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What is so disgusting?

MALMO, SWEDEN

Museum asks its visitors to explore why certain edibles turn them off

BY CHRISTINA ANDERSON

The idea that anything labeled “food” can be described as “disgusting” is a minefield, running up against cultural tastes and personal preferences, not to mention the shrinking ability of some countries to feed all their people.

But clearly, if every human had a cornucopia of the world’s edibles laid out on a table stretching from one end of the earth to the next, not everyone would dig enthusiastically into, say, a lamprey pie, a sliver of maggot-infested pecorino or a chunk of rotten shark meat.

A basic human reaction would surface at some point: disgust. And that emotion is the basis for an unusual and controversial exhibition here in Malmo, in the south of Sweden.

“I want people to question what they find disgusting,” said Samuel West, the lead curator of the Disgusting Food Museum, a touring pop-up exhibition that opens on Wednesday.

Visitors will be invited to explore their notions of food through the lens of disgust, said Dr. West, an organizational psychologist, who hopes the museum will stimulate discussion and self-reflection.

“What’s interesting is that disgust is hard-wired biologically,” Dr. West said this week over a restaurant lunch of cabbage pudding. “But you still have to learn from your surroundings what you should find disgusting.”

The idea for the exhibition was prompted, in part, by his concerns about the ecological impact of eating meat and his own environmental footprint. He said he hoped the exhibition would stimulate discussion about sustainable protein sources.

“We can’t continue the way we are now,” he said. “I was asking myself, why don’t we eat insects, when they are so cheap and sustainable to produce? The obstacle is disgust.”

When word of the exhibition broke, people in some countries were aghast that their favorite foods or treats were included.

“It’s interesting to see how everyone comes to the defense of their own food,” said Andreas Ahrens, the museum director. “People can’t believe that we take their favorite foods and put them in the museum.”

More than 80 items from 35 countries will be on display: Haggis, the Scottish delicacy made of offal and oatmeal, traditionally boiled in a bag made from a sheep’s stomach; Vegemite, the thick, black yeast spread from Australia; and Spam, the pink-hued canned cooked pork product that American troops introduced to the cuisine of the Pacific Islanders in the years following World War II, will be represented.

So will dishes such as fruit bat soup from Guam, a maggot-infested cheese from Sardinia and a glass vat of Chinese mouse wine.

Visitors can sample items like root beer, sauerkraut juice and salty licorice. But if you’re not up for tasting tofu with a smell redolent of “stinky feet” and “baby poo,” or durian fruit (banned on planes and in some hotels) or hákarl, an Icelandic shark dish once described by the chef Anthony Bourdain as “the sin-



Top, Samuel West, lead curator of the Disgusting Food Museum, with Japanese natto, fermented soy beans. “A crackling surface and soft dripping interior can often evoke disgust,” he said. More than 80 items from 35 countries will be on display including, below from left, fruit bat soup; baby mice; and a boiled duck egg with a partly developed fetus.



gle worst, most disgusting and terrible tasting thing,” you can get a sense of their taste by taking a whiff from a “smell jar.”

Mr. Ahrens said that to make it into the museum, foods had to be real and considered disgusting by many people.

“It is inherently a somewhat subjective thing to figure out what is disgusting,” he acknowledged.

He said a panel worked its way down a list of 250 foods based on four criteria: taste, smell, texture and background, the latter being how an animal is treated in the making of a dish, for example.

Pork scored low on taste, smell and texture on the “disgusting” scale, but very high for background. Japanese natto — fermented soy beans — scored high for its slimy texture.

The factors that go into a feeling of disgust vary.

A combination of textures, as with the sight of many insects on one surface, can make people feel ill at ease.

“A crackling surface and soft dripping interior can often evoke disgust,” said Hakan Jonsson, a food anthropologist at Lund University in Sweden.

Seeing the way animals are treated in the preparation of food (displayed on video screens at the museum) can also

“I was asking myself, why don’t we eat insects, when they are so cheap and sustainable to produce?”

inspire revulsion: geese being force-fed to make the French delicacy foie gras, fish served still flapping in Japan, or beating cobra hearts in Vietnam.

“Disgust is the result of a combination of biological and cultural factors,” Dr. Jonsson said. “And when it comes to food, it is most often impossible to define what is biology and what is culture. You can say that something is disgusting —

but only from the individual’s point of view.”

While it is difficult to find something that is disgusting to everyone, there are foods that large groups of people uniformly find disgusting.

“Things that are particularly raw and also things that are really rotten — they are disgusting to most people,” he said.

Disgust is also mutable.

“We can change what we find disgusting,” said Rebecca Ribbing, a researcher working on the exhibition.

It has shifted in local cultures through the ages. She cited lobster as an illustration. “In the 1600s, it was considered inhumane to feed lobster to prisoners more than twice a week,” Ms. Ribbing said (this is possibly because lobsters were so common at the time).

Fried tarantula became popular with Cambodians when food became scarce under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s.

This isn’t the first time Dr. West, 44,

has explored hot-button issues through a museum. An innovation researcher who advises companies on how to become more successful, he opened a Museum of Failure in 2017 to examine why some gadgets end up in the junkyard of product history.

Since news of the food museum was announced, there have been many complaints on social media, Mr. Ahrens said. Australians are angry that Vegemite is included. Americans are shocked that root beer made the exhibition.

“I had the same reaction when we were talking about my favorites like pork and beef,” he said. “My initial reaction was that we can’t put this in here. When we talked about it, it was obvious that we had to have it in the museum because of the factory farming and the environmental impact.”

If any of the items in this exhibition makes visitors want to throw up, the curators have thought of this, too. The ticket doubles as a sickness bag.

Bringing Shakespeare’s voice to the modern stage

CICELY BERRY
1926-2018

BY RICHARD SANDOMIR

Cicely Berry, whose unorthodox exercises released actors’ minds to feel the sound and muscularity of Shakespeare’s verse for nearly a half-century as the Royal Shakespeare Company’s voice director, died on Oct. 15 in Cornwall, England. She was 92.

Her daughter, Sara Moore, confirmed her death and said Ms. Berry had recently had two small strokes.

Ms. Berry was not an acting teacher, but her passionate work as a voice director influenced the stage and screen performances of generations of British actors, including Sean Connery, Judi Dench, Emily Watson and Patrick Stewart.

Ms. Berry, who was known as Cis, used her understanding of Shakespeare to help actors absorb the rhythms of his language and the weight of his words. It was not enough to grasp his literal meaning, she argued; one had to feel his vowels and consonants and to appreciate the beats of the iambic pentameter in which he wrote.

Only then, she said, would an actor’s voice be capable of evoking Shakespeare’s poetry and musicality.

“When we read a piece of text, our first impulse is to make sense of it,” she said during a workshop with British and American actors in 1996 that was reproduced as a book and DVDs titled “Working Shakespeare” (2004). “The danger is that, having come to a conclusion about the meaning, we often miss out on the surprises within the language.”



Cicely Berry in 2008. She used her understanding of Shakespeare to help actors absorb the rhythms of his language and the weight of his words.

In a soothing but commanding voice that she leavened with profanity, Ms. Berry took actors at the Royal Shakespeare Company, one of Britain’s leading theater organizations, through movements designed to bring them a new understanding of Shakespeare’s resonant language.

She would tell a group of actors to read, in unison, the prologue from “Romeo and Juliet,” while appearing to walk aimlessly around a rehearsal room.

“Walking around, speaking it all together,” she said in the 1996 workshop, “the danger is that, having come to a conclusion about the meaning, we often miss out on the surprises within the language.”

the text without feeling the pressure to do it right.”

She also directed actors to toss chairs and kick beer cans while reciting Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy. And she devised breathing exercises and other activities that included having actors bounce up and down on the floor while reading a “Macbeth” passage.

“The exercises took away the fear and overconcentration that actors used to approach Shakespeare,” Jeffrey Horowitz, founding artistic director of Theater for a New Audience in New York City, which is devoted to Shakespeare and other classics, said in a telephone interview. Ms. Berry held annual workshops with his troupe in New York.

Mr. Horowitz described one exercise in which several actors held the actress playing Ophelia in “Hamlet” and had her push against them while reciting the “O, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown” speech.

“Cis wanted to show that the effort to overcome the physical resistance to the group is the same energy that was needed to reach the audience,” Mr. Horowitz said. “She felt that physical responses to things like her exercises energized the text.”

The actor Ian McKellen was another admiring pupil. “Her personal approach is almost that of a confidante, relaxing the mind and the body, or of a healer soothing tensions, rooting emotions in reality,” he said in an interview in 1976 with The Times Saturday Review of London. “She prepares the actor to be a tuned instrument, which may clearly, resonantly, play Shakespeare’s subtlest and grandest notes.”

Cicely Frances Berry was born on May 17, 1926, in Berkhamsted, England. Her father, Cecil, was a city clerk, and her mother, Frances (Batchelor) Berry, was a part-time dressmaker.

Cicely became enamored with poetry as a youngster, often escaping her boisterous older siblings by retreating to the bathroom to read aloud Shakespeare, Keats, Shelley and Auden, sometimes to Micky, her dog.

“Taught myself, read it aloud to myself,” she said in a video interview in 2014 with Jane Boston, an instructor at Central School of Speech and Drama in London, which Ms. Berry attended in the 1940s. “I was absolutely obsessed.”

After graduating, she was hired by the school as a voice instructor. Her reputation steadily grew and led Trevor

Nunn, the Royal Shakespeare’s artistic director at the time, to hire her as the company’s first voice director in 1969.

She said she was fortunate to work for three very different directors there: Mr. Nunn, John Barton and Terry Hands.

“It was a wonderful, enlightening time to work on Shakespeare,” she told Ms. Boston. “I started working on voice, but it quickly worked out that actors would ask for advice or help on a speech, and I’d have to find ways of honoring what the director wanted but find ways to get the actors to get their own responses to the language.”

Ms. Berry also taught at Nô do Morro, a theater company in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, and in various British prisons. She also directed productions of “King Lear” in Stratford-upon-Avon and London, wrote several books, including “Voice and the Actor” (1973) and “The Actor and the Text” (1987), and was the dialogue coach for two Bernardo Bertolucci films, “The Last Emperor” (1987) and “Stealing Beauty” (1996).

In addition to her daughter, she is survived by her sons, Aaron and Simeon Moore; four grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren. Her husband, Harry Moore, an American-born actor who was later a producer for the BBC, died in 1978.

The cadence, flow and power of language that transformed Ms. Berry as a girl in poetry’s thrall guided her into her 10th decade.

“We were working on Thomas Kyd’s ‘The Spanish Tragedy’ a few years ago,” she told The Guardian in 2011, “and the line kept coming out at me: ‘Where words prevail, not violence prevails.’ That’s the bottom line of what I feel my work does.”

She turned her pain into activism for the abducted

ANA GONZÁLEZ
1925-2018

BY PASCALE BONNEFOY

SANTIAGO, CHILE Ana González, a relentless Chilean human rights advocate whose husband, two sons and pregnant daughter-in-law disappeared during the Pinochet dictatorship, has died in Santiago. She was 93 and never learned the fate of her family members.

Her death on Oct. 26 was confirmed by her daughter, Patricia Recabarren.

In late April 1976, Ms. González’s sons Manuel, 22, and Luis, 29, and Luis’s wife, Nalvia Alvarado, 20, who was three months pregnant, were seized by security forces on their way home from the print shop where the brothers worked. The abductors left the couple’s 2-year-old boy on the street. Early the next morning, when Ms. González’s husband left to look for his missing children, he too was kidnapped. She never saw or heard from any of them again.

They were among the 3,000 people who disappeared or died during the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, who was installed in a coup in 1973 that overthrew Chile’s democratically elected president, Salvador Allende.

The disappearances began almost immediately after the coup, with opponents of military rule snatched from the streets and taken to clandestine torture centers. Ms. González became one of the early members of the Association of Relatives of the Disappeared, vowing to turn her grief into political action and to refrain from crying until she knew the full truth of what had happened to her family.

She joined dozens of others in the group, mainly women, who took to the streets at a time of fierce political repression and widespread fear. They protested, went on hunger strikes, chained themselves to the gates of the outlawed National Congress and marched relentlessly with photographs of their missing loved ones pinned to their chests.

Ms. González’s abiding optimism and sense of humor helped make her a high-profile campaigner for justice.

“They never thought that a woman, a housewife who didn’t know anything, not even where the courts were located, would take up the battle cry,” she said in an interview with The New York Times in 2010.



Ana González spent decades trying to find her abducted family members in Chile.

Publicly defying the military authorities, Ms. González traveled to New York in 1977 to denounce human rights abuses in Chile before the United Nations. She was briefly barred from re-entering the country.

Once democracy was restored there in 1990, she continued to demand justice and the truth about the fate of her loved ones and the other Chileans who had disappeared.

Ana González was born on July 26, 1925, one of six children of a widowed mother, in Tocopilla, a city 800 miles north of Santiago, the capital.

She became involved with the Communist Party in her teens and in 1944 married Manuel Recabarren, who was also an active party member. Mr. Recabarren led a local food distribution committee under the socialist Allende administration, making him a target of the right-wing dictatorship. The couple’s sons and daughter-in-law were also members of the Communist Party.

In addition to her daughter, Ms. González is survived by two sons, Ricardo and Vladimir, and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Another daughter, Ana Maria, died of cancer in 2007.

In 2010, Ms. González figured prominently on posters and in television advertisements as part of a government campaign to collect DNA samples from the relatives of the disappeared so they could be matched with unidentified human remains in the morgue.

After her death, hundreds of people came to her home in spontaneous expressions of affection that reflected “what she represented, her principles, her values and her struggle,” Congresswoman Maya Fernández, the granddaughter of Salvador Allende, said. “She kept on fighting, but with a strong love for life.”

Judicial investigations eventually determined that Ms. González’s husband had been taken to at least two torture centers before vanishing. But at her death, Ms. González had come no closer to knowing anything about the fate of the others, including her unborn grandchild, than she was in 1976.