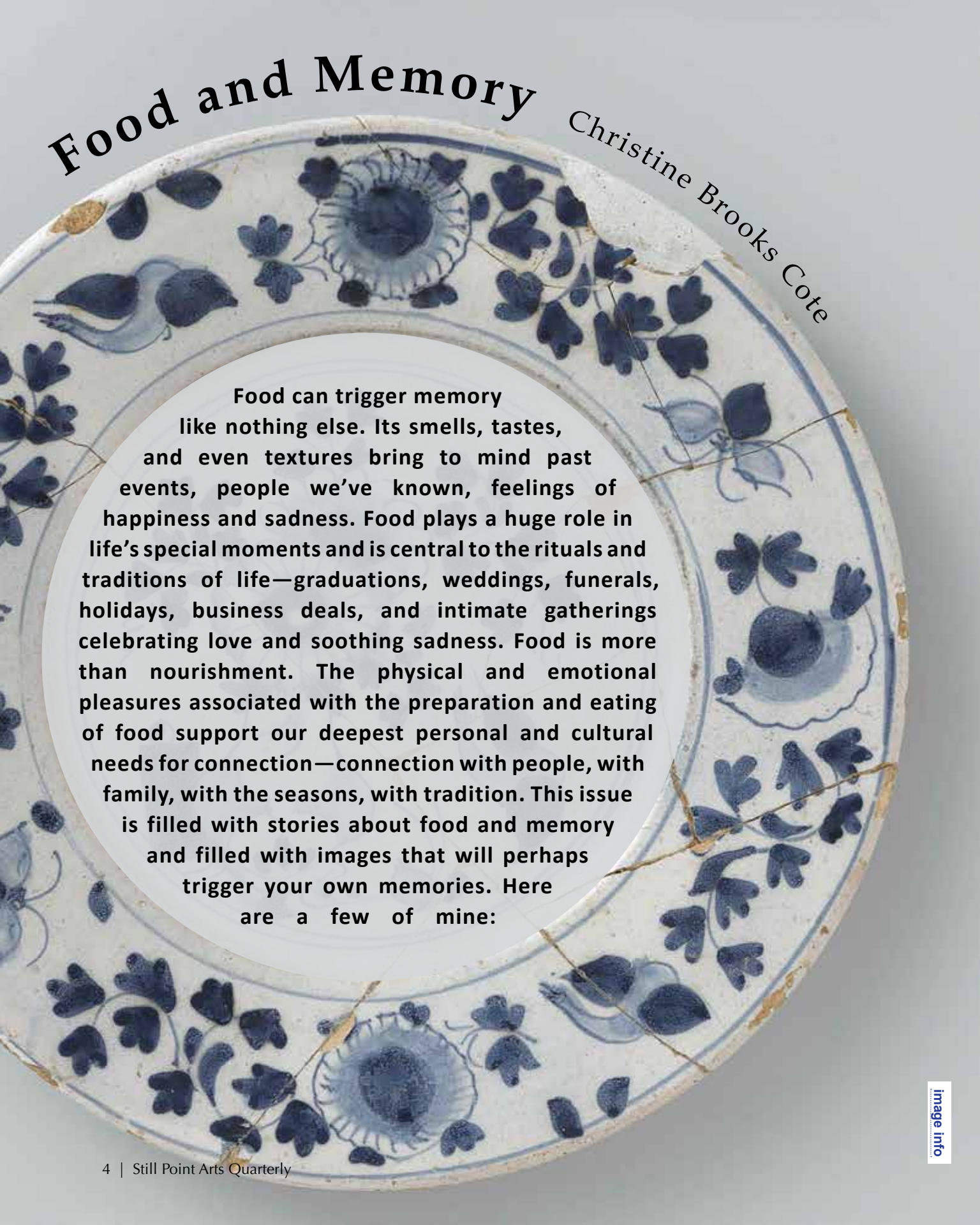




Food and Memory

Christine Brooks Cote

Food can trigger memory like nothing else. Its smells, tastes, and even textures bring to mind past events, people we've known, feelings of happiness and sadness. Food plays a huge role in life's special moments and is central to the rituals and traditions of life—graduations, weddings, funerals, holidays, business deals, and intimate gatherings celebrating love and soothing sadness. Food is more than nourishment. The physical and emotional pleasures associated with the preparation and eating of food support our deepest personal and cultural needs for connection—connection with people, with family, with the seasons, with tradition. This issue is filled with stories about food and memory and filled with images that will perhaps trigger your own memories. Here are a few of mine:

Lobster—

Everything you need to know about lobster rolls and where to find the best ones in Maine.

Before moving to Maine, lobster was equivalent in my mind to caviar—extravagant, unnecessary, and not really all that tasty. But in Maine, eating lobster in the summer is like eating strawberry shortcake on the Fourth of July—it’s tradition, special, and not all that expensive. Whether you buy lobsters and cook them at home on the stove (not recommended since it leaves your house smelling like the ocean at low tide) or over a fire pit in your backyard (while also getting rid of the dead tree that fell over the previous winter), or you drive out to your favorite seafood restaurant (often



just a shack on a wharf somewhere), eating lobster is complicated. You need the right tools—crackers and picks, big bowls for the shells, and little bowls for melted butter—and proper protective equipment—lots of napkins and sometimes even bibs—because lobster juice and bits of shell and butter typically go everywhere. But eating lobster on a bun is much easier. When I first moved to Maine, my new friend Kathryn and I would go to Holbrook’s Wharf in Harpswell about once a week for lobster rolls—fresh lobster meat, just a touch of mayonnaise and butter, some crisp lettuce, and a perfectly toasted roll. The ambiance was perfect—lots of people sitting together on old picnic tables on a wharf next to a shack where the lobsters were boiled and food prepared; the cook in his long white apron walking around talking with people; the rumble of lobster boats going in and out; fishermen working on their boats and traps; Labrador retrievers (usually black ones) hanging around waiting for a French fry or a piece of bread to fall on the ground; and, of course, the smell of the ocean. It was a great way to experience the culture of coastal Maine—its look and feel, traditions, the native accent, and the rugged and independent way people approach life. Lobster is important to Maine’s culture and economy. For me, it offered a way to begin to understand and appreciate a culture very different from the one I grew up in.

Brussels Sprouts—

Except for potatoes and an occasional cabbage, I grew up on mostly canned vegetables—peas, carrots, corn, and green beans. In the summer we had cucumbers and tomatoes from our garden. That was the extent of it. My father was a meat and potatoes man, and it didn't much matter what the vegetable side was as long as it was one of those mentioned above. For variety, sometimes my mother served the vegetable

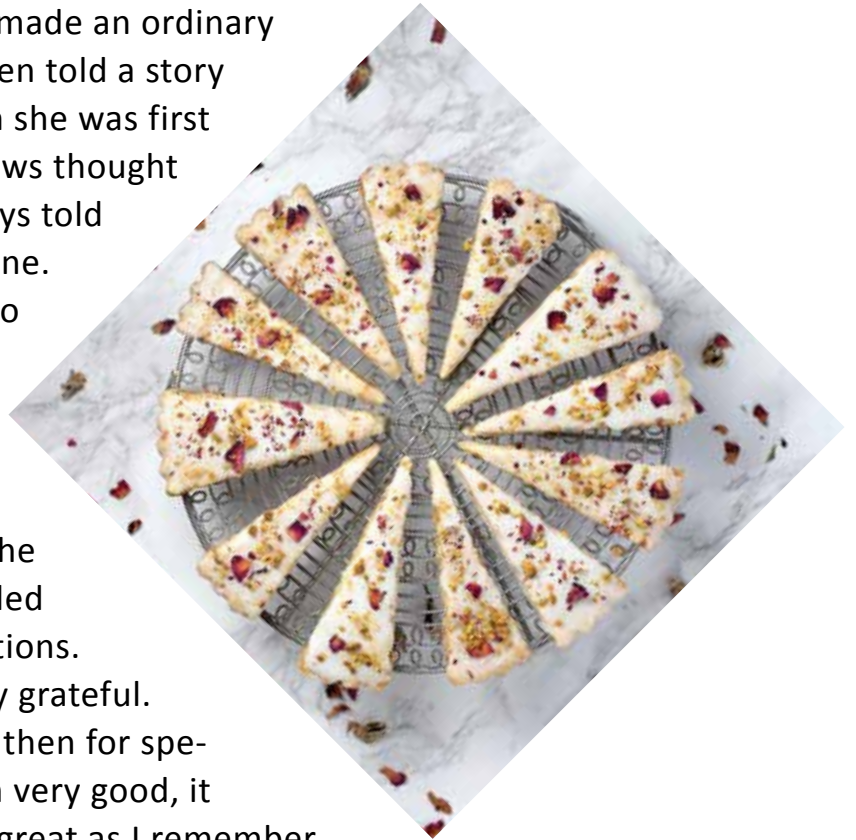


“creamed,” that is, mixed with water thickened with flour. Creamed cabbage was particularly forgettable. When I started college, I got a job in the cafeteria. At first my job was cleaning and chopping lettuce and tomatoes for the salads, starting at 5:30 in the morning. Eventually, I

worked my way up to the line, putting food on students' plates. That was the best job. You were the one thing separating students from their food, so despite the aprons and hair nets, you felt important and respected. When the line got slow, we'd sneak food out of the pans, using our fingers of course. That's how I discovered Brussels sprouts. I loved them right away. I thought they were like tiny cabbages but way better. I cook Brussels sprouts often, and they are my Thanksgiving signature piece. In fact, I introduced my husband's French-Canadian family to them. Now they're hooked too.

Blitz Torte—

My favorite dessert when I was growing up—thin layers of vanilla cake with meringue topping, filled with vanilla pudding, and lightly dusted with cinnamon and toasted almonds. My mother knew she was making a special treat when she made this, and she reserved it for special times—not birthdays or holidays necessarily, but singular times when life was going well and she decided that a special dessert would make for a perfect evening. She was right. It made an ordinary day extraordinary. She often told a story related to this cake: When she was first married, her German in-laws thought she was too thin and always told her, “Eat, eat, eat, Josephine. Have more cake. You’re too skinny.” My grandmother and aunt were both sizeable women, and my mother had no desire to match their girth. But she took their recipes and added them to our family’s traditions. For this one, I’m especially grateful. I make this torte now and then for special occasions, and though very good, it somehow never tastes as great as I remember it being when I was young. But I enjoy it nonetheless. Funny how that works.



Coconut Cake with Fluffy Boiled Icing and Raspberry Jam Filling—

When I got into my twenties, got married, and bought a small old house in South Bend, Indiana, I was so excited to be able to set up and decorate my own house. The house, built around 1920, had dark wood floors, doors, and trim; glass doorknobs; and lovely old light fixtures. The house was so small that just bringing in a tree for Christmas filled a good portion of the living room and made the entire house feel festive. The first Christmas in the house, I remember looking for recipes to make the holiday special. And I found a recipe for coconut cake with fluffy boiled icing and raspberry jam filling. It sounded amazing. And it was. A wonderful dense cake, topped with an icing made with egg whites and sugar cooked in a double boiler, and filled with raspberry jam. The glorious taste of coconut in every bit. It was perfect! It became my traditional cake for Christmas. I still make it every year (now in Maine and with a different husband) because for me, this cake is the taste of Christmas.



Coffee or Tea—

My mother drank tea first thing every morning. Lipton tea with milk. My father drank coffee, made early in the morning in an electric percolator and left on all day so he could get hot coffee anytime. I

drank tea sometimes, but as a child I developed a fondness for the first cup of coffee out of the percolator. We were a German family, so coffee was a staple, as was coffeecake. I loved the smell, the rich flavor of the coffee with milk, the heat rising from the cup. Until I got into my forties, I drank a cup of coffee every evening before bed, but eventually it started keeping me awake. My current practice is to drink tea in the morning and



evening—English Breakfast in the morning and Oolong in the evening, no milk or sugar. But in the middle of the day, right after lunch, I make coffee. Often I make a latte, making the coffee in a stovetop espresso pot, heating the milk in the microwave and foaming it with a nifty battery-operated device. It smells good, looks good, feels great. With cup in hand, I sit in our sunroom, my two Irish setters at my feet, with a feeling of complete contentment as I look out at the woods. Some days I gaze at the woods in full flower—green leaves, ferns, wildflowers. Some days I watch the rain clean and refresh everything in sight. Some days—the ones I look forward to the most—I watch it snow and think the world couldn't be more beautiful. The woods may change, I might replace the couch I sit on, we might get a new puppy or lose one of our aged pals, I might get more gray hair and have a bit more trouble with arthritis, but the constant—oddly—is coffee. It evokes memories, soothes the worries, improves the day. Tea is OK, but make mine coffee.

CHRISTINE BROOKS COTE founded Shanti Arts Publishing in 2011 to revel in nature, art, and spirit. As an editor, writer, photographer, one-time data analyst and higher education administrator, and a full-time observer of daily life, Christine draws from a diverse background and a wide range of experiences to curate the work of artists and writers that comes to her from creative people all over the world. Christine edits and publishes the quarterly art and literary journal *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and designs and produces books of poetry and prose that cover topics from nature and spirituality to music and memoir. Born in Milwaukee and raised in southern California, she has called Maine—a Mecca for nature lovers and artists—her home for the last twenty-five years. Visit shantiarts.com and christinecotephoto.com for more news and information.