



TASTING THE COLORADO PLATEAU

MICHAEL ENGELHARD

“Mesa tops of thick-headed pinyon-juniper broccoli, meandering banks of lush cottonwood celery and tamarisk slaw . . . rich teeming eddies of catfish bouillabaisse and carp carpaccio . . . sage-freckled Uinta Basin custard, Book Cliffs tortillas . . . a jumbo helping of Moenkopi mud pies” and “Wingate Sandstone tarts steaming beneath a latticed cryptobiotic crust.” — ELLEN MELOY

Adding a twist to the cliché of the Colorado Plateau as geological layer cake, the great, prematurely departed Ellen Meloy, in her essay collection *The Anthropology of Turquoise*, likened this region seen from the air to a giant, scrumptious smorgasbord. She relished

Far from mere whimsy, her metaphors reveal a deep hunger—one writer’s craving for the landscape of her heart, her desire to plumb life with all senses.

We moderns are predominantly visual beings, underestimating or taking for granted what our taste buds know—until a head cold turns all food, and existence itself, into bland cardboard. Loss of taste uproots us, somehow. Who has not played the mind game of considering which handicap would be worse: to be blind, to be deaf, to be numb or bereft of speech? Who, on the other hand, ever imagines life without taste? We don’t even have a word for that sort of condition.

Sweetness. Sourness. Saltiness. Bitterness. With only four base notes—the palate’s cardinal directions, as it were—taste might appear rather impoverished; but like the ancient Chinese (and modern scientists), residents of the Southwest are wont to add a fifth flavor, the axis around which all others revolve: spiciness. Luckily, countless nuances enrich Plateau cuisine by degrees, each combining the five basic sensations in unique and often mouthwatering ways.

Flavorful names garnish the Plateau’s topography, proof that pioneers shared Meloy’s appetite for the land. Bitter Seep, Salt Gulch, and Brine Creek denied thirsty travelers relief. Cherry Flat, Strawberry Point, Chocolate Drops: Yum! Carcass Creek, Strychnine Wash: not so much. Together with Bean Hill, Beef Basin and Cheese and Raisin make a substantial meal. For desert there are Lemonade Springs and Big Rock Candy Mountain, which a Depression-era song popularized as landmarks in a hobo’s paradise. Chase everything with postprandial Moonshine Wash, near Robbers Roost, commemorative of Prohibition.

Mudflats. Photo by Michael Collier.

Facing page: Peach picking at Capitol Reef National Park.
Photo by Scott Smith.

Dates for picking fruit at Capitol Reef:

Cherries: June 11–July 7

Apricots: June 27–July 22

Peaches: Aug 4–Sept 6

Pears: Aug 7–Sept 8

Apples: Sept 4–Oct 17

Pictographs at Dinosaur National Park, Utah.

Photo by Laurence Parent.

Much culinary history can be deduced from little evidence. One of my acquaintances roams the La Sal Mountains' tributaries looking for rock art that encodes pre-Columbian game drives. Another, a botanist, swears that the presence of blue agaves (agave azul or "tequila agave") at the Grand Canyon's Deer Creek campground means that the ancient ones brought the succulents there, pit-roasting the sugary cores, as the plant is not normally found in this region.

Just like the signature sights, sounds, or smells of a place, its flavors define it. Closely related to scent, less ethereal but no less visceral, taste can relocate us instantaneously in time or space. Some smells, Diane Ackerman writes in *A Natural History of the Senses*, "detonate softly in our memory like poignant land mines." The same is true for certain flavors, and the aftershocks from such charges of volatile chemicals can reverberate through an entire lifetime. When I get homesick for the Plateau in distant Alaska, I close my eyes and bite down on a dried juniper berry, and summer sun, resin-y green, golden dust, and lush slickrock flood my insides. After more than twenty years in the Southwest, I can tap into a memory file of flavors and complementary places: seedy, sweet pulp of prickly pear tunas in a Kanab box canyon; cress, radish-sharp, dewed by Calf Creek Falls; peach ambrosia shaded by Capitol Reef's simmering orchards; cow-fouled water-tank soup atop Boulder Mountain . . . I will not dwell here on the roadkill-bobcat tamales that a friend once served at a Moab bunkhouse. (Quite tasty, surprisingly.)





Making piki.
Photos by Lois Ellen Frank, Ph.D.

Some adventures of the palate I still look forward to. I have never tried sego lily bulb or that Southern Paiute specialty, roasted chuckwalla, or rattlesnake cakes at the Café Diablo in Torrey. (Beware—the heartbreakingly beautiful sego lily and the death camas closely resemble each other. Also, the somewhat rare sego is Utah’s state flower—it once saved settlers from starvation—and is therefore protected within the state.)

LIKE THE BLESSINGS of hearing and speech, taste, too, is a social sense. We connect wordlessly in the sharing of food. Some of my fondest gustatory memories of the Plateau come from spontaneous hospitality, from meetings with strangers. Walking back on the washboard road from Round Valley Draw’s slot canyon once, I passed Mormon picnickers at the Cannonville municipal park. They invited this hungry, hot backpacker, though,

unfortunately, Green Jello—the first I had ever sampled—is all I recall of their generous spread. Another time, I partook of a sacramental meal in the Hopi Village of Moenkopi. It happened during Powamyua, the start of the Hopi ceremonial year marked by the katsinas’ Bean Dance. Our host’s house was bursting with guests who were eating in shifts. At the lunch counter, we were served piki—phyllo-thin blue corn bread baked on a fire-heated flat stone. A girl with almond eyes and a shy smile warned us of the batch spiced with chilies. We had fry bread and beef soup with bean sprouts grown for the occasion in the secrecy of the kivas, the clans’ womblike underground chambers. I was reminded again how food should nourish the soul as well as the body, how much we ignore the spiritually wholesome for the merely nutritious.



Agave tequiliana, Ostrich, and Nopales. Dreamstime.

Traditional Hopi sometimes buried a sheep's head with the skin on in hot coals overnight, and when it came out it would be nicely done. Some dishes described here might strike the gourmet as exotic or even surreal—but from our birth onward, the culture that surrounds us shapes our food preferences. Like the widespread belief that particular animal parts—such as the blood, heart, or testicles—convey that creature's powers to those who ingest it, our craving for novelty and our desire to understand the foreign by tasting it have guided human epicurean exploration from the beginning. Food thus serves as a marker of belonging, part of a group's identity, reflecting one's place in the world. It can easily trigger prejudices or cultural misunderstandings. Banned to Fort Sumner's Bosque Redondo Reservation, the defeated Diné were issued unroasted coffee and flour as part of their government rations. Starving, but unfamiliar with the White Man's fare, they cooked the strange beans and chalky powder for a soup.

On the Plateau, numerous cultures have contributed to the table: Hispanics, Native-Americans ("local" hunter-gatherers as well as Meso-American farmers), Anglos, Basques, Mormons, and other, more recent immigrants, including nouvelle cuisine chefs from Denver or Salt Lake City. There now are microbreweries, farmers' markets, and vineyards, Flagstaff dairy goats, and ostrich ranches near Escalante—the Plateau connoisseur today has choices like seldom before.



However, as Ellen Meloy suggested more than ten years ago, life as a desert omnivore is never that simple. You must choose between engineered, Orwellian yellow corn and the multi-hued heirloom ears of the Pueblos, between free-range beef and the bison you ambush in House Rock Valley. Forage or grow locally, or have food trucked in from afar? Always our diet is seasoned with politics, embroiled with personal philosophies. And the aftertaste of historical or ecological trauma can taint even the best ingredient. Take trout for example, fresh-caught below Glen Canyon Dam. Pikeminnow fisheries once thrived throughout the Colorado River Basin. The six-foot, eighty-pound muscled torpedoes were known as "white salmon," for their migrations. A Vernal old-timer remembered that one such fish was like a harvest, which, cut into steaks, produced "not just one meal, but quite a few meals for the family."

Dams, agricultural runoff, and introduced fish species long ago put the pikeminnow on the endangered list—three million years of locally grown "organic" food and diversity circling the drain. But at least the survivors are no longer saddled with the ignominious moniker "squawfish;" it is no longer appropriate, like the overharvesting of wild foodstuffs, or the settlers' name for three-leafed sumac, "squaw bush" or "sourberry," whose tartness substitutes for red-zinger tea in my water bottle.

"When the earth is cleansed and nourished, its purity infuses me," writes one of my role models, the deer-hunting, fishing ex-anthropologist Richard Nelson. Conversely, he laments, "A fouled molecule that runs through the earth runs through me." This is not flight of fancy or New Age mysticism. Archeologists routinely use bones and tooth enamel to reconstruct human paleo-



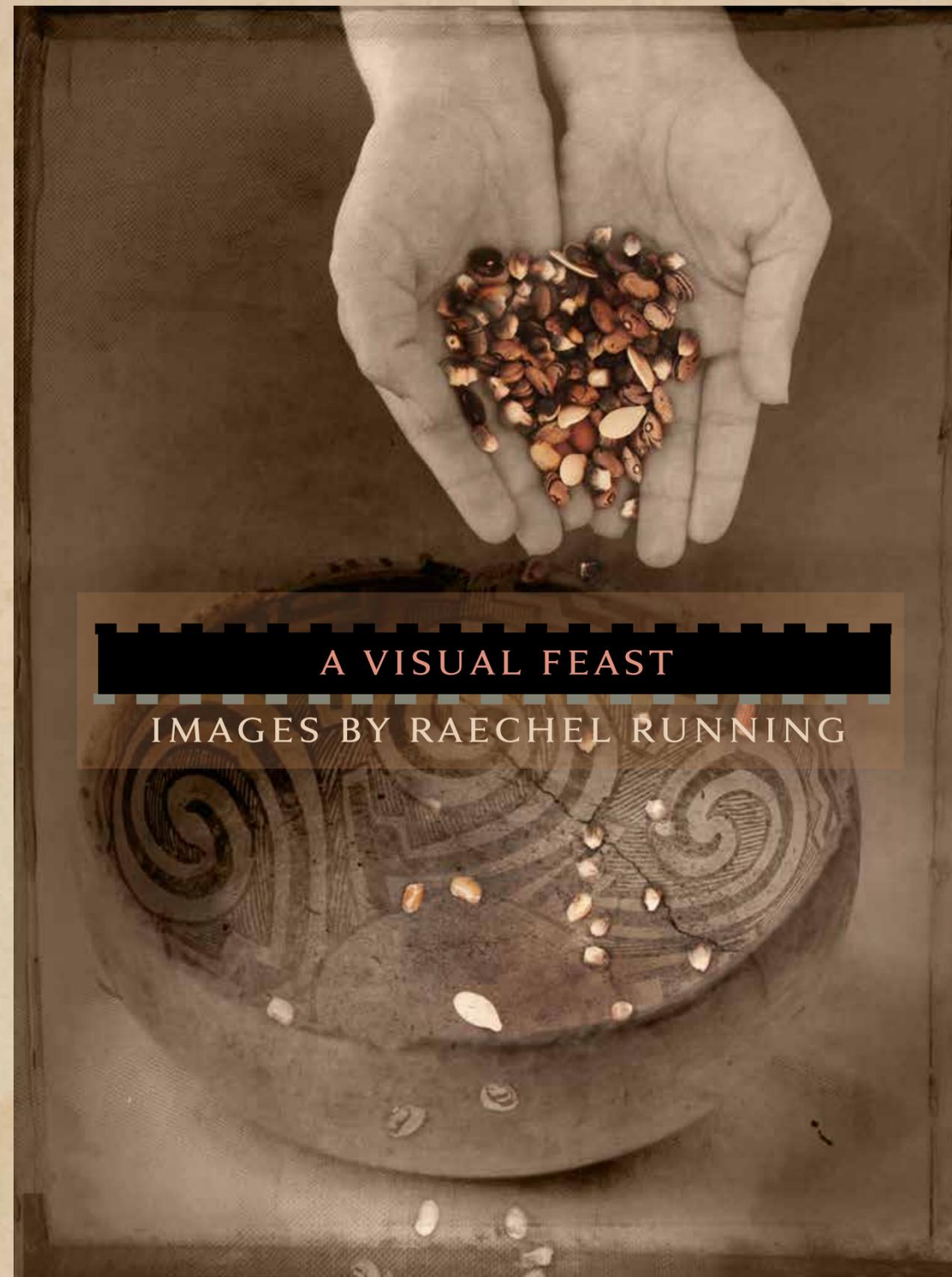


Corn is dried in the sun for future use by Hopi farmer Leslie Koyawena. Photo by Jerry Jacka.

diets and migrations through isotope analysis. While we grow up, our bodies accumulate chemical elements—carbon, nitrogen, strontium, oxygen—from the foods that we eat and the water we drink, which in turn carry mineral traces of the specific soils from which they sprang. These fingerprints of place stay with us throughout life and even afterward, for a while, locked in our skeletons. We hold the places that first sustained us, just as we hold our memories. We are not only what we eat but also where we eat.

Despite its apparent barrenness, the Plateau provides healthy, vigorous fare. So— ¡Buen apetito! Tuma angwu noonova! Dig in!

MICHAEL ENGELHARD now lives in Cordova, Alaska, where wild blueberries, fiddleheads, kelp, and smoked salmon pervade his days. He works as a backpacking guide in the Arctic, and there, it is mostly dried chili and oatmeal. Currently researching the cultural history of the polar bear, he has yet to sample the animal's meat.



A VISUAL FEAST
IMAGES BY RAECHEL RUNNING