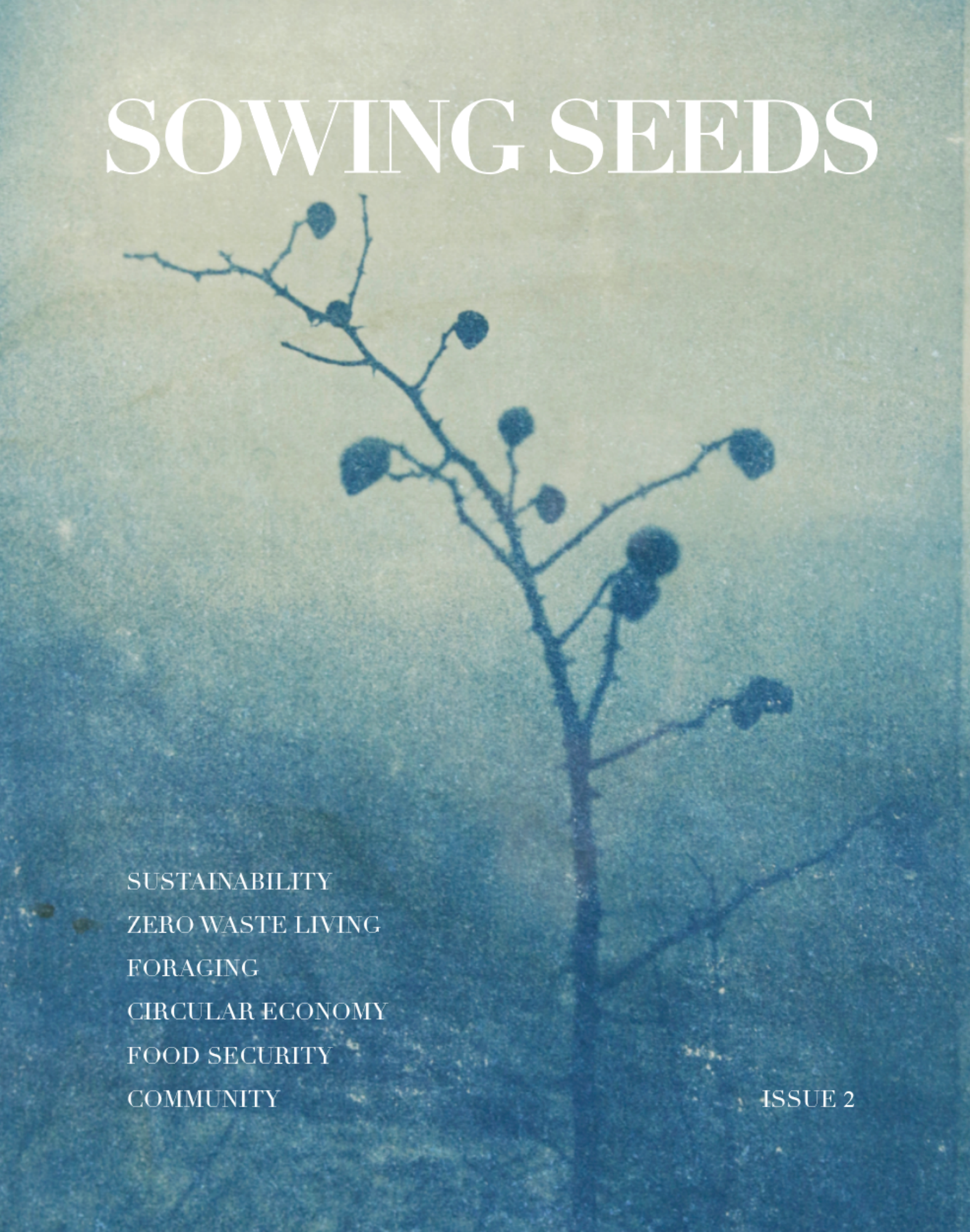
SOWING SEEDS



SUSTAINABILITY

ZERO WASTE LIVING

FORAGING

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

FOOD SECURITY

COMMUNITY

ISSUE 2

Artwork by Foscr Democrito

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Food Culture:
A Conversation with Inés Lauber

Photo by Hisham Assaad

Tell us a bit about your work.

I have a background in product design. You can do so much in this industry, because everything, in a sense, is a product. Tableware—everything that happens around the table—is actually design. Many of these things were designed a very long time ago, when we started shaping knives and plates, those were the first designs. The stories, things that are tradition based, have always interested me.

When I attended Salone del Mobile in Milano (the largest furniture design trade fair in the world), I was overwhelmed. On one hand, I thought this is great, look at everything I can do as a product designer. However, after attending a couple of times, I started realizing the production process that lays behind every single product, and seeing the massive amount of things that are created every year, another new collection, this and that. So much in the trade made me realise I didn't actually want to be part of it. My first inspiration came from Holland, where I found designers working with food as their design material. I realized that was what I had been waiting for.

Why is food design so much more important than we normally realize?

As a chef, among other things, you style plates. Having a background as a designer made me always think of what happens outside of the plate; the chairs, ambience, how people feel. A big part of my design studies was finding solutions to problems, using certain materials, creating things for a certain purpose and fulfilling that purpose. I wouldn't just make a chair, I would create a chair to make someone feel comfortable, or to serve a more specific purpose. Being trained in this field makes me look at these topics from a broader range. The story is an element that is very important to me. I think you can tell a story simply with a dish—but the story becomes much more significant and understandable if you include everything else. Including the material of the plate itself, or asking—does there even need to be a plate? Not being trained as a chef, in a restaurant context, gives me less limitations because normally you may learn; oh that is the etiquette, and this is how you should do it, and this is how you shouldn't do it. Not being professionally trained in the kitchen means I can be more courageous.

You mentioned not necessarily needing a plate, what would that look like?

Plates haven't always been here, but people have always eaten. It's not a new invention. Sometimes we need to think about where we come from, how we got here, where are we now? When we look at different cultures, we see that we don't all eat in the same way. We can eat with natural materials that we find in nature, or maybe we don't need a plate at all because we are all sharing from a big pot. These are exactly the experiences that speak to you, much more than anything else.

Eating is an international language, it is internationally understood. When I was in Thailand for instance, which was quite some time ago, we were in the forest, with local people. We came with nothing to the forest, just a few materials for the whole day, and I asked myself—is this what we are surviving on?—but they got everything from the forest. This memory imprinted itself in me, because they were creating pots from bamboo on the spot and cutting banana leaves to sit and eat on. The meal was full, rich, beautifully decorated so to speak. We came with nothing, and created no waste. Anything can become a plate, your hand can become the plate.

I was living in the mountains, with communities that are not Thai. They have their own tribes and aren't acknowledged by Thai

Image courtesy of Inés Lauber

culture. They are so rich in their own culture, they could live completely independently, but what often happens to tribes all over the world, is their land is taken away, their traditional ways of living are somehow not made possible anymore, they find themselves unemployed, and it results in many social problems, things that would never occur if you didn't deprive people of their culture.

They were very proud people. Very poor, money wise, but other than that, I would say I haven't met many people that were much more rich in culture than they were. They were also super generous, which is something I kept realizing in my travels, that people who own very little are often very generous with food. They want to invite you in, share everything they have, and that's a beautiful memory that stays with me.

It's shocking, isn't it? So many UN resolutions, so many countries agreeing to their terms and still people are prevented to live in the way their ancestors have—in the way they want to. How do you incorporate these memories, and encourage change through design experience? How do you get people to consume more mindfully?

I create experiences that are interactive. I think it's very important that people are not just sitting, consuming or receiving. For me, eating is an experience of its own, but I also want to include the senses that we have forgotten to use; smelling, touching. Often, we just eat without giving it any attention. I want to create attention, and put little obstacles in throughout the dinner experience. It's easy to serve three courses on a plate, but it is much more fun to hang something from the ceiling, or have people dig something out. I approach it like a story, kind of like a plot. I ask myself what story I want to tell, what I need in order to create the feeling I'm after. How can I make people feel that they are harvesting something? How can I make people understand the importance of biodiversity; that there are all these different varieties of apples for example. Even when the topic isn't necessarily fun in itself, like climate change, dinner still needs to be fun.

Give us an example of one of these experiences. Bring me to one of these rooms, to the obstacles, eating food from the ceiling, what would that look like?

Our dining experiences use the entire space, so when people enter, there is this moment of awe—everything looks beautiful, it looks like edible decoration, but it is my way of showing that food is beautiful. I don't need extra materials or decorations because the food itself is already perfectly beautiful and becomes the decoration.

I have worked with apples a couple of times, because apples are a fruit that are traditional to this area of Germany. We have more than 2,000 varieties that will become extinct if we don't take care of them. It's a topic that we can discuss, discover and experience along the way. Today, people just go and buy apples from the supermarkets, they don't go and buy a, let's say, Boskoop, Goldparmäne, Renette or Gravensteiner —all these varieties have different names—they just go and buy an apple. I wanted to teach people about biodiversity, and to show them that apples can be tart, sour, sweet, good for eating... but not only for eating fresh. Back in the day, we had apples that were for storing, to be consumed in winter when there was nothing else. So, they wouldn't actually be ready to eat until they had been kept in the basement for two months or so. There is a difference between an apple that is ready to eat and an apple that needs to be turned into something.

What are some other examples of how you get people to use their senses?

Photos by Nicolas Jardry

I really enjoy it when people eat with their hands, it's very simple but it is something so memorable for most people. It's easy to take the cutlery away, but it's not so easy to make people feel comfortable eating this way. So, that's my job, to make people feel comfortable in the unusual. I do this project where we cook things in clay. We get root vegetables, because the roots come from the soil, they grow inside the soil, and it helps us discuss the topic of soil and its fertility. It's something that we need to talk more about—because most people don't think of soil as a precious thing, but it is. If we don't have fertile soil, then we won't have food tomorrow. So for this project, we use root vegetables that are from the soil and cook them in clay, which is also soil. Digging the root vegetables directly from the soil, and then eating them in their entirety, as a whole carrot, without chopping them or discarding any part is an experience which stays with people. Sometimes we just serve them with dips which are made of the usually discarded parts, like the leaves of carrot or beets for instance. Showing a whole root-to-stalk approach. It's a course that's very enjoyable because it is very playful. It also wouldn't make sense to serve it with cutlery since it's really about digging and the soil.

Sometimes we will serve things on fresh compost—similar to how you eat oysters served on ice cubes—well, it's like that, but instead of ice cubes we serve the food on soil. The compost gives it a nice smell (fresh compost actually smells like forest soil), but it's also a learning experiment, because you ask: is it dirty? No, it's not. If you lay something on soil, it doesn't harm it. If I put an apple on some soil and I pick the apple up, I can eat it, I don't have to wash it with a brush or clean it, it's not sticky or dirty, it's just there.

How are eating rituals connected to eating sustainably?

I actually teach a course series titled, "Rethinking Eating Rituals" and I believe it's a topic that is very important. Nowadays, we need to challenge traditions. For instance, meat, is this really something we need? We have Christmas traditions, where we eat a whole Christmas goose. Most people think they need to eat a big piece of meat to enjoy the holiday. Is this up to date? I don't believe so. This tradition is from times when meat was precious. The goose was actually growing all year, around you and your family, and during the holidays you would eat it together. But nowadays, people eat meat every single day, it isn't special anymore. It's probably

more special to eat a big heap of vegetables on Christmas day, to take the time to create something very delicious with your loved ones. This ritual, or tradition, is something I would ask people to question; to re-think, and the reverse too. We need to rethink, and bring back rituals that have been forgotten. For instance, dishes that take a lot of time to make. We also need to rethink our values. For Christmas, we need to ask what is the essence of this day, what is the thing we should celebrate? It's no longer plentiful plates, because most of us have plentiful plates everyday. It is the coming together, spending time together.

That's such a beautiful alternative. My experience of this holiday is one where one to two people are extremely stressed trying to get everything together, then you consume the meal for 30 minutes and become so stuffed that Christmas is over. It becomes a tradition of over consumption—and not just gifts, but food, alcohol, everything. I think that in order to push back from this flawed tradition, people often opt out of giving gifts or making a big celebration, which is something I struggle with because I love holidays. I love the idea of making someone a gift that you would make no one else, something that represents them, and to then celebrate all together. To push back against the traditions we find inadequate, we don't necessarily have to get rid of holidays all together.

Yes, and eating only heavy things, this is also something to rethink. Our lifestyle has changed. In the past, you would eat all your calories at Christmas time because it's a day where you aren't working all day on the land, or chopping wood, you would eat all the heavy foods that you usually aren't able to. Another thing is recalling seasons. There is always something new to eat every month. In winter, people buy the same things they do in summer because they forget about winter foods. We need to re-learn a lot of things that should be obvious but aren't, a lot of things that were normal even just one hundred years ago.

You spoke about the international language of food, can you go into that more, how do you see food as connecting us across boundaries of culture, landscape, time and space?

I believe, first of all, it also connects generations. We are often separated from our grandparents nowadays, but if we cook together, then we have a lot to talk about. We can talk about recipes, we can learn from them, and you also give someone the feeling of being needed, which is so nice. In the context of recipes, you can learn a lot from older generations, knowledge that is so important to learn, because soon it may be gone. Also, when traveling, if you show interest in food culture, there is no one that won't want to tell you about their own traditions. When going to markets, asking people; what is this vegetable, I've never seen it; what should I do with it?—especially farmers who gave so much love to growing them, they will tell you so much, because they are so proud; they will tell you more recipes than you can try. If someone prepares a traditional dish for you, they feel a connection to it and they will tell that story very proudly.

Food is such an important, and easy, way to connect people, any culture, any differences that keep us apart in our regular day to day. Are there any foods or dishes that have been lost, not necessarily completely, but from a lot of German minds?

In German cuisine, we have lost a lot of traditional recipes. A big part of this is the wars. When you lose a war, you often lose identity. Most simply, many were killed, and with them, that knowledge. New people come with new influences, which isn't a bad thing, but it is a new influence, and we have missed returning to our traditional recipes. A lot of people also

Photos by Nora Novak

fled to other countries, and when you go somewhere new, recipes change, they are adapted. Let's look at Germans that went to the Americas. The food you find in these German communities is very different than it is here. It is also the case that, sometimes, traditions are preserved very well in those communities—even better than in Germany—because there are no new influences, they want to ensure they uphold tradition. In the United States, there is a very rich Jewish culture that we lost, so all those recipes are also gone from our culture. People like to cook pasta, they like to cook what is considered more modern, easier food, less heavy; but not traditional German dishes (most people don't know a single traditional dish from the region they are living in). Nowadays, there is also a modern approach on German food, but this trend is mostly found in gastronomy.

What do you mean by gastronomy?

Restaurants and chefs do this now, a modern take on traditional recipes that nobody would know how to cook at home. There is also an interest in heirloom and older varieties of vegetables. For instance salsify, or colorful potatoes, things you will see on menus, but not know what they are until after you eat them. Even earlier today, I was at a farmers market and I heard this couple say—ohhh this is salsify, I would love to buy it, but I don't know what to do with it. There are things that are becoming fashionable to eat. These trends start in restaurants and they allow people to become interested in cooking them at home. People become more open to trying things because they have eaten them already. I think that chefs and designers have a really important responsibility and role because the choices they make will be replicated. When the product is good, and people like it, they will be interested in finding out more about it. I believe that as a chef you have a lot of power to educate.

Are there any events or workshops that you have done which focus on traditional German food, something that was lost in history?

I had a project called Tales of Taste. It was a dinner series on the story of wild, forgotten foods. The menu started in the middle ages, when it was normal to eat wild food, when we didn't cultivate very much yet, so it was a thing no one would question. Our second chapter was during wartimes. People consumed wild foods often because they had to eat what they could find, the market shelves were empty, but people still had to survive, so what did they eat? Foraged food. And the third chapter was today. If you look at most of the world's best restaurants right now, there is usually wild food on the menu. There has been a shift, where we find something more special than an imported lobster or salmon.

What are some examples of foods found in the first chapter?

In the middle ages, people would eat a lot of cereals, or if they ate meat, they would use up every single part of the animal. There also wasn't much of a difference between salty and sweet—desserts didn't really exist, because you would cook much more with fruits, so flavours were different. Also textures were different. Cooking techniques were simpler, people would cook things for a very long time to not miss out on any vitamins or fats, things like stews and porridges; salty porridges were something that was eaten a lot in the middle ages.

I've heard you mention that food habits have replaced religious beliefs, what do you mean by that?

People have always believed in something, and they will always believe in something, it's just in our nature. Today, religious belief and what the church says is becoming something that many people don't agree with. So they look for something new. When you look for a system of belief, you search for something that is healing. The church tries to offer healing, but often its practice is not a very contemporary approach. Food can also promise healing, but in a way that can be very confusing; what is and isn't healthy. It also promises to achieve certain goals with certain eating rituals. You need something to hold onto, to believe in—so you eat. When you go to a church, temple, mosque, to any place of worship where you believe in something, you follow a certain way of thinking, and political attitudes. When you go there, you are surrounded by like-minded people. Equally, when you follow a certain diet, you might, too, meet other people that think and act in a similar manner, so it's actually pretty comparable in a way. Having something to believe in, that you can hold onto, that gives you values—to make a choice.

I have often thought about this, not in your words of "food becoming religion," but in terms of food labels. Labeling our eating habits becomes almost a blind following, where whatever title you use to describe yourself; vegan, vegetarian, becomes a checklist of how you belong, as opposed to something you choose during every meal. In my own experience, I was vegetarian for years and very briefly vegan. When I chose to start eating meat again, it was partially based on wanting to reclaim ownership of my decisions, to choose to not eat meat 29 days a month, and to eat it for 1. I wanted to make that choice in that moment, not to follow some title that I had given myself. When you follow a checklist blindy, you do just that, follow a checklist—but the thinking stops there. Many vegetarians or vegans will consume soy everyday. Most of that soy isn't local, it's being shipped across the world, and that mileage is so harmful to the environment. If you're a vegetarian for animal rights this may not matter, but for all those that are doing it for the environment, these choices don't often add up. In my case, I prefer to make decisions in the moment, with thought into every food choice I make, rather than as a rule.

Yes, I think making certain food choices or following certain rules is definitely something which defines you as a being, more or less consciously. It starts with how much time and care you put into the topic, where and how do you shop, do you cook or eat out? Where do you go, if you eat out?

Food and eating take up a big part of our lives and it shapes us as we shape it. Shopping and eating in a certain way also creates peer groups, social connections, we might even call it "modern tribes."