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Imagining the American Institute of Wine and Food: The Legacy of John Ronsheim

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Source: *Gastronomica*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Fall 2001), pp. 29-35

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2001.1.4.29>

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Imagining the American Institute of Wine and Food

The Legacy of John Ronsheim

IN 1973, STEVEN DEMBSKI had more than the experience of a lifetime. You see, he was only twenty-three, but the Vouvrays he was tasting was from 1947, his elder by three years. It had taken him all morning to travel—sensually—that far back in time. First he'd had to break from the group of Antioch College chorus students who were somewhere in the Loire valley experiencing culture through the senses as part of a ten-week, full-credit program, singing fifteenth-century masses in the cathedrals for which the music had originally been commissioned (itinerary: Belgium, France, Italy) and studying the local art, architecture, wine, and food.

That morning, Dembski, a recent Antioch grad and the trip's staffperson, made a special trip up the Loire chalk cliffs along with the group's host, an administrator of France's *Appellation Contrôlée* system; their leader, forty-seven-year-old Professor of Music John Ronsheim; and Ronsheim's wife, Eileen, to visit René Loyau, a winemaker so venerated that every year the Loire growers let him choose from their grapes before making their own wine.

Once there, the group heated some savory tarts over an open fire and began to drink Loyau's Vouvrays, starting with a '73, Dembski recalls, then moving their palates back in time to the '60s, then a '59, a '57, a '49, preparing themselves, finally, for the '47. As they sat there, not needing more than half the bottle among the five of them, the wine an object of contemplation, Loyau remarked that this vintage surpassed all Vouvrays that he knew. "And as far as that went, he was holding some cards," says Dembski, for Loyau had drunk Loire wines from the eighteenth century and apparently knew nineteenth-century vintages the way few today know twentieth-century ones.

The orchestrator of this sensorial symphony was Ronsheim, a small, sprite-like man with thinning brown hair. Wherever he took the Antioch group, he would talk about the flavors of that particular place—why this part of Alsace grows the best Gewürztraminer, how the soil and grapes of Bonne marry to produce the distinctive Druanne wines. Jeff Treistman, a student on the trip, recalls that

they would be eating or drinking something and Ronsheim would shout out in his high and whiny voice, "People—people! Did you taste that? It's Florence!" He would go crazy." Topics like wine, food, and music excited Ronsheim, says Treistman, and when you got him started it was like listening to a jazz musician riffing on a theme.

By profession, Ronsheim was all music—a teacher and, in his rare private time, a composer of avant-garde twelve-

Imagine what it would be like to be living in or near a place where young and not so young students, renowned visitors from all over the world and professors were dedicating their lives to discovering the meaning of food.

—John Ronsheim

tone "high-pitch squeaky voice stuff," as a friend of his called it. He had studied composition and taught at the New England Conservatory and the University of Iowa, attended the International Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, Germany, and studied for three years (1957–60) in Florence under the famous composer Luigi Dallapiccola.

Culinary and vinous aesthetics Ronsheim did not study with anyone. (The first time Ronsheim drank wine he poured a glass, put the bottle in the fridge, and drank the rest a month later.) Leaving behind a typical middle-class, and gastronomically unremarkable, youth in the small town of Cadiz, Ohio, where his father published the local paper and his brother went into real estate, Ronsheim developed



John R. Ronsheim, ca. 1975.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT DE GAST; COURTESY OF ANTIOCHIANA, ANTIOCH COLLEGE

an idea of what he called “quality” cuisine out of what he saw, smelled, and ate during his years in Europe.

By the time he arrived at Antioch in 1967 Ronsheim had become a culinary forager. Any friend traveling to where unique wines could be had was conscripted to loot. By 1975, Ronsheim was as serious an amateur on wine as you could find in the United States. (The English wine merchant Bristol’s of Avery, encountering him at a tasting, had even offered him a job as a wine buyer.)

Cultivating wine and food aesthetics was not just a pastime to Ronsheim, not what most would call a pleasure. Dinner at Ronsheim’s had to be studious—a ritual of tasting that would often begin by spending several hours examining his wine cellar, which, housing several thousand bottles, was more valuable than his actual house. Eileen, who was an excellent cook, would prepare simple dishes like boeuf bourguignon, to which Ronsheim attuned his wines. You could learn a lot from one dinner, as though the dining room were a classroom, and not just a dining room.

At one meal several years ago, says David Bergen, a former student who became Ronsheim’s friend, Ronsheim pulled out some white Burgundies over thirty years old, which at first sip Bergen found unpleasantly bitter. “I thought, ‘What are you serving this plonk for?’ and John kept saying, ‘Be patient, pay attention, listen; you’ll get it.’” It boiled down to understanding the role of time: After several hours of arguing with Ronsheim, “we got it,” Bergen says. “There’s a completely different palate of flavors you need to appreciate when you’re dealing with wines of that age. Wines that in their youth are not quite right you are charmed by in their age because they’re still limping along.”

Of course, people frequently want to enjoy their meals without having to take a course on them. To everyone’s sometime annoyance (including his wife’s), the monomania of Ronsheim’s “research” (he kept notes on every wine he’d ever drunk) forbade talking about anything other than the comestibles in question during dinner.

If Ronsheim could not enjoy wine and food without teaching about them, neither could he teach without bringing up food and wine. An aesthetic moment in a Verdi opera would be like the taste of a particular bottle. The logical

conclusion of this might have been the culinary chorus trips, which happened in 1973 and 1975. But it wasn't. One day during the first chorus trip, as Ronsheim would later write, while standing in front of a Fra Angelico *Annunciation* in Florence, he had an epiphany. He would be the one "to place, for the first time in the history of the world's educational system, food and wine preparation within the theory and practice of the fine arts and to afford this activity a curriculum within the academic community."¹ The idea more or less fermented until 1979, when Ronsheim finally popped its cork to the Antioch faculty, and to the world.

Ronsheim's proposal for a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Culinary Studies would appear to be aesthetic in orientation. Through learning and labor, students would explore what he called cuisine's "quality" (as opposed to "quantity"). Rather than associate quality cooking with elitism, he wanted students to pursue the nature of quality itself, and through such pursuit come to an understanding of culinary, and human, integrity. He wrote in his proposal to the faculty:

The body requires less "nourishment" if that nourishment is of uncompromised quality....If one could change people's habits and attitudes, and learn humility through quality, this could then effect a change in the quality of our lives on other levels. If one could become aware of what one perceives...if people would be in a better position to control what they consume, then perhaps cooking and eating would be less disassociated and become more integrated with the whole of life's experience. If a "place" meant something specific, and people could identify with that "place," then people would have the possibility of belonging to that specific "place." If people had more control over what they consumed, then consumption would have a more personal meaning, and this leads to a specific proposal...that a new department involving fine cooking be constituted at Antioch College...The major goal will be...to understand cookery not as "art for art's sake," but as a wholly unselfish art, related to all dimensions of life, something to help harmonize the human race with our natural environment; to integrate the artificial (human skill, art) with the natural.

Much of the students' time would be spent in the kitchen ("studio work") learning classical French and Italian techniques. In the classroom, in addition to required courses on the theory and techniques of cuisine and the history, cultivation, and sensory evaluation of wine, students could choose from electives. These included culinary history, sociology, politics, economics, physiology and psychology, cookbook history, oenology, fermentation, journalism, food-service administration, and the relation of food and wine to the arts.

Ronsheim's ideas (to put things in context) were not so outlandish at Antioch—a radically intellectual and politi-

cally incendiary liberal-arts college in rural Yellow Springs, Ohio—as they would have been elsewhere. Back in the spirit-freeing '70s, "the great thing about Antioch was that the college allowed people to follow their passions. No one cared what you taught, as long as you taught it well," says Bob Fogarty, Ronsheim's friend and editor of *The Antioch Review*, who once taught a course on "second-rate" American literature. In addition to food and wine, students in Ronsheim's music classes learned about psychology, philosophy, poetry—anything that Ronsheim could use to connect, enhance.

Nevertheless, Ronsheim was either wise or excited enough not to unleash this tempest of ideas upon the faculty without disseminating them elsewhere: in particular, among the echelons of gastronomic personalities in America, France, and Italy. He wrote to food writer Richard Olney, who referred him to celebrity chef Jeremiah Tower.

"I took notes because I was so excited," says Tower, who was then battling against the overwhelmingly banal food found in America's restaurants, cooking schools, and markets. Available produce often forced him to grow his own food (he raised geese in grad school). "We could have our own utopian movement in food, our own farms, feed our students."

Using Tower's and his own contacts (Ronsheim's vivacious and intelligent questioning forged food connections), Ronsheim tried to form a culinary arts panel to advise—gastronomically and financially—and lend credence to his program. He sent letters to the food luminaries, and they wrote back with words of encouragement.

"Well of course yes," wrote the English food writer Elizabeth David. "It would be an honour and a pleasure to be a member of your panel. I applaud your scheme and it *must* go ahead. Something of this kind is absurdly overdue." Fifty-seven people served on the panel in all, including Julia Child, James Beard, Craig Claiborne, Robert Mondavi, M.F.K. Fisher, Madeleine Kamman, Barbara Kafka, Richard Olney, culinary historians Alan Davidson and Jan Longone, Jeremiah Tower, and Alice Waters, helmswoman of Chez Panisse and preacher of the farm-community-restaurant trinity.

One thing Ronsheim was trying to do through the food program was to bring a sense of unity to eating as well as to the liberal arts. This unity attempted to connect not only mind with body (scholarship with its uses; understanding what it is we're eating) but also with the larger environment (context) of farming and production, and even with the whole body of culinary and viniferous tradition as Ronsheim knew it, which is to say, French and Italian.

Students, after studying French, would spend a ten-week term in France with Antioch-appointed wine and food

experts. Antioch would buy land in Tuscany, where students would study and produce olive oil and wine for use at Antioch. They would intern in the Napa valley. Back at home, the cafeteria would transform into a student-run establishment serving (along with the Tuscan wine) simple, regional dishes supplied by the Antioch farm, which in turn would expand enormously to produce meat, cheese, fruit, and “every vegetable possible in this climate.”² Thus, wrote Ronsheim, by unifying the creation and consumption of food within one community, “We would have our own Miami Valley identity.”

Unsurprisingly, these images flooded the food panel. “He was the one who had the most breathtaking ideas,” Waters recalls of her first encounter with Ronsheim, at a meeting on the direction the program would take. “He said, ‘Why don’t we have a campus in Tuscany?’ I’d never heard of Tuscany then. Nobody had heard of Tuscany. And he’d already imagined it. He wanted the full sensory experience.”

But Ronsheim’s vision of studying the aesthetics of food in its own context came out of a life rooted in the liberal arts, in theory. Ronsheim believed that what you did—your outer self—reflected some kind of interior essence. By cultivating the five senses to perceive the aesthetic (outer) qualities of wine and food, as well as music, poetry, and the other arts, you could come to understand the inner core—of the object and of its maker. Ronsheim even wrote an article that psychoanalyzed forty or fifty Barolo producers based on their wines, says Treistman, who cannot remember Ronsheim ever having talked about wine as a product.

When teaching, Ronsheim would try to distill the essence of whatever he was getting at, playing, say, only the principal theme of a Liszt piano sonata and moving on. “You’re trying to give people the soul without the body,” Michael Eckert, a former student, once told him. In class, or while conducting, Ronsheim danced, visibly transported by the music he was hearing. Treistman recalls, “His classes seemed to be less serious than others, but they were more serious. He didn’t pretend to be concerned with the topic: he’d be emanating the topic.”

The *terroir*, then, out of which Ronsheim’s own ideas grew saw the food program as a path leading from the senses inward to an understanding of the self in relation to its environment—the self harmonized with its environment. The result would be, Ronsheim wrote at the end of his proposal, “like tasting a completely harmonious wine from a perfectly shaped rounded glass; within-without totally integrated. What could be more idealistically symbolic than that?”

At just this time, however, Antioch was on the verge of bankruptcy, struggling to preserve itself. The faculty, already

partitioned ideologically (there were the Marxists, activists, revolutionaries, anarchists, also something called the “beer-and-pretzels” crowd), had grown self-protective, departments more isolated. And here was Ronsheim standing up at a faculty meeting in May 1979 and talking about hiring chefs (salary \$17,000–\$20,000, like the professors) and turning the cafeteria into a place of culinary integrity. Even Ronsheim’s friends had trouble accepting the food-studies program, both practically and as a potential new component of the liberal arts.

“I thought it was a joke,” says Connie Pelakutus, Ronsheim’s friend and a dean of Antioch at the time. “There wasn’t a soul who thought he made any sense whatsoever. What the hell kind of sense did a culinary arts program in a small college in rural Ohio make?”

Antioch’s school newspaper, *The Antioch Record*, published the following letter to the editor, by student Kate Bruner, the week after Ronsheim proposed the program to the faculty.

It was untimely that John Ronsheim’s proposal for a degree in Fine Cooking came up to the Faculty Meeting last Tuesday, right after discussion of staff payments. The proposal did not seem to get the attention it deserved. I believe that the faculty missed the boat entirely.

It is a proposal that could be just exactly what Antioch needs to turn itself around. The institution is slowly sinking into the land of the average small college. It is no longer the unique, initiative-taking school it once was. This proposal shows more thought and excitement than Antioch has seen in years.³

People thought the program would be vocational. People had little faith in Ronsheim’s conviction that he could get outside sources to fund the program’s first two years (\$1,000,000, to be collected by September 1980), after which the program would rely on its tuition fees. Ronsheim’s communication skills did not help matters. Pelakutus recalls the first time he heard Ronsheim speak at a faculty meeting. “I thought he was crazy. I couldn’t make heads or tails of what he was saying.”

While Ronsheim was easily approached, talking with him could be uncomfortably intense (he asked strange, personal questions), and it was difficult to make him stop. “We called it the Ronsheim Gavotte,” says Fogarty. Say you ran into him at the supermarket. The conversation would begin. “You’d walk back a bit and John would walk forward—you’d do it in a sequence. Then you’d say, ‘John, I’ve got to go,’ and he’d say, ‘Yeah,’ and keep talking. Everybody did it.”

The concept of an ending did not rest naturally with Ronsheim. When writing letters, upon reaching the bottom of a page he would begin typing on the sides, or upside

professional world. (“The CIA is corporate. They are not interested in turning out people who might become artists,” Ronsheim wrote.)

In an essay titled “A Dream,” Ronsheim wrote, “Imagine what it would be like to be living in or near a place where young and not so young students, renowned visitors from all over the world and professors were dedicating their lives to discovering the meaning of food.”

But why did it have to be a B.A. program? Tower recalls a bottle of wine Ronsheim shared with him and a few others at Antioch. “It was the first time I ever drank a ’61 Petrus, one of the world’s most expensive red wines,” he says, showing me the label, which he kept. (Today, a bottle would cost around \$5,000.) “Everyone took one sip and then there was complete silence. No one could talk, or even move, that’s how great it was. And that was the point of Ronsheim’s program. If you just open a bottle like that, metaphorically speaking, you have a benchmark of excellence.”

In addition to a B.A. program, Antioch would have one- and two-year food programs, as well as lectures and summer courses for the community. The four- to five-year B.A. program, Tower says, was to be the uncompromising “gold standard.”

But during the next months the idea began to stagnate. No one would put up money. So little happened that a December 1980 article from the *Yellow Springs News* had to state that the program was “not dead.”

In fact, the previous June, Birenbaum had tried to persuade Tower to start the program at Antioch’s San Francisco satellite campus, where it might have more corporate-sponsor appeal (Tower refused); he had also made Ronsheim an “elder statesman,” retiring him from his position as the program’s leader. “They knew I would oppose any plan that might compromise the original conception,” Ronsheim explained in a letter to Mondavi’s son, Michael. The panel, meanwhile, exasperated over Antioch’s reluctance to act, had begun to think of starting the program elsewhere.

Though officially out of commission, Ronsheim never stopped working on the project. During the winter of 1980–81, he traveled to the San Francisco Bay area, where Tower introduced him to rich and famous potential financiers from Napa and Sonoma. Although “Jeremiah holds a tremendous charm over them all,” Ronsheim wrote in his notebook, the story was the same: “Janet Trefethen [of Trefethen wineries] said, ‘Wait till Antioch gets their shit together!’”

By this time, the idea (no longer Ronsheim’s own) of a food program had reached its apogee, but everyone had a different vision of what would pour forth when it was popped by the million-dollar corkscrew. “There was a whole group that wanted to have it be an academic pursuit,” says Waters,

“but I have to say that I was interested in the practical applications. I wanted to set up a database of all the farms that one could buy from.” Mondavi recalls wanting to promote the quality and consumption of wine and food. Tower was running out of money. Ronsheim remained utopian, while Julia Child wanted something that would actually happen.

“John thought it should be a university discipline, but it takes a faculty so long to ever decide on anything, and the faculty’s usually so jealous of any new department,” Child says.

On February 3, 1981, Mondavi introduced Ronsheim and the others to Louis Gomberg, an expert fundraiser, and the panel contributed an initial one hundred dollars apiece (\$5700 total) to hire him. In addition, Child introduced everyone to Robert Huttenback, chancellor at the University of California at Santa Barbara (UCSB). The university had several oceanside cottages no one was using, Huttenback said. Why didn’t they start a program there? Santa Barbara’s climate, celebrity address, and relative proximity to wine country made it an enticing prospect. After so much waiting, however, a heavier kick in the pants was needed.

The kick that came was indeed heavy—a collection appearing on the market of over one thousand books (value: \$120,000) on French, English, and American gastronomy from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries. The books represented the joint collections of the late Eleanor Lowenstein, owner of the Corner Book Shop, which sold rare cookbooks, and André L. Simon, bibliophile and founder of the International Wine & Food Society. Napa winery owner Lila Jaeger had temporarily secured the collection, but someone had to buy it, fast.

With remarkable swiftness, an institute was founded: On September 23, 1981, the American Institute of Wine and Food was born. UCSB approved its site for the institute. California winemaker Richard Graff became its president.

Ronsheim, concerned that the institute would be only for the “beautiful people” of California, wrote letters to Graff and Gomberg still endorsing Antioch. “It’s not glossy here! And it is connected to all people.” Passing his curriculum at Antioch, he wrote, “was a hard fought democratic process and Santa Barbara, I will guarantee, will not go through that kind of process.”

But by that point, explains Tower, “John was basically an embarrassment, the voice of conscience saying, ‘Don’t let this become a social thing.’” As to pushing Ronsheim out of the way, he says, “The first instinct was correct: you need someone who won’t make American businessmen run for cover. But John was the one with a passionate vision.”

For years afterward, Ronsheim collected articles on the institute as it took off (leaving UCSB and splitting into regional

chapters, the books moving off to Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library and the University of California at San Diego's Mandeville Library) and on his former panel members, "correcting" them with red ink when necessary and adding loving annotations. Next to the title of a 1986 *Food and Wine* story, "Who is Jeremiah Tower?", he jotted the reply, "Our past closest friend! Would have been our external program director as we had planned it. Came here twice."⁴

ONE CANNOT REFLECT UPON Ronsheim's life without thinking hard about pleasure—the nature and the office of pleasure as Ronsheim saw it. "Too often we open a bottle of wine without knowing its history," he wrote in "Time, Song, Wine, and Men," a rambling review of eleven books about music, wine, and poetry. If you knew the history of a certain wine—the culture and climate that went into it and the effect of years upon it—then the pleasure of a single sip could lift you to another place, another tradition, another time. If you did not know, pleasure again was the best reason to learn. Ronsheim quotes T. S. Eliot: "We must enjoy [the poetry] before we understand it, if the attempt to understand it is to be worth the trouble."⁵

The idea of pleasure experienced for its own sake—without preparation for it or remembrance afterward—Ronsheim disapprovingly called "the whole meaning of POP culture." True pleasure was not only an end, but also a beginning—a way to experience something outside of ourselves. The pleasure of eating, then, would function as teaching does, at least as Ronsheim's teaching did: as a "catalyst," as Michael Eckert describes it, something that exists not for itself but to urge change in others.

"We all got ideas from John," says Eckert. "It's a paradoxical situation, because his music is what's left behind, but his immediate effect as a teacher was much greater."

Like Ronsheim's teaching, pleasure is evanescent. Yet because it is a catalyst, an inspiration, its effect carries into the future. Was inspiration, then, the essence (and Ronsheim was always after the essence) of eating, of teaching, of Ronsheim himself? Like a true catalyst, Ronsheim applied the spark to whatever he touched, and then faded away. He died of a heart attack in 1997, his wines auctioned off at Sotheby's for six figures. Yet the American Institute of Wine and Food remains.

And what about his proposal? "Food is not going to be good unless you spend a lot of time on it," Ronsheim once said. Maybe that was the point: studying good food goes beyond food to an understanding of the power of time, for only through time can ideas, like wine, mature. Can a sip of wine convey a sense of its age, a loaf of bread reveal, as

David Bergen put it, "the care, the integrity, of what generations of people can bring"? This is the great paradox of teaching: trying to convey experience to the inexperienced, expressing time in no time at all.

Perhaps that is what so frustrated Ronsheim and those around him—that he existed in a passionate and inspiring but nevertheless paralyzing state of yearning to gather up his own years of experience and brand them, in a moment, upon young, disinterested minds.

Eating, pleasure, teaching, quality, time: these were the components of Ronsheim's food proposal. Had it gone into effect, the syllabus might have sounded like that of a Romantics course he once taught:

No prerequisites, although having some fine senses would more than help (and plenty of patience; it is a pretty wide subject and to take it all in with some sense requires some talent to see everything all at once, just like how the Romantics themselves desired it). ●

NOTES

1. All quotations from Ronsheim's unpublished writings come from correspondence, memos, proposals, and notes found among his collection of papers in Antiochiana, the Antioch College archives.
2. From Ronsheim's proposal to the faculty.
3. *The Antioch Record*, May 21, 1979.
4. Stanley Dry, "Who is Jeremiah Tower...And Why Is Everybody Talking About This San Francisco Chef?" *Food and Wine*, March 1986, 65–86, 100.
5. John Ronsheim, "Some Summer Reading: Time, Song, Wine, and Men," *The Antioch Review*, Fall 1979, 488–500.