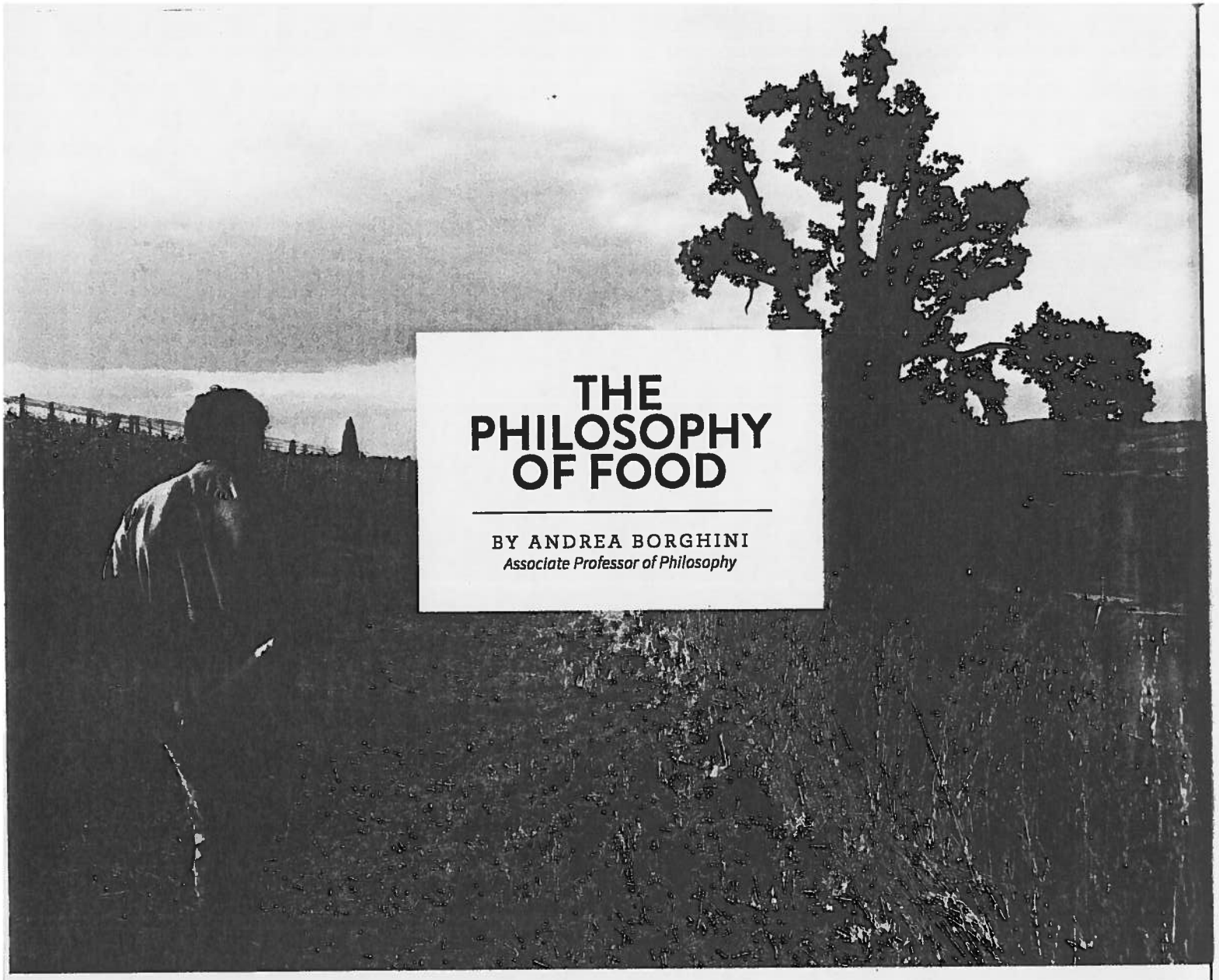

THE PHILOSOPHY OF FOOD

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We are what we eat–sure, but what does this really mean? How is it that the same food comes to have multiple meanings depending on who, where, when or how it is consumed? And how is it that specific dietary decisions mirror (if not ground) the identity of a person or a community, showcasing fundamental ethical, social and political commitments?

I came to the philosophy of food in little steps. When I was a graduate student at Columbia University, I devoted at least 12 hours a day to the study of metaphysical questions such as the nature of necessity and possibility, the identity of objects and the kinds of properties that they have. The prompts we used for our discussions weren't really practical. They included mythical vessels (the ship of Theseus) and generic references to cats, tables or rocks, without care for their specific features. In the few breaks in between classes, reading and discussion, I looked for food and often headed to a supermarket. Like many other consumers, I found myself asking questions such as, "Is this really yogurt?" Or, "How can they call this chicken?" To most, these were mundane questions, but to a metaphysician in training like me, they seemed the perfect prompts, opening up a terrain for philosophical investigation bridging sophisticated theoretical speculation with the dullest of all affairs–eating.

While in my first year at Holy Cross (2007-2008), an ideal opportunity to bring food into a philosophy class presented itself: I could teach a yearlong philosophy of food course for the Montserrat program, scheduled to be launched during the following academic year, 2008-2009. Teaching new content with new methods, in a brand new academic program, was challenging at first. Luckily, I was part of a terrific cohort of experienced colleagues from

(left) Borghini strolls in Tuscany, Italy, where he grew up and where he takes students on a four-week, immersive study program to explore the philsophy of food.

different disciplines–including Chris Dustin (philosophy), Michael West (history), Denise Schaeffer (political science), Vicky Swigert (sociology) and Jody Ziegler (art history)–who mentored me and passed along a fascination for experimenting in the classroom. To date, I have taught eight sections of the Montserrat seminar on the philosophy of food, and just started teaching two for the 2016-2017 academic year. The seminar has been a place for developing and testing research paths. It also led to designing new courses on the topic, including a Maymester study abroad program in Tuscany, Italy (the region where I grew up), an upper-level philosophy seminar on the philosophy of food and several tutorials.

Teaching students about their bodily pleasures has its specific hurdles. We tend to approach the upbringing of children by drawing a line between the education of the mind and the education of the body. A course about food cuts across such a line in many ways. You come to deal with students' intimate and core pleasures, asking them to think through such pleasures. When I teach other courses, such as metaphysics or logic, students step into the classroom separating what they learn from their daily affairs, and many teaching efforts are directed to ease such separation and make them draw connections. With the philosophy of food, it is the exact opposite: Students take on themes that, by their own nature, encompass the classroom as well as the dorm room, the mind as much as the body, their lives *qua* students and *qua* citizens. You don't have to show them a connection; on the contrary, the teaching efforts are directed to single out the philosophically relevant aspects of what appears as common experience, and to discuss them.

How to approach the philosophy of food? Analogous with the philosophy of medicine, the philosophy of physics, the philosophy of biology and the philosophy of art, the philosophy of food studies issues that arise from the consideration of a specific domain of discourse–what we eat and drink, and the act of eating. Not only is the philosophy of food a principal way for appreciating the value of the philosophical practice, it is also a privileged angle for comprehending the significance of diet to the human condition. To give order to my work, I divide up my research and teaching materials into three areas: production, consumption and labeling/evaluation.

The philosophical issues related to food production begin with the role of domestication in forming duties and privileges in our relationship to the Earth (as French philosopher Bernard Stiegler once put it: "agriculture [...] must take care of the world because to produce it, to cultivate it, is also to do violence to it: to throw it out of balance."). Other key issues include the ethical commitments we have to other animals, the environmental impact of food production, the social impact of food production and the role of food production in shaping the identity of a person or a group.

The philosophical issues related to food consumption begin with hunger: Hunger is arguably the most important concept in the study of malnutrition, under-nutrition and famine. Hunger, however, can also be approached from an existential point of view, as a defining aspect of the human condition. We are born hungry. We have been hungry well before we can remember being alive or gained self-consciousness of our own pleasures. Satisfaction of hunger is one of the most complex and important ecological relationships we partake in, which constitutes a major daily impediment to life for more than half of the world population (if we include those who face problems of under-nutrition, obesity and eating disorders). Other issues related to food consumption include the role of bodily pleasure in dieting, or the ethico-political dimensions of dieting.

Finally, the third area includes the philosophical questions related to how we conceive of and talk about food, such as the value of food experts' judgments, how we come to establish the identity of a recipe (an idea) out of many dishes and the politics of food labels.

Depending on the course, I select a different array and number of topics from (some of) those three areas. Over the last two decades, philosophers investigated certain issues in some detail. For instance, they have extensively studied the ethics of vegetarianism, the objectivity of wine criticism or the aesthetic value of (fine) dining. What makes teaching a course in the philosophy of food in 2016 particularly exciting, however, are the many remarkable topics still awaiting examination. As strange as it may seem, until a few years ago no scholar had wondered who invented Parmigiano, or how zucchini came into existence by selecting certain varieties of Cucurbita pepo. And the philosophers who pondered the existential significance of hunger, or the identity of recipes, could also be counted on one hand. Students who come up with a brilliant case study, or with a novel penetrating question, can make surprisingly important contributions to the field.

Each of us sits at the table from a perspective made of memories, emotions, preferences, commitments and values. The goal of the philosophy of food should not be to foster homogeneity of approaches. Rather, it should guide us to single out the fundamental commitments and values entrenched with our lived experiences. Ultimately, it should make us appreciate the diversity of perspectives and how difficult it is to abide by certain ethical and civic standards, and to actually live by them. ■

HUNGRY FOR MORE? Visit magazine.holycross.edu to see a list of some of the books that Professor Borghini uses in his course, including *Slow Food Nation* by Carlo Petrini, *Food Inc.*, by Peter Pringle and *I Drink, Therefore I Am* by Roger Scruton.