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CREATIVE WORK

The Human Dredger: Triggering Nostalgia

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Abstract

The Human Dredger is a non-fiction, autobiographical recount of the writer's education through food and its importance to society. The piece was written in June 2022 and includes scenes from Melbourne, Australia and Amalfi, Italy. The work explores the nature of memory regarding cuisine and its impact on growth from childhood into adulthood. The piece conveys how, foundationally, the understanding of different cultures can be approached through their interpretation of and appreciation for food. The writer reflects upon his childhood experiences with food and his changing perspectives as his palate develops. The story follows this human growth through a developed maturity of the palate. Replacing a linear timeline, the author's life is spelled out in a series of courses.

Keywords

Food; Sensory Memory; Italian Culture; Gastronomy; Palate Growth; Olfaction

I
Mushrooms, olives, capers, capsicum, eggplant, beetroot, Brussels sprouts, salad dressing, and mustard. Mustard. At the age of twelve, I hated all of it. No parmigiana *melanzane*, no beetroot tartare, no stupid sauce on the bland leaf-based salad, no olives or capers in the *livornese pesce spada*, no mushrooms in the risotto. Not even a touch of mustard on a hot dog would tickle my tongue. An Italian passport holder too. One could assume that if they knew of my dislikes, they would declare the document null and void. Cooking is the palimpsest handed down by generations; it is the crux of Italian culture from an outsider's perspective. It is the Constitution.

My cousin's wife (girlfriend at the time) once ignored me for a week because I refused to try her cooking. She happened to have made a mushroom and eggplant lasagne with a monkfish *livornese* and a French fish soup which boasted even more flavours than I was willing to try.

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One dinner. I didn't even try the cucumber and tomato salad—the dressing stunk up the fridge within ten minutes. The thought of consuming such miasma terrified my mouth shut. My refusal was taken... well, it was taken in one way, that's for sure. She was fuming. I had crossed my arms and said 'no' like some self-determined right-wing bigot. She shrugged it off and moved on with the dinner—I thought she must have—only a little more silently than before. I remember how my cousin stared at me from across the table, his eyes quivering in shock and knuckles white as pearls. He said nothing. My mother said nothing. My dad chuckled. My cousin's eyes were bidding me 'good luck' and 'you are screwed.' If I were to have access to such dishes now, without having (poorly) cooked them myself or ordered them off a menu, I would be singing their praise and leaping over the dinner table for seconds before firsts were even finished. I thought myself an irreproachable child but was veiled by irreproachable stupidity. And undeveloped taste buds.

If I were older and still didn't like the quality of food that I do now, or the variety of ingredients one could muster, I would have crawled below that table in embarrassment. I would get up and leave if the table were more forgiving. Alas, she remained polite and composed. The table? Well, that thing was inescapable.

The dinner table was no easy feat to access. Three metres of soft-polished granite heaved its head-thick mass over an unvarnished frame with pillar-like legs that rose from bulbous wooden buns layered up from the salmon-tiled floors. That thing was heavy, too heavy for an insolent child to move by himself. The table required not only the strength of two, but the press of legs of a third, their back on the ground and legs bent to their heads to push the table away from them. The table was so heavy that it had its own gravitational pull. The festive feasting family season involved smaller tables surrounding and joining with the main table; the international space station with 'the hub' being the cold grey stone heart of the home, its swells of folding tables and side tables would push out with gastronomic curiosities. The table had two long wooden pews, which I think had been purchased at some auction many years after the table was cast. Yes, the pews were heavy too, only worse: to move the damned thing, one required the involvement of all party members (whoever was sitting on the bench) to lift themselves from the seat and assist in shifting the pew away from the table. The even greater trouble was getting out when you were sitting in the middle of the three-metre-long seat, with the seat needing to be lifted back. Then everyone else would have to tighten back to allow for a shuffle across to the exit—unless you were brave enough to hop out from behind the backrest, involving a vault or step up and out from the table's pull. The night of the 'insult' just so happened to be a night in which I was seated in the middle of the table, providing me with a vantage point for all the food I disliked and an arm's reach from the gorgonzola which I loved. You have to love cheese. I always loved cheese. My lactose intolerance did not.

She had spent hours labouring away, entering the kitchen with two boxes of fruit and vegetables and a tote bag with her computer and book. My cousin held one of the boxes. She came in with her frock, crocs and smock, ready to surprise. Me? I didn't budge. I was only ten, though, but no, no excuses. She ignored me for the rest of the night, speaking though hardly raising a lip for a smile. I was offered dessert begrudgingly; I accepted gladly. Strawberries and yoghurt could always be tolerated, even though the mint leaves confused me. One week of ignoring? Somewhat deserved in retrospect. To this day, I have struggled to find a cook that even neared her abilities and experimental aptitude. After that week, I had learnt my lesson. I summoned and declined the offer of solely having a separate salad (undressed) and decided to have whatever was prepared. Mushrooms. It took me ten years to try them. Now? Probably my favourite vegetable—discounting the sweet taste of shallots, which is undoubtedly my greatest ally. My cousin's wife was no ordinary cook either. Since childhood, I would not only jump at their invitation for dinner at their place but listen intensely to every comment she would make about the food. I listened to every recommendation she would give regarding restaurants, coffee, dishes, and even the pairings of wine she would see as more fitting to a dish. It took me trans-continental travel to redefine my narrow mind and take a bite out of the most strange but beautiful tastes in the world.

The opportunity was always there. The fork just never pulled back for a bite.

 II

Following my embarrassing olive-less childhood, maturity brought me to venture outside of ordinary and bland food. Much of this was due to my growing interest in certain aspects of puberty and the need to ‘act your age.’ A man who can cook—and eat—is hot. A man who is uncomfortable with olives and salad dressing and is picky and whiney with what is put in front of him, well, that is not. So, I began to eat. And I ate well. Sure, my mother had never been one for experimental recipes, nor had my father been too keen to try anything too spicy or textured. Instead, he would opt to make baked beans on toast or a simple Spanish omelette rather than adding chilli or trying new food that required developing skill and creativity. Instead, I was left to my own devices, always thrilled when I would see family, always ecstatic when I was assured of a good meal. Not only was the southern part of my family great cooks, but they grasped all the fecund land they could find and grew absolutely everything that they could: ‘If it is this good here, how good must Noma *really be*?’

My uncle practically had his own vegetable farm at the back of his house. The back shed is the heart of a wire web holding tripod beams that cast nets to keep growing plants and tarpaulin shade covers that spread long blue shadows over brilliant green leaves. He had never ceased working on it, constantly labouring to maintain food production and expand in variety and quality. His backyard farm and its relentless manufacture meant two things: first, the products selected to cook were what was in season—a facet of cuisine he taught me as I sat cross-legged on hand-tied cross beams wrapped by tomato leaves, snacking on yellow zucchinis like bananas; and second, I gained an understanding of the importance of each and every ingredient *before* they were all mixed. I established the beauty of raw ingredients (like the yellow zucchini) and developed a tongue to pair them. Experimenting with food was one of my favourite parts of packing my bags and heading down south to the Italians, being brought new dish after dish, always something new. The new flavours that smacked my tongue like a half-coarse whip took deep, challenging questions to decipher.

After such discoveries, I would try to experiment with dishes at home. Even if half of them failed, the experiments were usually pleasant experiences since I learnt not only how to pair ingredients but what ingredients *do not* pair well together. This lesson was invaluable, although most of the failures occurred while I was a young man trying to impress some girl on a low-budget date and an expensive fillet of salmon soaked in terrible sauce. I like to look back and hope that they at least appreciated what I was trying to do. All it ever took was to try. From being thrown a weird type of plum from a tree on the backyard farm to being carried around by my cousin and his wife to try alchemic levels of mixing and matching. From tasting raw vegetables and sashimi to avoiding mistaking ingredients not in season. Even after believing I had developed a more advanced sense of taste, I ate half a dish of admittedly tasteless artichokes in a Djerbien couscous in Marseille, thinking they were a ‘weird sort of potato thing.’

Italian cooking allows you to understand simplicity. Simplicity in preparation—learning to dice onions in equal sizes to ensure they all cooked through without some burning to coal. Simplicity in timing—knowing the order in which thicknesses of scallop should come off a skillet (thick on first, thin on last and off first etc.). Simplicity in garnishing and ingredients was my most influential lessons. Garnishing? Easy. Add olive oil. Ingredients? Start with garlic and olive oil. Get that done and your dish will be guaranteed not to suck too badly. The difference between cherry tomatoes and plum tomatoes can be one thing, but the flavours of basil in a bruschetta? Now that changes *everything*. The flavours and textures are as contingent on you as they are dependent on the type, freshness and quality of your ingredients. They are the difference between being a driver and being towed by your tongue, and nobody likes being towed. Just wait for the worst to happen and become a vegan. Wait for the worst to happen and take up your morning tea with the flavour doused in too much milk. Watch your sauté spit dewed fresh kale as it fries and flies out of the pan. Now add vinegar and dance in your clogs over the cracked wooden floors. I will weep like a funeral if I am in a

place for over a day without a stovetop and icebox. I will softly say to myself: ‘salads can still be interesting’ over and over as if preaching ‘we are all worthy of love.’ The saviour of such an instance came wrapped in prosciutto and had the name ‘rockmelon.’ No, not the antipasti dish you will undoubtedly have dragged 10 euros out of your pocket for in Rome; but the ability to cook without adding heat. Christmas with Italians can teach you many things—seeing that long, polished granite heavy table covered with meticulously paired dishes without the click of a kettle or a sizzling pan can be helpful.

Of course, many cultures have mastered this; the popularity of the tartare in nearly every Parisian bistro or the Italians and their carpaccio. It is not always necessary to add heat and fire to everything. Acidity is all it takes to make a dish perfect. The ideal for me? Ceviche. Thank you, Peru. In the Antipodes, my home was blessed with parks that rounded green grass onto barbeque stations, letting heat be used almost as a requisite for ‘good food.’ Of course, people who do not believe that food can be had without heat are usually the people who order ‘well-done’ steaks and still don’t eat their veggies for dinner. Europe and most parts of the world are not as privileged to boast free cooktops for public use. Instead, they can be bought from a supermarket or, if you are lazier, one could just as easily buy a variety of ingredients and make serious charcuterie energy with the tap of your Amex and basic knowledge of dish composition. Don’t get me wrong, I understand that cured meats are not necessarily raw. Still, your little beachside picnic does not always need to be from a takeaway box or red, yellow, and brown paper bags. Eat more cheese, but that discussion will be held another time.

III

It never matters what Italian town you are in, there is always a labyrinth. At times, a labyrinth may be easy to navigate. It can be difficult to wind one’s way through the craquelure of walkways and passages, especially when the untrained eye has not experienced the uncanny similarities of nearly every road when wrapped by small homes and cream-coloured buildings. How is one to find their way across the precariously signed side streets in such towns? Well, surprisingly, it is easy. Simply forget your intended destination and wander around until you find what looks right for you. Keep in mind that if you have a train, plane or ferry to catch, you should probably just check your phone and head in that general direction—no one cares if you get lost, just be where you need to be *on time*. When one is exploring a place, they perhaps use a device to geolocate themselves, or perhaps they have a map—and that’s OK too. But what is the *most* effective means to get about? Sound, and yes, smell. If it smells good in one direction, go that way. If it smells like rotting fish, dead cat carcasses or minced mice from mutilating cars? Go the other way. But, if the smell of fresh garlic, glowing brown onions, and discarded two-litre tins of diced tomatoes seeps through the nooks in the walls and the limestone walls, you have to at least see what is going on there. If it is a restaurant, that is preferable. If it comes from a home, then maybe let that go and keep walking as nobody really likes a break-and-enter situation. Excuses of ‘but the *Zumo di Pomodoro* just smelt so good’ are not gastro-legally acceptable excuses. But hey, if you knock and tell them ‘It smells great...’

Good luck to you.

I would rather have a guaranteed sure-thing for my lunches. Don’t expect the movie scene cliché of being invited into the home of a lonely grandmother to try some of the *cog au vin* she happened to be making. Expectations dampen pillows. Restaurants not only cater to you as you trundle into the doors after smelling their cassoulet from three blocks away but have menus that allow you to even order what you want! I know, life changing. I once underwent the same realisation. I was wondering the streets in Amalfi, or perhaps it was Minori, and smelt something I had not smelt in a long time. I was in Italy for an entire month before then so maybe a long time is a slight exaggeration but for weeks I had wished to enjoy the smell of crustaceans. Specifically, that buttery, spiced silky sauce from crab meat which, if made properly,

can make one's mouth salivate, drawing them like the glasses of teeth on old bed stands. The sauce, however, was just a tad different. I needed to know how. A man in his mid-fifties ushered me in; his exclaiming face had warm eyes and a smile which seemed almost paternal. He ran the joint. The owner wore black pants and a black shirt, his slicked-back grey hair stuck rigidly to the top of his head like rice to a pan, and his bark skin was spotted and peeled after hours—or years—in the sun, leaving his nose red fresh with a new epidermal facade. His restaurant was small, no larger than a wine bar in Sentier. The walls cascaded down to the aquamarine blue tiles, which revolved around the salon like a stationary conveyor belt, pilled and dark against the metallic white walls and grey floors. I ordered the crab—usually only prepared for two—and the owner sat and talked with me as I waited for my entree to arrive: swordfish carpaccio topped with olive oil, black pepper and rocket. He used to be a ceramicist, or was it a Tileist—is that even a word? He owned his shop, where he sold his works on ceramic plates and sculptures he would hand paint. He decided to run a restaurant instead, which, to my surprise, he thought would be easier than art. Ten years later, he had a stable business in his pocket, and he loaded his salon, bathroom and storerooms with his tile art. A pocketed stable business in a pocket of a building in a pocket of Amalfi with a rag-tag family, each operating as a contingent part of the business. His first two sons? One was the *maitre d'*, and the other ran the back-of-house accounting. His youngest son was the runner, only about twelve or thirteen by the looks of his black, greasy hair and noisy tracksuit, which he wore under his apron but sounded out loud every move he made. The chef was the only team member who was not directly related to the family. He was also the only person who stayed in the kitchen for the entire time, unassisted—besides a couple of other cooks and the dish-pig who liberally took a smoke break for what felt like ten minutes every half an hour. He would be ashing and discarding his butts in the general direction of the nearby restaurant, which had a slightly larger capacity and sat only ten metres from the closest terrace chairs. Friendly littering fuels friendly competition. I wish I had known the other cooks too. I never got to hear their stories. They seemed nice. Cheerful smiles and well-worn hands.

Following the carpaccio, which went down smoothly with the dry Franciacorta in my right hand, the wind had picked up from the alleyway, which fed out to the sea. The breeze had whispered past me for the last half hour without making its movements obvious. However, as the day swept past, the white paper tablecloths popped past the grasp of the tiny aluminium vices, forcing a clacking disappearance of the U-shaped metal pegs. The corners lifted briskly, and the bottle and bread and glass and booklet were placed over the table to avoid the crab being cradled away by the strengthening wind. My broken Italian grasped little, but my eyes noted the owner's chuckling glance as he handed me the crab, which looked up at me as if to say: 'I am on a time limit... there's no space for you inside the restaurant.' I looked into the tiny little dining room with the ten or twelve tables steaming with guests. Then I looked up at the owner, who looked up at the sky and then back down at me. My hair was too long to escape landing over my eyes and into my mouth, dropping follicles on my fork. The dish was buttery and rich and complex in its flavours; complex too was the process of pulling apart the crusty exoskeleton to unlock the meat which lay sizzling inside.

Malignant complexity can reap the greatest reward if the crab is good.

And the sauce? Give me a minute.

The bright reflection of the hand-painted plate and the light red tinge of my wine turned dull and obscure, the light from the sun now begotten by cloud and rainfall. It was soon to hit the restaurant, the town, and the ferry, which was my one way home. I had thirty minutes to get under cover. Of course, most people would not think to find this sort of situation even remotely challenging: 'why not just eat faster or ask for the waiters to bring the table closer under shade...?' I suppose I still do not know why I didn't... maybe it was the sauce. Beautiful things in this world deserve attention and time. Especially a good sauce.

I finished in time. The crab? Outstanding. The juices ran through the body and onto the cracked legs where freshly cooked meat stretched patiently across the joints like bodies before massages. The meat did

not need to wait very long before my hands met with grease and oil and my lips attracted the juices that run from them and onto my chin and fingertips.

The plate was mopped clean with my bread to save no sauce for the sink.

IV

Sometimes I forget that I was born. I chase my past and try to bite deep into its juices to remember how it felt. To remember how memory feels, grasp at it and for the scenes and shapes and colours to flood into the mind. A pressure so solid and forceful, putting to shame the pitiful attempts to replicate it in the movies; they would flare lenses and fog viewpoints and give us flashbacks. All of it, all the digital editing in that blurry screen provide the illusion of achievable recollection. I was not born in any circumstances that were nuanced, interesting or noteworthy. Born in a barn wrapped in scratchy canvas cloth with veins of hardship and eyes of turmoil? Not me. I was not held in darkness, kissed by angelic light, or blessed to sleep through the night by the day's gift. I was just there, and no memories truly seeped in until my age turned four, and I could run around the boat that swung from springs by the old school yard. Childhood playgrounds tend to spark some thoughts for quite a few. Before then?

The eyes go foggy, and the head sings and pushes its path to have just... something. Most of the time, we remember what we think are memories but are later memories of events captured in time: a stormy day in coastal Spain and oversized red jackets shielding me from rain. That is what first comes to mind, the video, not the event. But one sense that holds itself true and unswayed in the mind's windy passing is, for me, smells. Olfaction. Like your sense of taste, a chemosensory section bears roots in the past. Sure, it can be hard to associate smells from childhood with adulthood. Kids are dumb nuts and can hardly correspond to an object with its aroma.

However, as one grows, it is relatively easy to recollect. A past lover and their favourite perfume, the washing detergent used in the family home of your best friend, the smell of your grandmother, the smell of your uncle's house, which was always woody from years of carpentry etc. The tests of aromatic memory are as vast as our palate. For me? Well, I got pretty lucky. I was always connected to my sense of smell. I was so attached to it that I displayed tendencies similar to synaesthesia: I could practically taste shapes and hear colours when I was younger. Later, I realised how my mouth felt swarmed by flavours that drove by from an auditory road into my gustatory driveway, popping up like pop rocks and warheads met with Sprite. And when I reach as close as I can get to anything close to my birth, I remember the smells instead of remembering something I saw. Not the smell of my grandma or mother, not the smell of my family home or the salt water from the nearby beach. I smell garlic.

And olive oil. Both of them sometimes. Finely chopped and poured over a heating pan soaked in oil and perfusing a smell so deep and robust and significant that even with a short description, one could say 'garlic and oil on a pan' and you could imagine what that would smell like. One could smell it from the other side of the house if they thought against positioning themselves directly in line with the movement of the heated garlic as it pirouettes out into the room and nestles just outside your nose; just close enough to sense it, but urging you further, urging you to keep breathing it in. That addictive sense pulls your nose from your neck as your chin pops out, and you lower yourself into the pan for another deep breath in... and out. Italian crack. The olive oil is the pipe to get you where you need to be. That first pour of olive oil to coat a pan, the lathering of it into a tin, the drenching of salads and vegetables, the golden goodness is the foundation of all of it. At least for Italians and the Spanish too. I remember being in the same kitchen in Amalfi or Minori—I still cannot remember—and I talked to the chef after destroying the crab and the entree before the wind blew me inside to pay. In the restaurant (no, you still do not get the name), we spoke about the dishes I had ordered, and I questioned him thoroughly since my eyes had practically been gouged from my

sockets after tasting his stuff. ‘That crab, man, that beautiful crab,’ I said, reminiscing over the dish that had only just left its plate to rest in my stomach. Compliments barraged him, and my eyebrows had jumped nearly into my hair thanks to my excitement. He humbly thanked me and shrugged off the compliments, wiping his brow of sweat and tucked the towel back into his pants. I asked, or more pleaded for his story, getting ahead of myself already after being invited into the back. A warm man, with a holed smile and petite purple patches under tired eyes and worn brows, seemed calm all of a sudden; the calm after an adrenaline rush leads to a tiredness that only double-espressos can fix. After telling me about his relations with the fishermen in the port, he indulged me in how he managed to get the crustaceans into the restaurant from the morning catch. Then, he briefed me on his history with cooking, which, as I should have anticipated from a thick-spoken southern Italian, ‘all started with garlic and olive oil.’

Laughs were heard in the kitchen.

He was leaning on the benchtop, which had just been wiped down following the lunch rush hour. The service had yellowed his whites and shined out his head with beads of sweat bedazzling his forehead like a blue-collar tiara on a bald grown man. He was good-spirited but tired and still working. During the lunch hour, I watched him as he rinsed the octopus-filled sink in prep for the night. Singular noun for octopus, yes; that thing was big and still breathing at the time. That night it had gone down amazingly with a sauce that I could recognise from my childhood— possibly because it had garlic and olive oil in it or because it was just as good. I asked him about it as we chatted about his thirty-five-year stint at the local restaurant and how he had been a cook for forty-seven years of his life. He only ever cooked Italian food. He never even left the country. Not once in his entire life. He liked the simple life, a Tuscan technique of cooking transferred to his simple and beautiful style of life: minimal ingredients with significant results. The sauce, to my surprise, was not made by him. I must have come across a tad too startled, the type of startled reaction which occurs when one realises that even Italians go through immense amounts of butter when they cook. As we spoke, a cold block of butter sat behind my head as it rested on the shelf, oozing into my nose. He chuckled and shook his head jollily, pointing to the glass bottle in the *mise-en-place*, which was filled with the same reddish diluted and cloudy liquid I had seen between the gills of a coda fish *étouffée* when walking past the pass. ‘My mother makes it for me at home,’ he whispered, holding back a laugh between his gapped teeth and dry lips. ‘She taught me how to cook and gives me interesting sauce ideas to try when she gets bored of the political crap that’s always on the TV.’ He lifts the reddish bottle and gives it a turn as a tiny chunk of garlic revolved around the glass.

Forty-seven years of cooking, and your mum still makes the sauce? I imagined the six-foot-bald momma’s boy cooking in the tiny kitchen of his mother’s house, most likely around the corner from the place he only just moved into after leaving home. Italia. He popped a teaspoon into the bottle and extracted a rippling mouthful, offering it to me. The sauce was brilliant, and he gave me a warm smile as the beginnings of a tumult were heard from outside. ‘More customers,’ I shrugged, watching him as he snatched up his knife and pounded its side onto some cloves, producing a crunch. ‘Here we go,’ he shouted to the rest of his crew, who probably had still not rested from the last rush.

He whipped his bottle of olive oil onto a pan, and then the frizzling began when the garlic met with the steel as the restaurant doors flooded once more.