## (Almost) Too Good to Eat: Marking Life Transitions with Food

July 14-December 8, 2013







Tea ceremony to honor visiting dignitaries celebrating the 50th anniversary of Buffalo's relationship with its sister city, Kanazawa, Japan, 2012.



Detail of Atsuko Mitchell, assisted by Takako Michii, performing tea ceremony, 2012.



Earka Luzecky, in her kitchen, rolling out long cords of dough to braid into a wreath for a *korovai*, an elaborate Ukrainian wedding bread, 2013. The braid represents the couple joined together by God.

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*Korovai* in the Peremyshl regional style created by Earka Luzecky for exhibition.

In the study of folklore, a good portion of the research process involves spending time listening, asking questions, and observing people go about their daily lives. Folklorists joke that sitting around kitchen tables is one of their main professional activities. This detail is never truer than when studying traditional foodways. Sitting at Earka Luzecky's kitchen table in Rochester, she served me a heaping plate of Ukrainian-style stuffed cabbage, a

dish she considers representative of her ethnic identity. She told me, "If you're going to come to my house, I'm going to cook you Ukrainian food!" I was spending the day with Earka to document the lengthy process of making *korovai*, a decorative sweet bread displayed and eaten at weddings. To garnish our lunch, she laid out a bowl of sour cream—the customary choice, as well as her preference—a bottle of ketchup; the two options reflect her blended experiences as an immigrant whose family was displaced from the Ukraine during World War II. Before we ate, Earka bowed her head to say grace, asking God to bless our meal, our new friendship,

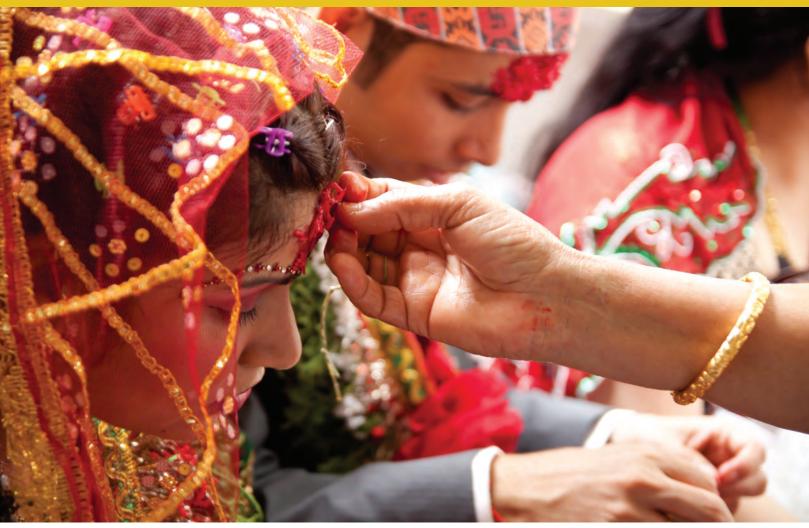
and to guide her hand in making beautiful *korovai*.

Food is a meaningful part of our daily lives. By preparing and serving food, we can demonstrate our hospitality to guests while also revealing important insights into our personal histories, beliefs, and tastes. For Earka, as for people everywhere, familiar foods provide a sense of continuity and wellbeing, a way to bridge time, a reminder of home. A shared meal—as in this instance of stuffed

cabbage—reaffirms her feelings of family cohesion, ethnic identity, and spiritual union.

Food is also a potential media for everyday artistry, one that appeals to all senses of perception. Master cooks know how to perfect common recipes to signal their understanding of good taste and to create stunning culinary presentations. Elaborate displays of abundance, like a table set for Easter dinner or an altar piled with *pan de muerto* for Day of the Dead, simultaneously celebrate life, community, and aesthetic excellence.

Cover Photo: Banana with money and ring on offering plate, prepared during the wedding of Lokesh and Karma Rai in Buffalo, 2012.

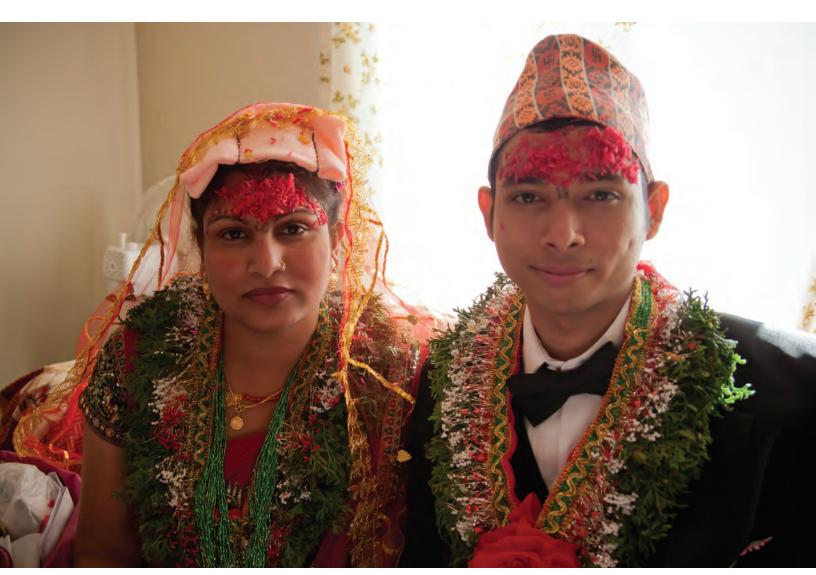


Wedding guest applying a blessing of *tika* (a sticky mixture made of cooked rice, yogurt, and vermillion powder) to bride Bishnu Dhungana's forehead, 2013.

As integral components of holidays and ceremonies, particular ingredients, dishes, or meals are singled out as significant. Traditional foods possess symbolic associations that can be creatively harnessed to express a variety of ideas. In some cases, their ability to communicate complicated concepts and beliefs outweigh their nutritional properties; some traditional foods are not meant to be eaten. A piece of fruit at a Hindu wedding may be adorned with money and flower petals, then presented as a sacred offering, enabling relations between humans and the divine. A plate of foodstuffs arranged at Passover may serve as a reminder of shared religious principles, as well as past events in Jewish history.

(Almost) Too Good to Eat explores some of the crosscultural ways that food nourishes not just our bodies, but also our social and spiritual lives, feeding our human needs for comfort and communion. Focusing on a sampling of ritual foods connected to transitional moments—from daily acts of prayer and hospitality, to cyclical celebrations, to the singular experience of migration—this show demonstrates the universal role of food as a mediator within human, spiritual, spatial, and temporal relationships.

What we eat identifies us, uniting humanity as the animals that cook, while simultaneously dividing us into smaller social categories influenced by communal tastes and habits, as well as geography and history. School children are commonly introduced to the world's cultural diversity by comparing how different populations address basic human needs for food, clothing, and shelter. Foodways are key to understanding what a group of people value, believe, and savor. Possible examples of ritual food, even in a small corner of the world, are countless. The case studies included in this exhibition represent recent fieldwork conducted in Western New York, from the intimate viewpoint of a family kitchen, to the commercial realm of a bakery counter, to the civic and educational sphere of public events. We hope that visitors can draw many parallels from their own experiences, discerning the cultural in the edible, and appreciating traditional foods for their multifaceted role as a daily tool and an everyday art.



Bishnu and Narayan Dhungana on their wedding day, their foreheads covered in tika, 2013.



Helen Gebrmariam performing a coffee ceremony for guests to an Ethiopian feast organized by Journey's End Refugee Services, 2013.

## **Acknowledgments**

**Curator of Folk Arts** Carrie Hertz

**Photography** Carrie Hertz

for Exhibition:

Lukia Costello Special Artworks Created

**Todos Santos Ofrenda** 

Leonel Rosario Dolores Rosario Galilea Rosario Leonel Rosario, Jr.

Polish Easter Lamb Cakes Melanie I. Krygier-Lamastra of Melanie's Sweets Unlimited

European-American "Dummy" Wedding Cakes

The Design Team led by David Muscoreil of Muscoreil's Fine Desserts and Gourmet Bistro

Ukrainian Korovai Earka Luzecky

Bhutanese-Nepali Hindu Wedding Altar Padma Khanal Khem Khanal Tika Nirola Bishnu Adhikari

Japanese Tea Ceremony Arrangement Dr. Takako Michii

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Photography by Carrie Hertz



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