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Exquisite Paradise: Taste and Consumption in Hebe Uhart's 'El budín esponjoso' (1977)

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Food Studies in Latin American Literature

PERSPECTIVES ON THE GASTRONARRATIVE



EDITED BY ROCÍO DEL AGUILA
AND VANESA MISERES

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*Vice of habituation. Wonder of childhood,
magical feeling of raw materials and elements:
flour, salt, oil, water, fire.
Moments of pure vision, pure hearing, pure touch.*

*Consciousness of life at one moment.
All the memories revolve around bread.*

*It carries an intense sense of life, and also,
through I don't know what internal association,
an equally strong sense of death.
The thought of life turns banal from the moment
it isn't blended with the thought of death.
The pure essentials are superficial giants
or little pagans.
The pagan paid attention to both.*

Gabriela Mistral, "Bread," 1938

Exquisite Paradise

*Taste and Consumption in Hebe Uhart's
"El budín esponjoso"*

KARINA ELIZABETH VÁZQUEZ

Hebe Uhart was born into a middle-class family in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1936 and died in October 2018. She studied philosophy and became a prolific writer, served as a rural teacher, and taught literature at high schools and universities. Uhart maintained a very low profile despite great admiration from her peers and being an ardent participant in writers' conferences, workshops, and presentations. After a long career in narrative and short fiction, it was only with the 2010 publication of *Relatos reunidos*, for which she received the Fundación El Libro Award for the Best Argentine Book of Literary Creation, that she gained widespread recognition. She became particularly renowned for short fiction by the time of her death and has left behind a large body of work—primarily short stories as well as some chronicles and novellas, all with small publishing houses. Her famous short story collection, *El budín esponjoso* (1977), was followed by others, including *La luz de un nuevo día* (1983), *Memorias de un pigmeo* (1992), *Guiando la hiedra* (1997), *Del cielo a casa* (2003), *Turistas* (2008), and *Un día cualquiera (mapa de las lenguas)* (2015). Her novels include *Leonor* (1986), *Camilo asciende* (1987), *Mudanzas* (1995), and *Señorita* (1995). An animal lover and avid traveler, she published the travel chronicles *Viajera crónica* (2011), *Visto y oído* (2012), *De la Patagonia a México* (2015), *De aquí para allá* (2017), and *Animales* (2018).

One of the most distinct characteristics of Uhart's fictional universe are the everyday situations, spaces, objects, and characters, conspicuous in their simplicity and plain language, that become radiators of hidden

truths. Her short stories lead readers not to contemplate the existence of other realities, but to realize the inherent complexity locked within the small and the simple. As Graciela Speranza has pointed out, Uhart's stories offer "simple and enigmatic truths that are hidden in the universe of the everyday . . . [which] reveal a more abstract and essential order."¹ The house, the classroom, the neighborhood, the spaces of the everyday are the loci for philosophical reflections. The small stories of domestic life reveal a full spectrum of nuances that make visible the singularity and importance of every simple gesture. The orality of her narrators and characters transposes the social dynamic that organizes and rules an individual's experience. Through phrases uttered instinctively and "just like that," the author exposes the minutiae, the "micro physics" of the ordinary world.² Her stories do not illuminate what the characters think, but rather expose what they do by inviting the reader to explore the singularity of the real. In this sense, Uhart creates fictions that propose a "philosophy of the domestic."³ Family conflicts, feminine domesticity, the imaginary of middle-class upward mobility, devoted teachers within a wasted educational system, suffering of impoverished students, and ruptures between mothers and daughters are present in her stories as the ingredients of the daily concoction of power, one that is ingested through a transcendence of the smallness. Bedrooms, balconies, living rooms, local shops, classrooms, and kitchens are settings for philosophical explorations of perception, experience, and thought.

"El budín esponjoso" is one of the author's most famous short stories. Set in no specific historical period, it is narrated in the first person by a girl who embarks on a culinary experience: baking a spongy loaf cake (*budín*), similar in consistency to the famous Italian cake named *Torta Paradiso* (Paradise Cake), using a cake mix. The narration textually reproduces the girl's conversations and negotiations with her mother, and her exchanges with a friend who accompanies her in this task. As the description of the baking adventure progresses, it becomes clear that despite following all the steps in the recipe something strange and unavoidable starts to happen, rarifying the whole situation. Within the girl's simple language Uhart weaves the nuances of daily life—an individual's subjectivity, actions, and perceptions—into a broader invisible reality impregnated with modern consumption imperatives. After a series of stumbles and due to her uncontrollable curiosity, as well as her mother's lack of interest in guiding her, the culinary exploration ends in a disaster: the cake is an inedible burned mass. The culinary failure reveals tensions between the symbolic system

that feeds the girl's desire and taste and those of her mother, and taste is unveiled as a territory in dispute crossed by social and economic class mobility, gender identity, and intergenerational conflicts.

In this essay, I will analyze how "El budín esponjoso" cooks up a critique of the social grammar of consumption that governs individual and collective taste as a practical ideology of gendered and class power relations. Food as a language spoken by taste is the daily apprehension of reality. As the result of the daily cooking of power relations, taste organizes perceptions ideologically and politically through culinary grammars or gastronomies. In this sense, Uhart's philosophical and pedagogical perspectives, marked by her biography, converge in an authorial enunciation that distinguishes her treatment of the kitchen, food, and commensality from other writers' representations of food. In "El budín esponjoso," Uhart offers the reader a transformation at the level of the signified by turning an idealized middle-class culinary action that is very feminine, such as baking a delicious and delicate cake equivalent to a *Torta Paradiso*, into an intelligent concrete critique of consumption, gendered class relations, and class prerogatives. In the story, taste is a matter of market but also of experience. Cooking and eating are represented as acts of consumption; they materialize a feminine power lauded in an advertising and print culture that determines taste, social roles, and gender identities.⁴

My hypothesis is that through the microphysics of cooking, the author invites readers to question the referent of taste by showing the tensions within a social imaginary that materializes a series of actions and experiences such as cooking, guiding our perceptions and wiring us through our senses into a singular reality. The story illuminates a shifting moment in the status of cooking and culinary knowledge as a defining component of female domesticity and taste. The girl's strong desire for a tasteful experience associated with a traditional imaginary of romantic couples and weddings takes her on a culinary experience. Using a modern cake mix and lacking her mother's guidance, the girl fails in her purpose, but instead of internalizing the fiasco as her fault, she offers a critique of adults' relationship with consumption, failure, and daily life. In the end she learns that in the complex relation between production and women's representation, experience and exploration have been replaced by consumption, and what has been gained in time has been lost in sensory embodiment of the infinite meanings of daily spaces and experiences. The transformation of the signified cake through the sensorial descriptions exemplifies how taste is the result of a complex interaction between

material reproduction and representations. Taste crystallizes patterns of consumption that become a tool for the daily ingestion of power relations and social hierarchies. Regardless of the result, Uhart still shows that cooking is an emancipatory experience, as it is the only manner in which the girl can contrast the entelechies sold by the publicity of new products (such as cake mix) and the full sensory experience of baking the cake she wants.

In the story, the kitchen as a locus of feminine identity and knowledge acquires a different significance. The girl wants to bake a cake but is expelled from the kitchen by her mother, who argues that children make disasters in the kitchen and sends her to cook in the shed. This initiates a transformation in the meaning of the cake and the kitchen—given the conditions imposed by the mother, the first turns into a piece of “crap,” and the second becomes a space dominated by order and consumption. The kitchen is no longer the locus where feminine communities are congregated around pots, smells, concoctions, spices, exotic ingredients, cookbook recipes, and traditions dripping beyond generational, ethnic, and class differences. The transmission of culinary knowledge between generations is canceled by the role assumed by advertising, appliances, commercialization, and clear class divides. There is no inheritance of recipes and revelations of secrets, as could be observed in Ana Sampaolesi’s “Pachacamac” (1997), Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, 1989) and *Íntimas suculencias, tratado filosófico de la cocina* (2015), or Isabel Allende’s stories in *Afrodita* (1997).⁵

For Uhart, the kitchen is not an allegory for a woman’s own room for creativity and independence, as in Tununa Mercado’s “Antieros” (1998). And cooking does not refer to writing, as in *Locas por la cocina* (1997) by Angélica Gorodischer et al. Ingredients, utensils, and recipes are not linked to the discovery of sensuality and the exploration of the body or to a feminist vision, such as in Rosario Castellanos’s “Lección de cocina” (2012), Ángeles Mastretta’s “Guiso feminista” (1992), or Ana Sampaolesi’s “Sal en bife” (1997), or to an eroticism and the conflicts between the social imposition of the female figure and a blameless appetite, as in “Inmensamente Eunice” (1999) by Andrea Blanqué. There is no reminiscence of the intellectual shrewdness of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz in Uhart’s story; on the contrary, the philosophical questioning in Uhart’s work results from her clever capturing of actions, movements, and words that exhibit the incarnated memories guiding our bodies in the perception of reality through cooking and consuming.

Bodies in “El budín esponjoso” reveal in their gestures and words a sensorial learning. In this way, the author connects the symbolic realm with that of a singular experience. The kitchen brings memories of mistreatment: a place where cabinets enclose and hide desires, secrets, and frustrations behind the fancy kitchenware. Chocolate, sugar, and flour come mixed with distrust and ingenuity. Pans and lids do not match and exhibit marks of past fires and overcooking; strainers get clogged; and mothers and daughters curdle gender and class identities through the discipline of soup and the promises of cakes. Each bite is digested with the taste imposed by a diet made of affect and normalizing power. “El budín esponjoso” offers a vigorous critique of the cultural and social prerogatives written symbolically in food and leaves readers wondering about its referent.

In the field of literary studies, particularly regarding Latin American literature and history, food has lent itself to the elaboration of a feminist gaze; it symbolically subverts knowledge framed under patriarchal domination. And the representation of food and food as a social situation has been approached from an interdisciplinary perspective,⁶ and has received increasing interest in studies on material culture.⁷ The configuration of consumption cultures intertwined with the shaping of gender and class identities across racial policies at the core of the grammar of taste are contributions from cultural studies and the sociology of labor and consumption, as well as from architecture, which has placed food and culinary practices in dialogue with other social practices and with economic structures.⁸ A prolific and continuous corpus of critical perspectives sharpens the observation made by the French politician and lawyer Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin: we are not only what we eat, but how, when, and where we cook.

Worth noting are Paula Caldo’s studies on gastronomy, culinary arts, education, gender identities, and the consumption of cookbooks in Argentina;⁹ Rebekah Pite’s work on iconic Argentine professional cook Petrona C. de Gandulfo;¹⁰ Cuban Antonio José Ponte’s essays, particularly his work on Nitza Villapol;¹¹ Alison Krögel’s studies of the legacy of colonial extractive practices in the Andes; current culinary practices linked to the “foodie culture”; gendered economic strategies at community markets; and iconic and linguistic representation of food through film, literature, photography, and historical documents.¹² Compiled in a systematic way, *Comidas bastardas. Gastronomía, tradición e identidad en América Latina* (2013),¹³ edited by Ángeles Mateo del Pino and Nieves

Pascual Soler, offers a rich series of essays that form an interdisciplinary perspective and present food as a system of signs that creates communities, patrimonies, power dynamics, and production relations.¹⁴ As Sonia Montecino Aguirre has stated,¹⁵ we do not eat anything before us—only what we symbolically understand as food, which refers us immediately to the body as a surface that turns into a tool for knowing and a sensorial record, and subjectivity as a domain in which thoughts and ideas have flavor. Taste both lives in the palate and is a grammar of the social order that creates a sense of belonging and memories.¹⁶

In her study on food, aesthetics, and philosophy, Carolyn Korsmeyer analyzes the visual representations of food and taste, emphasizing their haptic nature. The author “rescues” taste from its relegation as an “inferior” sense by looking back to the body and the personal quotidian experiences and connecting it to Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “habit.”¹⁷ Habit is that invisible confluence of economic, cultural, social, and educational factors that guides individuals’ interpretation of the world and also orients perceptions, from the palate to the set of rules that we naturalize and apply when we read a recipe, set a table, and eat. Taste and commensality are social situations that are not accidental.¹⁸ David Sutton observes that food is able to “both generate subjective commentary and encode powerful meanings [that] would seemingly make it ideal to wed to the topic of memory.”¹⁹ This statement makes sense as it brings to the conversation the field of the senses and perceptions, which can be assessed through the observations and experiences of micro-social situations—those actions and experiences that inhabit our domesticity.

The grammar of taste, as seen in “El budín esponjoso,” is the set of rules shaping the intersection between the intimate/private and the public, and the way in which power dynamics are digested in between habits, rites, traditions, and also daily rebellions. Taste and commensality become key concepts in the analysis of this short story. Sutton suggests that we can comprehend the evocative power of food by understanding how the senses and perceptions work. Smell, touch, taste “have a much greater association with episodic than semantic memory, with the symbolic rather than the linguistic, and with recognition rather than recall . . . [which would] explain why taste and smell are so useful for encoding the random, yet no less powerful memories of context past.”²⁰ Therefore, the world of perceptions that flow in and through the quotidian experience without us consciously noticing them are deeply connected to our sense of taste. In this sense, taste is an “internal” feeling or perception, a way of

seeing things and comprehending reality. It is an embodied knowing that can either reaffirm or contest the very perceptions that lay out its conceptual foundation as part of our everyday “situated cognition” in which the body is constituted along with the world.²¹

In “El budín esponjoso” the transformations in the cake can be seen as a daring subversion of taste as a form of knowing that invests gender and class identities structured around consumption and tradition. In its opening lines, taste and sensory memory emerge as the key topics at hand. The narrator explains, “I wanted to bake a spongy pudding. I did not want to bake cookies because they do not have the third dimension. I eat cookies and it seems that they miss something; that is why people cannot stop eating them.”²² As Paula Caldo has noted, by the 1940s and 1950s the industrial or commercial stove in the food industry and the gas stove in the family home had replaced the economic stove (a kerosene-based stove), which broadened the public’s access to certain foods, including pasta, crackers, and cookies.²³ And although certain refined products such as chocolates, French-like pastries, and some baked goods such as cakes, remained at the upper-class pastry shops, the industrialization of food allowed the middle classes and popular sectors access to some alternatives or equivalents.

Cake mixes, such as *Exquisita*, are emblematic of this. The cake mix became a clear example of the modernization of culinary practices associated with changes in the transmission of taste values and dissemination of culinary knowledge. In the previous decades, food and food supply companies sought endorsements from prominent figures such as Doña Petrona,²⁴ who advertised brand-name products in some of her recipes and television shows, and product brands and women’s magazines that shared recipes guaranteeing their quality via an invocation of her name.²⁵

As part of a diversification of its production, by 1959 Molinos Río de la Plata, one of the most important companies in the Argentine food industry, launched *Exquisita*, which promised to do something more than just simplify the baking process. Cake mixes condensed and simplified knowledge, as they required one to follow a few simple instructions; they saved time; they seemed more economical, as they required fewer ingredients; and they were perceived as more practical and clean.

Cake mixes opened up the possibility for popular sectors and working-class families to enjoy cake by preparing it at home, and, more importantly, made cakes available for a more varied array of social and domestic events. But, above all, cake mixes eliminated the shadow of

baking failures. Before the creation of Exquisita the traditional Argentine *facturas* (Danish-like pastries) were the typical sweet treats for the working classes, while cakes and French-like pastries were designated for the middle classes, the commercial kitchen, and the food industry. But baking innovations made cookies and cakes accessible to all, drawing new lines for consumption, taste, and social differentiation in the crossover between gender and class. The story moves this passage from a formula based on culinary-art production and experience-based knowledge to one structured around consumption of cooking and kitchen aids more in line with personal comforts and home improvement models in certain domestic spaces such as the kitchen. The cake mix was better suited to the home's accelerating rhythms and to the gender expectations of the modern housewife. Initially, the girl's rejection of cookies would suggest a kind of longing for old times and a resistance to modernization (something apparently her mother does not resist), as she clearly announces that she is not interested in plain industrial or popular cookies (for the masses or the dogs), but in a cake that has an "aura" or "third dimension."

Consumerism and gender identity are clear in the narrator's appetite as she describes the cake's packaging: "[The cake] came beautifully packed within a small box: it was called the Paradise Cake. The box had printed a woman in a long dress: I cannot remember if it was a woman with a man or a woman alone; but if it was just a woman, she was waiting for a man."²⁶ Until the first decades of the twentieth century, the *Torta Paradiso* was manufactured and sold in Argentina by the industrial bakery brand Terrabusi. Its packaging had various designs, but the logo always showed a female silhouette holding an umbrella. Gender roles were prefigured by the press and advertising industries. They presented a sweet "feminine" palate for cakes and a taste for images that organizes the narrator's perceptions: "Just biting it softly, one could feel that all the mastication processes, swallowing, etc., were perfect. It was not like chewing cookies, which are for eating when we are bored; it was for thinking about the Paradise Cake in the afternoon and eating it, an afternoon of nice thoughts."²⁷ Publicity here functions at the level of social imaginary, recovering values fixed in memories and mixing them with intentionality, filling time and space with "floating signifiers" that inscribe taste as desire and connects material life with subjectivity: "When I saw the 'Spongy Pudding' recipe, I said: with this, I am going to bake something similar. I'll ask mom to let me use the economic oven for baking it. 'Not even in dreams,' she told me."²⁸ Perhaps what the girl is longing for in the evocation of the *Torta Paradiso*

is the artisanal experience in the kitchen as a mechanism or medium to connect thoughts and perceptions.

The gas stove was widely promoted by Doña Petrona during the late 1920s, and by the 1930s and 1940s most middle-class homes were equipped with one. Although "El budín esponjoso" was published in the 1970s and there are no explicit historical references in the story itself, the mother's excuses for not letting the girl use the economic oven could be because children make messes in the kitchen, or because her mother was simply cooking less than in the past (the narrator says that the "black box" was almost always off). Despite the ambiguity of the era in regard to the kitchen appliances, this discrepancy between a daughter who wants a taste of *Torta Paradiso*, implying all those gender roles, and a mother who seems to adhere to more modern values (either she does not see her daughter in the kitchen or she does not cook anymore herself) reveals the complexity of the tensions between symbolic systems regarding cooking as a materialization of gender roles and the knowledge "assigned" to them.

Taste emerges in the confluence between consumption patterns, class and ethnic prerogatives, and gender identities. Kitchen appliances and food brands relying on famous professional cooks to endorse their products as well as chefs relying on brand sponsorship to reach their public was a dynamic that helped configure the culinary arts.²⁹ Taste was embedded in a menu of gender roles and taste would be felt as a feeling and desire. In the case of *Torta Paradiso*, the gender roles associated with it seem clear. Versions of the recipe locate its origin in the Lombardy region in Italy, where it is said that a bride baked this cake and offered it to a monk, who after tasting it named it "*Torta Paradiso*." By the late twentieth century the recipe was registered, becoming one of the best-known Italian cakes. It appears in the 1944 edition of *El libro de Doña Petrona* in the desserts section, along with the following cakes: Anniversary Cake, Birthday Cake, Almond Cake, Wedding Cake, Wedding with Tiers, Silver Anniversary Cake, Coconut Ta-Te-Ti, Delicious Cake, Fruitcake "Charo," Christmas Cake, Tennis, Esther, Argentinean Independence Cake, Angel Food Cake, Negrilla, 9 of July Cake, Boy's First Communion, *Paradiso* Cake or "*Torta Paradiso*," Soufflé, Supreme, and Pompadour Cake.³⁰

A woman's life trajectory could be read in this list, which matches the imaginary of the young narrator. Recipes and cooking become a map of the senses and meanings through which women become desiring subjects. One of those afternoons of pretty thoughts while tasting *Torta Paradiso* prompts perfect body movements: a soft mastication, a perfect

swallowing. The young cook wants to acquire and practice the knowledge that will take her to that moment. Once again, revising Doña Petrona's recipe for *Torta Paradiso*, we see that it was not a difficult task. The secret is simply a slow and controlled beating of the batter until it is smooth and consistent. The cake's preparation requires essential skills such as deep concentration and a connection with the batter through controlled movements of the arms and hands. The cake requires 10 egg yolks, 6 egg whites, 200 gm of powdered sugar, 150 gm of potato starch, 200 gm of flour, 1 lemon zest, 1 cc of vanilla essence, and 150 gm of melted butter. Doña Petrona's recipe emphasizes whisking to form a frothy batter and moving the mixture gently until folding in the flour and the potato starch, and incorporating the warm butter at the end. Clearly addressed to an already trained cook, the recipe does not offer details about how to avoid the collapse of the sponge during its time in the oven.

The appearance of the industrial oven allowed the mass production of certain foods (such as cookies) similar to the imported ones consumed by the upper classes.³¹ Therefore, the narrator does not want the feel of "popular" cookies, but the fluffy, more prestigious touch of cake. However, either because children do not belong in kitchens or because her mother utilizes modern culinary products such as instant cake mix, the narrator embarks on the experience alone to prepare something similar to *Torta Paradiso*. The cake mix allows her to avoid the complex preparation; nevertheless, expelled from the kitchen and circumscribed to suboptimal conditions, the narrator is led to an experience that will impact her taste and her thinking: "In the shed, my mother was going to turn on a portable stove (it is dangerous, children should not use it) . . . maybe she did not care about death."³² Nevertheless, the differences between the traditional *Torta Paradiso* and ones prepared with modern cake mixes is notorious. The first requires beating egg yolks and sugar at a constant pace for a sustained period until a fluffy consistency is achieved, and folding in flour, potato mix, and melted butter with extreme care to avoid a glutinous formation, while the second only requires beating flour, sugar, and the leaven mix with eggs. Both mixtures will rise, but the first is a genoise that melts in one's mouth while the second, although fluffy, remains a dense sponge cake. Clearly, preparing a sponge cake with the modern cake mix is less time consuming, yet the *Torta Paradiso* demands a presence in the kitchen that implies actions (a body) rooted in a different emotional and intellectual experience of daily life. And the cake mix box hides the

complex process that the narrator wants to learn in order to avoid cookies, which lack that spongy texture.

The locus for culinary knowledge had changed and the kitchen had become more a place for the consumption (and exhibition) of objects rather than for complex meal preparation. The orality transposes in the narrator's voice the mother's justifications—children make a mess in the kitchen and should not handle dangerous things, therefore, let's take them both outside. Forced to bake the batter in a small pan, the young narrator follows every step in the recipe except one: avoid opening the oven while the cake rising. As she is cooking in an open space, in a pan with just a lid, she cannot observe the cake as it rises, something that could have been done through the modern gas oven's view-window: "But I wanted to check if it was already cooked; rather, I wanted to see how it was getting cooked. Same as a Japanese guy that had a nursery and used to get up every night to see how plants were growing."³³ Here we can find the tension between the symbolic systems that configure the mother's taste with that of the girl. It is her curiosity about the process that makes her craving for the traditional *Torta Paradiso* different from that of her mother, regardless of whether she is a modern or traditional housewife. The instant cake package may save the girl from some complications but it imposes a different taste on her own.

The girl's curiosity is not considered by the recipe. In fact, it is an internalized code (of patience or ignorance) that for baking success the oven should not be opened: "¡Qué manía!" (What a craze!) blurts out the mother when she sees the girl lifting the lid. Being curious about how things happen does not seem to be part of the culinary arts, which has rules to be accepted in *sotto voce*. Taste does not have to be questioned, but as a corpus of social and cultural knowledge it must be learned and accepted. A distanced observation as part of the experience seems to ruin the results: "The cake had turned dark brown and folded up in all directions: lengthwise and crosswise. It looked like a brown pastry, one of those called *vigilantes*."³⁴ Compactly folded in every direction, the *Torta Paradiso* resembles a "vigilante," a typical Argentinean stick-shaped pastry named by anarchist bakery workers, or *panaderos*, mostly Italians, who violently clashed with security guards and policemen during strikes and labor protests in the 1920s. To contest the brutal repression and incarceration of union leaders, as well as the complicit understanding between the church and the police, bakery workers created "vigilantes,"

a stick-shaped pastry resembling excrement, and “bolas de fraile,” a ball-shaped pastry resembling friars’ testicles. The culinary failure leads the young narrator to corroborate that her venturing into the baking experience herself elicited her mother’s censorship. Although from the beginning of the story, taste as a social situation appears interrelated with consumption and power (the imaginary the girl adheres to in the description of the cake), taste as a feel depending always on the experiential sensation is subjected to the gesture of exploration, in this case, the girl’s curiosity. Combined with the culinary restrictions imposed by her mother, caused too by a taste guided by the grammar of consumption (of food, ingredients, recipes, culinary appliances), curiosity pushes the girl to evaluate the process not as a culinary failure to feel ashamed of, but as a natural product of a bigger social recipe: “My mother said: ‘It is to be expected, I already imagined that.’ I thought that for adults making crap was something logical and inevitable.”³⁵ Cooking is an experience that enables us to become conscious of our senses; it forces us to explore perception as part of our constant thought process. It is, ultimately, a form of rewiring through transformation. The cake mix eliminates the magic of that experience-changing taste. By avoiding any reference to a cake mix brand such as Exquisita, Uhart emancipates her narrator from consumption.

The refined Italian Torta Paradiso represents baking as the rarefied event, while its replacement, the modern cake mix in a box, confirms that mass-consumption baking is the event, rather than the experience of baking itself. The final product, a cake shaped like a vigilante, reveals that transformation of taste as a result of consumption and modernization in the kitchen occurs at the expense of the sensorial experience and imposes new perceptual codes. Only a narrator with a spirit of innocence and exploration—as that of a child in the kitchen—can visualize how reality is apprehended in small gestures, through every bite and every perception. Between the enchantment of baking a cake and the strangeness of the product there is a string of small events, movements—those of cooking—through which bodies are alert despite trivial repetitions that allow us to approach the unknowable of the real or the singularity that composes reality. And what was the referent of taste in this story other than the unattainable or the unstable meaning feasible only through the quotidian experience?

“El budín esponjoso” is a metaphysical exploration of the small, sensorial aspects of daily life, and as such, it takes the reader into an inquiry

of the senses: touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing are all present through the orality transposed in the text, driving us to the uncontrolled flow of certain actions, making us face the importance of failure as a learning tool and as part of this embodiment. If Torta Paradiso requires an embodiment of the kitchen by sensing the air forming into the batter, the modern cake mix requires only following instructions. The story articulates the expectations of consumption inherent in both mother and daughter. But at the same time, through the narration, it brings to the surface the tension between two symbolic systems that, despite not being explicitly and clearly defined as opposites regarding gender values, are distinct in the materiality that they refer to: the girl still wants to experiment as a constitutive part of her identity and her learning, and her mother wants to avoid the experience and the failures by consuming. She sees consumption itself as the experience. As a pan out of the oven, Uhart leaves us at the door of the referent. What is taste if not the result of a constant experience of contradictions, negotiations, resignations, failures, and rebellions? What makes Torta Paradiso delightful is the girl’s desire to experiment with cooking, regardless of the values associated with that particular cake. She wants to embody the kitchen as a sensorial adventure. Uhart dissipates any doubt about it through the detailed description of the action of baking. It was not the girl’s baking failure that made the cake inedible, but her mother’s inability to guide her in her exploration. With this story, Uhart opens the door for emancipation through experience. In the end, the girl realizes a terrible truth: for adults, baking a cake has become a matter of mechanical appetite rather than one of desire.

Notes

1. Hebe Uhart, *Relatos reunidos* (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2010), 10. Translations are my own throughout the chapter.
2. Graciela Speranza, prologue to *Relatos reunidos*, by Hebe Uhart (Buenos Aires: Alfaguara, 2010), 11.
3. Adrián Ferrero, “Entrevista a Hebe Uhart,” *Confluencia* 30, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 83.
4. Oscar Traversa, ed., *Cuerpos de papel II. Figuraciones del cuerpo en la prensa 1940–1970* (Buenos Aires: Santiago Arcos Editor, 2007), 18.
5. See Maite Zubiaurre, “Culinary Eros in Contemporary Hispanic Female Fiction: From Kitchen Tales to Table Narratives,” *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 29–51.

6. Jean-Pierre Poulain, *The Sociology of Food: Eating and the Place of Food in Society* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).
7. Emblematic are Rebecca Earle's studies on food, bodies, Spanish conquest, and colonial power dynamics. Rebecca Earle, "European Cuisine and the Columbian Exchange," *Food and History* 7, no. 1 (2010): 3–10; Rebecca Earle, *The Body of Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Spanish America, 1492–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2012); Rebecca Earle, "Food, Colonialism and the Quantum of Happiness," *History Workshop Journal* 84 (October 2017): 170–93. These add to the contributions made in the field of cultural anthropology by classic studies that establish the relationship between food and language such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 40–47. Others reveal conceptions of witchcraft and practices of eroticism in the connection between class, gender, and racial demarcations in the preparation and consumption of chocolate during pre-Hispanic and colonial times, such as Martha Few, "Chocolate, Sex, and Disorderly Women in Late-Seventeenth and Early-Eighteenth Century Guatemala," *Ethnohistory* 52, no. 4 (2005): 673–87. Roland Barthes in "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 28–35, proposes food as a system of communication that possesses a nostalgic value that wires past, present, and future together regardless of the latitudes.
8. Inés Pérez, *El hogar tecnificado. Familias, género y vida cotidiana 1940–1970* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2012), 107–8.
9. Paula Caldo, "En la radio, en el libro y en la televisión, Petrona enseña a cocinar. La transmisión del saber culinario, Argentina (1928–1960)," *Educação Unisinos* 20, no. 3 (September–December 2016): 319–27; Paula Caldo, "Leer, comprar y cocinar. Una aproximación a los aportes de los recetarios de cocina en el proceso de construcción de las mujeres amas de casa y consumidoras, Argentina 1880–1940," *Revista Sociedad y Economía* no. 24 (January–June 2013): 47–70; Paula Caldo, "Pequeñas cocineras para grandes amas de casa . . . La propuesta pedagógica de Ángel Bassi para las escuelas argentinas, 1914–1920," *Temas de Mujeres* 5, no. 5 (2009): 33–50; Paula Caldo, "Recetas, ecónomas, marcas y publicidades: la educación de las mujeres cocineras de la sociedad de consumo (Argentina, 1920–1945)," *Arenal* 20, no. 1 (January–June 2013): 159–90.
10. Petrona C. de Gandulfo, *El libro de Doña Petrona. 1000 Recetas Culinarias por Petrona C. de Gandulfo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Atlántida, 1944); Angélica Gorodischer and Ana Sampaolesi, eds., *Locas por la cocina* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 1997).
11. Antonio José Ponte, *Las comidas profundas* (Rosario, Argentina: Beatriz Viterbo, 2010); Antonio José Ponte, "¿Quién va a comerse lo que esa mujer cocina?," *Ddc*, March 2, 2012, <https://cubamaterial.com/blog/quien-va-a-comerse-lo-que-esa-mujer-cocina-por-antonio-jose-ponte/>.
12. Krögel's work on food and resistance in the Andes by means of the concept of "food-landscapes" is particularly vital for integrating the world of symbolic figurations of food into the material production of daily life where those representations conform to the "apprehension" of social and racial hierarchies within the economy and food production. See Alison Krögel, *Food, Power, and Resistance in the Andes: Exploring Quechua Verbal and Visual Narratives* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2012).
13. Ángeles Mateo del Pino and Nieves Pascual Soler, eds., *Comidas Bastardas. Gastronomía, tradición e identidad en América Latina* (Santiago: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2013).
14. Focusing on gastronomy as the culinary art that speaks to food preparation and consumption, and the link between food manipulation and commensality, the volume includes studies such as those on tamales by Meredith Abarca, "Receta de una memoria sensorial para tamales: Eduardo Machado," 387–407; as well as those on corn, chicha, and music such as Adriana I. Churampi Ramírez, "Who Is Afraid of . . . Chicha?," 269–85. Churampi Ramírez analyzes key notions related to the cultural heterogeneity of Latin America such as *mezclaje*, syncretism, and transculturation.
15. Sonia Montecino Aguirre, *La olla deleitosa* (Santiago: Catalonia, 2005), 11.
16. Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *The Brain's Body: Neuroscience and Corporeal Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 44–45.
17. In *El sentido del gusto. Comida, estética y filosofía* (Barcelona: Paidós, 2002), 22, Carolyn Korsmeyer analyzes how the values embedded in the hierarchy of senses penetrate representational systems that are exhibited and explored in food representations. Pablo Maurette's observations in *El sentido olvidado. Ensayos sobre el tacto* (Buenos Aires: Mardulce, 2015), 56–67, about touch as a sense associated with vision are interesting regarding taste. An image, a sound, or a smell moves us and that perception is haptic in the sense that we can feel it, which is why looking at something "is" a haptic experience. However, as Korsmeyer has pointed out, vision and hearing are considered "objective" senses as they operate at some distance from the object, which means a kind of separation between perception and feeling or sensation, whereas with taste, smell, and touch, Korsmeyer observes that sensation or feeling is experienced as if they were "internal" (45–46). Such distinctions have run across classical philosophy as a form of hierarchizing knowledge, and, as a revision of phenomenology indicates, the information that we obtain from the senses is concrete, specific, and circumscribed to the here and now.
18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1986), 136.
19. David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 6.
20. Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts*, 102.
21. Pitts-Taylor, *The Brain's Body*, 35, 46.
22. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 175.
23. Caldo, "En la radio," 324.
24. Rebekah E. Pite, *La mesa está servida. Doña Petrona C. De Gandulfo y la domesticidad en la Argentina del siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Edhasa, 2016), 48.
25. Pite, *La mesa está servida*, 48–51; Caldo, "En la radio," 326.
26. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 175.
27. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 175.
28. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 175.

29. Pite, *La mesa está servida*, 46-49.
30. Gandulfo, *El libro de Doña Petrona*, 329.
31. Caldo, "En la radio," 324-25.
32. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 176.
33. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 177.
34. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 178.
35. Uhart, *Relatos reunidos*, 178.