

Closer To The Bone

IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND OUR ANCESTRAL RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD, ANTHROPOLOGY PROFESSOR BILL SCHINDLER PUSHES STUDENTS TO CONNECT WITH THE PAST AS A WAY TO RE-EXAMINE THE PRESENT. BY WENDY MITMAN CLARKE

SO, HERE'S SOMETHING YOU MIGHT NOT EXPECT TO HEAR IN YOUR TYPICAL COLLEGE CLASS: "You two are in charge of the livers, and you two are in charge of the head." Or, how about this: "I have 23 pig brains in the freezer right now, and 27 more brains coming." And then there's this: "Oh! You found the eyeball! We'll eat that together."

Really, there's nothing about learning with Bill Schindler, associate professor of anthropology at Washington College, that is typical. He's always pushing students (and everyone else, for that matter) well beyond their preconceived notions, nowhere more so than in his approach toward food and our complex relationships—historical, anthropological, cultural, environmental, physical—with it. He does this powered by a passion that has all the irresistible force of a

spring-melt mountain river in its tumbling rush of intellect, intensity, humor, and child-like enthusiasm. So many ideas, so little time—that's what it's like talking with him.

"I do think that many of the problems we have today in human health can be answered by looking at the diet we evolved from," Schindler says. "We are anatomically the same as we were 200,000 years ago, but our diets are nothing like it. All of a sudden we're getting all these new diseases, and we're asking ourselves, why? We're going to the doctors, and they're giving us pills and this and that, and we're trying to do these regimens, but we haven't stepped back and answered the real question. One of the first things we have to do is look into the past and find out what we have been eating forever, how did that change us anatomically, and when did those changes happen? Forget



Grace Li '17 wrestles a pig's head out of a pot of boiling water.

issues of economy and who's making money and what the USDA is telling us, and just use our own brains. With that information I think we can make the right choices."

This spring, in conjunction with the College's Center for Environment & Society and C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, Schindler and the Anthropology Department hosted a four-part series called Recipes For Change, whose aim was to challenge and educate people about this deeply fundamental relationship between humans and their food. Four authors presented their work, engaged in discussions, and prompted listeners to reconsider the status quo. The series' ultimate goal was to encourage people to effect change—in their minds, pantries, families, and schools—that would make their choices about food better for the planet, the people, and themselves.

This is all very interesting, but on one level—say, from the perspective of an 18- or 19-year-old undergraduate—rather esoteric and distant. Unless you happen to be a student in Schindler's Global Perspective Seminar. In that case, yeah, you're picking pigs' heads and eating eyeballs.

"I'm really interested in the students being engaged with the food in the same ways we were in the past," Schindler says. Before each guest in the series made their presentations, Schindler's students researched foods, and the ways they were historically prepared, that would complement and contextualize the speaker's topic in some way. "One, it helps them become more invested in what the speaker is talking about. It gives everybody a chance, once the speaker is done, to dive in with all of their senses. And it's also a chance for the students



To coincide with Briana Pobiner's talk on "The Real Paleodiet"—the first lecture in the Recipes for Change series—Professor Bill Schindler and two of his students, Mason Sheen '17 and Isabelle Ryan '17, prepare a meal using locally-sourced meats and greens.

who have done this research and cooked the food to interact with the audience."

A few nights before the first presentation—"The Real Paleodiet: What Our Ancestors Ate and How We Know," by Briana Pobiner, a human origins research scientist at the Smithsonian—four students gather at Schindler's suburban home to work on the food they would serve after the talk. The evening's tasks, scribbled on a white board on the wall, go like this: headcheese; paté; egg sauce; marrow bones prep; salad prep; dressing x 2. Pobiner's research focuses on the period between when humans were eating animals that were killed by something else, and when they were eating animals killed by humans, says Schindler.

"There's a big difference there. You can tell by the gnawing marks on the bones who got at it first," he says. Typically, predators—including humans—will take the organs, blood, and

other nutrient-dense parts of the animals they've killed, leaving behind meat of poorer quality for scavengers. For a time, humans were scavengers, and their diet changed when they became predators. "She's going to talk about what we were eating for a long period of time and why it made sense. And she's going to talk a lot about organ meats and quality fats and this sort of thing, so we are going to reinforce that with modern examples of incorporating those foods into our diet, things like a really good paté, a headcheese, roasted marrow bones, these kinds of things that the students are going to prepare and present there as the meal."

On the stove, an enormous, deep pot simmers steadily in the background, while on the center island small bowls overflow with fresh thyme, dill, scallions, and colorful mosaics of spices. Dozens of short, thick bones cover a cutting board, some standing in rows like macabre chess pieces.

While Kathy Thornton '13, program and intern coordinator for CES, and Schindler's 8-year-old son Billy steadily shave fibrous tissue off the bones, Schindler runs through the list of jobs to be done, rarely staying in one place for more than a minute.

"Head's already been brined, it's been in the pot for three hours with the trotters and a hunk of the shoulder," he says. "You two can do the head garnish. That sound good?" He passes around a small container, encouraging everyone to smell. "It just came today, I'm so excited. My fennel pollen is here, I'm so excited." And then, another container: "Anybody know what mace is? It's the covering of a nutmeg and it smells so good. Everybody smell it? Close your eyes. What does it make you think of?" After Schindler assigns the students various tasks, the kitchen grows comfortably busy and warm the way kitchens do when people are preparing foods for a common



purpose—a steady banter, a question now and reply then, the soft sound of knives snicking against a cutting board and, when the chicken livers and scallions land in the heated olive oil for the paté, the sizzling of sauté.

The livers, Schindler explains

just a locavore food ethic.

“There is this idea of sole authorship,” Schindler says. “The idea that you have been a part of that process from the very, very beginning. That if you’re going to talk about bread, at some point in your life you’ve made a loaf of

“ANYBODY KNOW WHAT MACE IS? IT’S THE COVERING OF A NUTMEG AND IT SMELLS SO GOOD. EVERYBODY SMELL IT? CLOSE YOUR EYES. WHAT DOES IT MAKE YOU THINK OF?”

to the students, come from Cedar Run Farm in Sudlersville; the bones for the roasted marrow, which they will bake just before the Recipes for Change presentation, from St. Brigid’s Farm in Kennedyville; the pig’s head simmering in the pot for the headcheese comes from Sudlersville Meat Locker; the trotters (legs and feet) are from Crow Farm in Kennedyville; the venison for the carpaccio to be assembled the night of the talk comes from Schindler himself, as does the goose breast for the prosciutto, which is already finished. If he can’t hunt and butcher his own meat, Schindler insists on knowing exactly where it comes from, often down to the very animals. This is more than

bread, you’ve milled the wheat, you’ve built the oven, you’ve made the fire . . . most people aren’t thinking about the fuel that’s used when you just flip a switch in the oven. But every time we bake bread at home, one of us is chopping wood outside and we’re loading the oven. And our conception of that human relationship and sustainability, all of that completely changes when you become part of that whole process. That’s why I want the students in this class to be a part of this from the very beginning. Obviously we don’t have time to grow stuff from the beginning or go to Madagascar to get vanilla beans, but at least in this case they start the process with the raw ingredient and they follow it

through the entire process. And if possible we go a little farther.”

Things in the kitchen are moving along fairly quietly until it’s time to pull the pig’s head and other assorted parts from the pot that’s been simmering. This is no simple task; with the meat falling off the bones, it takes three of the students to do it, steam purling upward to the ceiling. Then, when it has cooled a little in a pan on the kitchen island, Schindler shows them how to start pulling strands of meat from every single piece of the head. That’s where the eyeballs come into play. And, the ears. And, the tongue. Some of the students, like Mason Sheen ’17, jump right in, trying a piece of the eye (it tastes pretty fatty, actually), a strip of the ear (chewy, bland).

“It doesn’t have much of a taste,” says Tom Griffin ’17, an economics major.

“We usually serve this with soy sauce,” says Grace Li ’17.

“Just knowing you’re eating it makes it gross,” Griffin says. But he forges ahead unflinchingly when Schindler gives him the job of extracting the pig’s tongue and skinning it. It will assume the place of honor smack in the middle of the headcheese when

they assemble it. Headcheese, it turns out, is as much about varying textures and colors as it is about flavor, and its assembly and presentation follow firm guidelines to achieve the proper gustatory and visual effect. (And it’s called cheese because traditionally it’s assembled in crocks and pressed, like cheese, not because there’s anything cheesy about its ingredients.)

“What’s really interesting is if we are talking about this in class, people are like, eeww,” Schindler says. “But when they’re doing it? Completely different.”

“I’m from New Orleans, I’m big into food,” says Sheen, who’s a business major, economics minor. “A lot of Cajun cuisine is like this.” Sheen says because he loves to cook, he’s been aware for a long time of the importance of buying local and fresh. But this class is opening his eyes further to the problems with industrially produced foods. Now, he says, he finds eating a processed hamburger patty much more disturbing than eating anything he’s seen tonight. “I think this is definitely going to influence preparation, and I’m going to look at where I get my foods more, look at options.”



TOP: Roasted bone marrow is a high-caloric, high-protein source of nutrition. **ABOVE:** After Ann Vileisis’s talk on Kitchen Literacy—the second lecture in the Recipes for Change series—students served several breads they had made using ancient grains. They used the bread ovens at Evergrain Bakery in Chestertown.

“Is that the zygomatic arch?” Isabelle Ryan '17, a double major in anthropology and history with an archaeology concentration, has paused in her meat-picking to examine a piece of bone she holds between two quite slimy fingers.

“Yes it is the zygomatic arch! Very nice!” Schindler says.

“Archaeology class comes in handy,” Ryan smiles. She’s working on an ethnic diet paper about the Maasai in Africa, pastoralists who, she says, live mostly off of meat, milk, and blood. Like Sheen, she’s more

intrigued than grossed out by what they’re doing in Schindler’s kitchen.

Once all of the meat is out—and there’s a huge pile of it—Schindler shows Griffin how to assemble the headcheese, while Ryan and Sheen puree the chicken livers for the paté. The headcheese goes into a rectangular tureen, while Mason and Ryan pour the paté into several ramekins, which Schindler then tops with cognac butter he whips up. As they’re finishing, he pulls out some homemade bread and strawberry

jam, and everyone feasts on a single ramekin of paté.

“Take note of what you’re doing, guys, because you’re going to be talking to people about your experiences cooking this food, trying the ear and everything else,” Schindler says. “They’re going to ask you how it’s prepared. You guys are the experts.”

This is the link to the origins that he’s trying to forge. When you work toward drawing everything you eat from the very basic raw materials—the cows, the pigs, the wheat, the wood—

what happens is more than a trendy word like “locavore.”

You begin to build relationships; you invest your life not only in a philosophy and a diet, but in a culture and a community. “It’s very difficult to attain that 100 percent sole authorship,” Schindler says. “But the journey is worth it.”

Wendy Mitman Clarke, staff writer at Washington College, made her own bread and collected locally-sourced foods during a four-year sailing trip.



LEFT: Isabelle Ryan '17 measures the cognac for the flavored butter that will top the chicken liver paté. **RIGHT:** Professor Schindler shows Grace Li '17 a Paleo delicacy—the eye from a pig’s head used to prepare headcheese. The meat was used to make headcheese, a terrine served as a cold dish. Historically, meat jellies have been served since the Middle Ages.