



Chew on this: Poetry is like food, to be savored

By JoANN BALINGIT, Special to The News Journal
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I went to the homepage for Academy of American Poets (<http://www.poets.org>) and typed “beef tongue” into the advanced search dialog, I confess. For the record, there are no poems of praise for this *variety meat* at poets.org. I hear sighs of relief.

To be honest, I am writing a poem. I checked first to see if anyone has beat me to this cow tongue topic. Yes, plenty of poems with literal cows in them, and many poems with beef--but none mention chewing an actual tongue.

I have been thinking about poetry and food. Poetry *is* food. Good poems *feed your head*, Amy Gerstler reminds us in her introduction as editor to the latest volume of “Best American Poetry” (Scribner’s 2010).

Like a favorite food, a cherished poem “can arouse (and maybe satisfy) hungers, be gnawed on for a good long time, and have effects not unlike those of your favorite handmade vodka or exquisite dish of risi e bisi,” she writes.

Pickled cow tongue is a family dish my brothers and sisters recall with longing, mirth and incredulousness. Is it true? we ask ourselves. Was this standard fare?

I remember watching my mother pull the rough skin like a sock off the boiled muscle, talking all the while like a physician in an operating theater. The shiny, bumpy texture of the taste buds gripped me. She sliced the chewy meat into smaller and smaller rounds all the way to the tip, then dumped it all into vinegar brine.

I have threatened to make this dish at our next family gathering: Surprise! The rich associations overwhelm me. Tongue, *Lengua*, Lingual, Linguine, Language.

Of all the fine arts, I would argue that poetry does the best job extolling food and praising life. We naturally call upon poetry to share our sweet and sour childhoods, bitter first love, mordant self-doubts and salty passions. Poetry serves up the stew of our lives.

While there is no recipe for a good poem, like a good recipe, a satisfying poem has been tweaked and tested by its maker until the result is full-bodied savor.

Isn’t it the *emotional experience* both the cook and the poet long to share? To ladle joy, anguish, wonder, outrage or laughter from one dish into another’s, in language highly-seasoned with the seen, heard, touched, smelled, tasted.

So let us get back to food. Since I can’t have a literal sandwich of brined beef tongue thinly-sliced, between ghastly white bread spread with Miracle Whip and horseradish, I am searching for some figurative food to satisfy me.

Here, I found it: a poem about grapefruit, another food of mythic proportions from my childhood, a fruit of royal stature in my poetic imagination—my personal, private language of recurring images.

This quiet, intense poem by the late Craig Arnold deserves to be called “Best American Poetry”—for my tastes. It is a take on how to live.

I love its clarity and devotion to every sensation in the ritual of peeling and eating a grapefruit, and how the end lines leap from a section of fruit in the mouth, into mysticism.

Meditation on a Grapefruit

To wake when all is possible
before the agitations of the day
have gripped you
 To come to the kitchen
and peel a little basketball
for breakfast
 To tear the husk
like cotton padding a cloud of oil
misting out of its pinprick pores
clean and sharp as pepper
 To ease
each pale pink section out of its case
so carefully without breaking
a single pearly cell
 To slide each piece
into a cold blue china bowl
the juice pooling until the whole
fruit is divided from its skin
and only then to eat
 so sweet
 a discipline
precisely pointless a devout
involvement of the hands and senses
a pause a little emptiness

each year harder to live within
each year harder to live without

--Craig Arnold

“Meditation on a Grapefruit” is reprinted with permission from *Made Flesh* (Copper Canyon Press, 2008).
Read an essay about Craig Arnold at <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/article/237750>

JoAnn Balingit, Delaware’s poet laureate, writes occasional columns on poetry, especially during April, National Poetry Month. Contact her at <http://joannbalingit.org>. JoAnn will offer poetry summer camps this July at Cab Calloway Summer School of the Arts. Info: <http://www.cabsummer.org>.