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INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
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/ Scotland /

Edinburgh

Scotland's Foodscape

To paraphrase the American food writer, M.F.K. Fisher...

People ask me: Why do you talk about food, and theorize about eating and drinking? Why don't you make food, and struggle for justice and labeling standards and food security, the way others do?

Like Fisher, I sometimes feel accused, as if the people asking think that I am a bit too esoteric and abstract, ungrounded in the 'realities' of food. (She herself said that others seemed to find her 'gross and unfaithful' to her craft of writing—admittedly, a rather rougher perception than what I have experienced.) Also like Fisher, my answer is that the abstract and the concrete are all one within food—the thinking and the making, the talking and the feeling, the doing and the eating.

In late April, a two-day symposium took place at Summerhall in Edinburgh, a collaboration between the Eco-Gastronomy Project and Queen Margaret University's master program in gastronomy. Scotland's Foodscape, as we named it, was designed as an occasion to demonstrate the thinking-doing-feeling of food, while eating, drinking, and exploring the distinctiveness of food and foodways in the Scottish context.

It was a chock-a-block two days. There were presentations on the politics of foraging, native foodways, the construction of identity and stereotypes, and how Jews in Scotland put kosher laws into practice. There were workshops on bread making and Soylent tasting, beremeal producing and Mars Bars frying, farming ideating and cookery teaching. And there was food aplenty, with tastings (insects, gin, coffee, salmon, oatcakes), drinkings (beer, wine, more gin), and eatings (snacks, lunches, a banquet).

A debate on the Brexit took place, and what it would mean for Scottish food. A film on crofting was shown, showing those who are newly practicing an old way of cooperative farming. A cheesemaking demonstration was given, and the fresh curd was served up later that day. Two visitors from Poland used local ingredients and foraged branches and leaves to give Scots a taste of their own, albeit with an outsiders' perspective.

We kicked off the symposium with a panel discussion that brought together a freelance writer, a scallop fisherman, a restaurateur-activist, and an academic. While they sat on stage answering questions about foodscapes, a foodscape sat on stage asking questions about how making and talking come together. A master butcher cut up a hogget; a baker kneaded bread dough; a cook prepped vegetables. The food-making—explicitly demonstrating the ingredients and efforts that often remain hidden at events like this—took equal place next to the food-thinking. Later, many of the symposium participants said how powerful it was to witness these multiple forms of food expertise, all manifesting themselves side-by-side.

Around midday, I was asked by the cheesemaker—in good faith and very unaccusingly—why I felt it was necessary to theorize about food. Why was I practicing my food work in such an academic way?

I paused, recalling M.F.K. Fisher's words but keeping my defensiveness in check. I answered that it was because food hasn't been theorized enough, and that it is a necessary part of making change and preserving what is good.

We theorize about politics and violence, human psychology and subatomic particles, historical events and social relations. Why not food, food systems, food art, food culture? These things have gone under-theorized over the history of human thinking, and although endless theorization (of anything) may not be justified, theory helps practices evolve, just as practice builds more meaningful theories. When multiple food theories are brought together with multiple food practices, all become stronger. Together, they reveal things about the other—the way textbooks and storytelling do, or maps and walking tours, or recipes and cooking. Together, they form more of a whole thing—just as Fisher knew about power, and security, and love... and food and hunger and satisfaction.

By the end of the second day, we had put many things in ourselves: hogget stew and pickled vegetables and rhubarb junket, foraged cocktails and local beer, cured lard with dried ants, scallop sushi, deep-fried tea cakes, and on and on. Into those same selves, we had also put narratives both old and new, challenges to social institutions and our own preconceptions, inspiring methodologies, depressing disputes, and potential partnership proposals. Where and when had food theory and food practice become one? Through our participation with them, in our acceptance of their interdependence. But also in our relationships with each other and with the space where we came together, and when our internal, personal ecologies met up with our external, universal ones.

The program for the Scotland's Foodscape symposium can be found at unisg.it/ecogastronomy, showing what we the organizers projected would take place. It includes descriptions and bios and contact information. A Facebook page ([#Scotland'sFoodscape](https://www.facebook.com/Scotland'sFoodscape)) tells another tale, in various real-time postings.

[A Storify narrative tells a different version of what happened](#), as related through social media's texts and images. An archive of the material shared by presenters and makers and talkers and doers is also available on the Eco-Gastronomy site, and will continue to grow over time. Yet for anyone looking at this material, flipping through the electronic documents, please remember: It all became one when we talked-thought-felt about food together. This is what participating in and with food food can bring, wherever, whenever, however.

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