

HANDMEAL

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Abstract

HANDMEAL

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A monograph on savory pastry, this book explores meat pies from a historical, art historical, and contemporary viewpoint. From Italy to the South Pacific, Bolivia to England, these linked essays examine the migration of pies and the cultural influences that have formed and changed them along the way. Part travelogue, part cookery book, this text follows in the food-steps of M.K. Fisher and Patience Grey.

# HANDMEAL

SILO THOMPSON

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Correspondence

For Address Only

POST OFFICE









# HANDMEAL

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SIOLO THOMPSON



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# PREFACE, POETICS, ARTIST STATEMENT, APOLOGIA

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“For far too long [food writing] has been the timid little sister of the writing world, afraid to raise its voice. Food writers were missionaries of the delicious, celebrating rural simplicity - usually in other countries - or luxuriating in the extravagance of urban fare. Sensual and sensuous, their tools were travel and nostalgia. ...But that was in another time, an era when America’s interest in food was so minimal that serious writers refused to choose it as a serious subject. It was, they thought, beneath them.”

In her introduction to *The Best American Food Writing* anthology, 2018, Ruth Reichl makes a case for the existence and importance of food writing while also acknowledging its bottom-shelf status in the pantheon of the arts. More telling than her words perhaps, is the mere fact that 2018 was the first time food writing was included in the *Best of American Writing*, an annually-published collection of books, by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. For comparison, consider that sports writing has been included since 1991 and mystery writing since 1997. Even comics, an art form that has only recently been considered as more than low-brow entertainment, has had a place in the series since 2006.

Food writing dwells unequivocally in the realm of the body. In our Cartesian world it is relegated to a category that is not ‘of the mind’. Erotica and sports writing, to cite two examples that are also preoccupied with the body, escape from this conundrum because they are more readily metaphorical. Questions of

identity, independence, and coming of age can be developed through the lens of the libidinal. The struggle of man-over-matter, the pursuit of greatness, the expunging of weakness can be told through baseball, or written about as a memoir on running. When food is a metaphor it escapes its low-brow designation, it can become symbolic of time, nostalgia, and identity ala Proust. However, most food writing is not striving for symbolism, nor is is terribly interested in struggle. It is an un-puritanical literature of abandonment and immersion, of pleasure for pleasure's sake. And even food writing that is, for example, preoccupied with memory and identity, it is still mostly about the creation and consumption of delicious things. It is a celebration - of oven hot crusty bread, luscious double-cream french camembert, full bodied red wine redolent of summer berries and black pepper. No matter how intellectual the prose, a book about cake tantalizes more than it edifies.

There is also the 'how to' aspect of food writing that places it in the utilitarian rather than literary realm. Athletic memoirs and erotic works of fiction are seldom didactic, while most food writing will include some manner of instruction, even when the work is not a recipe book per se. People that read about food are, generally speaking, interested in making food. As contemporary food writing moves forward, we are seeing more works that blend the utilitarian and the literary. A sub-genre of literary food writing has of late sprung up. *Cabinet Magazine*, for example, hosts a column called *Ingestion*, "that explores food within a framework informed by aesthetics, history, and philosophy". The publication *Gastronomica*, "represents the space where the breadth of academic scholarship on food cultures meets a public that is increasingly interested in questions of food, gastronomy, and the culinary arts." A number of books have been published in recent years that toe the literary/culinary line. *The Joyce of*

*Cooking*, for example, in which Alison Armstrong explores the food and drink of James Joyce's Dublin (interestingly, this book is listed in History & Criticism instead of Cookbooks, on Amazon). In another example, *Cooking With the Muse*, Myra Kornfeld pairs essays and famous quotations with recipes and food photography. M.K. Fisher, Patience Gray, and more recently Janette Winterson are writers who bring (or brought) their preoccupation with food to the proverbial table and artfully explore the ways in which food can be both poetic and political. On the other hand, the internet era has given rise to the 'personal essay recipe,' in which one must wade through lengthy exposition before being given basic instructions. Who hasn't at some point gone looking for a biscuit recipe only to spend twenty minutes reading about someone's grandmother? All that to say, the historically utilitarian spirit of food writing accounts, in part, for its exclusion from the realm of literature.

To reference, as I have, the names of some of our finest food writers - M.K. Fisher, Patience Gray, Jeanette Winterson - is to introduce another of the hurdles that food writing faces: the overwhelmingly female identity of its greatest contributors. Angela Carter spoke to this when writing about Patience Gray for the London Review of Books,

"For these writers... cookery is what the open road was to Cobbett or the natural history of Selbourne to Gilbert White. There is, however, a difference: these are women to whom food is not an end in itself but a way of opening up the world. And indeed, they are all women: this is, at the highest level, a female form."

Food writing has been marginalized by the patriarchy along with other art forms that have been classified as inherently female or domestic.

This is a monograph about savory pies. Should I have started with that sentence? Perhaps. Or maybe I should tell you the reasons why I wrote about

about pie. Maybe I should explain that my preoccupation with food stems from a childhood of privation or that the culinary was where I first discovered myself as an artist. The thing about food writing is that it provides, and many times insists, on the development and inclusion of personal identity. It is difficult to speak about the foods we love without also telling the story of why we love them, how they came to be familiar to us etc.. In food, our preferences tell our story, describe our domestic culture, socio-economic past and present, our travels and relationships, our cultural infatuations. Food is a gateway to knowledge, about ourselves and others. It is a way to tell stories and to 'hear' the stories of others. If I were writing a formal apology for food writing, I would tell you that it is a more-than-ever relevant art form because it has the ability to combat xenophobia, it welcomes 'otherness' and seeks to expand and understand the world. But I have not written an apology for food writing, I wrote a book about pie. I traveled to England during national pie week in the pursuit of a perfect steak and ale pie. In Italy I chased down a chard and onion confection I first discovered in a painting. I traveled to Australia and New Zealand to try this year's national award winning pies. In Bolivia I had my Proust madeleine moment with a spicy meat pastry I loved as a child and have spent years trying to recreate.

Why pie? Why not bread, or soup, or cookies? Why not the history of salad greens or the American citrus industry? All of these are worthy topics for a culinary monograph but none of them are as dear to me as pie. A savory pie is a perfect thing. It is a literal encapsulation of the culture from whence it comes and also of the place to which it has travelled. The pies of the pacific commonwealth, for example, bring together British tradition and indigenous ingredients. The classic fish and potato pies of English settlers became mutton bird and kumara, when they were produced in the hard scrabble sealing posts of costal Australia.

In sheep stations in northern New Zealand, the pies were filled with hogget and wild onion. In Fiji and Samoa, pie liquid is thickened with starchy cooking bananas while the Tourtiere of Quebec features wild game and a potato starch gravy. A pie is a postcard, a culinary missive in a dough envelope. A pie can be a poem, a story, a portrait. Salad greens just don't have that kind of mystique.

In this book you will find a series of essays about pie. I have also included illustrations of some of the pies I encountered while traveling. These little paintings were done on Cason 90lbs, cold pressed paper with Windsor and Newton professional artist series watercolors, over graphite. I chose to include illustrations because drawing and painting is an essential part of my artistic practice but I felt it was appropriate to include these visual musings as illustration and photography are also intrinsic parts of the food writing cannon. I love illustrations and illustrated books and as Angela Carter wrote,

“It is a glorious thing about the cookery book that it is the last genre of books for grown-ups to carry illustrations.”

I chose Avenir Next as the font for these pages. The sans-serif, rounded shape of these letters reminded me of the compact, no-fuss lines of a well baked hand pie. The font, created by the Swiss designer Adrien Frutiger, is both modern and historical. The name, *Avenir*, is french for “future,” while the design is heavily reminiscent of art deco elements. Past and future in one neat little package - much like a pie.

For the title of this work I settled on a single word: *Handmeal*. The accuracy of this word appealed to me, each of the pies in this book are single serve and for the most part, portable. It describes the thing in a straightforward manner. *Handmeal* is a humble, hardworking word. It intones an atmosphere of laboring bodies, of people working with their hands. Of meals not eaten with a knife and

fork. After all, the history of savory pie is a working history. Italian pastries sustained dockworkers who had no time for a leisurely repast between loading and unloading ships. English pies fed miners, the thick crust 'handles' discarded to keep the workers from ingesting the arsenic and lead that coated their hands. In New Zealand and Australia today, tens of thousands of pies are purchased from petrol stations every month, to be consumed by long haul truck drivers and others traveling for work. These are just a few of the things I learned about savory pastries as my studies took me to various countries, bakeries, restaurants, kitchens, grocery stores, and libraries. As utilitarian as pie can be and as succinct the title, *Handmeal*, is, there is also some poetry to this word. Handmeal/handmaiden/helpmate - a thing that brings succor and sustenance. It implies immediacy - a meal in the hand rather than one that is in the future, off in a kitchen somewhere or dwelling in the realm of memory. *Handmeal* - the word itself is rather like a pie, a stolid and literal thing, it is both form and content.



## *Sfeeha*

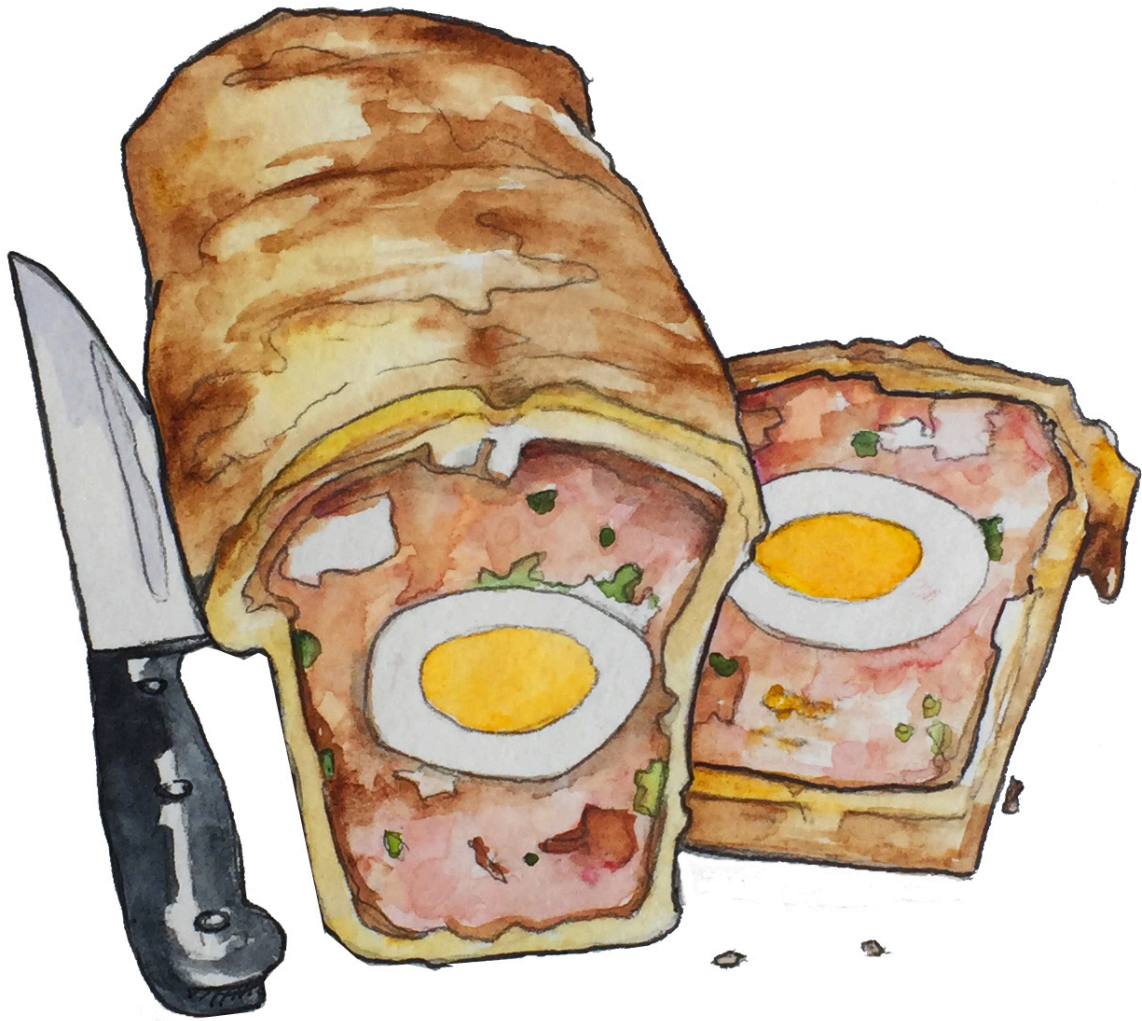
Said to hail from the Levant, these savory treats can be found in modern day Iraq, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. In Argentina and Brazil, introduced by Levantine immigrants, it is known as esfiha or esfirra. The pastry is a yeast leavened, quick rise dough, similar to pita bread. The filling most often features a mixture of ground lamb, onions, and herbs but can include cheese, curd, nuts, beef or vegetables



sfecha

## *Grosvenor Pie*

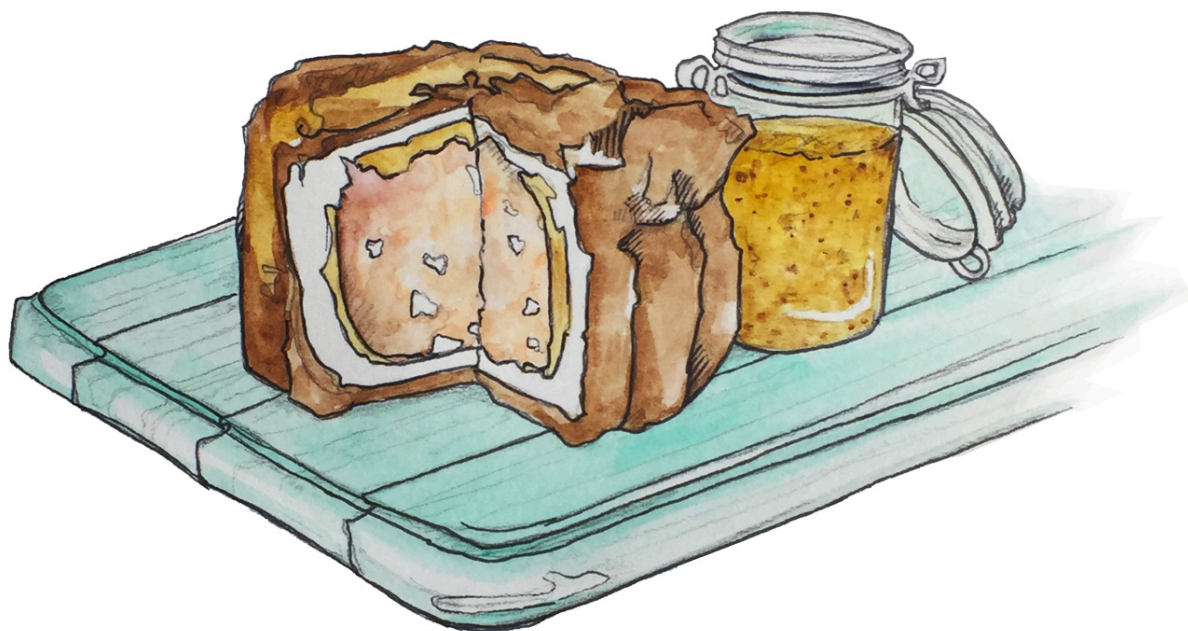
A Grosvenor Pie boasts a rich, minced pork filling with boiled eggs in the center. A hot water pastry is traditionally used for the casing of this British classic. It is finished with gelatin and is commonly served cold, alongside pickled onion and mustard.



Grosvenor Pie

## *Melton Mowbray*

This pie is named after Melton Mowbray, a town in Leicestershire, England. A distinctive feature of a Melton pie is that it is made with a hand-formed hot water crust. The pork filling of a Melton pie is chopped, rather than minced and is grey in color when cooked. The pies are baked free-standing, rather than in a mould.



Melton Mowbray  
Pork Pie



# IN SEARCH OF THE ORANGE DRAGON

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“Butter, flour, salt, paprika,” the recipe reads and I am flooded with the kind smoldering irritation I generally reserve for urine on toilet seats and people who talk on their cell phones in public. It gets worse from there. “Frozen peas, one package of unflavored gelatin.” It’s too much. I shut my laptop with a curt click. In the twenty two years I have been trying to figure out this recipe, the internet has offered little help. Bolivian cuisine has not yet been digitized. After years of failure, and countless attempts, I decide that it’s finally time. If I want to get this right I’m going to have to go back to Bolivia.

If you search for *Salteñas* in Latin American cookbooks or on the web, you will find a few grossly dumbed down recipes or posts written by self-styled backpacking food bloggers. Wikipedia does no better, their entry on *Salteñas* features an inaccurate, anemic photo of two pale pastries on a plate the color of an artificial limb. Invariably, the *Salteña* will be described as “a meat or chicken filled empanada,” a description that does no justice to the true nature of this culinary wonder. In a few places I have seen them listed as “an empanada filled with soup,” this is still not an adequately glorious description, but is somewhat more accurate.

It is not that I have anything against the empanada. They are delicious, as are Mowbary Pork Pies, Cornish pasties, Borek, and Hum-bow. Every culture has a savory filling wrapped in dough. It is a universally loved human consumable and I am a meat pie expert. Self-proclaimed expert, sure, but with all the

enthusiasm of the gentleman scientist traveling the globe to collect rare lichens or count antler points on roving ungulates. Over the last few years I have gone on many a hand pie quest. I spent a month in Southern England taking a formal course on regional pastry. I drove three hundred miles to investigate an Idaho gas station pirogi, and journeyed to Zagreb largely motivated by the rumor of a dish called *Štrukli*, rich layers of cheese and sauce between thin sheets of pastry baked into various shapes. This last, although delicious, didn't make the list as it fails to meet portability, an essential category in my hand pie classification system. I have had many food obsessions but none so deeply held as this and the origin of it all, the queen of all pocket pies and spring-well of my preoccupation, my very own orange dragon, the *Salteña*.

You start with a cow's foot. There is no getting around this. You absolutely cannot, despite what the internet tells you, substitute this for unflavored gelatin. A pig's foot, even uncured, won't work either. While the trotter will give you the right texture and mouth feel, the flavor won't be right. With this foot you make a savory, spiced broth, thick with gelatin, solid at room temperature. It will melt as it cooks and fill the pastry with soupy goodness. The filling is a separate component in this three-part, two-day mystery. The filling starts with beef or chicken. Hand minced, not ground. Never ground. This is sautéed with onion, garlic, aji Amarillo, brine cured black olives, and raisins which left overnight in the filling grow plump and spicy. Diced par-cooked potato and one hard boiled quail egg go in at the end. You can put half a boiled chicken egg in, if there are no quail eggs on hand. Don't skip the egg though - while you are eating a *salteña* the yolk will crumble and mix with the broth, this will give the filling a velvety unctuousness.

The pastry is the hardest part. Lard based, I know that much and scoff at the mere mention of butter. You want no layers here, no flake. This is a thin resilient dough that holds the soupy filling like you would hold a baby bird; secure, delicate, perfect. It is also a bright, almost neon orange. This atomic Dorito hue is achieved by mixing ground achiote into warmed lard. *Achiote* aka annatto are the mild, slightly nutmeg flavored seeds of the *Bixa orellana* a shrubby tree that provides color to cosmetics, sausage casings, and cheddar cheese. Sometimes called poor man's saffron or lipstick seed due to its use in cosmetics. These seeds are smashed in a mortar and pestle and added to hot lard which is left overnight to re-solidify before becoming the base of the pastry.

The flight to Bolivia is long but uneventful. We, that is me and my partner Andrew, have a brief layover in Huston before the longest leg of the journey. While flying, I have a lot of time to think. In many ways this trip is overdue, a thing I have been avoiding. Bolivia is dear to me and a major part of my inner topography. However, my history in South America is complicated and difficult and as a person that believes repression to be the better part of valor, I've simply not wanted to deal with it. Born into a cult called *The Children of God*, I was raised by apocalyptic extremists that had communes all over the world. I was born in the South Pacific but spent spent most of my childhood in South America. I was a food obsessed child that had few days of plenty. We subsisted on donated after-market goods and US Aide bags of bulgur, powdered milk, and a chicken feed product called milo. Food insecurity exaggerated my natural culinary bent. Once a week a small group of cult members would leave the compound and go 'provisioning,' in which we would solicit donations from people on the street and in the shops. I would volunteer for this activity which often involved humiliating tasks such as singing on street corners and begging

for damaged produce from market stalls. As a proud child not eager to grovel, especially in front of an audience, it was difficult but it got me out of the compound and most importantly, if quotas were met before noon we would each be rewarded with a *Salteña*. The glorious football shaped orange pastry was not particularly prized by our supervisors but at a street food price point it was a cheap option that provided ample motivation to a group of underfed kids. My memories of those mornings, when quota met I would stand next to bulging burlap sacks of dented cabbages and brown bananas, bent at the waist slurping broth from the meat filled shell are tinged with a kind of Proustin light. Though undeniably pathos laden it is my strongest and dearest food memory. Little wonder I am chasing it still.

Arriving in Bolivia we disembark from the plane via a wheeled staircase and cross the tarmac on foot. A large billboard above the runway offers bulletproof glass "for your home and vehicle!". The advertisement perplexingly features a nude woman, arms akimbo, breasts ironically ballistic. At customs we are told that we need visas which cost \$120, but this fee can only be paid in unwrinkled American currency. Unlike the obviously been-through-it-before folks on line with us we do not have a ziplock bag full of pre-ironed money. The agent informs us that there are ATMs in the airport, on the other side of security. He points toward security, a pod of uniformed guys with AK47s slumped against a sign that says "security". I think but do not point out that it would make more sense for the ATMs to be in here where the flat money is required. After some negotiating they accept Andrew for collateral and I hurry past the guys with guns who blink at me lazily but without inquiry. The cash machine offers a variety of startling options. Quantities of \$1000, \$2000, and \$3000 (US dollars!) are on offer. I wonder if this is a money laundering thing and then chide myself for self-righteously

criminalizing local custom. Maybe bulletproofing naked ladies requires large quantities of flat cash?

I spot the first *Salteña* before we are out of the terminal. This surprises me as they are only served in the morning and usually sell out before noon. It's going on one PM and I decide that the dictate, "nothing is ever worth eating at the airport," applies here. We head out to the dusty streets of *El Alto*, the city that sits on the rim of the crater surrounding *La Paz*. It will be at least eighteen hours until tomorrow morning's *Salteñas* are available and I am grateful to have this period of required waiting. The quest element of this endeavor would not be well served by so quick a conclusion.

Any worries I had about coming here dissipate. It feels comfortable as I slip into old patterns of speech and recognize the landmarks I grew up with; the garishly colored art deco style facades of *El Alto*, the ubiquitous half-finished construction, the mountain *Illimani* and its jagged crest (like the perfect crust of a pocket pie) on the horizon. Things have changed since I was last here some twenty odd years ago. Notably there is a new cable car system that links the upper city to La Paz. It is called *Mi Teleferrico*. It has 22 stops and is the longest cable car in the world. I am entranced by this arial public transport system and also by the sheer number of dogs wearing human clothing. I have no explanation for this thing with the dogs. We saw a floppy eared boxer with a whole suit on, pants, jacket, tiny waistcoat. We decided it might have to do with marking a distinction between domestic dogs and feral ones, of which there are plenty.

That night sleep does not come easy. It isn't jet lag, the time difference is only a few hours. At 13,000 ft the altitude is discombobulating, leaving one with a light-headed short-breathed hangover feeling and outside there is the

unrelenting sound of off key marching bands. I would attribute this racket to it being a holiday weekend but, as I begin to remember, it is simply part of the South American soundscape; dogs baying, children playing, and a perpetual drunken brass section. There is also the anticipation keeping me from sleep. I have made a map of the *Salteña* shops in the city. I plan to visit them all.

I have tried to make *Salteñas* at home scores of times. My family has witnessed many a football shaped failure and the mere mention of the things is enough to send my son skittering off to some important task that involves not being around me. I don't hurl the failures at the wall or become irate but I do sink into a black melancholy. "But these are delicious!," someone will inevitably say. And sure, they might be delicious but they are never RIGHT. And it is this rightness that I am seeking as early the next morning I put on my comfortable walking shoes and prepare for the day ahead.

We approach the first place, a *Sopocachi* shop with a clever rhyming name. I wonder about this rightness I am looking for. Will I find it? Will the flavors have changed? Have I changed? Have I simply over-romanticized the thing? There is a line at *Salteña la Paceña*, I take this to be a good sign. When we finally get to the counter I am pleased with the braid on the *Salteña*, a black ridge running the length of the smooth orange body. The pastry is the color of a traffic cone. shiny and drum tight. No leaks or flakes mar the pink plastic plate upon which the *Salteñas*, one beef, one chicken, rest. At the Formica topped table in the back of the shop there are napkins and *llajwa*, a fresh Bolivian salsa made with local chilies and herbs ground on a flat stone mortar and pestle locally called a *batan*.

I can hear the words before they leave his mouth. Andrew is still chewing but I know he will shortly say, "It tastes like...". He will compare it to something. Though I would like each new thing to be greeted with amusingly original

descriptive language and keen observation, I know that we are nothing but category machines. I ready myself for irritation. This should have been a solo mission, I think. Nostalgia is not a sauce that can be shared with others. What if he doesn't get it? What if.... "It's kind of like a soup dumpling," he says, while adding a bit of *llajwa*. "It's surprisingly sweet which makes it taste kind of.... Asian." He isn't wrong. I take my first bite and realize that here was an essential missing component. The pastry needs sugar, a lot of sugar. To risk a comparison, it tastes like animal crackers. I've never added sugar to the dough as it tends to interfere with gluten development and how else would the pastry get its thin resilience? It occurs to me that it might need both water and egg. Water to help with gluten formation and egg for pliability and compactness. I scribble notes while eating.

In the following days we visit as many shops as I can find. The *Salteñas* from *Cochabamba* are spicier, and those from *Potosi* the spiciest. The olive - black, pungent, funky - is an absolute essential. The hard boiled egg breaks down as you eat, mixing with the brothy filling and providing a silky thickness. These things go into my notes, I begin to feel that a confluence of these elements will eventually help me produce the perfect, platonic *Salteña*. "Street Food Elevated," is a phrase I have come to mistrust. It smacks of white guys backpacking in Asia, hipster mustaches, and cultural appropriation. But I'm also aware that these hand pies are a business for the people here, that profit margins on food are slim, and that economy in ingredients, scantness in filling, and speed of production are all factors that leave room for a person to improve upon. If one were to set out to create the best *Salteña* possible what would that process look like? How delicious could it be?

It is the morning of our last day and I don't feel ready to leave. Andrew has been indulgent but I know he is eager for Peru and is under the anticipatory sway of Pisco sour and fresh ceviche. Rising at dawn I head out to watch the sun rise through the cobblestone streets. It's too early for children but an off key trumpet plays in the distance and I am joined by an amiable German shepherd wearing a bedazzled jean jacket. He walks with me awhile, sniffing at plants and utility poles before trotting off to do whatever denim clad dogs do at dawn. I can feel the pull and romance of the place. I remember what it was to live here; inherently separate despite speaking the language, knowing the words to all the songs, loving the food. Maybe it is easier to live in a place where you are so clearly an outsider, where you will never be mistaken for anything else. It is more comfortable than trying to overcome the cognitive dissonance of being an outsider in a place where you are supposed to fit in. As I walk, I entertain a fantasy of moving back, I let the word ex-pat roll around in my mouth. After a few blocks I enter a park where morning light shines on eucalyptus trees and the monuments are all of men with Spanish names.

An indigenous woman is setting up her *Salteña* cart. She is wearing a tasseled bowler hat and *pollera*, a multi-colored, multi-layered skirt. She tells me she only has one kind of *Salteña mixtas*, a combination of beef and chicken, they are her specialty. Her Spanish is peppered with Aymara and she calls me *caserita*. Three of her teeth are gold and her long hair, worn in two braids is shot through with silver. Maybe it's my mood, the heavy but not unpleasant melencholy of nostalgia. Maybe it's the morning and the sense of imminent departure, of last things; or maybe this really is the best *Salteña* in La Paz. Whatever the reason, the result is perfection. Olive heavy, sweet, crisp outside and broth filled, the braid and tails deeply cooked, almost black. She shies away

from my questions about proportion or anything that could be considered a recipe but speaks affectionately of her oven. Of burning the wood down to coals until the sides are of the dome are white hot, scraping them out and *rapidito*, she says, you bake until the braid turns black. Her eyes shine with pride, she is a master of this art form, a pocket pie Yoda and I know what I must do. Back at the hotel I jostle Andrew from sleep. Handing him a cup of coffee I declare, "we need to build an oven."

Fast forward many months. I am writing this as the oven warms. The process of tempering the dome was long, small fires building up to larger ones, the brick and concrete expanding and contracting, forming small cracks. First we tried flat breads then an olive oil rich ciabatta at about 350 degrees. We learned how to move the wood, where the coals should sit and where the hot spots form. Soon we were able to bake loaves of crusty bread and roast whole chickens. After all this time and research it was almost with reluctance that I readied the first batch of *Salteñas* for the oven. Warmed to about 600 degrees, the oven quickly cooked the bright orange dough and blackened the top braid and the ends. The sugar surely helped this process. "Well, they sure do look perfect," Andrew remarked as we pulled them from the concrete dome.

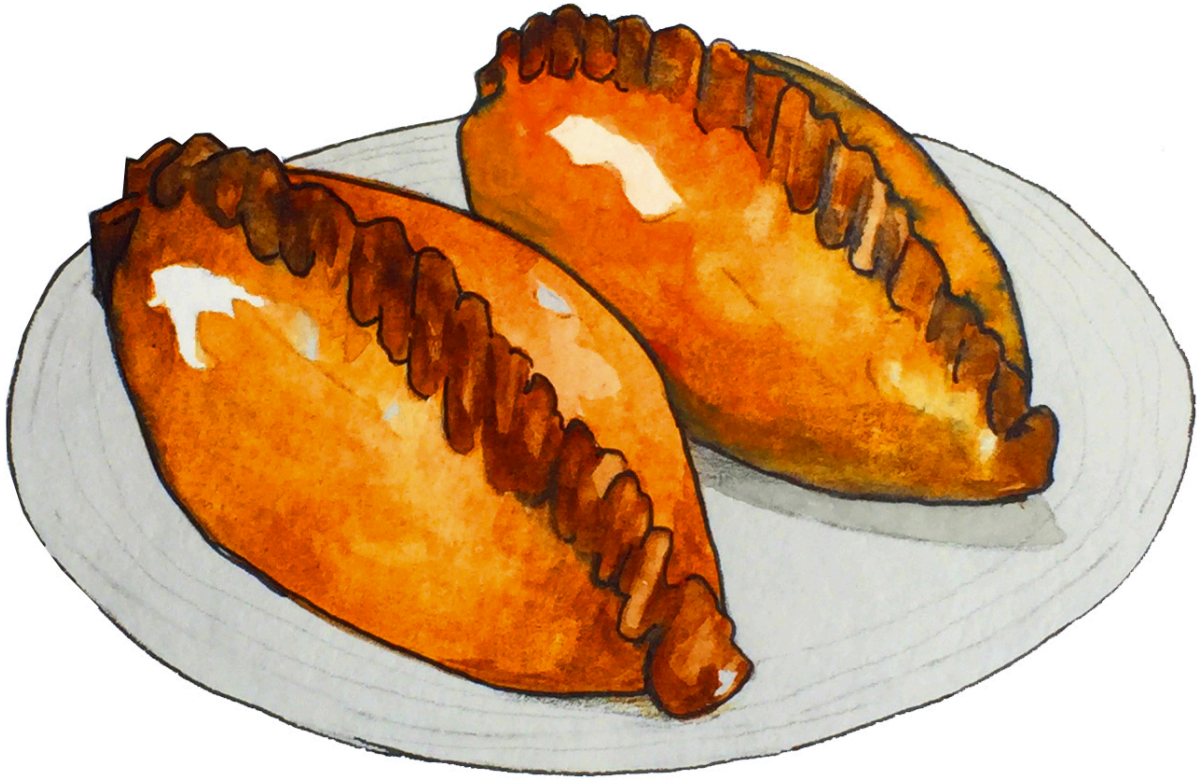
When they were cool enough to hold we stood in the garden and took our first bites. Andrew eyed me nervously as I broke the top off and examined the dough, which had that correct bit of snap and a pronounced sweetness. The interior was full of thick broth and the filling hit all the right notes. The salty olives, the slightly firm potatoes, the luxuriously beefy flavor from using rib meat rather than a more conventional, expensive cut. It was ridiculously delicious sure, but even then... not quite right. Maybe I need to grow the Bolivian *rocoto* and the metallic tasting *quillquiña* that goes into the *llajwa* that sauces these pies.

Maybe the beef has to take its flavor from Andean scrub grass, thin air, and a hard-scrabble life on mountainous terrain. Or perhaps these pastries, no matter how well made will never taste exactly right at sea-level. And that's okay, I think, as I crunch through the sweet, sticky pastry and luxurious meaty filling. Does one ever actually want to catch a dragon?



## *Salteña*

Hailing from Bolivia, *Salteñas* are savory pastries filled with beef, or chicken, olives, raisins, boiled egg, and potatoes. The filling resembles a stew and is achieved by adding calf's foot gelatin to the filling. This makes the filling solid when chilled and soupy when hot. *Salteñas* are eaten in the morning with most vendor's selling out by noon. The name is thought to come from an Argentine woman, from Salta, who was living in Potosi, Bolivia and created the recipe in the early 1800's.



salteña

## *Empanada de Pino*

The filling of this Chilean pastry is called "pino," a seasoned mixture of ground beef, onions, raisins, black olives and hard-boiled eggs. The pastry casing employs a mixture of lard and butter and is unleavened. These pastries are eaten year round but also form an important part of the Chilean independence feasts in the month of September.



empanadas de pino



# HUMBLE PIE

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At the Galleria Palazzo Colonna in Rome, a painting titled *Il Mangiafagioli* hangs, salon style, on a deep red wall amidst other, primarily Italian, Baroque and Renaissance masterpieces. *Il Mangiafagioli*, painted circa 1580, is a globally known work which resides in the palazzo's Red Salon<sup>1</sup>. The theme of *Il Mangiafagioli*, the naturalistic depiction of an anonymous peasant, is a departure from the gilt framed Madonnas, somber Tintoretto portraits of nobles, and marble busts that otherwise fill the opulent space. It is also remarkably distinct in palette and mood. Directly above the *Beaneater* hangs a Bronzino Madonna (circa 1550) full of religious pathos, hyper saturated blues and reds, brilliant golds and rosy flesh tones. In comparison, *Il Mangiafagioli*, seems rather beige, the only point of brilliance being the golden hue of the sunlight falling across the protagonist's hat, which he has not removed prior to taking his meal.

In *Il Mangiafagioli*, the artist Annibale Carracci (1560 - 1609), depicts a peasant man at his afternoon meal. The subject in the painting wears the typical rough garb of the *villano*, and is seated at a table, illuminated by sunlight from a glassless window on his right. He makes eye contact with the viewer, his eyebrows are comically arched, as though he has been caught unawares, mouth open, spoon raised. Before the man is a display of culinary items laid out in careful, taxonomic fashion: scallions with roots and greens still attached, a bowl of stewed white beans, a glass and pitcher of dark wine, rustic bread, and a *torta da bietola*, centrally placed and in the foreground. This last item is a chard or

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<sup>1</sup> Formally called the *Room of the Apotheosis of Martin V*, after the large painting by Benedetto Luti at the center of the ceiling.

spinach pie, which also makes appearances in *Bertoldo*, a sixteenth century satirical tale, by the Italian poet Giulio Cesare Croce, who listed this *torta* as part of the peasant Bertoldo's habitual diet.

When I visited Italy earlier this year, my objective was regular (vs pie centric) tourism with a heavy emphasis on looking at paintings. After all, did Italy, I wondered, even have a meat pie tradition? Calzone comes to mind, of course, but I wasn't sure if that was even an 'authentic' thing or if it had been an invention of the American pizza parlor. However, I soon learned that Italy not only has a wide array of savory pastries but that these pastries show up in countless works of art, most specifically in market and mannerist paintings created around 1580 and in the still life paintings that followed. *Torte* and *pastelli*, such as the one featured in both the Carracci painting and in Croce's writings, were Roman precursors of vegetable and meat filled dishes such as the *pâtés*, *timballis*, and of course meat pies, of modern European cuisine. These stuffed pastries were often made with meat which was finely pulped by mortar and pestle and combined with spices such as fennel seed, mace, rosemary, and garlic. Pulping meat in a stone or wood mortar and pestle would raise the disapproving eyebrows of contemporary cooks, most meat in the modern era would turn to mush if treated in this fashion. Using a food processor or hand grinder for tartare or minced meat fillings is frowned upon, which explains menus that boast of 'hand cut tartare'. However, recipes that use this mortar and pestle method pre-date the practice of grain or corn feeding cattle by several centuries. Meat in 15th and 16th century would have been pasture fed and therefore sinewy, lower in fat, and toothsome. These pounded meat mixtures were enriched with added fat or lard making the filling tender and juicy as well as satiating. They also provided high calorie fuel for the day's work. The food

historian, Giovanni Rabora, commenting on the popularity and ubiquity of these finely minced meat fillings draws our attention to the easily overlooked issue of orthodontia:

“Since dental prosthetics were not widely available and meat not always tender, the challenge was to make meat chewable and to season it as well as possible. Prepared in this manner, meat could be eaten even by senior citizens (in those days anyone over fifty).”<sup>2</sup>

These orthodontically compassionate meat fillings would be used for filled pastas, but also laid between sheets of thin, water or fat based dough, and rolled into various shapes or sealed into hand pies. The *torta di bietola* in the Carracci painting has a loose, leafy top indicating that a thinly rolled water based pastry similar to filo dough, was likely used. This type of pastry casing was popular in Italy in part due to several centuries of Greek influence but it was also much less expensive to produce than the more traditional pie casings which require butter or lard. I was excited to find this same dish, *Torta di Bietola*, in Vincenzo Campi’s painting, *Cucina*, which currently resides in the Pinocoteca di Brera, in Milan. In fact, the entire savory pie making process is depicted. Reading the painting from the viewer’s left, moving toward the right, you first see that an animal is being broken down by two butchers<sup>3</sup>. One of the butchers holds a knife in his mouth and gazes out toward the viewer. His features are coarse and rounded, his

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<sup>2</sup> See “Stuffed Pasta.” In “Culture of the Fork: A Brief History of Everyday Food and Haute Cuisine in Europe,” Rabora, Sonnenfeld

<sup>3</sup> There is some debate about what animal this is, Silvia Malaguzzi, in “Food and Feasting in Art,” call it an ox, and Breedlove and Meltzer, in “A Tale of Two Kitchens, Meals and Microbes,” call it a deer. I consulted with a professional butcher about this, food resource extraordinaire, Thea Webb, who believes the animal to be a deer, though Campi’s liberal use of distortion makes exact identification difficult and I was only able to provide her with reproductions. Though she did note that due to the animal’s cloven hoof we can at least be certain that the creature is not a pig. And, as my friend Jesse Beher reported, when I asked him to make a follow up visit to the museum after I had left Milan, the animal has a long, cow like tail (which I missed entirely when I saw it). “It is most likely a young cow, a calf for veal,” Jesse said, and apparently he had consensus from a group of Australian tourists who were viewing the painting when he was.

posture is self-conscious and posed, there is something performative, even sexually suggestive, in the way he holds the carcass open for our inspection. Adjacent to them, seated on the floor, an older woman works with a large mortar and pestle. She brings a finger to her mouth to taste-test the contents of the mortar, a thick green paste, either a pesto type sauce or more likely the spinach or chard pie filling. Directly in front of the mortar, is a plate holding three fish.

On the table behind the figure with the mortar and pestle, is a shallow bowl with eggs and two mounds or piles of something, one yellow the other white. These could be lard and butter, or salt and saffron. Salt, is an obvious ingredient, but saffron is present in almost all historical pie recipes from the 14th - 18th century, even as far north as England. The saffron is added to the dough, rather than the filling, most likely to enhance the color and aroma. Continuing along the table, two women work the dough, one kneading and the other rolling. The rolling pin being used has a textured pattern which leaves a distinct chevron design in the pastry dough. On the table are two, large ceramic dishes, one empty and the other filled with a pastry base crust and the green filling of *torta di bietola*, or perhaps a spinach and onion variation. Behind them is the final station where the filled hand pies, in their recognizable half-moon shape, are being egg washed in preparation for the oven. The woman holds a long thin knife and is cutting vents into the side of the pies. The only pies I know of that would have such vents are the *fiadone di formaggio*, an egg and cheese pie made exclusively in Italy, during the Easter season. Cutting vents in the side of a pastry would usually allow the contents to escape and would therefore not make sense. However, the filling for *fiadone* is a thick egg and cheese mixture that puffs up as it cooks, the vents allow the dough to expand. The gastronomic sensitivity of this work can be appreciated in the inclusion of these details, the

textured rolling pin, the vents in the pies, and for example, the attention paid to the hues of the pastry. The glazed pies being prepared for the oven are a rich egg-yolk-yellow, while the unglazed pies and pastry on the table are the chalky white of raw dough. It is interesting to note that the process of making filled pastry has changed very little over the ensuing centuries. Other than swapping a food processor or meat cleaver for the mortar and pestle and omitting the saffron (or substituting it for the less expensive Annatto, as is done in some South American pastry traditions), the modern cook would likely use similar ingredients, methods, and tools to produce their pasties, empanadas, or hand pies.

The other elements of Campi's painting, *Cucina* - a cat and dog fighting over offal scraps, the child blowing up what appears to be a bladder or stomach, the people laboring in the background, and the gaze that some of the 'actors' in the scene direct toward the viewer - are all typical to this kind of work. When decoding market scenes or genre paintings, or even the still life works that came a century later, it is useful to keep in mind that these were often allegorical, or works intended to illustrate specific proverbs. Many times a specific Emblem is being illustrated, the pose or characters taken directly from an Emblem book .

In the case of this painting, the art historian Shiela McTighe, posits that the proverb being illustrated here is the Northern Italian saying: *A grassa cucina, povertà si vicina*, (poverty is close to a fat kitchen). In this painting we have a bustling kitchen where the peasants are hard at work making pies, grating cheese, preparing poultry, and butchering - while in the background a sumptuous table is being set for the gentry. This table setting scene and out-of-frame existence of the wealthy for whom the food is being prepared, distinguishes this work from other Campi paintings. In the other works the

background scenes are consistently of laborers at their labors, which leads the viewer to believe that a deliberate juxtaposition is being made in this particular piece. Note also that the 'dining room' in this painting is outdoors, and an elaborate arch of greenery has been constructed. This arch is reminiscent of the Easter arches of Southern Italy and along with the aforementioned pastries, would specifically make this a painting of an Easter feast.

Returning to the pies - once filled with the minced meat combination, the pockets or envelopes of dough would be baked, fried, or boiled, and over the years have survived and remained popular in various guises and under names such as *pâté en croûte*, *pasty*, and *empanada*. Rabora, in "Culture of the Fork," writes that, "Documents outlining the statutes regulating bakers in Genoa, during the 13th century, use the word *artoscreas* and *altoserceas*, from the Greek term for bread and meat," to refer to these types of filled savory pastries. This word relates more directly to stuffed filo pastries such as *spanikopitta* and *lukanikopitta*, popular Greek foods even today. Curiously, I found that my *Torta di Bietola* from the Carraci painting, and Croce's writing - is often called *Torta Pasqualina* in Genoese cooking and features whole eggs cracked into the chard filling before baking. You can find this pie, as I did, in almost any of the *farinatas* or *foccaia* shops in Genoa. Most cafés will have a version of the pie on offer and at the *Mercado Orientale* it is featured in featured several stalls along with other savory pies, filled pastas, and the regionally famous pesto, olives, and sun dried tomatoes. On the tourism website of the City of Genoa this pie is not only prominently featured, but the recipe is also provided in both English and Italian.

*Torta di Bietola*, or *Torta Pasqualina*, is a traditional food served at Easter (Pasqua), when coincidentally, chard is also in season. In Italian savory pastry traditions, fillings tend to be dictated both seasonally and liturgically. *Tortas* and

pastas filled with seasonal vegetables such as chard, artichoke, zucchini, broccoli rabe, onions etcetera, were and still are, popular dishes on Fridays and Lent, when meat consumption is avoided by the devout. Lent (early March to mid April) is the best time to find the full array of vegetarian Italian savory pastels and indeed the only time at which certain pastries are commercially produced - for example *casatiello*, a cheese stuffed yeast risen ring bread, topped with hard boiled eggs. And of course the aforementioned *torta pasquilna*, and *fiadone di formaggio*, the egg and cheese hand pie featuring a very firm dough which has characteristic vents on the side of the pastry. The firmness and rich yellow color of the *fiadone* dough is due to the large number of egg yolks used, which makes the pastry difficult to work with but is an ingenious way of getting protein into the meatless Lent diet.

Savory pastries and pastas with meat fillings were, counterintuitively, popular among the working class and poor populations of urban areas, and not only because they had bad teeth. In the countryside, vegetables, eggs, and milk could be harvested directly from the peasants back yard, the neighbor's chickens, or the dairy down the road, and therefore tended to be staples of country eating year round. However, shipping fresh vegetables, eggs, and dairy products, into the city, especially during summer months, was difficult and made these items prohibitively expensive for all but the wealthy. Meat was surprisingly less expensive than most other perishable goods. Kept relatively dry and cool meat will keep far longer than fresh fruit or vegetables would, and when preserved by drying, salting, or immersing in fat, can keep for months. For this reason, meat, along with dry sundries such as polenta, various milled goods (wheat flour, almond meal) and beans, were dominant in the urban European working class diet up until the invention of refrigeration.

Beans hold a place of special importance in many working class diets because of their worldwide availability, high crop yield, high caloric and protein content, and affordability. They are also very filling. The common bean (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L.) is a species that has grown wild across the world for thousands of years and has been cultivated extensively. Italy and southern Europe have favored particular varieties of this bean such as the *botoli*, *cannellini*, and the pea-family varietal, Garbanzo. From an art historical context, it is interesting to note that *Il Mangiafagioli*, is far from the only bean-eater present in these specific sixteenth century genre paintings. In the 1580 Vincenzo Campi painting titled *Fishmongers*, a peasant man and woman on the left hand side of the painting are happily spooning up beans while a young woman pours out the days fresh catch onto a table. The peasant child bawls as he is being bitten on the left arm by a crayfish or lobster (The motif of the bawling baby may have been directly inspired by a famous drawing, *Boy Bitten By a Crayfish* by the Cremonese painter Sofonisba Anguissola circa 1559). In the background, other *villani* are slinging nets into the water. An earlier version of this work, a 1579 painting, also titled *Fishmongers*, features a similar composition with a peasant couple and their baby - mouths agape, bean spoons aloft, faces plastered with jubilant smiles. A third fishmonger painting of a somewhat different composition, titled *Fish Vendors*, also features bean-eating. In each of the Campi paintings as well as the Carracci work, the bean-eaters are pictured grinning with open mouths, and nearly ecstatic, joyful expressions. Their eyes are rolled back and their heads loll. "Look at these peasants," the paintings seem to instruct, "they fucking love to eat beans!"

These open mouthed bean eating figures, the children with puffed up cheeks, the women with rotund and exposed bosoms - these are all are oft

repeated motifs in these 16th century Dutch and Italian genre paintings. Many experts have written extensively on the eroticism and bawdiness of these works calling attention to the recurrent use of sexually suggestive flowers, fruits, and vegetables and to the frequent incorporation of poultry or fowl. The art historian Grosjen wrote,

“due to the semantic proximity in Flemish of Vogel (bird) and *vögelen* (to fornicate) the presence of fowl in these paintings must always be assumed to be a sexual reference”.<sup>4</sup>

Catering to the original audience of these paintings - the wealthy gentry - the peasants or *villanos* are depicted as base and animalistic. The ‘low-born’ bodies are comically and erotically on display. They could be mocked, and gawked at, thus making a contribution to middle-class self-identification as distinct from that of their less fortunate neighbors.

Returning specifically to *Il Mangiafagioli*, this painting, along with others created around 1580, such as *The Butcher Shop* by Passaroti, *Life with Peasant* by Giovanna Garzoni, or any of the marketplace paintings created by Vincenzo Campi, show a continuity not with classical painting, as one might expect, but with representations of natural history, particularly botanical illustration and scientific specimen collection. Around the 1570’s when these genre paintings began to appear in Italy, the *Wunderkammer* or Cabinet of Curiosities, had become a popular craze among the wealthy. Commissioned works, such as the Campi paintings, resemble the ‘market scenes’ of Aertsen and other Dutch artists working in the decade immediately prior, and were widely collected and

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<sup>4</sup> See “Toward an Interpretation of Pieter Aertsen’s Profane Iconography,” Ardis Grosjen for *Konsthistorisk tidskrift* 43

commissioned by gentry who had famous cabinets. The influence of the Dutch genre painters of the sixteenth century or the Italian painters of the same era and vice-versa is well documented. In both cases, Dutch and Italian, these works use a painterly naturalism that feels both biological and social. The way in which food, livestock, fish, and indeed the bodies of the laborers are arranged offers an important insight into the common ground that unites these paintings and also distinguishes them from the Northern Mannerist works from which they clearly derive influence. These paintings are also distinct from the still life works that follow them. In still life paintings objects are generally placed in aesthetic arrangements, carefully composed for maximum visual impact and with an eye to beauty. That is not the case with genre paintings where all of the objects in view - each species of fish, poultry, type of fruit or vegetable, butcher, fisherman, kitchen wench - has been given its own container or separate space, they are all presented as scientific vouchers, examples of a type. All the objects and vessels in which they are contained (even the spoons entering the bean-eater's mouths) are tilted downward on the picture plane to offer maximum visibility and deliberate display of each item. The argument toward the market place paintings being 'scientific' in nature and placing them within the Cabinet of Curiosity tradition rather than a fine art context, is further confirmed by what we know of how the paintings came about.

The series of Vincenzo Campi paintings, (five paintings, three of which represent fish vendors, together with one of a vegetable and fruit vendor and another of a poultry display) were commissioned by the Fugger family of Ausberg who had one of the most famous *Wunderkammers* in Europe. From the late 15th to the early 17th centuries, the Fuggers of Augsburg were among the leading merchant-bankers of Europe and were enthusiastic patrons of the arts as

well as voracious collectors of all sorts of things. The Fugger family history covers hundreds of years and was involved with much of European banking history but the Fugger that most interests this essay is Hans Jakob Fugger (1516 - 1575) as he is attached directly to the history of the Cabinet of Curiosities and to the commissioning of paintings that fall into this realm. The reader may wonder why it matters, that these paintings had a specific viewing or collecting intention and also, how it connects to the savory hand pies of Italy.

To the first matter, Cabinets of Curiosities were not only collections that served to boast of the wealth and status of their owners and the taste of their curators, they were social devices used to establish and uphold rank. Not content to stop at the collection of fish or rare butterflies, many Kunstkammern included human depictions or specimens. Ferdinand II, Archduke of Austria, for example had a collection, that placed special emphasis on people with 'interesting' deformities (you can see this largely intact collection, today titled, "The Chamber of Art and Curiosities," at Ambras Castle in Austria). These paintings depicting the foods, animals, and peasants of Italy and the Netherlands were displayed in some of the wealthiest homes of Europe. For example the Campi series of five paintings commissioned by Fugger, hung in the formal dining room of the Fugger estate in Kirchheim, near Augusta, before eventually moving into museum collections. There is also conclusive documentation that a Campi fish market scene and a fruit stall painting were in the possession of the Duke of Savoy and later the Habsburg Emperor, Rudolf II. All this to say, the intended audience for these genre paintings were the wealthy merchants and gentry who in large part were responsible for the continued economic oppression of the very people the paintings depicted.

The strongest common thread that links all the Dutch and Italian genre works of the late 16th century, is the juxtaposition of 'low-born' human bodies with foodstuffs. By placing these bodies in this display and market context they are relegated to commodities, commercial objects, and figures of derision. These display dynamics are evident in all of the genre paintings but to cite particular examples, consider the 1582 Campi painting titled simply, *Fruttivendora*, in which a young woman is pictured seated among an array of fruits and vegetables. She is frankly positioned with legs akimbo, shoulders turned toward us, and is leaning slightly forward offering a glimpse of her modest bosom. She gazes directly toward the viewer with a frank yet docile expression. In her lap are a pile of peaches, below her knee a bowl of ripe cherries, and to her right is a suggestively vulvular bisected squash. A single Madonna lily<sup>5</sup> grows improbably from the middle of the fruit display. The resemblance of the lily to the maiden is unequivocal, the white of her garments, the ruffled collar, and even the pose of the figure is mirrored by the flower. In the background peasants are picking fruit. This painting suggests that in the countryside are many fruits ready to be plucked.

There are two genre paintings of this period that protest against this juxtaposition of food and bodies and the objectification and commodification of the 'low-born'. *The Ricotta Eaters*, by Vincenzo Campi and *The Butcher Shop*, by Annibale Carracci, both push back in interesting ways. At first glance, *The Ricotta Eaters*, fits in with the other genre paintings executed circa 1580. The same themes are present and similar techniques are used in this work. Four peasants are gathered around a fresh mound of ricotta cheese which they are enthusiastically devouring. Again, we have the open mouths and tilted spoons of

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<sup>5</sup> A symbol of virginity in western art, frequently associated with Mother Mary and the Annunciation.

the bean-eaters. A voluptuous female figure is on the viewer's right, her rounded bare shoulders and generous décolletage are on display. She looks directly out at us and smiles coyly. Her body, with its feminine mounded shape and pale, exposed flesh is not unlike the soft cheese on the table. In her hand is a phallically upraised spoon. Adjacent to her, a rough, ruddy type with a lascivious half-grin is wearing an odd garment with a double-pointed collar and matching double-pointed wispy beard. Behind him is a younger peasant, head thrown back, teeth exposed, a comically heaped spoon of ricotta aloft. The figure to the viewer's left is the most grotesque of the group. He has stuffed his mouth with cheese to the point of overflowing. His face is painted with a combination of forced grin and nausea. The spoon he holds is several times larger than that of the others, it is more a ladle than spoon, and it is tilted on the same downward plane of the bean-eater's spoons in order that the viewer may observe the mound of ricotta this peasant is going to continue shoving into his mouth. This figure also wears a strange red hat and buttoned up vest over a red shirt.

In each of the former paintings we have discussed, one or two of the figures makes direct eye contact with the viewer, *The Ricotta Eaters* goes further. Each of the four ricotta eaters stares directly out of the frame. This deliberately confronts and collapses the distance between the subjects and the observer. It is also worth noting that this is a painting that is only about the people in the painting and the cheese they are eating - there is no market stall, table of fish, or busy kitchen behind them. Indeed there is no background at all, so tight is the framing of the work. There is something theatrical to this posing and direct engagement. Generally known as *The Ricotta Eaters*, or *The Cheese Eaters*, the artist himself entitled this piece *Buffonaria*, which directly references *Commedia dell'arte*, a popular form of satirical theatre which began in Italy in the 16th century. As with

these genre paintings, the characters of the *commedia* represented fixed social types - the slatternly servant woman, the devious footman, the wealthy merchant etcetera. The biggest buffoon in this painting, the red-hatted cheese eater, is in fact a self-portrait (Campi had a penchant for making cameos in his own works). Campi places himself into the painting in the most degraded of the roles, face stuffed with cheese. He has also chosen the costume of *Pantoleon* from the *commedia*, a character who represents the money grubbing noble class which sits at the top of the social hierarchy in all *commedia* dramas. *Pantolon de' Bisognosi*, Italian for 'Pantalone of the Needy,' is the full name of the character Campi choose to inhabit and most simply put, *Pantoleon* represents money. The 'type' Campi plays in this painting is that of his patrons, the bankers, nobles, and gentry who commissioned these works. In doing this he turns the tables on his patrons and subversively gives them a heaping ladle-full of their own medicine.

A different kind of subversiveness is present in the *The Butcher Shop*, by Annibale Carracci. Rather than the comedically grotesque and erotically charged figures of his other 'low-born' characters and scenes, this is a beautiful painting with a subtle but undeniable dignity. It is perhaps useful to first contrast this work, Carracci's 1583 *Butcher Shop*, with a similar painting by Bartolomeo Passaroti, also titled *Butcher Shop*, (circa 1580). In the Passaroti painting two butchers in the familiar peasant garb stand amidst meat in a market stall. The butcher on the viewer's left holds a knife pointing phallically upward and with his other hand grasps the snout of a boar he is butchering. The boar's snout looks rubbery and pliant and its tusks and teeth are exposed. The butcher looks out of the painting at the observer with a suggestive half smile and appears to be on the verge of winking. A front quarter and hoof of the boar are on the table in front of him and in the background sides of pork and lamb hang on hooks.

Though hard to spot in reproductions, the keen observer will note the sparrow perched in the rafters above younger butcher, this same bird is found in other Passarotti paintings<sup>6</sup>. The meat vendor on the right holds up a loin of pork or lamb, silver-skin and fat cap intact. He leans forward in a manly fashion with his sleeve pulled up to expose a meaty, well developed forearm. His face is rough and ruddy and bears a distinct resemblance to the boar. He has a snout like nose and snaggly teeth which protrude from his mouth like small tusks. At the edge of the table his knife rests propped up by a beef heart. Again, this painting has a theatrical quality. The butchers are self aware and they both freely acknowledge the viewers and seem complicit in the display of themselves and their wares. The entire scene has an obvious and comic carnality. The gestures of both of the butchers are performative, they are showing this meat to someone, holding up the boar snout and meat as though asked to pose for a picture. One can nearly hear someone in the background, instructing them to "smile and say cheese!".

In contrast Annibale Carracci's monumental (the figures are nearly life sized), *Butcher Shop*, is naturalistic rather than posed. Here the butchers are at work, cutting, hanging, and weighing - rather than holding up cuts of meat or waving knives about in a pantomime of butchery. On the far right, a man hoists an entire side of beef onto a meat hook. You can feel the difficulty of the task in the dynamic, bent kneed pose of the young butcher. On the floor adjacent to him another man is dealing with the slaughter of a ram. His back is broad and arms thick, he holds the animal down with one hand while wielding the killing knife in the other. Behind the table a third man, in an open shirt with rolled up sleeves, hangs pieces of meat. All of this is painted with great care. The bodies of the butchers are powerful and dynamic but they are unselfconsciously applied to

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<sup>6</sup> The sparrow appears as a pictorial signature and play on words. Passarotti's hid sparrows in many of his paintings as this bird's Italian name is the passerotto. For example it is present in the Fishmongers c1580 where the sparrow is perched on the handle of a basket.

their work and none of them look out at the viewer or seem to be aware of an audience. On the left side of the painting we see a butcher weighing a cut of meat with a Roman scale. He looks thoughtfully down at the apparatus and with his open shirt, clean white apron, and square shoulders he conveys a sense of respectability, authority, and competence. There is an undeniable masculinity to all four of the butchers, they have bulk and muscular, working bodies but are painted with regular, strong features rather than the puffed up animated faces and exaggerated poses of other masculine figures in genre paintings. At the far left of the painting we have an entirely different sort, a comic, burlesque figure, in the tights and fancy pantaloons of the gentry. This is a customer buying meat. Reaching into his purse he has knocked awry his absurdly bulbous codpiece. His face is red with effort and perhaps constriction from the frilly collar round his neck. He has some kind of a long staff and wears a hat with a floppy long feather. These two figures, the principle butcher and the wealthy customer are placed exactly adjacent and on the same plane. It is impossible to look at this painting and not compare the two men. The comedic elements associated with masculine figures in other genre paintings are here applied to the 'noble' man. From his codpiece to his hat feather, he brandishes symbolic masculinity while the butcher exudes genuine masculine energy and strength. In the very background of the painting, approaching the meat stall from behind, an old woman lurks. She too has something of the buffoon and she conjures a type - the scheming wives or grandmothers of the town that come to purchase meat at the market. She is both in shadow and wears a head wrap, there is something puppet-like about her appearance. This painting is out of alignment with genre painting in a number of ways, for example it lacks the taxonomic and comedic elements of other paintings of this time. Additionally the table and market stall, which

dominate these scenes, is small and pushed off to the side of the composition. However, the chief difference is the inclusion of the gentry. It is the only painting of the Italian series, that directly brings a 'high-born' body into frame and places it along side food, and the production of food - a realm generally reserved for the poor and working class.

Food and social hierarchy have always been intimately bound. In the late sixteenth century when these paintings were produced a text by Bartolomeo Pisanelli was widely read, titled, "*Trattato della natura de' cibi et del bere*" (Treatise on the Nature of Food and Drink), it served as a formalization of common beliefs about food and social order. For example, Pisanelli cited beans as a food which was only suited for the 'low-born' rough peasant body and claimed that beans would have disastrous effects upon those more finely made. The classification of certain foods as noble or ignoble was sometimes an issue of economics, that is to say logically based on the prohibitive cost of acquiring or preparing particular items or dishes. Often the categories of 'low' and 'high' foods were more obscure and related to particular religious texts, local lore, or fallacious correspondences. In the 15th and 16th centuries people strongly ascribed to the belief that correspondences in nature could be used as a guide to health matters. For example if a leaf shape was similar to a kidney, the plant was thought to be good for your kidneys. White meat from fowl or poultry was better for the 'high-born' who tended to have lighter skin. Red meat, dark bread, and dark wine was thought to induce carnality and darken the skin. While the rules of correspondence and similar methods of organizing the culinary into hierarchical social systems may seem absurd, there are culinary traditions that are logically related to the patterns of working class life. For example, the pasties

and hand pies of northern Europe, which were designed as portable meals for miners and other manual laborers.

Hand pies found in the mining towns of England gave workers an easy way to carry a high calorie lunch when they would have been unable to return home for a meal. Some of these pies are made with an internal division which would keep a small dessert, for example stewed fruits and nuts, separate from the savory filling. The Cornish pasty was typically made with a thick pastry spine which the tin miners of the region would use as a handle. Their hands, covered in arsenic and other harmful to ingest substances, would never need to touch the pasty and they would discard the handle after eating the pie. Mowbray Pork pies, among the most famous meat pies in the world, were conceived as a hunting snack to be carried in a saddle bag and eaten astride a horse. In Italy, as I tried to track down the *Torta di Beitola* from the Carracci painting, I came across variety after variety of hand pie and savory pastry many of which had come about as easy to carry lunch items for dock workers. The *Torta di Bietola*, I found at a *panatteria* in Naples where I was told that it falls under the general umbrella of *Torta Salata* which can be any savory pie, from ricotta and egg to sausage and cheese. The aforementioned *Torta Pasqualina* is a near kin to this dish with the addition of whole eggs and is commonly eaten at Easter. A smaller, handheld version of this treat, *Fagottino bietola* - I sampled in Palermo and after some research discovered that the word *fagottino*, simply means small bundle and is used to indicate any number of bundle shaped pastas or filled pastries.

*Erbazzone*, is a flatter pie (some call it a savory tart) from the *Reggio Emilia* region of Italy (though I ate much of it in Genoa). It often includes pancetta and can have a distinctly patterned upper-crust. The combination of pancetta and *Parmigiano Reggiano* cheese gives this pastry a complex salty, nutty flavor with a

bit of funk which is absolutely delicious. As with the other dishes discussed in this essay, *Erbazzone* falls under the umbrella of *cucina povera*, the Italian peasant cooking traditions that rely on whatever is seasonal, cheap, and available.

An example of a dockworker inspired item, though not strictly a hand pie, is *Pizza Portofoglio*, a wood fired, thin crust pizza folded in four (resembling a wallet), which allows you to walk and eat pizza. Or indeed, to grab a bite to eat and get back to moving freight on or off ships waiting in the harbor. It is a popular Naples street food and one of many hand meals that use the Neapolitan pizza ingredients. *Pizza Fritta*, are triangular shaped fried calzone - tomato sauce and cheese encased in the signature Neapolitan style yeast leavened pizza dough. These portable treats can feature an array of local, seasonal ingredients and because they cook so quickly once dropped in oil, it is especially handy for encasing wet ingredients that would make an oven baked pastry damp. Vegetables such as zucchini, wild asparagus, and sautéed broccoli *spigarello* (a long-stemmed Southern Italian vegetable with curled green leaves and edible flowers) can be found in these fried golden triangles. *Panzerotti* also deserves a mention, a baked or fried savory turnover from Apulia, this little pastry is the progenitor of the American Hot Pocket™ and the commercially produced Canadian Pizza Pop™.

The marketplace paintings, much like the hand pies I've mentioned, fall in the realm of 'low culture', *cucina povera*, genre painting - they depict or feed the laboring body. The period in which these Italian and Dutch genre paintings were popular was brief, its heyday lasting only a few decades. These works fell out of favor and the artists returned to religious subjects and traditional portraiture. However, in the ensuing decades, these genre paintings paved the way for

*natura morta*, still life, which is enduringly popular even centuries later. The food of course, remained. Glossy piles of multicolored grapes, gloriously feathered fowl, ripe pomegranates and flowers, even pies, pies of every kind were enthusiastically embraced as worthy subjects of depiction once they were distanced from the 'low born' bodies they were meant to feed. Still life painting was able to do what genre painting never could - enter the realm of 'high art'. It is perhaps telling that in still life paintings the vessels of hospitality - copper coffee urns and bone china tea pots, silver slavers and cake stands, serving spoons and flower vases - took the places of working bodies. The reflective surfaces so frequently favored by still life painters are false though, offering only the illusion of reflection. The silver surfaces are eternally resplendent and blank, they show us nothing of ourselves. Real life occurs somewhere beyond the canvas, in the kitchen perhaps, where laborers continue their labour maybe stopping occasionally to enjoy a pie.

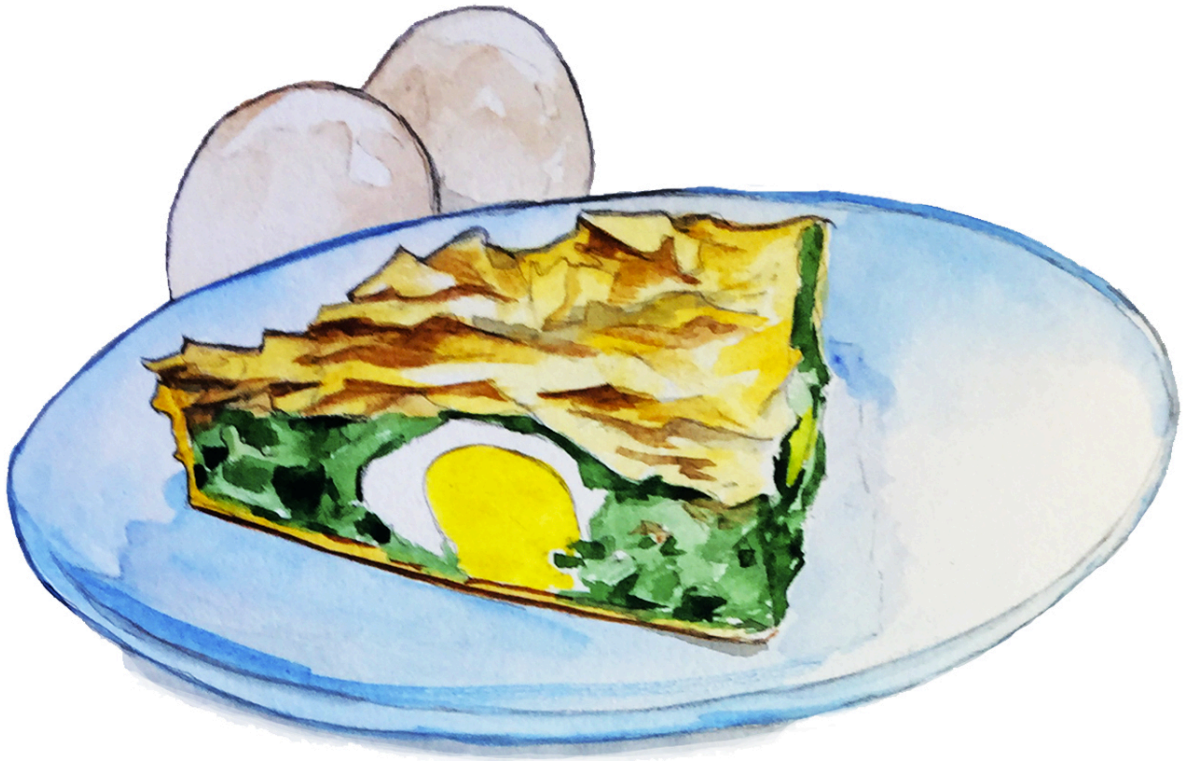
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## *Torta di Bietole*

Variations of this savory chard pie can be found throughout Italy but it is most common in Liguria. Chard, which grows year round in the area, is the most traditional filling but the pie can feature mustard greens, spinach, onion, leek, or the local leafy broccoli. Often a central part of Easter feasts this pastry sometimes features whole eggs along with the traditional ricotta and chard filling.



torta di bietole

## *Fiadone di Formaggio*

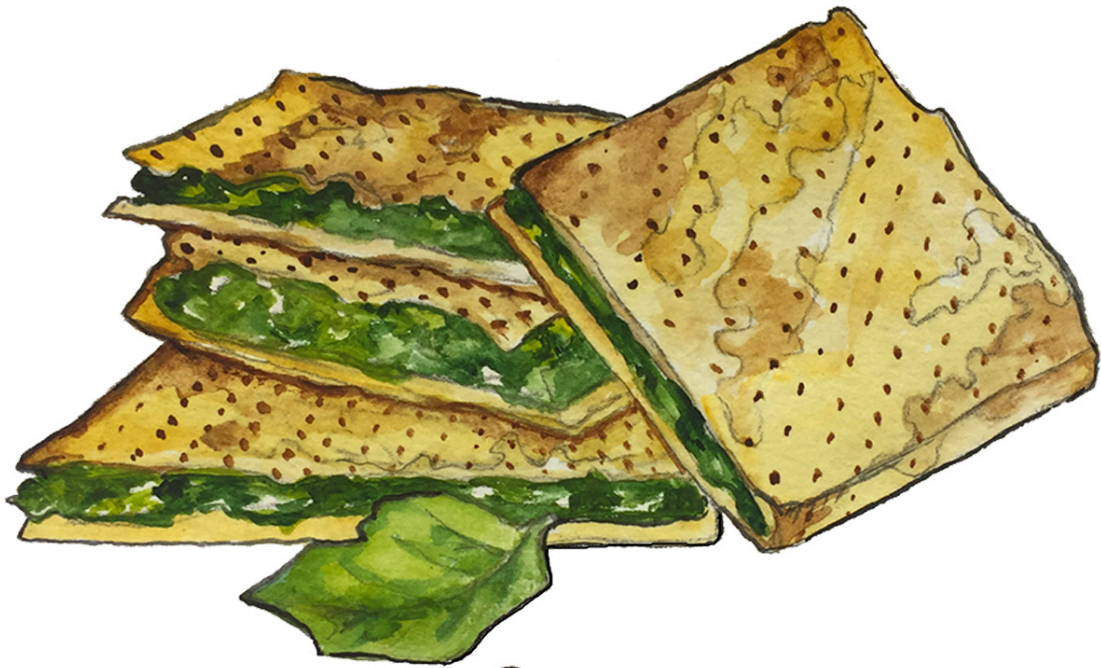
The Italian Fiadone di formaggio, is a rustic egg and cheese pie most often served at Easter. The eggy filling is enveloped in a very firm dough and features steam vents on the side of the pastry which are traditionally made with a thimble.



fiadone di  
formaggio

## *Erbazzone*

This pie falls into the category of *torta salata* and is most popular in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy. Variations of this dish can be found in the city state of San Marino, Genoa, and other Italian cities. The most common variation of this dish features spinach and ricotta in a thin pastry casing. Chard, onions, parmesan, and pancetta are also frequently included.



erbazzone



## HOW TO JUDGE A PIE

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Classic Mince - Mince and Gravy - Mince and Cheese - Pepper Steak - Steak and Cheese - Steak, Bacon, and Cheese - Steak and Red Wine Gravy - Potato topped Steak and Gravy - Beef, Guinness, and Thyme - Pork and Mushroom - Lamb and Red Wine Gravy - Lamb and Rosemary - Braised Peppered Lamb Shanks and Kumara Mash - Chicken, Leek, and Bacon - Chicken and Vegetable - Chicken, Bacon, and Mushroom - Chicken and Brie - Butter Chicken - Green Curried Chicken - Curried Carrot and Pumpkin - Stir Fried Vegetable and Cheese - Mushroom, Leek, and Cream Sauce - these are just a few of the 64 different pies I counted on offer at the Woolworth grocery store in New Norfolk, Tasmania (a town on the Derwent river of approximately 6,000 people). In Australia and New Zealand, meat pies are wildly popular and can be found at any bakery, take-away, or gas station. These pies are often regional in nature and vary in filling, shape, quality and price. The freezer case at every local grocer is stocked with a plentiful variety of ready-made pies. Many of these are state based brands such as *Jester's Pies* which started in Claremont, Western Australia, New Zealand brand *Big Ben*, *National* of Tasmania, and *Dad's Pies*, of northern New Zealand.

I discovered this wealth of pies on my recent, and first, trip to New Zealand and Australia. Despite having been born in Western Samoa, I had not travelled farther east than the Hawaiian islands since leaving the South Pacific as a young child. When I was contacted via facebook by some of my estranged father's family, and they informed me of an upcoming reunion that would be taking place in Auckland, it seemed the perfect opportunity to visit. While I was

cautiously excited to make some family connections, I was unabashedly enthusiastic to sample the much lauded pies of the region. In preparation for the trip I spent some time researching the history of the pie industry and as I told (my ever patient partner and travel companion) Andrew, yearly pie competitions are held in both countries, the largest of those being the Great Aussie Pie Contest, now in its 29th year. The Bakel's New Zealand Supreme Pie Awards, at the time of writing, is in its 24th year. Among the categories judged are Classic Mince, Gourmet Meat, Poultry, Game, Seafood, Vegetarian, and Breakfast. 2014 saw the first Official Great Aussie Sausage Roll competition, added to the fray. "It'll be like a quest!" I told Andrew as we packed, "we will set out to find the best pie in each country!"

For the last several years there has been one baker who consistently dominates the competitive New Zealand pie scene, and 2018 proved to be no different. Champion baker, Patrick Lam, took home accolades in eight separate categories and also won the ultimate prize, the Supreme Gold Award, which is given to the best overall pie in New Zealand. While we were very eager to get our hands on this year's winner - Patrick Lam's, Onion, Mushroom, and Pork Belly pie - which won the top honors - we saved it for the tail end of the journey. Perhaps, we should have started with this highly lauded pie, using it as the standard against which to measure other pies in the region. Instead, we decided to take a long loop from Auckland, where there are dozens of famous pie shops, to Tasmania and then back to northern New Zealand. We ate flaky pork and mushroom pies at gastro pubs, and red wine sauced pies at fancy bakeries. Disappointing, leathery crusted, unevenly heated pies were served to us at various airport food stands, gas stations, and grocery stores and after a night of drinking in Tasmania, we cooked Chicken Curry and Classic Mince grocery store

pies in a friend's kitchen. At the family reunion in Auckland, we microwaved Big Ben mince and cheese pies in my cousin's kitchen. We rang in the new year in Melbourne with pies from a shop called Pie Face, and ate Curried Lamb pies while driving. We enlisted friends, family, and strangers in the quest and took hundreds of pictures and many detailed notes.

By the time we made it to Patrick's Gold Star Bakery on Bethlehem road in Tauranga, an elaborate pie judging system had developed - points for crust texture and appearance, points for color and smell, for deliciousness of gravy, crispness, density of filling, seasoning. Even with assiduous note taking and the methodical application of criteria, it was difficult to be truly objective about the judging. Pies, like various other foods - can be enhanced by the charming-ness of surroundings, the presence of friends, one's level of intoxication. Although meat pies are not a new area of investigation for me, the savory pies of New Zealand and Australia differ greatly from the British variations they derive from. My time studying the hot water-crust pies of Melton Mowbray, and the football shaped Cornish pasty, among others, did not adequately prepare me for these double crusted sometimes potato topped items. A new series of criteria were required. So, how do you judge a pie?

1) Can you eat it out of a bag?

Both Australians and New Zealanders frequently cite portability as the primary attribute that a meat pie must have, even over quality of ingredients, or flavor. Toward the end of our trip I had the opportunity to interview Auckland based food historian and journalist, André Taber, who wrote a book called, "The Great New Zealand Pie Guide". Taber emphasized portability and told me that an

estimated 80% of pies in NZ are eaten in cars. Further underscoring this point is the fact that BP and other petrol stations sell more than 75% of the commercially produced pies consumed in these two countries.

“You have to be able to drive, eat it with one hand, and not get it all over the place,” this was said by Ron Mickan, one of my Auckland based cousins. He also commented on the tradition of having meat pies as a staple food one enjoys when, “watching footy.” This conversation quickly became animated as every person in the room seemed to have an opinion about pie. One cousin adamantly insisted that classic mince was the only proper choice while another extolled the virtues of Chop Suey Pie, which, we were told, he was sometimes served for lunch at New Zealand’s Spring Hill prison. Haley, one of the younger cousins (third removed on my father’s mother’s side?) urged us to try the hyper-local kina and bacon pie, (kina is sea urchin row, ‘uni’ to the sushi aficionado). Another person at the reunion extolled the virtues of a green-shell mussel and cream sauce pie and then drew us a map on a beer coaster of where we could find this item. The most animated disagreement was a debate about cheese and mince vs classic mince with classic mince being the most loudly defended.

We found that an important aspect of portability is the flakiness of the crust. If it has no flakiness, the pie will be travel ready but will suffer in the obvious ways, deficient in taste and texture. On the other hand, an overly flaky crust will get all over the car or on your jersey at sporting events. Many bakers reach a happy medium by using a blind baked, lower fat pastry for the bottom of the pie and something closer to a rough puff, enriched with layers of cold butter, on top. The flakiest pastry we found while on this pie quest, was at higher end bakeries and fancy restaurants. The more expensive the pie, the more likely it was to have a highly layered, butter based, laminated pastry, both top and bottom. To most

Americans, flaky equals good (when it comes to pies). American fruit pies, such as classic apple or cherry pie, invariably eaten on a plate with a fork or spoon, have skewed us toward a rich, buttery crust. But a short pastry, such as that found on a classic apple pie, is not ideal for holding a meat and sauce suspension that is meant to be eaten while driving and is often served at a temperature appropriate for melting pig iron. The last thing you need while driving is molten meat and cheese leaking onto your hands.

Surprisingly, the pies that got our lowest marks overall, were also among the most expensive. We ate some truly awful concoctions during this experience, but the first 'gourmet' pie we purchased at an expensive brunch place, in Auckland, was perhaps our least favorite of the entire trip. We ordered a Red Wine and Beef pie from a coffeeshop/juice bar located in the posh Britomart shopping district of Auckland. We took our pie and juice to a park bench across the street from the shop, in front of a Tiffany boutique preparing to open for the day. At the adjacent Chanel store, sales girls were dusting the window displays. The pies were as flaky as fresh croissants and as we broke into the crust we were immediately surrounded by pigeons and myna birds. Andrew and I both marveled at just how un-delicious the pie was despite the mouth watering description which promised braised local shorthorn beef, red wine jus, paprika topped puff pastry. With this pie, both the filling and the crust were problematic. The filling was unpleasantly sour, very salty, and over-laden with bitter herbs. And, making portability nearly impossible, the meat and vegetables were cut into large chunks, which is fine in a stew but makes for messy eating in a pie. The crust which as mentioned, was very flaky, had a strange aftertaste, as though some kind of butter alternative had been used. Much to the delight of

the park pigeons, we didn't finish these pies and we were left wondering if the price had affected our expectations.

Still hungry, we tried again that morning at a nearby place called *The Shaky Isles*, where we split a mince and cheese pie that cost \$9 NZ (approximately \$6.10 US, which is on the high end for single serve pies). The decor of the café was appealingly familiar and the illustrative murals and exposed brick would have looked at home in any hipster bar in London, Austin, or Seattle, that is to say, it was the kind of place that charges 6 bucks for a cup of coffee and uses the word 'artisanal' a lot. The pie was a fork and knife affair and was served on a predictably charming, miniature cutting board. It came with a small green salad. The flaky pastry shattered into crumbs as we dug into the piping hot cheese and meat. The seasoning wasn't bad but the overly buttery crust made the pie unpleasantly fatty. On 1 to 10 scale, I'd likely score it a 5. That was strike two against the posh pie, it was time to try something cheaper.

The poverty pies, as the New Zealand locals refer to them, have very little flake to the crust and an almost cracker like base. The cheapest of the grocery store pies, *Big Ben* brand, for example, cost about a dollar fifty and feature an almost gummy crust that has a texture not dissimilar to the filling, giving the entire pie a homogeneous mouth feel. These low cost pies may hit the spot if you are in the munchie mood but at a whopping 2000 or more calories per pie, they are not health friendly. However, they are portable and can be eaten with one hand while driving, mowing the lawn, showering, or doing whatever else you might want to do while eating a meat pie.

The portability of these lower cost pies is not based only on the crust. The filling even when scorching hot, is never runny. The gravy that holds the filling together, is thickened with cornstarch, flour, or as we discovered -most

frequently with a commercial thickener called FINO, which after a few dozen pies, we could identify by sight and smell. This substance is a modified starch product such as that found in industrially produced gravy and soup mixes. Marketed on commercial restaurant websites as, "Fino Pie Thickening, product code 7311", it is described as: *"a blended powder for thickening and stabilizing pie meat. It is uncolored and unflavored to allow the user to select their own flavor and color."*

I mention FINO not to malign modified starch products, which are in everything from potato chips to pudding, but because the overwhelming majority of the pies in New Zealand and Australia, have a similar texture due to this particular thickener. What this product allows, is for pie filling, regardless of temperature, to be thick enough to slice neatly and hold together. This is handy for portability, certainly, but it gives the filling a gloopy texture that I found unpleasant. The thickened gravy element of the pie is one key factor in its portability, the glue that holds the whole situation together. However, distribution of ingredients is also key. Because of this, ground meat is most frequently used.

2) Lets talk about the filling.

Classic mince, is the most popular and best selling pie in the South Pacific Commonwealth. These pies feature a simple mixture of ground beef and gravy, nothing else. In fact, for a mince pie to qualify for any of the major competitions it must contain ground meat (either beef, veal, or lamb) and gravy but no vegetables, other than onion are allowed. Mince, aka ground meat, is preferred as it allows for an even distribution of filling. Each bite of the pie should be the

same with no large chunks or pieces of carrot or potato interrupting the homogeneity of the filling. Mince and Cheese, is another popular option but the cheese can be unevenly distributed and cause pockets of molten oil or gaps between the crust and the filling which cause the pie to fall apart when you bite into it. We found that Mince and Cheese works best when the cheese is placed in an even layer across the top of the mince filling just before baking. This mitigates some of the overheating and ingredient distribution issues.

While classic Mince, Mince and Cheese, and Chunky Beef, are all common pie flavors, if you travel anywhere in the British Commonwealth and you will find a vast variety of ingredients in the pies. From the Indian influenced butter chicken to the clam and mussel pies of northern New Zealand. Many locals top the pies with tomato sauce, or brown sauce, and indeed some pies are improved by these condiments. One 'problem' we encountered was an absence of spice. Aside from one, Double Pepper Beef pie, that we bought at a grocery store, none of the pies would make even the first level of the Scoville Heat Scale. This observation extends to the other food as well, which is somewhat baffling. The proximity to Asia means plenty of diversity in the cuisine but even the curries and Pacific Rim specialities, usually so redolent with mouth numbing Szechuan peppers and chiles, could be called *mild* at best. Is this aversion to heat a hold over from the days before Britain embraced Peri-Peri chicken and curry?

Historical records and early settler diaries chart the progress of savory pastry, from British staple to local speciality. By the seventeenth century the British Empire reached the pinnacle of its colonial power and as the empire developed the British, grain-based cuisine was adapted to local ingredients and conditions. For example, in a glass case at the Maritime Museum of Tasmania there is a menu, from a Christmas leisure cruise on the SS Paloona, at the

command of captain F. McBeth. Among the other offerings listed (on the rather meat heavy carte du jour) is a, "Jellied Veal & Ham Pie," The menu is dated 1911. At the Auckland library I found many cookery texts that featured examples of early meat pies that took advantage of the ingredients available to the first wave of British migrants. In the encyclopedic, "New Zealand Food and Cookery Since 1769," there are dozens of examples of this including mutton pie variations made on sheep stations, and fish and eel pies made by sealers. Highly regional, and some now extinct creatures were all put into pies, including the sea cucumber, the flightless Kaka bird, and the Maori delicacy - muttonbird - an oily kind of petrel that tastes like a cross between a fish and a duck and can be still be purchased at regional fishmongers.

Among the many recipes I found when scouring the library archives for historical cookery books were gems such as the Kina Pie which combines sea urchin row, kumara (NZ sweet potato), and a shark fin gravy. The Wellington pie is another interesting variety that was popular on sheep stations. This one has lamb kidney and hogget meat. Hogget, as I learned from the sheep station cookery records, is a sheep who is older than a lamb but not yet mutton. There are many sheep specific words employed in these cookery books and indeed, in the modern lexicon of the place. For example saltmarsh lamb, which is grazed on costal estuaries. This linguistic preoccupation with sheep feels very unlike the United States where all sheep products can be marketed as "lamb," regardless of the age of the animal. Sheep products less than 12-14 months old can be labeled "prime lamb" or "choice lamb" and all other sheep meat can be labeled simply as "lamb."

The Kina and the Wellington pies are just two examples of regional pies which can be the subject of much competition, boasting, debate and as we

found out, derision. At a fancy lunch event at the Taste of Tasmania food festival, we asked our fellow diners where we might be able to find one of the local scallop pies. The folks in question looked vaguely horrified and then told us that they neither knew where to find scallop pies nor would recommend eating one. "They really are, quite horrible," was the only response we were given before they snubbed us and went back to their lamb and wine. Luckily, a local foodie friend was able to point us to Jackman & McRoss, a small, long standing, bakery that had a Scallop and Wakame pie on the menu. I didn't think the scallop pie would be good, but we sought it out in the name of research. Scallops are one of those things that should be barely cooked, just a flash in the pan or they get rubbery. The scallop pie would need at least 20 minutes in the oven for the pastry to bake, by then wouldn't the scallops be completely overdone? Additionally, the traditional scallop pie features bay scallops embedded in a thick, curry scented, mornay sauce. There are a very few instances in which seafood is made better by a thick, cream based sauce, a nice American clam or oyster chowder might be an exception. My fears were unfounded, the Scallop and Wakame pie at Jackman & McRoss was lovely. The seaweed scented mornay sauce had a smooth, silky consistency and none of the starch thickened gloopiness of other pies. The scallops were just cooked through and the pastry, though too flaky to pass the driving test, was crisp and delicious. It was a good pie but the real triumph of that particular outing was their goat and lentil pie. The interior featured beautifully seasoned goat meat, peppery and curry scented. The tender goat combined perfectly with lentils that had been cooked right to the point of breaking down, this created the starch necessary to hold the pie together mitigating the need for thickening agents. Sitting on a sun dappled park bench in the charming Battery Point neighborhood of Hobart, we devoured

four different Jackman & McRoss pies but it was the Goat and Lentil I kept thinking about.

Many of the regional pie variations are odd and they often seem to have unlikely combinations and flavors. Hyper regional ingredients such as Makata mussels or wallaby, don't seem the obvious choice for a pastry filling. Though I am a pie obsessive, I often found myself wondering if seafood and game wouldn't be at its best simply prepared, and minimally fussed over. A few of the regional pies seem frankly geared toward culinary bemusement. The Coat of Arms pie, for example, which contains emu and kangaroo, the two animals depicted on Australia's official emblem. And there are pies such as the previously mentioned ChopSuey pie, that one might think of as a vehicle for leftovers and scraps. Both the exotic pies and the mainstream ones vary region to region, and shop to shop, and the quality of the fillings varies greatly and pie filling is the subject of much commentary. In Australia we were told that a common moniker for mince pies is, 'Maggot Bags,' and in New Zealand they are referred to as 'Rat Coffins'. These pejoratives and others, arise frequently when people speculate on the low quality ingredients that they suspect might be hidden in their pies. Rat Coffin, is a particularly interesting colloquialism, though obviously meant as a slight in modern times, any food history nerd will be quick to point out that pies (of all sorts) were originally referred to as coffyns or cofyns. In early European cooking, pie crust served as both cooking utensil and preservation method, with whole game birds and even entire sides of venison encased in the thick crust and then sealed with gelatin or suet. The Fifteenth-century Cookery-book, "Harleian," (dated 1430), includes recipes for various types of pies, including this one for Fried Chewets, a kind of hand pie, note the use of the word cofyn:

Chawettys Fryidde.

*Take & make fayre past of flowre & water, Sugre & Safroun & Salt, & þan make fayre round cofyns þer-of; & þen fylle þin cofyns with þin stuf, & keuere þin cofyns with þe same past, & frye hem in gode Oyle, & serue f[orth].*

These 'coffins' once baked and sealed, excluded air as a method of preservation (before canning and refrigeration) and became synonymous with saving things from mold or decay. Coffyn, from the French coffer, was a word used for any kind of box. Indeed the word tracks back further to the Greek *kóphinos*, and the Latin *cophinus* which both mean "basket." It gradually became a funereal term as the practice of placing the deceased in boxes for burial (instead of shrouds etc.) became more popular. Pie, a term derived from the Latin word *pica*, which refers to magpies and other birds that gather bits and bobs, was used in middle English from the about the 12 century on to indicate any gathering of random things. For example *pi*, in printers' slang is a mass of type jumbled together. Pie eventually replaced the word coffyn as the defining feature of pie became the various combinations of ingredients being compared to objects randomly collected by a magpie. Indeed, in middle english a bakery was often called a piehaus.

The descriptive term 'Rat Coffin,' is most frequently used when the discussion of meat pies turns to quality of ingredients. It is often said that cheaper/mass produced pies, are filled with dubious, low quality meat or, more derisively, with rodents and road kill. However, this speculation is misguided. While it might be possible for home bakers or small shops to hide inferior ingredients in a pie, commercial pies are strictly regulated. In Australia and New Zealand, the governing food administration body, the aptly named *Food*

*Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)*, requires that anything calling itself a meat pie be a minimum 25% meat and suggests an upper limit of 15 to 35 grams of fat per pie. Lest you think that a shoddy pie can slide under the wire with a loose definition of the word 'meat,' the FSANZ has standards for that as well. The meats that can be considered in the 25% of a meat pie are beef, buffalo, camel, cattle, deer, goat, hare, pig, poultry, rabbit and sheep. Kangaroo meat, a leaner alternative, can also be used as long as it is butchered and processed correctly. FSANZ's definition of meat includes snouts, ears, tongue roots, tendons and blood vessels but excludes offal (brain, heart, kidney, liver, tongue, tripe) which must all be specified on the label. Game, or wildy caught and killed meats, cannot be used in commercially mass produced pies but they are frequently featured at craft bakeries.

Anyone familiar with American stock yards, pink slime, and bovine antibiotics and growth hormones, may counter the above claim with suspicions regarding not the percentage of meat, but the quality of the included meat. The fact of the matter though, is that the land down under produces some of the highest quality meat in the world, and the vast majority of the livestock (beef, sheep, and goat) is primarily free range. It is only in recent years that some producers have adopted the American method of grain finishing at end of life (the last 120 days is customary for beef). The internet is a great source of information regarding farming practices in New Zealand and Australia but the ubiquity of cattle and sheep grazing on every gorgeous hillside and open pasture certainly made me feel better about the pies I was consuming. The organization, World Animal Protection, rated New Zealand in the top four countries globally for its animal welfare measures, alongside the United Kingdom, Austria, and Switzerland. Unlike in other countries, the cattle are not

routinely fed hormones or antibiotics. And one testament to the standards of meat farming in New Zealand, specifically, is a story reported in September of 2018, by various news outlets. An Anzco (100% owned by Japanese interests) feed lot used for finishing Angus breed cattle, was brought to task for: "... breaching the code of welfare for beef which provides animals with five freedoms<sup>7</sup>. Feedlots ... violate at least two of those freedoms. The cows are not provided with adequate shelter, and they cannot display normal patterns of behavior such as grazing," Animal Law vice-president Cassandra Kenworthy

In Australia, where finishing beef in feed lots is a more common practice, the Lot Feeders' Association (ALFA) has been eager to demonstrate that the industry is well credentialed in these areas and there are a number of good resources online that can further inform on this subject. The point of all that, is that meat down under is a point of pride and is held to very high standards despite people's suspiciousness regarding their pie meat. If anything, the meat industry may suffer from the pie industry's almost fanatical preoccupation with 'quality'. Consumers equate premium cuts with quality, cheaper cuts of meat would be the far more flavorful and texturally advantageous meat to use.

Toward the end of this Australian and New Zealand pie quest, I was able to meet with the aforementioned journalist and food historian Andrè Taber. Quality of ingredients was one of the things we chatted about when we met in the Ponsonby neighborhood of Auckland, where Taber both lives, and leads walking tours of the local gastronomy hotspots. From his home we walked to a nearby pie shop. A dutch transplant to New Zealand, Taber is a tall, deliberate man who spoke knowledgeably (among other things) about the local Victorian

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<sup>1</sup>The five animal welfare freedoms are a universally accepted cornerstone for assessing and ensuring animal wellbeing around the world. The five freedoms of animal welfare are: Freedom from hunger or thirst by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour. Freedom from discomfort by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area. Freedom from pain, injury or disease by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment. Freedom to express (most) normal behavior by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

architecture. Before writing the Great New Zealand Pie Guide in 2006, he published a book on the regional olive oil industry. I thought we were walking to a pie shop, we actually ended up at a BP service station where he steered me toward a pie warmer which offered a variety of flavors. I choose a steak and pepper pie and he opted for the Thai curry chicken. I was surprised that the guy who literally wrote the book on New Zealand pies, would favor a gas station for our interview venue but the choice made more sense, once I tried the pies.

The BP service stations in NZ are stocked with pies from a local purveyor called *Dad's Pies*. Taber filled me in on the history of the company. Dad's Pies went from a small, beach side bakery established in 1981, to a major purveyor of pies supplying not just BP stations, but convenience stores, grocers, and take-away shops. They currently produce 13 million pies a year and are branching into Japan where meat pies are becoming a popular fast food option. *Dad's Pies*, as I discovered at the Ponsbaby BP station, hit that middle ground between price point, overall tastiness, and portability. Their Mince and Cheese pie was awarded the gold at the 2018 Bakell's Supreme Pie Awards. Which brings me to the question I was dying to ask Taber - what did he think of Patrick Lam's Supreme Gold award winning pie? He smiled wryly but didn't answer right away, I pressed on. We (my partner Andrew and I) had just returned from Tauranga where we had sampled Patrick Lam's, Supreme Gold Award winner - the Onion, Mushroom, and Pork Belly pie - I recounted the experience to him. The pie crust at Patrick's was nearly perfect, but the filling, Andrew and I had both agreed, tasted like ... well, like instant gravy or soup mix. In fact, many of the pies we sampled on the trip had that gloopy, instant gravy, taste and texture. As I recounted this to Taber, he somewhat conspiratorially whispered, "I'm not going to say anything negative, however, think about the name of the competition."

“Bakels New Zealand Supreme Pie Awards?” I said slowly. “Right,” Taber responded, “and do you know who Bakels are? What they make? Look that up and I think you’ll have your answers.” after saying goodbye to Taber I headed to the Auckland library to see what I could find out about Bakels and the products they create.

NZ BAKELS LTD or NZB as it is known within the company, was first registered in New Zealand as a business in 1953. The initial products that NZB produced were: the patented emulsified fats MASTERFAT and BRITTEX; an emulsified tin release agent TINCOL and Baking Powder. NZB now manufactures hundreds of products, from pre-made pastry to the aforementioned FINO modified starch pie thickener. A look through their website yields hundreds of pie ‘recipes,’ all of which include a step by step guide to using their pre-made pie mixes. Recipe R771f, for example, is for a Beef Stroganoff Pie, and the first ingredient in the recipe is BAKELS GOURMET PIE MIX. I felt somehow scandalized by this information, even cheated a bit, until I realized that my own naivety was at fault. If the contest had been called the “McCormick’s Instant Gravy Mix Supreme Pie Awards” - would I not expect to have a bit of instant gravy in my pie? Wouldn’t the “Cool Whip dessert challenge,” necessarily involve artificial ‘whipped topping’? This was no different.

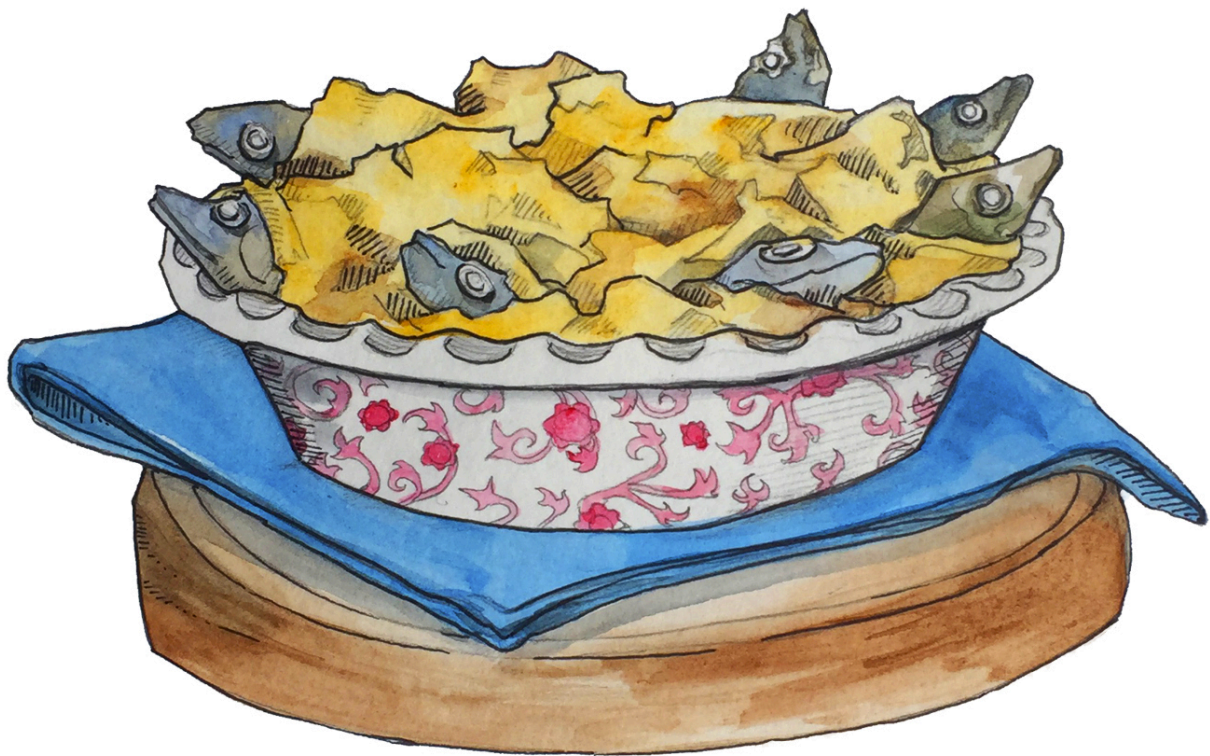
In Quebec and other parts of eastern Canada, there is a regional pie called the Tourtière. Potatoes are a primary ingredient as are onions, ground beef, or any of a variety of game meats. One par boils the potatoes before adding them to the filling and the potato cooking liquid is used as the thickener. I mention this pie because of the cooking method which circumvents the need for any pre-packaged thickening agents and therefore avoids that gloopy texture that

modified starch gives. Fillings in other types of hand pies, such as the Melton Mowbray pork pie and the Bolivian Salteña, are thickened with gelatin from boiling down pork trotters, calves foot, ears, snouts, or other collagen rich bits. As with most cooking, shortcuts can be taken but they seldom yield the best result. In the case of the pies of the Australia and New Zealand, the ubiquity of commercial thickeners has been a detriment to an otherwise wonderful culinary tradition.

After this whole experiment, I am still a pie aficionado and at the time of writing, am planning my next pie adventure. I will say this about the pies of the South Pacific Commonwealth - many of them are delicious, well crafted, and worthy of the fanaticism they inspire. However, the best pies we had were the ones that didn't skimp on seasoning and most importantly ,those that do not use powdered thickeners. Bring on the potatoes, the slowly stewed vegetables, the yams, and starchy beans. Boil down fish collars, fins, pig ears, and eels. Or, take a page from Jackman & McRoss and combine tender goat with spicy lentils - now that was unequivocally, a Goldstar pie.

## *Stargazy Pie*

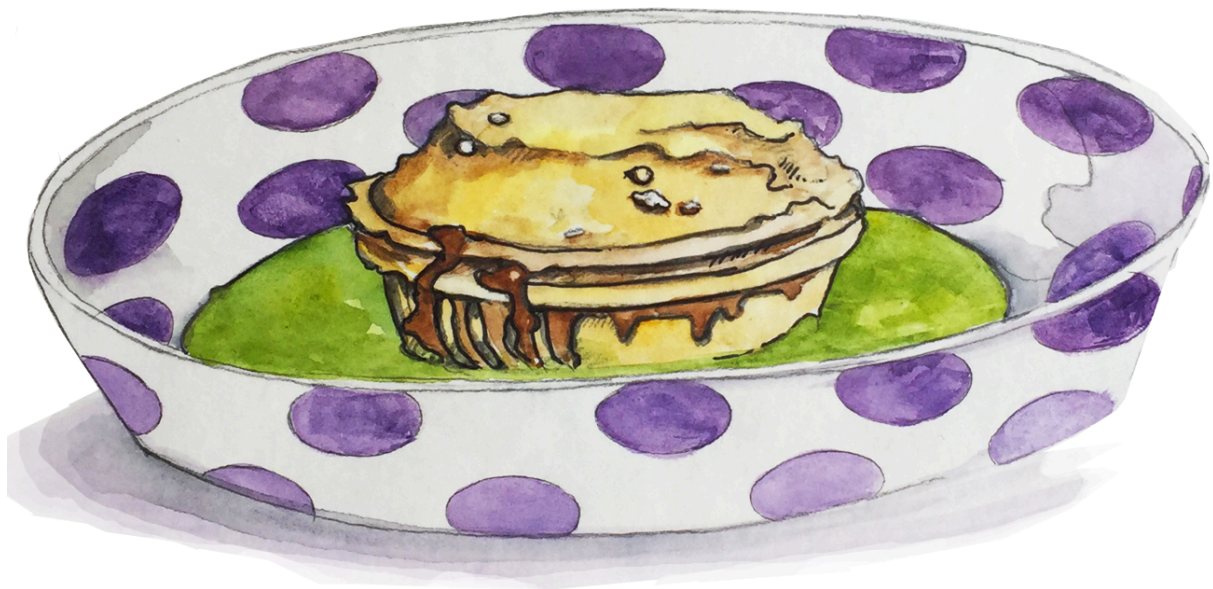
This pie hails from Cornwall and features head-on pilchards which poke through the crust and give the appearance of gazing at the stars. Oil and gelatin from the fish enhance the pie filling and give it a rich, if fishy, flavor. The dish is traditionally held to have originated from the village of Mousehole in Cornwall and is traditionally eaten during the festival of Tom Bawcock's Eve to celebrate his heroic catch during a very stormy winter.



stargazy

## *Pie Floater*

Dating back to early 19th century, horse-drawn pie carts, this soup and pie combo features a meat or eel pie 'floating' in a bowl of mashed peas or pea soup. Often the pie will be served bottom side up. The soup was traditionally made from blue boiler peas. Though originally from England, this dish is most commonly found today in Australia. It can be garnished with tomato sauce, mint sauce, or malt vinegar.



pie floater

## *Tourtière*

This Canadian meat pie hails from the province of Quebec, but is also popular in New Brunswick and across Canada.

Variations can be found in the north eastern United States. Most commonly made with minced beef and potatoes it also frequently features wild game. *Tourtière* is a traditional holiday meal. In Quebec it is part of the Christmas *réveillon* and New the Year's Eve meal.



tourtière





