

## **Culinary Studies at Antioch College: John Ronsheim's Influence on Food Studies**

Neil L. Coletta

[Edited notes from presentation at NonStop Institute – March 5, 2010]

“You have to give yourself up totally to things, if you are going to do them.”  
– John Ronsheim

My name is Neil Coletta and I am the Assistant Director of Programs in Food, Wine & the Arts at Boston University, and an Antioch alumn, class of 2002. I majored in what was then called Literature, Language and Culture, and went on to the Master of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy program at Boston University. I want to thank Chris Hill for inviting me, and everyone at The NonStop Institute, as well as Scott Sanders, Antioch College, and the Yellow Springs community. Also Laura McGough and “Anarchy in the Kitchen”.

The program said that I would address some intersections of food, art, media and social justice, and I will try to touch on these, however, what I'd really like to do is to give some idea of the ways in which food has been studied in academia in the past, and how the subject is being approached today. Antioch plays a very interesting part in this story, particularly in light of its current restructuring, which I'll talk about towards the end.

Let me first - and this is how I know I'm back among Antiochians - qualify my terms. I'll refer alternately both to *Gastronomy* and *Food Studies*. For my purposes here, I consider the terms interchangeable. At Boston University we offer a Master of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy, while at New York University, for example, they offer degrees in Food Studies, though the programs are quite similar in terms of content and objective. Food Studies tends to be more widely accepted in the field, however there is hardly consensus. There are ongoing debates over the relative merits and shortcomings of both terms, and over exactly what they each encompass, but to provide a basis for *this* discussion let's simply say that these fields examine “people and their relationships to food within a conceptual framework.” Generally speaking, scholars have approached these topics either from a strong disciplinary base – an Anthropology of Food, for example – or from an interdisciplinary perspective that could, but does not necessarily include, Culinary Arts, Sociology, Cultural Studies, Nutrition, Art, Media Studies, and more, in various combinations.

The starting point for all of this is simply that food matters. That it is extremely significant, not just to produce and to consume, but to consider, and, through this consideration, we may learn uniquely about ourselves, our bodies and minds, our histories, identities, cultures, economies, political systems, and much, much more. The ideological shift of focus which puts food and its relationship to people at the forefront, and which makes it the lens through which to examine the world, is one of the primary strategies of Food Studies.

A second point is that few have made, or are yet willing to make, this ideological shift, particularly in academia. Thus, food remains largely tangential. Despite, or perhaps, in part, because of, the increasing presence of food and cooking in American pop culture and the mainstream media, it is a topic still largely relegated to the realms of lifestyle and hobby.

One unique aspect of this is that food and cooking – taken broadly as cultural phenomena – are now enjoying an unprecedented vogue, at least in America and the UK. Emerging fields rarely have such corresponding cache in the dominant culture, and this can be seen as both an advantage, and a potential derailment. As an academic discipline, Food Studies engages with, and overlaps with, popular culture and media representations, albeit from an ostensibly more “serious” perspective. The question remains as to whether there are competing ideologies at work, or if these manifestations of the appreciation and study of food simply reflect disparate approaches.

Though most people will agree that food is important to them, their reasons for how and why will vary widely, and we are not yet in an environment where the study of food – in its own right – is widely considered worthy of distinct *scholarly* attention. By contrast, departments in well-established fields such as Anthropology, Sociology, etc., have long been considered essential to liberal arts Colleges and Universities. Let me emphasize here that I’m referring to programs based in the liberal arts. Departments in Food Policy, Food Science, and Nutrition, for example, all overlap with Food Studies, but tend to have their own histories and in many cases have already established departments at major Universities. They tend to study food itself – biologically, chemically, physiologically - whereas food studies may in essence study everything *surrounding* the subject of food, without necessarily studying the object itself.

Some view the emerging field of Food Studies as analogous to other, more relatively recent developments in academia, such as Women’s Studies, or, African-American Studies – fields that have undergone their own difficult paths towards legitimization, but which are now widely accepted, and in some cases considered fundamental. I don’t make these comparisons by way of content, or relative importance, but simply to illustrate that most Food Studies scholars consider the study of food at least as integral to our individual and collective understanding of the world, as issues of identity, gender, ethnicity, sex, death, power, revolutions, and more. When approached from an interdisciplinary perspective, the theories and methodologies one has access to are virtually limitless. This is one of the advantages to being on the fringe, for it affords a lot of intellectual and scholarly freedom.

A lot of the hesitation surrounding an investment in Gastronomy or Food Studies, from the student’s perspective, has to do with the fact that the field is relatively new and chronically misunderstood. After all, education is expensive. The field is small, obscure, and often not taken seriously. It is fighting for legitimization with limited resources, and is up against the powerful forces of academic tradition and a general trend towards the eradication of the liberal arts. Is any of this sounding familiar?

In a sense, Food Studies has been going on for as long as humans have been writing things down. Food is central to everything from cave paintings to Ancient and Classical texts and beyond. Modern scholarship has addressed food and issues of production and consumption from within a variety of fields, notably History, Anthropology and Sociology, but when you start looking for examples you tend to find them everywhere - that is, in most subject areas. In a way, then, it should not be such a leap of logic, or a provocative notion, to maintain that this area deserves a field of its own, however traditional scholars and University administrators remain hesitant to give credence.

So that's some basic background to a few of the ideas and issues happening in Food Studies today. I'd like to tell you briefly about what we do at Boston University, and to then go backwards chronologically to end up here in Yellow Springs in the 1970s. Then we'll jump forward to Antioch today, and hopefully the connections will become clear.

To my knowledge, Boston University was the first to establish an official degree program in this field. This began with a Culinary Arts Certificate in 1989, founded by Julia Child, Jacques Pepin and the program's current Director, Rebecca Alssid. Originally, this program was proposed as a Bachelor of Arts degree that would incorporate the kitchen and the classroom - both culinary and academic approaches - but was ultimately granted only Certificate status. Advocacy continued for a degree program, and in 1992 Boston University formally introduced, *not* a Bachelor's, but the Master of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy degree.

Fundamental to the philosophy of this program from its inception, and increasingly embraced in the field, is an experiential component within the curriculum. Therefore, students are encouraged to study the Culinary Arts, as well as to participate in Wine and Cheese Studies programs, for credit towards their degrees. In addition, many of the classroom-based graduate courses - which may focus on food history, food writing, food policy, tourism, and more - incorporate a hands-on cooking component, as well as field trips to various food production sites, such as farms that specialize in cheese making, and local vineyards. Not only are these activities fun, they are considered essential to an education so engaged with the visceral issues of food production and consumption. *Experiential* learning is key here, as it has been throughout Antioch's history.

While the programs at Boston University came together in the late 1980s and early 1990s, another institution, across the country, had been enjoying a slight head start, also by way of Julia Child's involvement, though it did not offer a degree. This was the American Institute of Wine and Food [or AIWF] in Santa Barbara, California, which began in 1981, with the goals of becoming a think tank for the world's food industry as well as to raise the preparation of food from a craft to an art. I'm not going to say much about this, because I'd like to focus more on Antioch's role, but if you're interested they're now a very prominent organization and easy to find online.

What is significant about the AIWF in the context of *this* story is that it provides a link - it grew directly out of plans originally proposed to Antioch College. It was largely bolstered by the involvement and advocacy of the late Julia Child, who in turn was

directly influenced by the ideas of a former Antioch professor. Remember that Julia Child co-founded the culinary and Gastronomy programs in Boston between 1989 and 1992. And before all of this she had served on the Advisory Panel for the Culinary Studies proposals to Antioch College.

In other words – Antioch - Santa Barbara – Boston. By way of Julia Child as a *figurehead*, but with a lot of other people’s ideas, input and hard work.

So, this brings me to Antioch, and Yellow Springs, and specifically to a person named John Ronsheim, who, I would argue, had a much greater hand in the origin of all that I’ve spoken about, than almost any other individual. And yet, most people in the field have never heard of him. When the American Institute of Wine and Food began in Santa Barbara, John Ronsheim was invited to the kickoff banquet as their Honorary Founder, and was referred to as, “the father of this whole movement.” Today, a search for John Ronsheim on the AIWF website yields zero results.

I understand that some of you may have known John Ronsheim personally (he passed away in 1997), so I welcome your thoughts, questions, or corrections at the end. I, somewhat ironically, learned of John Ronsheim from a friend only after my time at Antioch, in fact just about when I began to formally study Gastronomy. Since then I have felt a strong connection to his ideas and ideals surrounding the study of food as integral to a holistic education, and feel that in many ways these ideas remain untested, and unmatched. I believe that he was a visionary, almost single handedly predicting this field, and I believe that he can rightly be considered a sort of “godfather of food studies,” if such a title can be applied to any one person.

For those who did not know him, or have not heard of him, I’ll give some brief background. Incidentally, what I know of John Ronsheim comes primarily from a visit I made in 2007 to the archives at Antiochiana, where I was able to review press clippings and original writings, but also from a great article by Adam Kowit in the Fall 2001 issue of the journal, “Gastronomica,” which I highly recommend if any of this is interesting to you.

John Ronsheim was a Professor of Music at Antioch from approximately 1967 to 1990. His classes, lectures and performance as a teacher are somewhat legendary among his former students. He was apparently extremely charismatic, passionate, and inventive, and has a loyal following that continues to keep his spirit alive even today. His teaching style has been compared to jazz improvisation, and his philosophy of aesthetics strove to incorporate many disciplines, not just music, and particularly food and wine, towards the higher goal of bringing meaning to the lives of his students, and showing them how to make meanings of their own. He is noted for many accomplishments during his time at Antioch, but I’m going to focus only on his ideas about food and wine. If you’re interested in his life or music, Antiochiana has a wealth of information, and you can also find some of this online.

First in 1973 and again in 1975, John Ronsheim led groups of Antioch students to Europe on what were called, “Culinary Chorus Trips.” These were ten-week, full-credit programs of touring choral performances through France, Holland, Belgium and Italy, which incorporated the study of history, art, architecture, and cuisine. Students ate and discussed local and regional foods, and learned about wine and winemaking, visiting as many vineyards as cathedrals. Ronsheim titled this portion of the course, “Taste Perceptions,” whose goal was “for people to see the correspondence between what goes in the mouth, what you hear, and what you see...to discover how it all can be integrated into one. Realizing what’s given to us can give us a different way of looking at life.” Ronsheim also designed a class at Antioch titled, “Art, Wine, and the Five Senses,” and I just want to say, as an aside, that we’re offering a class in Boston this semester called, “Experiencing Food Through the Senses,” which scholars in the field have told us is the first of its kind. Not so.

It was on one of these chorus trips that John Ronsheim, according to his unpublished writings, had an epiphany, and decided to “place, for the first time in the history of the world’s educational system, food and wine preparation within the theory and practice of the fine arts and to afford this activity a curriculum within the academic community.”

The success of the chorus trips along with Ronsheims’ relentless vision culminated in a formal proposal for a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Culinary Studies at Antioch College in 1979. Again, this is the first that anyone is talking about such a program at the college level, and in some ways his proposal is more complete and complex than what we have currently.

Two of the essential points of the proposal, *I think*, are 1) the experiential education component – this would be achieved through students working in an Antioch kitchen, learning the culinary arts, and also practicing farming and agriculture, therefore an integrated system of production. And, 2) the insistence on quality, as distinct from notions of elitism. It’s easy to dismiss that which is physically enjoyable as intellectually frivolous, and it’s even easier to dismiss the appreciation of good food and wine as elitist. But of course it’s never quite so black and white. John Ronsheim knew these things, and was careful to make the necessary distinctions. This was real education, and in the Antioch model – it worked perfectly with the co-op program, for example. The proposal states that, “the major goal will be...to understand cookery not as “art for art’s sake,” but as a wholly unselfish art, related to all dimensions of life, something to help harmonize the human race with our natural environment; to integrate the artificial (human skill, art) with the natural.”

In the classroom, students would study food history and culture, sociology, politics, economics, physiology, cookbook history, fermentation, journalism, and sensory theory. One of the most striking aspects of the proposal is the enormous support it received from luminaries of the food world at the time. In today’s food world, the endorsement of any *one* of these individuals would go far, so just to give you an idea of who, of fifty-seven total people, signed on to the advisory panel, I’ll read a few of the more prominent names: Of course, Julia Child. Also, Elizabeth David, James Beard, MFK Fisher, Craig

Claiborne, Robert Mondavi, Alan Davidson, Jeremiah Tower, and Alice Waters. If you're not familiar with these names, it would be something like getting the thumbs up from Karl Marx to teach your class on labor relations.

Here is where the proposal starts to get really interesting, particularly when we think about recent Antioch history. "Students, after studying French, would spend a ten-week term in France with Antioch-appointed wine and food experts. Antioch would buy land in Tuscany, where students would produce olive oil and wine for use at Antioch. They would intern in the Napa valley. Back home, the cafeteria would transform into a student-run establishment serving (along with Tuscan wine) simple, regional dishes supplied by the Antioch farm, which in turn would expand enormously to produce meat, cheese, fruit and every vegetable possible in this climate." Thus, wrote Ronsheim, "we would have our own Miami Valley identity."

Sounds nice, right? And it may also sound utopian, but I'll tell you that this summer our students in Boston will have the opportunity to make wine and olive oil in Sicily as part of a 2 credit course, and that some of our wine students participate in an annual trip to Tuscany to learn winemaking and viticulture. So, John Ronsheim's ideas have come to fruition all these years later, and down to the very region, in the case of Tuscany. It's almost frighteningly prophetic. And I'll add that not only were his ideas on education ahead of his time, but he really knew food. Very few people were talking about Tuscany or Napa Valley in the late 70s, but he knew.

In addition to the Bachelor's program, Antioch would offer one and two year food programs, as well as lectures and summer courses for the community. Again, in Boston we also run year-round public food and wine events, and host lecture series, attempting to integrate the students with the community.

Nonetheless, the proposal was rejected by the administration. However, it had gained the approval of much of the faculty along the way. It would of course be quite expensive to initiate and maintain, but also some felt that it would be vocational in nature, not fully grasping the integrated and experiential education that Ronsheim had envisioned. He considered this an ideal place to launch such an experimental program – despite the fact that few associated rural Ohio with fine cuisine – because Antioch was already a risk-taking liberal arts college, set apart from the relatively corporate culinary world dominant at that time.

What was left in the wake of the proposal's rejection were a lot of vibrant ideas with a lot of celebrity support. It didn't take long for this to lead to major investors elsewhere taking interest and - fast forward - there you have the AIWF in Santa Barbara. Of course, the core values and *academic* aspects of the proposal went by the wayside, and the result was largely a social organization, promoting food and wine, but lacking Ronsheim's holistic approach.

Now, I'm not saying that Antioch "dropped the ball" and that this program would have been a huge success simply because a field is now emerging that is largely based on these

original ideas. It's impossible to know, and it's not very helpful to speculate. I'm more interested in the fact that these ideas – in some ways very directly – have come to life at all. John Ronsheim sowed the seeds, and Julia Child took them to California, and then to Boston, where they grew into very different species. Boston's Gastronomy program is perhaps the closest realization of Ronsheim's ideas, but is still a ways off from his complete vision. We don't have a farm, for starters.

And I think that this is all particularly significant now, on the eve of Antioch's resurrection.

I recently learned of the latest developments in the new plan for Antioch College at an Alumni event in Boston. As you may or may not know, the plan will incorporate local, national and global perspectives with a focus on problem solving and critical thinking in the areas of energy, food, water, health and governance. The work component of the new Antioch will be as central as it has historically been, with opportunities for on-campus jobs that will engage with and benefit the entire community.

I can't speak in much detail regarding the "new" Antioch, however, at least on the surface, this holistic envisioning is not only a continuation of Antioch's radical approach to education, but is also in some ways a revival and refinement of earlier ideas. While perhaps not *explicitly* referencing John Ronsheim and his proposals for the College, the plan, as it's currently conceived, will likely reflect many of the late professor's ideals and interests, particularly as they relate to ideas surrounding food production and consumption with an integrated campus workforce component.

I believe that such a restructuring would not only resituate Antioch within its *own* traditions, connecting it to its past at a pivotal point in its present, but would also situate it, for the first time, within a more recent trend towards understanding the world through relationships involving food and food-related issues.

I hesitate to say that Antioch will become a home for "Gastronomy," or, "Food Studies" as the terms are currently used, but as a representative of that field, as an Antioch alumn, and as a believer in the power of the liberal arts to educate, and ultimately change the world, I'm grateful for the opportunity to note at least some of the intersections between this place and the scholarly study of food – past, present and future.

Thanks.