

Harry Mathews: A Meal Should Last Forever

Harry Mathews has written some of the most formally inventive, and perversely moving, American fiction and poetry of the last 50 years. As the American standard-bearer for the otherwise predominantly European OuLiPo, his influence can be felt throughout the cultural sphere. He splits his time between France and Key West, where we conducted this interview last April.

Mathews has increasingly seemed to me a sage arbiter not only of all things literary, but also of living well. It made sense, therefore, to ask him a few questions about food and wine and their relationship to literature, all of which I have enjoyed heartily in his presence. This conversation between Mathews, the Key-West-based poet and publisher Arlo Haskell, and myself took place over dinner at the erstwhile Key West Italian restaurant Antonia's. We were joined by Marie Chaix, Mathews's wife, and Ashley Kamen, who by the time you read this will have become Haskell's.

-Stuart Krimko

Harry Mathews: Is the recorder on now?

Arlo Haskell: It is, but we'll pretend like it's not.

HM: You've already asked me an extremely recordable question.

Stuart Krimko: It was really just an appetizer question. I'd asked you whether anyone had asked you in particular about the ways in which food and wine play into your work.

HM: One basic thing is that I don't drink whiskey. I love it, but I don't drink it so much anymore. T.S. Eliot said that he often had a glass or two of whiskey to get the creative juices flowing, which was amazing, coming from him, and quite understandable. I can see how he might well need it.

SK: Maybe he could have used more.

HM: Yes, especially in his later period. But I know that if I've had a glass of something at lunchtime, it's easier for me to work in the afternoon. And I work better in the afternoon than I do in the morning.

SK: Thomas Bernhard once said half a liter at lunch and half a liter in the evening. Of course, he was tubercular, so I think it was palliative.

HM: Maybe. But it does get you over some hesitation. When I got to writing *Cigarettes*, I would sit down, and especially when I was rewriting it, because I rewrote it four times—well, three-and-a-half times. Perhaps we should pause, since I'd like to order something. We're talking about food, after all. Are you finding the wine OK, Marie?

AH: What is the wine we're starting with?

HM: It's a verdicchio, which is a wine that appears in Dante, in the *Purgatorio*. I may be able to quote—I'll give you a translation of it. They're in the Circle of the Gluttonous. "And this one," Virgil says, pointing, "held in his hands the Holy Church, and died...." Have you ever seen *Mad Men*? Our waiter looks like the English guy.

SK: You mean the one who's cowed by his father?

HM: Yes, his father hits him over the head, it's terrible. Some scene. But back to food and drink.

SK: I thought it was interesting that I asked you about food and wine as they affect the characters in your books, and you took it upon yourself to talk about how they affect you. The last book of yours I read was *The Journalist*, and sometimes I felt that it was food that was holding the narrator together.

HM: People reacted with incredulity to the family meals in that book. Americans in particular said that nobody cooks like that, and I would tell them that this is considered normal for a working wife in Europe, in Italy, in France outside of Paris. People come home for lunch and they expect a real meal. And at dinner it's not the way it used to be, when people would just have some soup and cheese—they have a real meal then, too, and the wife is expected to produce these things. People didn't believe me.

SK: The geography of that book is a pleasing puzzle to me.

HM: It is never named. I imagined it taking place somewhere like Czechoslovakia, or Hungary. Someplace where they grew wine—well, I didn't know that they grew wine in Czechoslovakia then, but they do,

and lots of it. Or Austria, some middle European place. Where did you think it was supposed to be?

SK: I kept jumping around. I suppose walking into the book, reading the first word, I assumed that I was someplace American. But that was only because you are. And then for some odd reason, given a few turns of phrase, though it was impossible given the wine, I thought that we were in the UK.

HM: There were vineyards near the town where it took place, so it had to be someplace south of the UK—Germany, France, points south. I thought it could have taken place in the United States, but my American friends told me no, even though they praised my description of office life. But hardly anyone's read *The Journalist*.

SK: I have.

AH: So have I.

SK: That makes two of us. Including you, that means more than half the people at this table have read it.

AH: According to this survey, then, 60% of Americans have read *The Journalist*. And Marie's French, so if we counted her, we'd have 80%.

HM: We're married, so she is American, and she has read it. Well, she had to. It was not a big hit here, and interestingly it also had trouble finding readers in France. Nobody knew what to make of it.

AH: It's a hard book.

HM: You think it's a hard book? I thought it was one of my easiest.

AH: Easier than *My Life in CIA*?

HM: No, *CIA* is obviously easier. We need to finalize our next wine decision here. That bottle of verdicchio is not only empty, but gone. That's like literature, isn't it?

SK: I had a fantasy, when I was thinking about how to conduct this interview—perhaps I shouldn't play my hand, though I guess it's too late—of trying to come up with an Oulipian structure based on, say, wine appellations in the Loire Valley.

HM: I have a performance piece about a nonexistent Loire wine that I'm going to do again in June. It starts with a description of a period in the 100 Years War, when the British are being driven out of Normandy. There's something that's always been unexplained, which is that there were an enormous number of skirmishes near a village of no strategic value whatsoever. I start the performance by saying that I have the answer to this quandary: next to the village was a hill, in an area known for its red wines, where an extraordinary white wine was grown.

SK: In Normandy?

HM: In the southern part of Normandy, getting close to the Loire. So I start explaining how this wine was made, what grapes went into it, how there was a grape used that was never used elsewhere in the Loire, mixed with Sauvignon Blanc. And then I say, "To better explain what I'm describing, I've brought along a bottle of this wine." And I put it on the table and open it.

SK: What is it?

HM: The last time I did it, it was a very good Bourgogne Aligoté. As I started to drink it I described my sensations, saying, "This way you will be able to participate in the quality of this wine," and I made the usual ornate comments on its nose. Then I went on describing the story of the 100 Years War, and then a little bit more of what the wine was like, and little by little, the written lecture, which alas I've lost, began to be corrupted by Oulipian methods as I got drunk.

SK: In other words, despite yourself?

HM: Yes. And it was terribly difficult to read, because I had to read these extremely exact deformations of language while I was in fact drinking an awful lot of wine. It had people falling out of their chairs laughing. The more I had to drink, the more careful I had to be, because I wasn't making just any kind of changes to the words, I was making very specific ones, so I had to be able to articulate them. I'm performing it again it at a colloquium for translators on drunkenness. Aside from that, and the story "Country Cooking from Central France," I don't know that food figures so conspicuously in my writing.

AH: Well, there is a place where both food and drink figure prominently. In *The New Tourism*, the poem "Crème Brûlée."

SK: In fact they're found all throughout *The New Tourism*. The "Haikus Before Sleep" are full of drinking.

AH: And in "Crème Brûlée," food is keeping you at the table and drink is keeping you away, or food is keeping you here and drink is keeping you elsewhere. You want to be in both places at once.

HM: That's true. And with regards to the haiku, they were a nocturnal diary, so naturally dinner was more prominent in my memory than breakfast. And then there are the recipe poems that make up "Butter and Eggs: a didactic poem," which are based on very simple recipes: how to make a poached egg, or how to make a boiled egg.

AH: But I want to return to the poem "Crème Brûlée," in which you're sitting down at a restaurant and you're having a crème brûlée and some wine—I can't remember what kind of wine it is.

HM: I say that it's "of a denomination you don't have to puzzle your head over." I'd also like to say, to turn the thing around, there's a relationship between eating and reading. That is to say, I have nothing against electronic readers, but I love books, because it seems to me it's like opening something up, you don't know what's there, but you plunge your nose into it. It's a very physical experience. Even if the book doesn't suck your cock, you can eat its pussy. Isn't that your line, "I licked her pussy, she sucked my cock."

SK: No, it's from Shawn Vador's story "Life Within a Life."

HM: It's a great line! But reading really is like entering into the physical unknown. That's why the book will always be preserved. I can imagine that digital readers are great for traveling salesmen, if they read. It occurs to me that there's another major food-related project of mine that you probably don't know about. After the tenth year anniversary of Georges Perec's death, I decided that I would do a memorial for him, which was, theoretically, a version of something he himself had done years before: a list of all the food and drink he had consumed in the previous year. So I kept a list all through that tenth year. But I soon discovered that he had not done that. I got in touch with the editor of *Action Poétique*, who had commissioned Georges to do the piece, and I said, listen, this is ridiculous—what Georges had published as his year's consumption of food and drink I had surpassed in a few months. And I didn't eat and drink as much as he did.

SK: Was he legendary in that regard?

HM: He was an eager eater and drinker. But the editor confessed to me that in fact it was only a quarter of the year.

AH: Harry, if you were a wine...

HM: If I were aligned?

AH: No, if you were a wine... interviews have to have stupid questions in them, for comic effect. If you were a wine, what wine would you be?

HM: Romanée-Conti. There's nothing like it in the world. It's like paradise made.... like the best wine in the world, with something more. That is to say the best wine in the world—a strong gutsy, masculine wine—that has a feminine element added to it. A little while back, in 1994, Marie and I bought a case of Domaine la Romanée-Conti. We bought the 1992 vintage. It was very "cheap" at the time, a relative term when it comes to these wines. The guy who runs the domaine, and who also has his own little vineyard in Southern Burgundy, told me, "You have to wait 15 years to drink this, otherwise it will still be asleep." On the 13th year we opened a bottle, and it was delicious, but not what it should yet be. And the year after we tried another one and it still wasn't there yet. But on the 15th year, when we sold our New York apartment, which was where I was keeping the case, we had ten bottles left. And we drank them all during a two week period. And they got better, and better, and better.

On the last night, the night before we left the apartment forever, we had a meal, with good but lesser Burgundies, which were wonderful in their own right. We certainly didn't need any more to eat or drink, but the apartment had this little terrace that looked out over a little courtyard between 10th and 11th Streets of yore, and the courtyard was covered with wisteria. Marie had found some wonderful fresh goat cheese—that's what the Burgundians eat with these great wines. And we drank the last bottle of 1992 Romanée-Conti. I'm sorry guys, we wouldn't have shared it with you. People make the mistake of saving their best wines for parties. They should be shared with one's lover.

AH: But if your lover is out of town...

HM: Then with another lover. [Laughter]

AH: How did you get to know wine? Who told you about it?

HM: My parents. I used to be given glasses of great wines, great Bordeaux wines and things like that, when they cost as little as a dollar a bottle, before the War. There was a great crisis in the French wine industry at that time.

AH: And your parents were American, right?

HM: My mother was half Italian, but fully American. Anyway, when I was 14, I was at a beach party on Long Island, with my mother and her friends, Mies van der Rohe, all kinds of fabulous people. We were all drinking jug Chianti, and it was pretty good. And I realized that this stuff could do something for me. So I started pursuing my mother's beautiful friends, chasing them into the water. We were all naked... nothing happened, alas. But that's when I started drinking wine. Then when I got to Europe, at the age of 18, I started drinking it more regularly.

AH: That was when you were in the Navy?

HM: Well, of course I drank wine then, but no, this was earlier. When I went to France as a student in 1948, my father, who was then one of the partners in Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill, had helped out an aspiring Italian architect by securing him a position as a draftsman in his office. In return he asked the young man to ask his mother, who was an American and from the prominent Gould family of Boston, if she could contact her relations in Italy to help find some young ladies to spend time with me while I was in Florence that August. Her relations included Signor Rucellai. This was the man who had inherited, and still inhabits, I believe, the Rucellai Palace, which, with its façade designed by Alberti, is one of the great examples of Renaissance architecture.

Anyway, the problem is, there are no young ladies in Florence in August, they're all off at the seashore. But there was one left that summer—her name was Lisa Ricasoli. She was allowed by her family to see me until five o'clock in the afternoon—no later. A-very nice—a young lady, she took me around Florence and showed me a lot of things I might not have seen without her. Finally she decided I was OK, so she had me invited down to her father's castello in Brolio.

Now, Brolio is a big name in Chianti. There were two kinds of Chianti: the one in the straw basket, the fiaschi, and the one that was put into regular bottles. I decided that I should learn something about this

wine before I went to the castello. So I would go to Sabatini every night, which was then a wonderful a little restaurant; it's now a large horror—and I would sit down, have a nice meal, and drink a bottle of Brolio Chianti. The wine was very strong, so strong that I was not able to get up from the table at the end of the meal. I would have to explain to the waiter, "Look, I'll pay for my meal, but I cannot stand up." And he would reply, without missing a beat, "Brolio cuts your legs out from under you." So I would sit there for awhile and then eventually get up and make my way back to my hotel.

Finally, it was time to make the trip to the castello. They sent a limousine for me and another guest—he happened to be the man who had served as the German consulate in Florence during the Second World War. He had saved innumerable Jews, Resistance members, and other difficult people from being arrested, helped them flee from the country, and so forth. But when the Americans arrived they arrested him and put him in jail. I spoke to him about the best teacher I'd ever had, who was German, and my love for Heine, and Rilke, and so on and so forth, and he cried, because he never expected to meet an American who would feel warmly towards him. I said, "Listen, I adore German culture." I do so somewhat less now, but never mind.

SK: Heine has always interested me. I feel like he's a touchstone I've never been able to touch.

HM: Well don't get stoned before you touch him. You have to learn German to read him. He's what Wordsworth wanted to be. You like music, right? Listen to the songs that Schumann set, and learn what they are saying.

Anyway, we arrived at the castello. We were escorted to our rooms, and didn't change for dinner in the English sense, thank God, meaning we didn't have to put on dinner jackets. So I came down in my not-very-well-cut gabardine suit, just a ridiculous caricature of an American. They were all very polite. I sat next to the contessa; the conte was at the other end of the table. The whole family was there—two brothers and three sisters, perhaps. We had a first course, and then a man came in bringing the red wine. I said in my inadequate but nevertheless efficient Italian, "I am so curious to see what you will serve, because while the '43 Brolio is older, I find the '44 even better." The count looked at me and said, "Bring this man five wine glasses at every meal." And I thought, "What have I done?" Every meal I would be presented with five different wines. It was fabulous. I demonstrated that American civilization wasn't totally hopeless—all thanks to my

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drunken dinners at Sabatini. Wine is so much fun. I didn't know anything about it at the time. Did you know that Chianti Classico is made from four different grapes, including one white wine grape? And of course now they've started to make wine from just....

SK: Sangiovese...

HM: Bravo! Compagno! Good for you. I'd like another glass of wine. I think I'll have a glass of prosecco.

SK: I'll have what Harry's having. I have to go to the bathroom, I'll be right back.

HM: Listen, over the urinal, there's a photograph of the Piazza San Marco at acqua alta—it's fantastic. I think meals should last forever. I was telling Arlo that he was unforgivable for ending our lunch at 5:30 the other day.

AH: I had to put it to a halt after three bottles of wine.

HM: And the Campari before. Shall we go to the bar and have another drink? To conclude, I'd like to say that I think there's no real relationship between food and literature, except in the consumption aspect of it. But wine is something else.