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Gastronomy, Gastronomía, Gastro-anomie? Food Studies and the G-Word

The long-standing baggage of the word continues to dog us, we food scholars who choose to call our subject “gastronomy” rather than “food studies.” From outside of the field, and regardless of where we are (Pollenzo, Montreal, Mexico City), we are often confronted with dubious looks, a perceived lack of credibility, and perpetual misunderstandings: How do you do a PhD in cooking? There’s a master degree in that? You can’t apply to a graduate program with a degree in gastronomy—you’re a chef!

So it was with great pleasure (and solace) that I sat down recently with several food academics from Mexico City. It was December 11, the last night of my week in Mexico for the [Eco-Gastronomy Project roundtable](#) on food, ethics, and entrepreneurship. In the quiet back garden of the [Centro Cultural Elena Garro](#), Hilda Irene Cota Guzmán, Julieta Flores Jurado, and Mariana Coria López talked with me about the state of the state of food scholarship in Mexico, including the challenges they face as foodists and the directions in which they see the field going. And, perhaps, the slowly growing legitimacy in calling what we do gastronomy.

Hilda, the senior scholar among us, has been teaching in [the gastronomy program at l’Universidad del Claustro de Sor Juana](#) for nearly twenty years. While her interests include the cultural aspects of food, she initially entered academia through political sociology. An encounter with the now-defunct Comisión Nacional de Alimentación (National Food Commission) opened her eyes to the political implications of food and food access, as well as the role that food policy does (and does not) play in mitigating hunger. Her PhD at [l’Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México](#) (UNAM) was the first ever in the country on food security, comprising an analysis of twenty years of federal programs for food policy in Mexico. Since teaching at El Claustro, she has continued to work and teach in the area, yet complements it with courses in history and culture, as well as work for [Slow Food México’s Ark of Taste project](#).

Both Julieta and Mariana are currently graduate students at UNAM, and each in her own way has encountered institutional challenges to their academic food explorations. Julieta, a master student in literature, also teaches at UNAM. Like Hilda, her first contact with food study came somewhat accidentally. Her licenciatura (undergraduate degree) was in English Literature, and because her program made it possible to examine content that was hitherto considered unworthy of literary criticism—cultural material such as graphic novels, mainstream films, videogames, and TV programs—she opted for a rather more experi-

mental research subject. Julieta chose to write about the role of food in crime novels, and since then has discovered the vast range of work being done on food and literature. Her current project looks at a lineage of British food writers that includes Elizabeth David, Claudia Roden, and Diana Henry—specifically, the literary themes that thread through their cookbooks. Strikingly, despite that such an approach is relatively common in literature and food studies departments elsewhere, Julieta still sometimes faces doubtful looks and confused colleagues. While her own department is open to her approach, systemic challenges remain: lack of food-specific resources, a limited community of peers, and generalized resistance to what gastronomy is and can be. Nonetheless, determination is Julieta's forte: having presented at the [ASFS/AHFVS conference](#) in Pittsburgh last summer, she is now interested in co-organizing an Oxford-like symposium on food in Mexico, and perhaps editing a collection of essays merging food and gender studies.

For her part, Mariana is one of that marvellous generation of scholars who is 'native-born' to gastronomy. Having studied with Hilda Cota at El Claustro, she grew up as an academic with a built-in sensibility about the entanglements of food. Her interests ranged from literature to anthropology, history to cooking. However, influenced by UNAM's thought-leader in food anthropology, [Dr. Luis Alberto Vargas Guadarrama](#), she eventually settled into a cultural-historical approach for her PhD, which suited her love of archival research. Importantly, it also allows her to bridge a gap in the ways that historians treat food, specifically the socio-cultural heritage and symbolic value of food itself. Like the other two women, Mariana also teaches (in dietetics and nutrition at El Claustro). This brought her to realize that many students would benefit from a broader understanding of the interconnections within food. Mariana notes that budding nutritionists often focus on food as a "mass of data," rather than as a socio-cultural web of relations, with histories and futures, as well as political and environmental impacts.

Personally, I felt a keen sense of alignment between my own trajectory in gastronomy and the paths of these three women. Having studied chemical physics and art in my early career—and swearing off working in food after a one-year stint as a caterer—I worked for many years in communications, media, and consulting. I only came (back) to gastronomy through chance—I heard about UNISG on the radio. Like Julieta, I was delighted to find a space that was welcoming to my broad interests in and about food. As in Mariana's case, I was struck by the interconnectedness of foodish things, and the issues that can arise when food is studied within distinct (and often self-isolating) disciplines. Hilda and I also share several parallels, I discovered, including a fierce defence of the term gastronomy. For both of us, the G-word seems to best communicate the ways in which food is political-and-poetic, cultural-and-environmental, personal-and-theoretical. Beyond all these individual similarities, however, I felt cheered to know them as a group: a cluster of like-minded food scholars, determined to make a difference in their own careers, but also to contribute to a future of food study that can be more open to more people.

As our conversation progressed towards this theme—the future opportunities and challenges for gastronomy—other orbital lines spun out into the distance, often in many directions. Hilda seemed most pessimistic about the possibilities for Mexican food studies. A culture of potential exists, yet she senses a resistance to innovation, perhaps because of the all-too-common issues that haunt many academic communities. A limited number of research centers focused on food, combined with sometimes insular practices and cronyism, can be discouraging to new scholars or those not already part of established networks. Yet this may also trigger opportunities, such as work that addresses hybrids of scholarship and entrepreneurship.

Julieta, too, senses potential, although for her it means anchoring food studies to the legitimacy-making structures of universities. While a few faculties exist, only one (to her knowledge) is within a public university, [Tourism and Gastronomy at l'Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México](#). It is a start, and

combined with El Claustro's bachelor program, the seeds of change are being sown. Still, as [my own re-examination of gastronomy](#) suggested, there is more work to be done on the fundamentals that undergird our systems of knowledge. Mariana feels that this is a key next step for food scholarship (in both Mexico and elsewhere): to critically address the structures of symbolic meaning with which we create our realities. Food was long-ignored by academia, and now that it is emerging as a key area of study, perhaps we need new frameworks that accommodate some of the reasons for which food historically went unregarded. Does gastronomy rattle the foundations of academic work, scientific paradigms, and anthropocentrism? It certainly seems to, as witnessed by we four, among many others who study food.

What are the key issues, the danger points, or opportunities, in these gastronomes minds? For Hilda, they include seeking innovative and interdisciplinary (as well as multidisciplinary) ways of studying food, and to expand the field continuously. At the same time, reflexivity is necessary—to avoid any whiff of ethnocentrism or linear evaluations of the 'other' (that is, the "my culture is better than yours" paradigm). For Julieta, the key seems to be diversity: more programs, more attention to food, more access for young scholars. She is cheered by the proliferation of consumer media about food, like [Hoja Santa](#) and [Animal Gourmet](#), and by efforts to preserve heritage corn and chocolate varieties, as well as movement in the worlds of artisan beer, wine, and mezcal. Julieta also feels that teaching and being visible to the next generation of food scholars is critical: "I wish we could show more young people who are interested in food that this is a legitimate interest that could open many opportunities for them." Mariana, like all of us, says that perseverance is key. Making change is slow—to the way researchers understand the word gastronomy, to the professional motivations of students, to the patience people have for complex ideas about food. We need to hunker down, do our work, make noise about it, and be patient.

As the four of us stood up to leave, hope reigned for me, even though the conversation had raised many more questions about food studies in Mexico. We continued chatting about food more generally, and drifted towards the lively-yet-peaceful main square of [Coyoacán](#), where we were going to have dinner at [Los Danzantes](#), a lip-smacking spot chosen by Julieta. Certainly hope, innovation, and more questions seemed fitting, given the locale. Just a few blocks from where we had sat and talked lies Frida Kahlo's former residence, now the [Museo Frida Kahlo](#). It was an apt reminder of the power of brilliant, creative, and paradigm-shifting women. Yeah, there was a man there too—i.e., me, (like Diego maybe?)—but I think it's the Hildas and Julietas and Marianas of the food world who will shake things up the most. We'll have to wait and see, as we keep stirring the pot.

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