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A feast for the eyes: edible art from apples to zucchini

Jessica Kehinde Ngo

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BOOK REVIEW

A feast for the eyes: edible art from apples to zucchini, by Carolyn Tillie, London: Reaktion Books, 2019, 144 pp (hardcover), ISBN-10: 1789140633, ISBN-13: 978-1789140637

A Feast for the Eyes: Edible Art from Apple to Zucchini utilizes the format of an alphabet book to explore the world of “food as art form.” According to Tillie, food and art have been linked since the beginning of time. There are chefs whose dishes – like sushi and birthday cakes – are so artistic their customers are blown away. Likewise, there are artists with no culinary background who turn to food as their medium and create nostalgic odes to the kitchen – like Andy Warhol’s famous Campbell’s soup cans. Food as an art form is also for the common folk. To use Tillie’s words, “The great thing about works of art that have been created *with* food is that they are immediately accessible to everyone because we are already familiar with the edible ingredients used to create the artworks” (11).

Before delving into the alphabet, Tillie offers a thorough introduction to her subject. She begins by exploring the role food art plays in our daily lives, such as table setting for holidays or a strategy to entice picky eaters. Then, she chronologically traces the role that food as art form has played over time: decorated eggs from the Middle Stone Ages in South Africa; banquet centerpieces made from sugar during the Renaissance in Italy; gourd carvings (i.e., jack o’ lanterns) brought to a young America by Irish and Scottish immigrants; social activist performance pieces involving butchery and gastronomy during the 1960s and 1970s; and, in the present day, food photography on various social media platforms.

After this introduction, flipping through the alphabetized examples of food as art is like a slowed down, offline scroll through an Instagram news feed from a food blogger. Each letter of the alphabet is linked with a food item (e.g., “A is for Apple”) and a beautifully rendered photograph of food art made using said food item (e.g., a photo of *Apple Head Dolls* created by artist Leslie Griffin). Lastly, a paragraph or two about the photographed food art tells its story succinctly, much like the text that would accompany a post on a food blogger’s page on social media. This gives the photograph just enough context to make it stick in the reader’s mind, but avoiding, to use social media speak, “tl;dr” (“too long; didn’t read”) syndrome. For example, Tillie offers a one-paragraph story about how the first patent for the photographed dolls whose heads were made from real dried apples was filed in 1913, but by the 1940s, they were no longer made of apples due to mass production (44–45).

The *Apple Head Dolls* really set the fun, uplifting mood that carries through the rest of the alphabet book. It depicts a smiley all-American couple, one in overalls and the other in a dress with an embroidered apron, placed in front of a dreamy prairie-like backdrop. Moving on through the alphabet, “F is for Fruit” offers a photograph from artist Caleb Charland called *Fruit Battery Still-life (Citrus)* in which fruit is symbolically presented as an energy provider, as the fruits are connected to a lamp using electrical cords, giving the nutrients needed to provide light (88–89). In “L is for Latte,” Tillie includes mesmerizing photographs of latte art, noting that the goal of one latte artist, Diana “Dee” Milashevskaya, is “to inform the world that coffee is not just a beverage, but offers both taste and beauty; latte art is an art to be embraced” (110). Some of the most breathtaking and inspiring artwork in the whole book is in the “S is for Sugar” section. It involves everything from spinning, pulling, blowing, and pressing sugar, to, in the case of Brazilian artist Vik Muniz,

arranging grains of sugar to form stunning portraits of children workers in a sugar-growing and processing plant (158).

The only real downfall to Tillie's alphabet book is that it ends much too soon. Once readers get to "Z is for Zucchini," see the artwork (intricately carved zucchini), and read the story of Swiss chef-turned-vegetable-carver Andy Branca-Mass whose masterpieces are meant to surprise the guests in the retirement home kitchen where he works, they will want to go back to A and start all over again. In sum, Tillie's work offers a refreshing, offline look at food photography for those fatigued by the rapid speed of the digital age.

Jessica Kehinde Ngo
Otis College of Art and Design
 jngo@otis.edu

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