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## Surreal Meals

Revisiting Salvador Dalí's lavish, unsettling cookbook.

MELANIE REHAK

Agnostics and atheists rejoice! If the holiday season brings out in you, as it occasionally does in me, a nagging undercurrent of regret that there is no higher order giving weight to your festivities, Taschen books understands. Its reissue of Salvador Dalí's 1973 cookbook, *Les Dîners de Gala* (\$60), filled with lavish recipes and images that frequently verge on the disturbing, is not, as the introduction teases rhetorically, "just another cook book presented to an already saturated market." Oh, no. It presents nothing less than a new way to live now: Dalí's Gastro Esthetics. Or should I say, "the Spirito-Mystic-Monarchic, Catholic, Apostolic, Romanism of Dalí's Gastro Esthetics." If that's a little too sweeping and abstract, allow me to throw out a few of its guiding principles for your delectation: "All my experiences are visceral"; "I am exalted by all that is edible"; and, of course, the Esthetics' most important tenet: "mystical conversion." This is an ontological system I can get on board with.

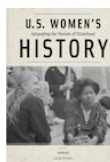
It's also one that involves an entire chapter of recipes devoted to aphrodisiacs—hard to resist in the season of mystery and starry, chilly nights. When you title your cookbook after your wife, as Dalí did—and how handy that her name doubles as a description of a lavish banquet—it seems only reasonable to crown its sexiest section with her moniker as well. "Les 'je mange Gala'" (let's hear it for triple entendres) has recipes for a lamb Siren Shoulder, Aphrodite's Purée, and Pierced Heart, which in spite of its dramatic name seems to be more or less a giant meatball served on a biscuit—apparently even Surrealists like their protein. There is also the Casanova Cocktail, prescribed by Dalí for those moments when "circumstances such as exhaustion, overwork or simply excess of sobriety are calling for a pick-me-up." Once you've combined orange juice, bitters, ginger, two kinds of brandy, and cayenne pepper, the author advises, "drink . . . and wait for the effect. It is rather speedy."

Though the Casanova Cocktail no doubt packs a pretty quick punch, it's hard not to speculate that it might also create that other kind of speedy effect: access to the hallucinogenic world depicted throughout *Les Dîners de Gala*. There are all the usual bits of Dalí iconography—the melting clockfaces and anthropomorphic telephone receivers and hybrid animals. Because this is a cookbook, they're often accompanied by fried eggs. There are also many pictures of genuinely freaky food, like a giant mussel shell with human limbs coming out of it. Collectively, these images make us consider the relationship between our bodies and what we put in them. In the painting accompanying "Les 'je mange Gala,'" two fancy, flesh-colored puddings sit side by side in silver dishes, on beds of aspic. The window behind them looks out on a blue-and-green landscape filled with asymmetrical reflections and a giant fish. If you examine things more closely, the left-hand pudding, smooth and unctuous and glinting, actually turns out to be a naked woman settled atop an aspic-and-ladyfinger base, with rosy nipples that echo the dome of gelatin on the companion dessert in the other half of the image. She's meant to be eaten ("je mange Gala"), and she is, like all of us, literally made of food. Everything here is both what it is and what we believe it cannot possibly be.

The entire book, in fact, is an invitation to reconsider convention. Many of the recipes it includes are taken straight from the fanciest, most venerable Paris restaurants of the day. Maxim's, that paragon of French dining, contributed among others a recipe for Stuffed Saddle of Lamb Roasted In its Own Juices. It appears in a section titled "Les entre-plats sodomisés" ("the sodomized in-between courses"), surely not the category under which it was listed on the restaurant's own menu. In a series of photographs, Dalí appears, resplendent in a crimson-velvet blazer, ruffled cuffs, and that mustache of his, in dining rooms cluttered with all the stuffy china and silver dishes that were de rigueur at places like La Tour d'Argent and Le Buffet de la Gare de Lyon in the mid-twentieth century. Sometimes he's accompanied by tuxedoed waiters or a chef in a white toque who, one imagines, probably weren't aware that their images were going to appear near drawings of trollish men balancing food on their erect penises or grisly visions of death and desiccation. Dalí's mere presence in these densely patterned rooms makes the most staid and traditional of scenes seem bizarre. We're forced to rethink the organizing principles we take for granted. Is Dalí actually any more peculiar than the elaborate settings and rich, super-complicated food put forth as the height of chic, which to today's eye look claustrophobic, heavy, and completely over the top? By the time you're done perusing *Les Dîners de Gala*, it's hard to say.



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YOU  
DOING  
TONIGHT?



One of Salvador Dalí's original photographs for *Les Diners de Gala*, 1973. © Salvador Dalí, Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí, Figueres, 2016.



Ultimately, this is a book about acknowledging all of the carnal desires that come straight from the dark heart of what it means to be human, with Dalí as both high priest and ringmaster. The second section, which covers eggs and seafood, is called "Les cannibalismes de l'automne" ("autumnal cannibalism"). The following image—a tower of vermilion crayfish capped by a martyred woman with a dagger in her heart and blood flowing freely from her mouth and the places where her arms once were—is the stuff of nightmares. On the platter below her, corpses, headless torsos, and severed heads are scattered amid the garnishes, while red blobs that look like phallic maggots hurtle through the air against a backdrop of vaguely ecclesiastical buildings. It's a feast for a demon, the blood and the body transfigured. Or maybe it's just a feast for Dalí, who comments in the book's introduction that he hates to eat food with no defined form, like spinach, going on to say: "The opposite of shapeless spinach, is armor. I love eating suits of arms, in fact, I love all shell fish . . . food that only a battle to peel makes it vulnerable to the conquest of our palate."

Metamorphosis, of course, is one of the guiding principles of Surrealism. By laying bare the insane jumbles of the unconscious, it reminds us that those all-important powers of mystical conversion lie within us. It also shows us the force of the everyday magic we can create simply by believing that the world isn't to be taken at face value. Dalí's recipe for Goose Eggs starts off, "Of course, these are nothing but hen's eggs. We are simply going to transform them." In Boar Shank with Black Radishes, he reminds us that "what we call shank is in fact the leg of the animal." Now, instead of eating dinner, you're eating a leg. Sleight of hand was an important feature of French cooking at the time these recipes were published—whole ducks roasted, taken apart, then made to look as though they'd never been touched, via the sorcery of aspic and sauce; hams decorated with gelatin and truffles in floral and other patterns, making them appear covered in fabric rather than skin. Suddenly, the distance between the bizarre and the au courant closes even further.

Anchovies à la Christmas seems an appropriate dish to send you on your way at this time of year. It's more or less a homemade anchovy paté baked onto slices of baguette and sounds quite delicious. In the accompanying photo, the toast is shown stacked in formation, with a piece of coral at the center to remind us of the sea. As always, Dalí sees beyond the simple arrangement of fish and bread. "In my daily life my every move becomes ritual," he writes. "The anchovy I chew participates in a small way to the shining light of my genius. Being a genius I have to care for the body that harbours it, I therefore accept this obligation, I accept with joy this holy inquisition." It's the feast of the seven fishes, Surrealist style. Let us pray.

*Melanie Rehak is the author of Eating for Beginners (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010).*

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