

Cannibal (writing) feast

Kingston author self-publishes a 'cookbook' featuring human delicacies

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Gary Allen, a jovial Kingston-based food writer and lecturer, gets a little sparkle in his eye when he discusses what has become for him something of a culinary obsession—the consumption of human flesh. And, if Allen’s jocular tone, as he discusses the manners and mores of the Donner Party and that famous Uruguayan rugby team stranded in the Andes (don’t eat close relatives and eat the women last, respectively), alarms an interviewer, or dinner guest, Allen says it shouldn’t. After all, we are all the descendants of cannibals.

“In the course of my research I felt that I would probably find some old accounts from 16th-century explorers, some things from psychologists, but when I went down my bookshelf I found this astounding wealth of material from all over the world,” said Allen. “Every culture goes through a cannibal phase, usually just before the advent of agriculture. After it passes we still have a cultural memory there.”

In an attempt to get at the universal nature of the cannibal impulse, Allen and co-editor Ken Albala have put together an anthology of essays, poetry, fiction and yes, recipes under the title *Human Cuisine*. The anthology features work ranging from the musings of Dutchess County-based poet Tamara Watson on her inexplicable urge to bite the dentist’s hand, [to] an anthropological examination of *The Food Economy of Old New Guinea*.

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Allen solicited entries for the anthology via an online “call for papers” and was astounded by the volume of material that made its way to his inbox, including a fictional tale positing that Adolph Hitler’s missing testicle was the result of a childhood encounter with a cannibal.

“That one didn’t make it in,” said Allen whose more traditional writing credits include *The Herbalist in the Kitchen* and an encyclopedia of the food industry. “It was a little too gross even for [one of] us.”

The anthology is something of a side project to a much larger work in progress, *How to Serve Man: On Cannibalism, Sex, Sacrifice and the Nature of Eating*. That work examines the elemental role of cannibalism in human society and psychology. The subject, Allen says, may seem macabre, but a cursory examination of modern society shows how close we are to our cannibal roots. According to Allen, cannibalism is the perfect vector to examine deep-rooted, cross-cultural attitudes towards food.

From infamous statements like Mike Tyson’s desire to eat the (nonexistent) children of former champ Lennox Lewis to everyday phrases like “rake him over the coals” or “fry him in his own grease,” the cannibal impulse is never far from our consciousness, according to Allen. The writer recalls watching the movie *Silence of the Lambs* and being struck by the audience’s reaction to the cultured cannibal Hannibal Lecter (Lecter, by the way is Latin for “reader” aurhor Thomas Harris’ sly imputation that we are all cannibals beneath the surface, Allen says) butchers his less than sympathetic victims.

“As it turns out cannibalism is not as offensive to people as injustice and cruelty,” said Allen. “When Lecter went out and killed and ate these horrible people, the audience cheered for him.”

Allen has also examined the ways in which cannibalism has been used as a sort of cultural

cudgel to place rivals beyond the pale of civilization. When Pope Alexander VI issued a decree that only cannibal tribes could be enslaved by New World explorers, Conquistadors, predictably, began finding evidence of the practice everywhere. Cannibal tribes in New Guinea, trying to curry favor with white visitors would hotly deny allegations of people-eating while painting neighboring tribes as voracious consumers of human flesh. Centuries after the Anasazi culture of the American Southwest vanished from the scene, their Hopi and Navajo descendants are fighting a fierce battle against anthropologists' findings that the pueblo-dwellers practiced cannibalism.

Allen is trying to generate buzz and sales for his anthology via the web and at trade shows for food writing publishers who, perhaps unsurprisingly, have been cool to the concept.

"Most of my publishing contacts are in food publishing and when they heard what the book was about the reactions was 'why in the world would I want that,'" said Allen cheerfully.

As for his own appetites, Allen, a one-time vegetarian said that, while he was an adventurous eater, human flesh wouldn't quite suit his palate.

"I'll eat pretty much anything, but I do have some hesitation when it comes to human flesh," said Allen. "It's not a moral objection—I've done enough research to know that it's not a universal taboo. My problem with it is mostly medical—human flesh is not healthy stuff."

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