Writing about Food and Culture

Goals:

No one in the world lives apart from culturally-specific means of preparing, serving, and consuming food. When we talk about food, we’re talking about culture, whether the topic is Tibetan tea with yak butter or the pizza special at Alfredo’s. The purpose of this course is to develop your ability to write interesting, well-organized essays in which the contemplation of food illuminates some larger truth about humanity.

You will write and revise four essays and comment on each other’s essays in a workshop setting, to improve the clarity, structure, and power of each piece. We’ll talk about eating habits and prejudices and what they mean, and we will examine the works of several important writers who care intensely about what’s for dinner.

Required texts:

*Best Food Writing 2000*, ed. Holly Hughes
*We Are What We Ate*, ed. Mark Winegardner

Please budget for the photocopying of your essays, and for a meal in a restaurant.

Course Requirements:

Your grade will be based on the following:

- Essay #1 + revision (20%)
- Essay #2 + revision (20%)
- Essay #3 + revision (20%)
- Essay #4 + revision (20%)
- Class participation and informal written reactions to specific readings (20%)

At least two essays must be brought to the Writing Center before being handed in for workshop.

Grades for each essay will be based not only on quality but also on evidence that the revision was done with careful thought and consideration of workshop suggestions; I will look for substantial change. Late essays, in either draft or revised form, will not be
accepted; nor will e-mail or disk versions. Be sure to complete your drafts in time to bring at least two of them (but preferably all four) to the Writing Center before handing them in to the class for workshop discussion. Meeting with a Writing Center tutor will not only help accustom you to the process of revision, but it will also ensure that we can focus workshop time on the most substantive aspects of your work. You must complete all written work in order to pass the course.

All essays and revisions must be typed, double-spaced, with one-inch margins. You will not be asked to write a research paper, but if you do wish to cite sources, use MLA style. Be sure to bring enough copies to distribute to everyone in the class, including myself. (To save money and trees, feel free to copy on both sides.)

Participation grades come from your contributions to workshop and reading discussions, the incisiveness of your spoken and written reactions to both classmates’ essays and reading assignments, and attendance.

Schedule:

Please bring to each class the texts we will be discussing (this includes both published work and your classmates’ work), and make a habit of writing approximately half a page of informal reactions to each published text, before class.

M 9/3  Introduction
W 9/5  Discuss “Natural-Born Keller” by Michael Ruhlman (H) and “Don’t Ask, Just Eat” by Gish Jen (W)
F 9/7  Discuss “It Takes a Village to Kill a Pig” by Jeffrey Steingarten (H) and “Why I Stopped Being a Vegetarian” by Laura Fraser (H)
M 9/10  “My Son, Eating Dinner” by Charles Baxter (W), “Manje” by Madison Smartt Bell (W), and “My Dragon-Dancing Years” by Fae Ng (H)
W 9/12  “The Pleasures of Eating” by Wendell Berry (W) and “The Famine of Bengal” by Gita Mehta (W)
F 9/14  In-class writing exercise
M 9/17  Essay #1, on food and morality, due. Discuss workshop process.
W 9/19  Workshop
F 9/21  Workshop
M 9/24  Workshop
W 9/26       Workshop

F 9/28       “Should Chefs Write Cookbooks?” by Anne Mendelson (H) and “And $300 Fed a Crowd?” by Eric Asimov (H)

M 10/1       “Hot on the Barbecue Trail” by Vince Staten (H) and “Spamming the Globe” by Jonathan Gold (H). **Revision of Essay #1 due.**

W 10/3       “Recipes for Dummies” by Jim Quinn (H) and “Her Chee-to Heart” by Jill McCorkle (W)

F 10/5       Bring in two recipes -- from a source aimed at a mainstream audience (Gourmet to Better Homes & Gardens) -- that you think are (1) accessible and “normal” and (2) inaccessible, either because of obscurity, difficulty, pretentiousness, etc.

M 10/8       **Essay #2, a critical piece, due.** This should involve some real-world research. You may review a restaurant in Carlisle, or choose an angle for a critical commentary like Anne Mendelson’s. You may choose to review a cookbook, but be prepared to test a few recipes if you do.

W 10/10      Workshop

F 10/12      Workshop

M 10/15      Workshop

W 10/17      Workshop

F 10/19      “The Reluctant Gourmet” by Mark Kurlansky (H) and “The Chef Challenge” by Tom Sietsema (H)

[Mid-term pause]

W 10/24      Co-lecture with Prof. Adam Cohen’s Psychology & Religion class. **Revision of Essay #2 due.**

F 10/26      Co-lecture with Prof. Cohen’s class.

M 10/29      “The Risotto Lesson” by Dorothy Kalins (H), foreword to Best Food Writing 2000 by Alice Waters, and “Eat Your Pets” by Ellen Meloy (W)

W 10/31      “Smell the Coffee” by Dara Moskowitz (H), “Food Court” by Nancy Harmon Jenkins (H), and “The Breath of a Wok” by Grace Young (H)
F 11/2  Essay #3, a contemplation of food as art, due.
M 11/5  Workshop
W 11/7  Workshop
F 11/9  Workshop
M 11/12 Workshop
W 11/14 “In a Leaf of Collard, Green” by Jessica Harris (W), “Indian Takeout” by Jhumpa Lahiri (H), and “Watercress” by Elena Castedo (W)
F 11/16 “Spaghetti” by Robert Girardi (W) and “Grandma’s Table” by Steve Yarbrough (W). Revision of Essay #3 due.
M 11/19 “Jacques Pepin’s Safari” by Kate Sekules (H), “One Knife, One Pot” by John Thorne (H), and “Assault and Battery” by Betty Fussell (H)
[Thanksgiving vacation]
M 11/26 “Nothing to Eat but Food” by John Dufresne (W) and “Picky Eater” by Julia Alvarez (W)
W 11/28 Essay #4, a personal piece on your own culinary identity, due.
F 11/30 Workshop
M 12/3 Workshop
W 12/5 Workshop
F 12/7 Workshop
M 12/10 No class – work on final revision.
W 12/12 Revision of Essay #4 due at beginning of class.