

Report on 2018 Seeds Symposium by Voltaire Cang

A devoted Symposiast, now a good friend, once told me that his joining the Oxford Food Symposium was a gift he gave himself each year. Indeed, the Symposium is a gift, one consisting of time well-spent in the company of students and academics, writers, chefs, food producers, media and business professionals, scientists, and general food enthusiasts - which is just about everybody. It is also a gift that keeps on giving during and beyond the Symposium's three days, through thought-provoking lectures and research presentations, well-planned and utterly delicious mealtimes and receptions, sidebar (and "barside") events and informal discussions, book sales and signings, and, most importantly, new and renewed friendships.

This year's Symposium started before it formally began, with an excursion to the Oxford Botanic Garden by Symposiasts who arrived before registration and braved the midday heat with the Garden's Director, Dr Simon Hiscock. (A good number of early comers preferred to stay indoors and join a marathon Wikipedia editing session.) Dr Hiscock was to be the afternoon's plenary speaker, in which he reminded us how all life on Earth depended on plants and, thus, on seeds, that he called "boxes with baby plants inside." His lecture was followed by Dr Elinor Breman of the Millennium Seed Bank in the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, one of the largest centers for seed conservation in the world. Dr. Breman complemented the first lecture with her message about the critical importance of seeds for feeding the world's exploding population as she also introduced her organization's work in storing seeds that in some cases could be dried and frozen for centuries. After the plenary came the afternoon reception with sparkling wines from Schloß Vaux in the renowned Rheingau region that segued into dinner, an herbaceous, Eastern European "Wild East Feast" by Olia Hercules whose menu included the gift of a full fish head in each diner's soup starter. Hungarian wines from Robert Gilvesy and Zoltan Heimann (who were both personally present to introduce us to them) and a gorgeous sweet Tokaji from Balassa accompanied them beautifully. After dinner, a good number headed to "The Jewels of Life," a seed and plant jewelry exhibit-cum-atelier with artists Gönül Paksoy and Lalehan Uysal, where visitors were invited to create personal fashion accessories using the seeds on display. Many appeared unwilling for the day to end: discussion groups mingled around the bar, in obeisance to the trustees' exhortation at the afternoon's welcome session to "talk to everybody, since the Symposium is for everybody, an all-inclusive gathering of people with common interests."

Day Two continued offering feasts for both mind and body, beginning with a poignant film on Quechuan people from Peru transporting their native potato for storage in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault near the North Pole in Norway. The Seed Vault's self-

identified “only permanent employee,” Dr Åsmund Asdal, then gave the keynote lecture; he honoured the work of Nikolai Vavilov, pioneer of the plant gene bank. Some time was allotted after the keynote to introduce another pioneering work for a different kind of “bank”: Barbara Ketcham Wheaton’s “The Sifter,” a comprehensive culinary and food research database that is almost ready to launch. Research presentations were given just before lunch and continued until late in the afternoon. The diversity and breadth of the topics brought home the point that, indeed, the Symposium is all-inclusive. All kinds of seeds were talked about, such as maize in religious rituals in the Americas, coffee’s disastrous effects in Batangas in the Philippines, sesame seed’s links to Japanese identity, buckwheat’s history in Brittany, seed-saving practices in South Africa, Mexican amaranth resurgence, and wheatberries’ significance in Southern Italian cuisine. Other seed-related phenomena and curiosities were also discussed, including seedlessness in fruit, wheat from Mexico feeding the world, the future of seed spices in Hong Kong and Macanese culture, and the gastronomy of acorns. The day’s lunch was devised by Naomi Duguid, who directed everyone to tear the big Caravanseraï flatbreads with their hands to share. The same was true for the wine glasses: six different Scheurebe wines from Germany’s dynamic Rheinhessen region vied for attention – and again were introduced by one of the young producers himself, Fabian Mengel. Reception and dinner came with an even longer wine list, a beautiful merging of producers in Germany and Israel, Twin Wineries, brought to Oxford by Ursula Heinzelmänn. For dinner, Moshe Basson of The Eucalyptus Tree in Jerusalem created “Biblical Banquet: Seed of Peace” that started with a “Jacob and Esau Red Lentil Stew” and finished with basbousa semolina cakes and “Ice Cream from Paradise.” It was a peace offering for both mind and body. Post-dinner libation was again in many Symposiasts’ evening schedules, with a bigger number gathering at the bar than the previous night, not a few moving in and out of events held simultaneously: the jewelry exhibit continuing on from the first night; a film showing, “Seeds: Commons or Corporate Property?”; and an informal chat with Barbara with family and friends about “The Sifter.”

The final day was a packed affair. The morning’s keynote, underlined with pop music references, was by Dr Assaf Distelfeld of Tel Aviv University who explained his work on wheat genetics to improve crop quality and yield. The sessions that followed were another diverse and broad-ranging set that included discussions on mustard, wheat and fenugreek in the Levant and North Africa, and coriander seeds in beer and seed starters in cheese-making – both delightfully becoming degustation sessions. Lunch was a colourful soup festival cooked by Abi Aspen Glencross and Sadhbh Moore, with support from the Borough Market. An Austrian Grüner Veltliner wine from Bernhard Ott, a pioneer of this variety in his home region, the Wagram, brought equally vegetal-related aromas to the glasses. The afternoon

finale first saw the announcement of the winner for the Sophie Coe Prize in Food History: Anthony Buccini, whose piece investigated the etymology behind sauce à l'américaine (or "l'armoricaine"). This year's Rising Scholar awardee, Molly MacVeagh, talked about her PhD research that deals with irradiated seeds grown in "atomic" gardens by Muriel Howorth and her colleagues to tap the benefits of atomic energy. After some more prize announcements for student and first-time presenters and young chefs, the Symposium's newly-launched podcast series, Ox Tales, was introduced by the trustees and producer Anna Sigrithur, who played snippets from currently available episodes. (Do have a listen; they're all on this site.) The closing keynote, aptly titled "Summing It Up: Finding Paths Forward," was by Dr Stephen Jones of Washington State University, who graciously remarked at the outset that he was going to use the words "art," "beauty," and "delicious" a lot, then proceeded to speak about how these words could and should be used when talking about wheat and bread especially, all for life's betterment. "Seed matters," he emphasised.

Finally, a remarkably democratic voting session was held to select the Symposium topic for 2021. It will be "Food and Imagination." With "Herbs, Spices, and Health" in 2020 and "Food and Power" for next year, that's three gifts you may wish to consider to give yourself in the years ahead.

Thank you to all, with special mention to the Symposium trustees, chef Tim Kelsey and his dedicated kitchen staff, Jake Tilson for his peerless design work, and all who worked mostly behind the scenes. *Gratias maximus.*