The Question of Taste in the Opposition of Scarcity and Abundance in Diasporic Food Memoirs: a Study of Dignity, Authenticity and Equilibrium

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As autobiographical works, culinary memoirs offer literal and metaphorical representations of taste through personal experiences of want and plenty. They also embody paradoxes that offer insights into existential questions concerning the immigrant writer's relationship to their culinary culture. The recent genre records an aesthetic paradigm shift from survival to pleasure and from necessity to desire— the centrality of aesthetics regarding the question of taste in in scarcity and abundance. Authors recount memories that express pride in ancestral and community culinary heritages which contribute to the definition of their identity, telling stories, most often, of past scarcity and present abundance.

This paradigm shift, however does not lose sight of the opposition of survival and scarcity. The memoirs oppose and juxtapose the poles of scarcity and abundance and in doing so explore their points of intersection, notably around exile and the ensuing question of origins through culinary traditions. Abundance may be tainted with notions of excess, even decadence, yet also represents infinite plenty and diversity, while scarcity evokes lack, but also the idea of rarities to be savoured. At the juncture between two extremes lies the notion of taste. Memoirs celebrate the perfect taste, as well as the harmony between contemporary culinary cultures and retrospection, between poetic narrative and prosaic recipes. We will consider the extent to which the expression of taste in culinary cultures reflects the consideration of a specific or a common identity—assimilated or segregated—by diasporic individuals and communities. What is the place of taste, ostensibly a superfluous detail, in these stories of scarcity and abundance? In memoirs with recipes, the reader often seeks to be enticed by more than bitterness and nostalgia. When writers speak of creating a balance between past and present, tradition and renewal, bitterness and sweetness, does that equilibrium have a salvatory quality that speaks to both author and reader? Our discussion will focus on the poetics of autobiographical culinary-focused memoirs, with an analysis of specific literary elements, including recollections and recipes, as well as the affective and historical connection to culinary traditions around socio-ethnographic questions in diasporic literature and its relationship to scarcity and abundance in today's society.

While the autobiographical intention is typically the temporal deconstruction of a life from a subjective perspective, the memoir, as a genre, often reveals itself to be more flexible and outward-looking, with the inclusion of external events (Anderson, 113), an aspect that we see in the roots of these narratives in the migratory movements of the twentieth century. Richard Olney says of autobiography, that the "literary artistic function is of greater importance than the historic and objective function" (Olney, 42), and indeed, the intimate aesthetics of culinary memoirs temper the external perspective and emphasis the confessional nature of the works.

My corpus comprises a selection of essentially American women authors of various diasporic origins—Japan, Poland, the Caribbean, Jordan, China and Italy—whose histories are marked by scarcity or an ambiguous notion of abundance, and which describe the authors' relationship not simply to their culinary tradition but also to the complex subject of sustenance in a drive towards self-knowledge (see Jelinek, 185). After defining the semantic nuances and context of taste, we will consider its role within four dimensions of scarcity and abundance in diasporic memoirs: ambiguity around eating and hunger in representations of scarcity and abundance; diasporic memory and the American Dream; the salvatory nature of discerning taste in culinary practices; and the dignity and balance of taste with regard to the human condition.

I will begin by defining taste within the context of this genre. Taste-as-noun conceptually embraces notions of appreciation, judgment and discernment, as well as aesthetics. It is commonly considered that taste may be respected and expressed by those who enjoy abundance rather than those who suffer want. Taste is also the precise sensorial distinction and nature of a comestible that represents the harmonious balance between carefully chosen and measured ingredients. Gustatory perfection is a source of dignity, intrinsic to the cuisine of diasporic communities and a confirmation of its authenticity. It contends with oppositions of lack and completeness, of omission and saturation, which are, in themselves, an inherent part of recipe making. Thus, taste defines and arbitrates abundance and scarcity from a point of equilibrium that is reflected in the repeated pattern of recipes responding to a traumatic or nostalgic anecdote. The chapter in Japanese American Linda Furiya's memoir *Bento Box in the Heartland* (2006), in which she describes her repeated shame at her parents' inadequate English proficiency is followed by her recipe for Japanese Potstickers in which the filling must be thoroughly mixed for several minutes, "so the flavors can be absorbed into the meat" (Furiya, 213), the fusing of tastes a trope for the cultural assimilation in America that she desires and that her parents resist.

Taste-as-verb denotes perception and individual gustatory experience. The nuances of verbs in recipe instructions, as imperative injunctions, must be respected if the ideal and culturally-specific taste is to be achieved, however idiosyncratic it may seem. Third generation diasporic

writer, Elizabeth Ehrlich's recipe in *Miriam's Kitchen* (1997) for *Cholent*, the Jewish Sabbath stew that is placed in a warm oven to simmer over night for the Sabbath lunch, defines succinct methodical instructions until she reaches the point of adding the ingredients to the pot. She pauses at a colon and quotes Miriam's own words in italics: "*'Lay the bones and meat to the bottom of the pot*'" (Ehrlich, 27), as though the verb 'lay', and Miriam's approximate 'immigrant' grammar, held the key to a perfect dish.

These grammatical nuances highlight the paradox of individual taste representing identity, and food taste often representing shared opinion. Taste can be precisely defined in terms of a dish and yet defy definition when it relates to aesthetics. It both escapes and challenges the boundaries of abundance and of scarcity: for the former it may be lost to excess, for the latter, it may be forgotten to necessity. However, culinary memoirs suggest a harmonising alternative that respects identarian culinary traditions and the critical equilibrium in all things. In *Pig Tails'n' Breadfruit* (2014), Barbadian-Canadian author Austin Clarke captures the search for the perfect flavour of the humble king-fish recipe with his lyrical native expression and whimsical instructions, a passion-filled creation delicately constructed between the food of poverty and the spirit of abundance:

> And to bring out the full flavour of the king-fish, how about making some cucumber prickle?
>
> Slice some cucumber thin-thin, and put them in a bowl. Add a dash of salt; a few pieces of fresh hot pepper cut up small-small-small; a generous amount of freshly squeezed lemon juice; and a lot o' fresh parsley leaves pick-off and drop in the bowl. Stir all this round and leave it to sit (Clarke, 98).

Ingredients are as imprecise as the flavour is exact, opening up opportunities for reconciliation in the dish between the tensions of scarcity and abundance.

Indeed, Amy Trubek, in *The Taste of Place*, discusses the importance of *terroir* in taste, which impacts abundance and scarcity in itself, and is important from the perspective of Trubek's statement that: "[t]aste is the difference between food as a mere form of sustenance and food as part of life's rich pageant, a part of sociability, spirituality, aesthetics, and more. […] Our cultural tastes colour our physiological taste experiences" (Trubek, 6, 7). Taste is both literal and symbolic, representing sensation and cultural identity. Perhaps, as writer Adam Gopnik points out, its strength comes from the fact that "the metaphors of taste are so basic that they imbue and infiltrate our entire experience, and we no longer think of them as metaphors" (Gopnik, 92). He explains: "Moral taste is often an expanded metaphor rising from mouth taste" (*ibid*., 97). The memoirs explore tasting life intellectually and sensorially, probing origins and coming to terms with the coexistence of want and plenty.

1. Eating and hunger: ambiguous representations of abundance and scarcity

While an abundance of food offers an opportunity for cornucopian descriptions, and its scarcity provides a testament to trauma and suffering, taste can also be ambiguous. A number of memoirs offer introspective narrative and lexical examples of the ambiguous treatment of taste. The juxtaposition of extremes invites the question of digestibility of food as a trope for family tradition and imposed identity. Jordanian American Diana Abu-Jaber in *The Language of Baklava* (2005) offers a precise illustration. She confronts her confused identity in her first independent steps as a student when she is no longer able to keep down her father's copious and delicious Jordanian fare prepared for her Christmas homecoming, "roasted chicken, shish kabobs, grape leaves" (Abu-Jaber, 217), her body physically repelling the identity of "a good Arab girl" (*ibid*., 194, 197) that he tries to impose on her. She mourns the food that she loves even before she eats it: "It's so lush and lovely, I eat recklessly, like an amnesiac, with no awareness of anything but the table, the sweet sadness of return" (*ibid*., 225). Inversely, Chinese American Leslie Li describes in *Daughter of Heaven* (2005), the American food her father prepares with the bitter resentment he feels for his immigrant status in America, as equally indigestible. Li opposes scarcity and abundance with the edible and non-comestible, emphasising the importance of ritual as a harmoniser in situations of scarcity and abundance:

> Food, of course—the growing of it, the cooking of it, the people who prepared it, the people who ate it, the ritual surrounding it, the events which required it in splendid abundance—is the foundation of this book, as surely as rice and vegetables are the foundation of any Chinese meal. As for the savory stone which, if it is worth its salt, should flavor the repast from start to finish, from soup to nuts—that must be supplied by the stories themselves (Li, xiv).

Li's "splendid abundance" contrasts with the lack implied in the mythical Stone Soup[1] whose taste only emerges as shared ingredients join the stone, vegetable joining mineral, the story itself providing the ultimate taste in which "paper enfolds rock" (*ibid*., 273), the memoir as printed story enfolding the stone of elusive taste. Li concludes her story by bringing a stone of translucent jade called 'mutton fat'—its name symbolic of plenty—to the oracle Old Man Hill, to feed the memories of the dead.

Austin Clarke's reflective narrative seasons his childhood cuisine with images of rich tastes and lengthy preparations descended from his community's slave origins. His food is digestible by nature of its origins regardless of the often-improvised nature of his cooking. In exile in

1 "Stone Soup" is a European folk story in which a hungry stranger convinces villagers to each provide an ingredient for the soup that he starts to cook with merely water and a stone. The resulting delicious soup is tasted by all, and the story conveys a moral about the importance of sharing.

Canada, he contrives to create the traditional dishes with inadequate ingredients. The overwhelming lexical visibility of the words "one", "same", "identical" which Andrée-Anne Kekeh-Dika highlights, refers to the scarcity of food at certain periods on the island of Barbados, but also signals the various conditions in which the writer cooks (Kekeh-Dika, 15, 74, 89-90). Clarke makes do with compromises and turns them into something innovative, nourishing and sustainingly dense for body, mind and soul. As poverty required that nothing be discarded, everything was used, even the burnt food became a digestible delicacy: "the bun-bun is the layer of food stuck to the bottom of the pot. It contains, in coagulated form [...] all the good things" (Clarke, 17), a concentration of good taste that serves as a trope for their resourceful cuisine. Clarke also describes a way of manipulating the food to enhance the flavour of poor ingredients, using his hands as well as with his words: "One thing about cooking that comes from the slave days is that [...] you have to touch up the food and love-up the food" (*ibid.*, 64)[2]. Barbara Frey Waxman affirms that the culinary memoir offers "metaphorical associations that link food with love and emotional nourishment" (Waxman, 363).

From the physical and moral hunger of slaves to the emotional hunger of writers and artists, taste is explored in mid-twentieth century foundational memoirs such as those by American gastronome M.F.K. Fisher, and writer Ernest Hemingway. They inscribe the importance of want within an interwar aesthetic that blurs definitions of need, suggesting the intrinsic dignity that may be experienced within want as well as plenty, notably in situations of displacement which creates an immigrant link between these works and later culinary memoirs. Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964), while not 'culinary' in intention, contains an abundance of Parisian nourishment, scenes of commensality as celebrations of illusory interwar plenty and representations of emotional as well as physical hunger. Hemingway's sparse style intones an abundance of food, not in effusive descriptions but in the repetition of scenes of eating and drinking, often associated with writing, the form and content shaping the flavourful narrative.

Scarcity has an ironic central place in *A Moveable Feast*: both hunger and feasting are an integral part of Hemingway's formative years in the 1920s Paris art scene. He appears to live a hand-to-mouth existence, yet bistrot fare is omnipresent in the narrative. For Hemingway, hunger coexisted with feasting, artists treading a fine line between financial precarity and short-lived affluence[3]. He saw the privation of food as a stimulation for creativity: "When you

2 See also C. Bigot's analysis of this behaviour.
3 J. Tavernier-Courbin's (1992) research however leads her to question whether Hemingway was as impoverished as he claimed to be in *A Moveable Feast*.

are twenty-five and are a natural heavyweight, missing a meal makes you very hungry. But it also sharpens all your perceptions" (Hemingway, 101). In the Luxembourg Museum, he wrote:

> [...] all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty, hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cezanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted [...] (*ibid.*, 69).

For Hemingway the taste of hunger is aesthetically nourishing, arguing that it stimulates perception of art, but also of taste itself for those in need. He confirms the idea of multiple facets of hunger that capture the literary imagination and engender a narrative aesthetic of food and want[4].

For Italian American Louise DeSalvo**,** hunger is immutable and invariable. Her memoir, *Crazy in the Kitchen* (2004), tells the story of her grandmother's solid peasant food from a poor and hungry region of Italy; she speaks of extreme want, but also of honest cooking that she herself revers as the authentic taste of her family's homeland. It is inversely despised by DeSalvo's mother who considers it a hindrance to her assimilation into American culture. The scarcity of food in interwar Italy, and also of love, are present at DeSalvo's childhood table during convenience-era plenty, and echoed in the bitter and affectionless relationship between her mother and grandmother. Traditional cooking is a frontier against hunger, but also represents emotional obligation and coerced loyalty in an equivocal conflict of poverty and richness of taste. In DeSalvo's home, the food tasted more of grief and emotional hunger than comfort in her comparison of the Old World and the New:

> [...] although my mother wanted to eat like an American, her food habits recreated the privations experienced by her people in the south of Italy, though I am certain she did not realize this. For the families of many immigrants, living in America meant that you would no longer be hungry, that you could eat as much as the rich ate in the Old World. But in our house there was no culture of abundance to erase our family's history [...] (DeSalvo, 124).

Post-war guilt made it hard for immigrants to accept the reality of abundance. Mingled with the frustrating task of assimilation, it created ambivalent resentment towards the host land. The taste of bitterness and anger infusing her mother's cooking prevents them from enjoying the pleasures available to immigrant families in what became a self-imposed culinary impoverishment—"I can taste the rage in her food" (*ibid.*, 10) claims DeSalvo. The potential

4 S. Mennell explains this interplay: "Taste in food, as in other domains of culture, implies discrimination, standards of good and bad, the acceptance of some things and the rejection of others. Appetite and hunger are different – appetite is a state of mind, the setting for hunger." (Mennell, 21).

abundance of the Italian American table is overshadowed by family feuds with the harsh words of privation, excess and waste:

> In our relatives' households, eating much and eating well is the norm. It seems to be a way of putting the privations of the past to rest. I am always startled by the excesses of these meals and the waste. In our family, peasant habits die hard. And making do with less, so necessary in the Old Country, has become a thread that links my family to what was left behind (*ibid.*, 96).

Want and not the richness and pleasures of taste is their woeful tie to the homeland. Her grandmother's bread is the symbol of all that is authentic from Italy, and that poignantly embodies her grandmother's humble contribution in America. DeSalvo describes it as:

> A thick-crusted, coarse-crumbed Italian bread. A peasant bread. A bread that my mother disdains because it is everything that my grandmother is, and everything that my mother, in 1950s suburban New Jersey, is trying very hard not to be (*ibid.*, 9).

To DeSalvo, the bread is delicious, even though her grandmother must offset the American flour's stale taste with flavourful Italian ingenuity, and add weight to a bread that is otherwise insufficiently substantial to nurture the identity of the Italian immigrant: "To compensate for the dreadful flour that she is forced to use, my grandmother uses fresh yeast, a little barley flour, and some salt. The barley flour gives her bread some character, some color, some heft [...]" (*ibid.*, 21). This together with the warmed, bay-leaf-scented water, creates food that DeSalvo claims "sustains me and nourishes me" (22). The taste of her mother's white sliced loaf defines the limits of deprivation for her grandmother, who asserts that she would not eat it, DeSalvo carefully juxtaposing the ideas of starvation and taste:

> [...] even if she were starving, and she told my mother so the one time she tasted this bread, and she told my mother, too, that she knows what it is to starve, what it is not to have enough food, and that even if she did not have enough food, she would not eat this bread (*ibid.*, 12).

Paradoxically, although her grandmother perpetuates her peasant diet with all the bitterness and resentment that this passages expresses, her grandmother's sense of taste resonates with abundance. She gardens with a cousin on Long Island and "eats lustily each day" (*ibid.*, 47) out of reverence for sacred foods, recalling through taste what her life might have been: "A life she might have lived in Italy had she not been so poor." She sang songs that "praised the gifts of the land—figs, melons, wheat, herbs, wine [...] Songs that blessed the cooking pot, the bowl, the spoon" (*ibid.*, 48), appeasing the memory of want in a blessing of gratitude.

Ambiguity surrounding abundance is further elaborated when DeSalvo returns to Italy as a writer in pursuit of her origins, and finds herself eating gastronomic meals in the very places where her family had starved. She describes the comfort of the lodgings and the gourmet food she eats, concluding with a succinct expression of apparent guilt for her well-fed generation: "[w]e ate too much" (*ibid.*, 141). Indeed, her family's birthplace provokes a deep sorrow "[a]

yearning that will never be satisfied" (*ibid.*, 144), for respect, harmony and love; her emotional reaction reflected in the terse sentences, contrasting with the paradisiac source of abundance and symbolic of their poverty:

> We are staying in a converted *masseria*. It is exquisite. White stone. Moorish architecture. Wild poppies and wild daisies everywhere. An orange grove. A lemon grove. We lounge on a porch with arched windows and doors. Listen to birdsong. […] Sip wine made from grapes grown nearby. Eat prosciutto and cheese *panini*. There are olive trees that are over a thousand years old here. They look like pieces of sculpture. […]
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> In my grandfather's time, a *masseria* like this one was inhabited by landowners, overseers—those who persecuted my people. Yet I am staying here as a guest (*ibid.*, 140).

Her discomfort is exacerbated by the abundance in which she is able to indulge in the land that could not feed her ancestors, emphasized by her status as "guest". The delicious food descriptions, are delivered with the same humble taste of tragedy. "These are pastas I do not know; these are pastas my family never tasted." (*ibid.*, 140). The choice of the word 'tasted' rather than ate calls out the gustatory quality, uniqueness and authenticity of these dishes she considers herself fortune to discover. Chinese American writer, Gish Jen's cultural experience is comparable to DeSalvo's. She expresses the same ambiguity that permeated her family, the perception of a culture of want even in times of plenty:

> For these [conflicts] are what come with a move, such as my family has made, from a culture of scarcity to a culture of abundance. My parents were from rich families in China. They were not the ones who ate tree leaves during famines. But a culture intimate with famine is a culture that, even in its upper reaches, never forgets food. […] It is a culture that wastes no food at home (Jen, 124).

Her text speaks of inescapable culture, reinforced by repetition, of knowledge and cultural intimacy that cannot be avoided and which shapes ones relationship with food even in the host land.

2. Diasporic memory: the immigrant's perception of the American Dream

The American Dream incarnates the belief that every American, or aspiring citizen has the chance to know the abundance of the New World if they work hard. However, the concept is not easily appropriated within the diasporic culture of need, and it contributed to the distortion of immigrant perceptions of want and plenty, confronting the superficiality and malnutrition of consumerism with Old World family traditions. America's expression of abundance shaped the identities and practices of its many ethnic communities in unexpected, counter-paradigmatic ways. These memoirs, as memorial and imaginative literature, testify to both the universality and also subjectivity of need amongst immigrants. For example, to have enough to eat for DeSalvo's grandparents was portion enough of the American Dream:

> A dream of America was sold to laborers to lure them to America, where they provided the cheap labor needed [...] The vestiges of their culinary culture clothed them a protective dignity. During my grandfather's first years here, the dream faded. Though he never would trade life in this country for life in the Old World. (DeSalvo, 69).

Similarly, for DeSalvo's grandmother, the straight-backed chair by the radiator where she ate all her meals alone from a chipped bowl and large metal spoon—"a space that was not Italy but that was not America either" (*ibid*., 81)—was enough for her: "[...] for a woman used to so little, it might have seemed little enough" (*ibid*., 79).

Despite the inhuman conditions the Italian immigrant railroad workers experienced, they stayed (*ibid*., 70). Her grandfather, jeered at for his unkempt, scarcely human appearance, cooks over a roadside grill, a squirrel killed with his slingshot, rubbed with pork fat from his pocket and cooked with the wild thyme and onions he has foraged, prepared with skill and devotion: "eating food that satisfies him, not just food that fills his belly" (*ibid*., 72). The humble dish is not a starvation ration for him but tasty food that expresses pride in his origins.

Vivian Halloran reminds us that, for many, America was a destination of choice because it offered the abundance the immigrant sought[5], which first-generation Italian immigrant Angelo Pellegrini lucidly describes in his 1948 memoir *The Unprejudiced Palate*. He highlights the antithetical worlds of the starving Mediterranean immigrant arriving in plentiful post-war America:

> [...] my penurious past, in so many ways responsible for my deep appreciation of the abundant present, I can never wholly forget. [...] As an immigrant the discovery of abundance has been the most palpable and the most impressive of my discoveries in America (Pellegrini, 228, 232).

Frugality, a mentality central to Pellegrini's ethos, is not in itself a source of shame, but a virtue and a sign of authenticity and respect for the generosity of nature. His larder "[...] reflects the tangible results of the immigrant's thrift, his industry and resourcefulness, his high culinary standards, and his instinct for humane living" (235). Respect for taste generates benevolence as well as pride in making the simplest meal a "feast" of rich flavours, and is a sign of his respect for both his home culture and that which the American Dream offers, emphasized by the New World connotations of "discoveries". It is testimony that, according to Pellegrini:

> [...] the immigrant prizes substance above form [...] The bread is good [...] The soup is made from sound, flavored stock; the roast flavored with herbs and larded with olive oil, mounts to the nostrils and invites to the feast; the vegetables simmered in meat juices, bear no resemblance to their watery kin served above the tracks (Pellegrini, 34).

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5 See V. Halloran's *The Immigrant Kitchen*, notably chapter 2 on ethnic belonging and chapter 5 on diasporic invention.

Substance is here celebrated in the use of words suggestive of authentic taste with the repetition of inherent flavour: “the bread is good”, the soup of “sound, flavored stock”, “the roast flavored with herbs”, “vegetables simmered in meat juices", “the feast”. The memory of hunger shapes behaviour, never fully rid of the mentality of want. Hasia Diner writes: “Powerful memories of food and hunger influenced the way people confronted new realities. […] The basic nature of American plenty left a deep imprint on the various ethnic food cultures which developed among the immigrants.” (Diner, 220, 229). The promised land was far from idyllic and involved many compromises from which they sought reprieve. For Jewish communities such as that of Elizabeth Ehrlich, the abundance of home-cooking and diasporic fellowship that could be found in the New York Catskill resorts described in *Miriam’s Kitchen*, were a parenthesis in these compromises. Mid-century, the Jewish diaspora married pre-war east-European traditions with the comfort and abundance of American life according to their own recipe and flavour in their vacation kitchens.

They also had to contend with the dominant American mentality around food—the abundant larder exploited by capitalism and the Puritan tradition of guilt over eating (Diner, 231). It had to negotiate the complex but necessary task of discerning and promoting taste over American abundance to show they had moved on from want and starvation but, as they narrate, did not blindly embrace the values of off-the-shelf plenty that shaped American taste preferences, and effaced ethnic value-based traditions: “Being impoverished meant knowing viscerally the difference between sacred and ordinary through the sense of taste and the periodic satisfactions of a fuller belly” (Diner, 45). Abundance was not a constant but an occasional state that was appreciated as such.

3. The salvatory nature of discerning taste and culinary practices

Taste has a way of condensing and blending abundance and scarcity so that they are no longer truly in opposition but part of a multi-faceted emotional and physical experience. Trubek writes that: “[…] taste […] mediates between the body and culture” (51), which suggests a conciliation between hunger and the redeeming capacity of one’s culinary culture. As an example of this dichotomy, Austin Clarke writing of his ancestral cuisine, speaks of an interaction between physical salivation for the dish and its heritage, and salvation of the soul with its force expressed as “historical goodness”, a “strong reminder”, and a “powerful smell”:

> […] when you survey the contents of that pot, after you have taken off the lid and open-she-up, such a waft of historical goodness going blow in your face! Such a strong reminder from the slave days, such a powerful smell of Barbadian hot-cuisine is going to greet you that your mouth is bound to spring water and salivate, in a

contemporaneous salvation of salivation (Clarke, 65).

Individual and collective experiences of suffering are described in the memoirs of Ehrlich and Furiya. The healing metaphor of taste is a vital thread of survival, notably in two scenes that stand out for the barbarity of persecution and starvation, described against a décor of food preparation and eating, that of Miriam's Holocaust story, and Furiya's father's war years.

In *Miriam's' Kitchen*, food represents a form of emotional salvation. Her mother-in-law's family lost lives, homeland, identity and dignity. Miriam must cook to remember lost relatives, lost home and community, reproducing the recipes with precision, replicating flavours in defiance of abominations. Cooking the authentic tastes of the homeland is a reconstructive approach to dealing with loss. For this reason, Miriam's recipe for egg salad cannot deviate from its remembered formula. Her mother-in-law makes a salad that cannot be altered, a staple of her mother's restaurant in Poland: "It is egg salad transported, egg salad rescued from a vanished place." (Ehrlich, 8). Discerning taste honours the humanity, dignity and resilience of the individual and the community. While she cooks in a time of peace, war-trauma accompanies her preparations. M.F.K. Fisher explains this necessary respect for authenticity in writing about eating well in times of want in her war-time memoir-cookbook *How to Cook a Wolf*: "I believe that one of the most dignified ways we are capable of, to assert and then reassert our dignity in the face of poverty and war's fears and pains, is to nourish ourselves with all possible skill, delicacy and ever-increasing enjoyment" (Fisher, 350). Scarcity does not oppose abundance when there is savour. Memoirs articulate a discourse focused on gastronomic sensuality and gourmet sensibility in a narrative abundance of taste.

The chapter in which Miriam tells her Holocaust story carries the innocently understated title "Cake". Ehrlich frames the narrative within the Jewish calendar: "each holiday brings its own special offering: apple cake for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year; dark, moist honey cake to break the Yom Kippur fast." (Ehrlich, 162). Miriam's description of the events that destroyed her world is interwoven with the dialogue of a cake-baking session. All that is left to her are culinary rituals that create harmony between want and plenty, providing sufficient comfort for the trauma story to be told and heard:

> To live, we bargained for food. We sold our jewelry to buy potatoes and bread, bread and potatoes.
> At fifteen, I was no more a child.
> Cake is not all Miriam can do, figuring to delight those she loves. There are other desserts (*ibid.*, 160).

Luxurious cakes contrast with the repetition of subsistence potatoes and bread.

The paradoxical dichotomies, the juxtaposition of life and death, want and plenitude, hunger

and abundance, destruction and creation, abomination and banality, are unrelenting, skillfully blended into the aesthetic of the diasporic memoir, like ingredients into a bittersweet cake. The revelation of her father's death is juxtaposed with an affectionate invitation to her grandchildren to eat cake:

> Later they took my father away, to Buchenwald. He was very sick and hungry. He died a day before the American army came.
> "Eat a piece of cake, *mamele*."
> "*Nem* a cookie, *oytser sheyner*."
> "What shall I bake for you next week?" (*ibid*., 164)[6].

An ultimate paradox expressed in this and the following quotation associates despair with hope: that of negative absolutes, uttered within a world of choice and possibility, of total loss diffused in a gesture of abundance: "Nothing is wasted here, not an object, not a motion, not a bit of paper, certainly not a bit of food. […] Miriam pours oil, a lot, straight from the jar. It is a luxurious gesture. For a moment we are in a land of peace and plenty" (*ibid*., 43).

While taste searches for the perfect balance of ingredients, the dedication to its pursuit is limitless. Miriam bakes to excess so that neither her grandchildren, nor her ancestors will ever want. While Ehrlich shows that present abundance is destined to heal past suffering, for DeSalvo "there was no culture of abundance to erase our family's history" (DeSalvo, 124). She endeavours to rectify this through her own cooking. The repetition of "undo" contrasts paradoxically with the "alchemy" she performs at the stove:

> With care, attention, reverence, and discipline […] With each perfect meal I make, I can undo the past. Undo that my mother couldn't feed me, undo her fury at my grandmother. Undo my father's violence. Undo my ancestor's history. I act as if, through this alchemy at the stove, I can erase the past, instead of reliving it (*ibid*., 166).

These examples speak of emotional necessity arising from childhood trauma, often that of parents observed by their children. As Furiya watched her father foraging for food in a bin, she learned the truth of his past: "Dad once told me that after he experienced starvation, hunger by comparison was bliss." Her mother explains: "Your father was a POW. He'll eat anything. He's never full." (Furiya, 289). Furiya listens to the story of his prison days at dinner: "[o]ver Japanese-style salted salmon and grated daikon radish" (*ibid*., 290). Her father describes a hunger that heightened his sense of smell, drawing him into a guessing game with the other prisoners over the origins of the scents coming from the guards' barracks: "When the wind blew from a certain direction, he could make out the mouthwatering aromas of cooking meat and baking bread drifting toward him from the nearby village like music" (*ibid*., 295), the

6 In Yiddish, *Mamele* and *oyster sheyner* are terms of endearment, *nem* means 'take'.

imagination opening an interstice of salvation. Furiya struggles to listen to his starvation story, gorging herself with abundant and tasty food to deflect the unendurable words: "I was shoveling the rice, vegetables and seafood into my mouth while Dad talked, unaware of how and what I was eating, engrossed in the same way I would be if I were eating popcorn at the movie theater during a scary movie." (*ibid.*, 291). With the authority of one who had known starvation, her father taught her a moral lesson about hunger and need: "After being in the POW camp, when you never knew the next time you would eat, I changed my thinking. Eat your favorite first […] 'If you wait too long, it won't be there to enjoy.' […] 'Enjoy the best first', he told me. Enjoy the moment" (*ibid.*, 304, 306). His earnestness is conveyed in short emphatic sentences and repetition of the anomalous word 'Enjoy'.

Furiya's family secures its precarious connection with its homeland at each meal, through their Japanese diet, which is threatened each time their supplies run low. The basic ingredients of their cuisine arrive every few months in much-anticipated packages from Japan, or must be collected on long, carefully planned odysseys to Cincinnati or Chicago (*ibid.*, 94-103), a quasi-religious pilgrimage for something that was more than mere sustenance:

> Japanese home cooking had become the only daily thread my parents had to their culture. Even I knew that Japanese food symbolized something greater than sustenance. It was like a comforting familiarity that assured them they could make it through the daily challenge of living in a country not their own (*ibid.*, 91, 95).

Both Ehrlich and Furiya express the anchoring that taste offers in culinary practices, the preparing and cooking of traditional recipes, the bodily grounding and mental comfort of taste memories, in the distancing of starvation. Memoirs such as *Miriam's Kitchen*, are part of what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer described as the "powerful memorial aesthetic [that] has developed around such vestiges from the European Holocaust" (Hirsch and Spitzer, 354). Cara De Silva's 1996 edited Holocaust collection of recipe memories *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* also serves as a testament to pre-war food comfort and sufficiency, taste memories as a witness to resilience, the will to defy even death. They returned in their imagination to their family kitchens, exchanging recipes reconstructed from memory, creating menus, table settings, and even imaginary tea parties in their psychological battle against starvation, abundance in the face of annihilation[7].

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7 M. Hirsch and L. Spitzer's description illustrates this resistance also present in culinary memoirs: "Between 1942 and 1944, Mina Pächter and several of her women neighbors interned in the Terezín (Theresienstadt) camp […] reconstructed, from memory, and wrote down, in German, on small scraps of paper the meal recipes that they had routinely prepared in prewar times. Even while they themselves were barely surviving on potato peels, dry bread, and thin soup, they devoted their energy to recalling recipes for potato and meat dumplings, stuffed goose neck, and goulash with Nockerl; for candied fruits, fruit rice, baked matzos, plum strudel, and Dobosch torte" (Hirsch and Spitzer, 354).

In less extreme circumstances, authors express gratitude for their culinary grounding, Pellegrini's own rootedness springing from his intimate and early knowledge of hunger and survival. Experimentation and the purging of all culinary prejudice, which has no place in want, are crucial to the development of a "humane attitude towards the dinner hour" (Pellegrini, 232). Within and beyond trauma narratives, we appreciate that taste, both in the dish and in the savoir-vivre**,** are signs of civilisation and culture. Memoirs describe cooking as a humanising anchor for the diaspora who, having lost everything, wander in a culturally ambivalent no-man's-land, often with only culinary traditions to connect them to their former identity[8].

4. The taste of dignity in the human condition

The expression of taste as a marker of cultural values and a sense of belonging is concerned with survival and immigrant preoccupations with assimilation and authenticity. Ann McCulloch discusses the existential dimension of taste: "Taste as we know it, is not innocent metaphor: the acquisition, preparation and consumption of food, […] is, alongside those other intimate aspects of our shared material culture […] one of the central means by which social status is performed and measured in consumer society" (McCulloch, 64). Carole Counihan's 2004 anthropological work on food and community in Italy is revelatory of the intricate opposition between want and plenty within society. She observed in a Florentine study group of people who had known hardship, and when in modern times had found abundance, experienced the unexpected reverse side of that abundance which was the loss of longing (Counihan 1). For them, everything to do with food was important and interesting, even in hardship. "Tastes were rich and delicious, smells fragrant and pungent, hungers strong and deep." (*ibid.*, 1). They recognized a transition from poverty to well-being rather than scarcity to abundance. For the community, food changed essentially in quantity rather than composition in the post-war years (*ibid.*, 57). Yet, despite that, they felt that gaining in quantity they had lost in taste (*ibid.*, 179). Some of the sensitivity and taste stimulus emanating from poverty had been lost with the arrival of plenty.

In his history of famine and abundance in Europe (1995), Massimo Montanari writes: "The dream has come true, Cockaigne, is conquered: finally we can afford […] to live from day to day without the anxiety of having to conserve and accumulate. Fresh, seasonal food that only

8 See Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques 1 : Le cru et le cuit*, (177). Levi-Strauss insists on the metaphorical dimension of the raw and the cooked, that is, society and culture, as opposed to primitive subsistence.

now—and not in the past—can reach the table of as many people as possible"[9]. In this fantasy land that served as the antidote to the fear of hunger for medieval peasants, food is unlimited and easily accessible (132-134). Despite this assertion, Montanari believes that the fear of scarcity is still present in today's society.

> The irresistible attraction for excess, which a millennial history of hunger has etched into bodies and minds, now that abundance is a daily reality, is beginning to hit us: in rich countries, diseases due to over-eating have gradually replaced those caused by deficiencies. […] One excess has been overtaken by another: a cordial and conscious relationship with food remains to be invented. Abundance will allow us to do this with more serenity than in the past (Montanari, 230)[10].

I would like to suggest that this "cordial and conscious relationship" and degree of serenity can be constructed through stories at whose heart lies individual and community culinary identity and the respect for taste. In terms of genre, the abundance of food stories that reconcile scarcity and plenty, offers a plethora of examples of the reconciliation of these oppositions through taste. Memoirs serve as examples of stories of scarcity and abundance, both nostalgic and traumatic. Gopnik claims that we have moved not from efficiency to the waste that DeSalvo highlights (Gopnik, 96), but from famine to abundance (*ibid.*, 180), a recognition of the hunger stories that flavour diasporic narratives today. It would seem that where taste is a mark of resilience, and where there is respect and consideration for authenticity and culinary traditions even in times of scarcity, there is a sense of measured abundance.

The articulation of moral values in immigrant self-writing focuses on the importance of taste as a marker of authenticity, as a tribute to memory, as a humanizing quality and sign of resilience, as an ethnic distinction, and as an expression of aesthetics. Culinary memoirs expose the equilibrium vital to diasporic communities for whom the dichotomy between scarcity and abundance is ever present in the very essence of their exile, the scarcity they fled and the abundance they hoped to find in the host land regardless of generation, for the same

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9 "Le rêve s'est réalisé, le pays de Cocagne est conquis : finalement nous pouvons nous permettre […] de vivre au jour le jour sans l'angoisse de devoir conserver et accumuler. L'aliment frais de saison qui, seulement maintenant—et non autrefois—peut arriver sur la table du plus grand nombre." (Montanari, 221). (My translation).

10 "L'irrésistible attraction pour l'excès, qu'une histoire millénaire de la faim a sculptée dans les corps et les esprits, maintenant que l'abondance est quotidienne, à commencer à nous frapper : dans les pays riches, les maladies dues à l'excès alimentaire ont peu à peu remplacé celles de carence. […] Un excès a été combattu par un autre excès : un rapport cordial et conscient avec la nourriture reste à inventer. L'abondance nous permettrait de le faire avec plus de sérénité que par le passé." (230). (My translation)

preoccupation is present in diasporic memory[11]. As both narrative plot and metaphor, desired taste is central to stories that examine values in times of hardship *and* of plenty, not as the monopoly of plenty, but as an element common to both.

Ehrlich's *Miriam's Kitchen* is an example of this congruous and healing blend of recollection and recipes anchored in ritual. It tells her mother-in-law's story as well as her own, that of her quest to build a spiritual foundation under her children, notably through kosher eating. Constructing her narrative around the cyclic rituals of the Jewish year, that relativize scarcity and abundance by focusing on a quest for wholeness within the respect of tradition, form and taste, Ehrlich anticipates that: "Drawn to ritual, I may perhaps draw nearer to meaning" (Ehrlich, 351). She describes Holocaust survivor Miriam also as: "A keeper of rituals and recipes and of stories, she cooks to recreate a lost world, and to prove that unimaginable loss is not the end of everything. She is motivated by duty [...] and an impossible wish to make the world whole (Ehrlich, xii)," finding in each coded gesture, a semblance of healing.

Equilibrium is demonstrated in the harmoniously orchestrated rhythm of the memoir, an example amongst others, of a careful balance between cultural description, illustrative anecdote, narrative progression, and contextualised recipes. Food stories such as this bear witness to taste's power to bring completeness and 'make whole' even in times of hardship. Taste is presented as a multi-faceted, all-encompassing subjective perspective whose poetic influence in these works, embraces the immigrant, her community and its social ties, to create unexpected cohesion and connection in the face of both scarcity and abundance.

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11 Marianne Hirsch's term "postmemory" is a concept originally describing the experiences of those growing up under narratives of trauma to which the authors themselves have no access, such as the children of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch, 5).

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