singapore (there are only three flights a week on this route, I have discovered...)

But first a stop at Pateo, the Portuguese grocery store, to buy some Timorese products for mutual friends in Thailand. Then a pit stop at the [Hummingfish Foundation](#), where Emeliano Benevides (one of last night's jovial storytellers) greets us with bags of Maubere Mountain Coffee, and where Alva checks on her acidifying coffee-berry vinegar. (I get to taste a spoonful—another intense, undescribable flavor...) Finally, to the airport. We pass our bags through an X-ray machine that looks like it is made of Tinker-toy, pay the airport exit fee (US\$10), and fill out customs documents. I goggle at the price of duty-free liquor: a liter of vodka costs fifteen bucks here; at a Singapore 7-Eleven, I saw a bottle a third the size for seventy-eight Singaporean dollars. (The marvels of global trade.) The four of us gather for a final coffee, take a group selfie under the Virgin Mary's outstretched and no-doubt loving arms, and then hover for the farewell.

None of us can fully figure out what happened or what to say. It has been a pretty remarkable three days. Who is to be thanked? I insist that it isn't me. They do the same. We are just grateful, all around. Someday and somewhere, we hope it will happen again.

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Upon arrival at Changi, Gobie heads for his connecting flight and conference. I retrieve my left luggage and take a cab to my new AirBnB. A week of talks, a workshop, and multiple performances ensue in Singapore. People ask me what it was like in Timor, and I can't really express much. Still processing it, I say.

The residues of those three days linger in me. I wonder how the others are doing. Facebook, of course, eventually reveals some clues. Various images pop up on the storytelling evening event page, and then Alva's [TEDx posts](#) start appearing. I get a friend request from Gobie two weeks later, and he shares some images from his time in Thailand, where he spontaneously helped out in a friend's restaurant kitchen one night. A few days later, Laura confirms that she'll send me 1.5 gigabytes of rough-cut storytelling videos.

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I am now back in Montreal. It's comfortably below zero and there's snow on the ground. No mosquitoes. I dress in layers (mostly black). I'm back to eating pumpernickel bread with peanut butter and miso for my mid-morning snack. (It goes really well with the Maubere coffee from Emeliano.) I wonder if Québec has an equivalent of hero food. I want to try making budu. I think about aging some Manhattans in a little oak barrel and seeing what happens. I want to tell more stories, and I realize that I already am. I rededicate myself to figuring out how to Instagram usefully about eco-gastronomy, and will try it out in [Edinburgh](#) and Wrocław and Copenhagen and Oslo and Ås and Dublin. I think, though, that I'll leave the photos from Dili unfiltered.

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