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STEW OF THE EARTH

L. Sasha Gora

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Besides the leaves that a bag gathers, all you need for a cup of tea is hot water, and in the town of Furnas the earth boils it directly. I bend in front of a spigot and perform the same trick I learned as a child at family dinner parties: to run my finger through a candle's flame as fast as I can—too slow and the heat will catch it.



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Although not quite in the middle of the Atlantic, the Portuguese Azores Islands are so far, so distant, that the easiest coordinate feels like somewhere out there. Somewhere between Europe and North America. Somewhere in the thick of the ocean.

This somewhere is a green so bright it edges on psychedelic. But the weather is fickle. It teases you, making you believe you don't need a sweater or that it's safe to leave your umbrella at home. One moment the wind grates your skin, and the next the sun strokes it. Rain is always a possibility. You experience the weather by the hour, even by the minute. A single day performs multiple seasons. Ferns behave like trees, pineapples—against all odds—grow in green houses, and menus describe local wines as “persistent.”

The ground hums and hiccups and hisses with heat. Springs bubble and boil. Sulfur exhales from the earth, and vapor clouds rise and blanket the air.

Not only a geography lesson, the Azorean archipelago can teach you a story or two about energy, about warmth, about the boiling heat under the crust of the earth. The Azores are the souvenir from when volcanoes contoured a splatter of islands on the ridge where the Eurasian, African, and North American tectonic plates crash, clash, and collide. On São Miguel, the largest of the nine islands and the one that hosts Furnas, volcanoes roll like hills and stretch like valleys. The town is hemmed in by fumaroles, geysers, and hot springs (*caldeiras*) rich in minerals and iron, sodium bicarbonate and boron, fluorine and carbon dioxide. The ground hums and hiccups and hisses with heat. Springs bubble and boil. Sulfur exhales from the earth, and vapor clouds rise and blanket the air. The performance is dramatic, contrasting how much geological action takes place beneath the surface—what Bruno Latour calls “the thin skin of the Earth”¹—and how much pushes above. Its name makes it no secret that Furnas is a steam bath of a town.

The springs are too hot for bathing but just right for brewing tea or boiling stew. Some invite mugs and pots, and others hide behind signs warning that their gases are too noxious, their waters too warm. Usually these warnings are tomato red, but one is green: “Caution Hotsprings Very Hot,” it instructs. It hangs above a less colourful one—white flecked with skinny red letters. “Don’t Step On The Boil Zone,” the capital letters insist. A wooden boardwalk escorts me around what feels like an outdoor oven. The fumaroles sneeze and spurt and wheeze. Smoky with the threat of a run-in with scolding water the same temperature as hell, I can’t help but think about stories about climate change and what it means to say that the world is on fire.

On 3 September 1630, a volcano erupted and shook the site that would later stage Furnas. Dormant ever since, its former crater is now a lagoon, and on its banks, the heat of the earth is put to work simmering stew.

The earth shares its warmth, and local cooks are clever enough to cruise for it, to coax it to prepare their dinner for free. They extract heat and its energy from what lies beneath the surface. Known as both *Cozido das Caldeiras* and *Cozida das Furnas*, this dish typically begins by assembling a museum of meat—from chicken, blood sausages (*morcela*), and ribs, to bacon, pork belly, and pigs’ ears—folded between cabbage and carrots, potatoes and garlic. The meat coats the bottom of a stock pot, then the vegetables stretch themselves out, creating a bed for the sausages and, finally, more cabbage leaves.

What happens if you think of a recipe not as a set of instructions to follow but as a script to interpret or rehearse?

Professionally, I study recipes for a living, and, personally, I like to be bossed around by them when I’m too tired to figure out my appetite on my own. But, lately, I keep imagining other ways to approach them. What happens if you think of a recipe not as a set of instructions to follow but as a script to interpret or rehearse? Perhaps even an equation—about how to feed and be fed on a warming planet—to solve? As a formula that pens a credit line that includes the labour of those who turn flora and fauna into food, and not just the authors who translate these acts into words? By asking these questions, I follow the advice of the philosopher Timothy Morton, attuning to how I am “already being ecological.”² “Ecological awareness,” asserts Morton, “is awareness of unintended consequences.”³ Eating, in other words, is always ecological, and cooking is an environmental act. A score scripts multiple outcomes, choreographing the possibility of a plurality of performances. Energy tethers one step to the next.

Cozida das Furnas edges toward what I've started calling "culinary formulas"—or maybe even "culinary scores."⁴ But beyond the ingredients and sequence in which they are cast—it is not the what but the where of the *Cozida das Furnas* that things become interesting, steamy even.

Fifty-something geothermal cooking pits mark the lagoon's shore. At one meter deep, the craters are the size of manholes and lined with concrete. Wooden signs—the kind that identify garden herbs and vegetables—claim the fumaroles, calling dibs for restaurants, local families, or visitors. Managed by the Municipality of Povoação, its park attendants bury the pots, tucking them in under mounds of warm dirt so perky, so ambitious, they would impress the most industrious of ants.



Hot springs, Caldeiras das Furnas, São Miguel Island, Azores, Portugal. Photo by Jules Verne Times Two / julesvernex2.com, 2021. [Wikimedia Commons](#). [CC BY-SA 4.0](#).

The title of anthropologist and primatologist Richard Wrangham's book *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* gives away his argument. "What made us human?" he asks, only to propose that "one of the greatest transitions in the history of life, stemmed from the control of fire and the advent of cooked meals."⁵ Yes, fire can be made, but heat can also be found. And in Furnas, the simmering earth was waiting for humans to show up with a pot of stew. No tinder necessary.

In a sealed underground steam chamber of a cooking pit, a volcano stew is a slow affair. This is cooking that requires patience. Any good cook is an apprentice of temperature and how it behaves in relation to time. The earth begins its lunch shift at five a.m. The pot contains no water, no stock. Instead, the steam makes the ingredients sweat, producing their own liquid, extracting their own sauce. At a temperature between 64 and 96 degrees Celsius, volcanic heat simmers the stew for six to eight hours.

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After the stew has served its time, the park attendants—layered in puffy vests and flannels—call on hooked poles to hoist the pots, releasing them from the ground. I watch two men use one hand each to fish out a pot coddled in cotton and deliver it safely to the back of a van. I wonder whose lunch it is.



One of the pits used for cooking by Terra Nostra. © Richard Ellis on Alamy. All rights reserved.

That evening, I eat at Terra Nostra Garden Hotel—the kind of accommodation where the unofficial dress code is a bathing suit and a bathrobe, and the only activity that requires clothing is dinner. I study the menu, authored by chef Nuno Gonçalves. One page is a catalogue of *Das Nossas Caldeiras* (From Furnas hot springs). Translating the island’s specialty stew into gastronomy’s lingua franca, the menu calls it a “Portuguese pot-au-feu.” As I wait for mine to arrive, I think about how the underground heats and shifts all that is above, cracking any sense of stability.

I’m writing this elsewhere, on “an island off of an island” in the northwest Atlantic. Fogo is the largest offshore island in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Its Portuguese name—

fogo—means fire and draws a line between one side of the Atlantic and the other. Between the two, the ocean is a patchwork of blues, and the water quilts together the waves.

The studio I am working in is off-grid—a bring your own water, bring your own heat kind of place. Solar panels borrow energy from the sun, energy I use to power a space heater that sits at my feet, but a faster, hotter, option is the studio's woodstove. So, here on Fogo, I'm learning to make fire, recalling lessons from long-ago camping trips. The formula of bark, first, then kindling, and, finally, logs. The hope that the flames will catch, that the wood is dry enough. As I pile branches and light a match, I remember how on São Miguel the word fogo branded walls and decorated signs.

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A scene in *Land of Milk and Honey*—a novel as beguiling as it is disquieting—also brings me back to the tastes, textures, and temperatures in Furnas. Author C. Pam Zhang details brioche slathered with cultured butter and daube dolloped with crème fraîche before describing pudding with an interior “so creamy it recalled the molten center of the earth.”⁶ The book details sculpting gourmet meals—dishes so over-the-top that they have more in common with fine art than they do with alleviating hunger—at a time when crops fail, smog thickens like cream, and the world is dying.



Frederic Edwin Church, *Brimstone Head, Fogo Island, Newfoundland, 1859*, drawing. Courtesy of [Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum](#). Public domain.

Perched on Fogo Island's northwest tip is Brimstone Head, which, according to the Flat Earth Society, is one of the earth's four corners. “Did you notice the sign?” Jane the Geologist asks the brace of hikers she leads to the end of the trail up this stack of volcanic rock. Some grab their phones, camera apps on guard. Others turn around to sneak a second peek of the sign. “We’re still waiting to see what happens when someone wanders off the edge,” laughs one of the islanders. Before trekking to the top, Jane casts a rainbow of sponges—blue and pink, yellow and red—to mimic this island's geological history. She's teaching us what the rocks know, how the earth tells stories. A couple of weeks earlier someone told me that geologists lick rocks to identify their minerals. “Is it true?” I ask. “Oh yeah,” Jane smiles. To taste is to find. To taste is to know.

Volcanoes exaggerate how the earth is alive. How it isn't a passive surface on which to pin nations, cuisines, and dreams, but how it rumbles and shakes and spatters. Exhaling heat, the earth simmers stew and brews tea, all while shattering the expression "solid ground."

Notes

¹ Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Critical Zones: The Science and Politics of Landing on Earth* (MIT Press, 2020), 3.

² Timothy Morton, *All Art is Ecological* (Penguin Books, 2018), 41.

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴ This question guided my 2022 residency at Delfina Foundation as part of the fifth season of its [Politics of Food](#) programme.

⁵ Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (Basic Books, 2009), 4.

⁶ C. Pam Zhang, *Land of Milk and Honey* (Penguin, 2023), 130.



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