**"The Sausage of the Future" by Carolien Neibling. Clockwise, from top left: carrot, apricot and coconut sausage; berry, date and almond dried sausage; insect salami; berry and liver sausage; apple blood sausage; potato and pea sausage; vegetable mortadella**

# Waste lines

## The many contradictions of modern eating

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FOOD
Bigger than the plate
Victoria and Albert Museum, until October 20

"He loved to wallow and cuddle. He snored. His hams will age 2 years (twice his actual lifespan). The rest of his flesh is preserved in 182 cans of pâté, sausages and meat." The individual being described is a pig from the Basque region of France called Zelai, who formed part of a project called *This Little Piggy* by the artist Elaine Tin Nyo. She documented Zelai's existence, from birth to piglet to abattoir to ham. Nyo herself describes the project as being "like a baby album that turns into a cookbook". The cans of pâté and sausage made from Zelai's body are stacked up, decorated with labels that show a range of imagery, from cute piglets to slaughter. No matter how obvious the truth that a can of pork pâté was once a living, breathing, snoring piglet, it is still shocking to be reminded of the connection between animal and meat in this way.

Those of us who eat meat can only bear to do so through a kind of deep forgetfulness – or disconnect – about what it is that we are actually eating. But this disconnect around food now extends far beyond the meat industry. In the modern world, disconnect is a skein running through every aspect of our eating lives. This is the major theme of an ambitious new exhibition at the V & A, *Food: Bigger than the plate*, curated by Catherine Flood and May Rosenthal Sloan. In a rich sequence of often beautiful and always thought-provoking installations, *Food* explores the ways in which eating – this most intimate of human acts – now depends on a series of processes from which most ordinary eaters are removed and alienated. We are separated from the people who grow our food and often the people who cook it too. The curators describe the current food system as one "about which we know almost nothing".

Food is omnipresent in the modern world, yet we often simply do not know what is on our plates, never mind beyond them. One of the clearest disconnects in modern food is that between consumers and producers. In the UK a mere 1.5 per cent of the population is now directly involved in farming and the average distance between consumers and producers has never been so great. "For many of us", write the curators, "growing food has become something abstract and remote." The people who work tirelessly to grow and pick our food often live thousands of miles away from us. In the abundance of the supermarket, food seems to arrive as if by magic and we are never forced to consider how it got there. Consider the banana. One of the exhibits is "Banana Passport", created by two Icelandic designers, Björn Steinar Blumenstein and Joanna Seeleman. They set out to chart the fourteen-day journey that a consignment of Cavendish bananas takes en route from production in Ecuador to consumption in Iceland. Each banana passes through thirty-three pairs of hands and travels 8,800 km, but to banana eaters in Iceland, no trace of this journey remains. The global food system, as the curators comment, is "hiding in plain sight" every time we go grocery shopping.

If diners are disconnected from farmers, we are still more unaware of the technological processes that shift ingredients around the world. The writer Nicola Twilley has coined the word "coldscape" to describe the huge network of refrigeration on which life in modern Western societies depends. Twilley has attempted to document some of the thousands of cubic metres of cold spaces through which food travels before it reaches our mouths. Some of Twilley's haunting photographs of refrigeration units are included in the exhibition, representing the "unseen realities" of food behind the hype and pretty labels of food marketing. These coldscapes look like the loneliest spaces in the world: giant cylinders of foods stacked up in warehouses with blueish lighting. Like so many aspects of modern eating, these coldscapes feel like both the best and worst of times. Why the best? Because the sheer volume of calories contained in these chilly units represents freedom from the hunger of earlier generations. Compared to fifty years ago, many fewer people have to worry about going to bed ravenous. But there are downsides to the coldscape. In these vast refrigerated spaces, food becomes something impersonal and commodified. The imperatives of the coldscape are to shift more units, not to feed our bodies in the way that they need to be fed. A world that contains cold rooms housing juice storage tanks holding 1.5 million gallons of juice is a world in which many people are drinking crazy quantities of juice. Someone has to drink it, if those juice manufacturers are going to turn a profit.

Another of the disconnects of the modern food system is the sheer waste it entails. The exhibition starts with a room exploring food waste, from the tonnes of perfectly edible food that are thrown away each day to the human waste that is flushed down the toilet. A series of ingenious experiments point the way to getting more value from food waste, from a striking veneer made in Mexico from corn husks to a blue bioplastic made from waste animal bones. One startling exhibit shows oyster mushrooms growing in plastic bags filled with waste coffee grounds. These frilly fungi look like exotic vegetables from outer space. Another corner has a display of objects including mugs and plates made from "merdacotta", a kind of terracotta made from cow dung.

The great question raised by *Food: Bigger than the plate* is what can be done to reform supply chains and reconnect consumers with the food we eat. The final series of rooms offer a whole host of possible answers, large and small and sometimes eccentric, from rethinking the nature of cutlery to making cheese from human microbes. In the final room, you can use a touch screen to order your own tasty snack made by Loci Food Lab. These represent different possible food systems of the future. Will you put your faith in locally grown quinoa, heritage barley or vat-grown mycoprotein? I chose a snack that claimed to be "biodiverse", "delicious" and "nutritious". It consisted of a moreish cracker made from British seeds with sheep's cheese and a relish made from tomatoes too "ugly" for supermarkets.

If we seriously want to change the way people eat, we also need to rethink the entire structure of how we live and farm and organize our cities. In Hong Kong, an artist-run collective called HK Farm has occupied rooftops in the city and given them to farmers evicted from the land by development projects. The materials from HK Farm were some of my favourites in the exhibition, featuring enticing growing guides for Hong Kong farmers depicting luscious eggplants, pumpkins and green beans: a simple reminder of the pleasures of growing and eating.

Another answer is foraging: to reclaim knowledge about the edible wonders that are still available for free, even in the midst of a modern city. Apparently, enough elderflower is grown in Barking alone to make elderflower cordial for the whole of London. An enterprise called Company Drinks takes community groups on foraging expeditions in Epping Forest to gather wild herbs and flowers to make into bottled soft drinks. Halfway through the exhibition you can taste a refreshing mouthful of a herbal drink made from lemon balm and other herbs.

The exhibition also restates the case for the powerful value of humble home cooking. This is hardly an original thought, but it remains a persuasive one. You can listen to a series of oral history segments with different people talking about resurrecting or keeping alive old family recipes. At root, our dislocation with food is also a dislocation from the past. Fabio Parasecoli, a professor in Food Studies at New York University, offers his grandmother's recipe for vitello tonnato. On one of the recordings he talks about how he wanted to make sure that her recipes did not get lost because they represent to him a kind of "embodied knowledge" about food that has become sadly rare.

No individual can solve the problems of our modern food system. As this fascinating exhibition reminds us, food is now a web of processes too vast and too interconnected to be addressed by consumer choice. "Placing the onus on the individual", notes the exhibition catalogue, "obscures the responsibility of corporations and governments."

But getting back on intimate terms with food need not be a complicated endeavour. It can be as simple as reminding yourself how to use your own senses and eating with your own hands. In the final room, we see a video – "Contatto Experience" by the Italian designer Giulia Soldati – depicting food being eaten off a series of hands. A piece of cheese nestles between finger and thumb. An egg yolk drops into the palm of a hand. We see fingers handling spaghetti and lemon. It feels oddly subversive to see food being eaten so directly, with no packaging or plate or advertiser's spiel to get in the way. Soldati notes that we often hear the phrase "do not touch" yet we would never say "do not look". Of all the contradictions of modern eating, perhaps the saddest is the way we cut ourselves off from our senses and thus deny ourselves full enjoyment of the feelings, sounds and smells that can still be afforded by getting closer to food. It's easy to become disconnected from your own appetites. In each room of *Food: Bigger than the plate* we are reminded that food will always be a complex interplay of politics and pleasure. But the final call to arms here – rightly, in my view – is to pleasure.