

Chelsea Monroe-Cassell is a chef in Vermont. Back in 2011, she started a blog called The Inn at the Crossroads, which featured recipes based on Game of Thrones and the books a Song of Ice and Fire by George R.R. Martin. On her blog, she had recipes across the different regions of Westeros, and foods that had symbolic meaning like and Lemon Cakes, which were important to Sansa Stark.

CLIP: GOT

CHELSEA: You know, Sansa's love of lemon cakes early in the series, sort of represents her sort of sweet childish view of the world. And then you know later on there are no more lemon cakes and there are no more sort of fairy tales and she's been sort of become jaded about the world and sees it for what it really is. And I had written George Martin to say we're doing this blog thank you so much for your books. We really love them and sort of tongue in cheek said if you ever want to do a cookbook think of us and was shocked when he not only wrote back but said he would mention it to the publishers because he'd had a lot of requests over the years for a cookbook.

Beyond her Game of Thrones cookbook, she's also written a cookbook for Lord of the Rings, and the video game World of Warcraft.

CHELSEA: That was a neat challenge because in many cases there are no ingredients listed for some of those. But I had an image of what the finished dishes are supposed to look like. There's a goat noodles one where I meticulously went through and tried to drape the noodles the same way for the picture as they were for the in game image.

Her next goal is to make a Star Wars cookbook, which yes, would have a recipe for blue Bantha milk. Now making foods based fantasy world isn't just a creative challenge for her. It's a way of turning the make-believe into something real.

CHELSEA: I think that food and recipes are sort of this really neat way to take a step closer to all of these fictional worlds and you know eat what the character ate and sort of experience that in a very sensory way.

That had never occurred to me before – that food could be like a virtual reality, using taste and smell in a way that sight and sound never can.

Until recently, I hadn't thought much about food in fictional worlds. If it's there – great – but if it's not, I don't notice if it's missing. But it turns out food can be a crucial ingredient that makes a fantasy world gel together.

SFX SLICING

And Chelsea isn't the only chef doing this.

On a rainy summer day in Brooklyn, my assistant producer Stephanie and I went to the kitchen of Jenn de la Vega, who runs the blog *Randwiches*. She also creates recipes based on fantasy foods. Like, there's scene in *The Force Awakens*, when Rey goes to a cantina and Jenn was fascinated by the snack Rey was eating. I've seen that movie a few times and I never noticed Rey was eating anything, but Jenn did.

JENN: She's holding this hollowed out apple with a Romanesco sticking out of it and Romanesco is fractal broccoli. It's something that you see at farmers markets. It's a real food and it looks very alien and it inspired me to go home hollow out at Fuji Apple and the poached salmon Romanesco and put it in. But I call it *The Snack Awakens*. (Laughs)

Now we didn't come to Jenn's kitchen to make *The Snack Awakens*. Jenn wanted us to help her make pears and sausages in oil -- based on a dish from the novel *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, by Scott Lynch, which she describes as *Ocean's 11* set in a medieval fantasy world.

But what really intrigued her about the dish was the way pears and sausages were used symbolically throughout the novel.

JENN: They're associated with characters that are central to Locke's life and they also describe money. He's not worth a sausage. They describe shapes of people like his best friend when he first meets him. He describes him as a shaped like a dirty pear. And then it turns out that this dish pears and sausages and oil is the first dish that Locke eats when he becomes a gentleman bastard he joins a thieving gang. It's very significant he gets a double portion on his first day. ***Now had you ever heard of this dish before you saw it or read it in the book?***

JENN: No actually. This combination of works like fatty things like sausages can go really well with not necessarily very fruity. Like it's sweet and savory kind of situation. I don't know I kind of I love the idea. I actually hadn't seen anyone combine these two ingredients.

SCOTT: I'm pretty pleased with the way that turned out considering that I basically made it up on the spot those many years ago, just dumb luck that it turned out pretty edible.

And that is Scott Lynch, the author of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*.

SCOTT: One of the earliest notes that I wrote to myself considering the *Lies of Locke Lamora* in one of its very early formulations, I literally write this on the back of a napkin, just an admonition to myself – why does it need to be set in another medieval dirt town? I'd seen it a thousand times which is why it was familiar and comfortable and I started to go to. But then I began to see a mission to myself, make it weirder, make it more baroque, make it richer, make the experiences a little deeper don't just have the characters eat food unquote. Have them eat something that is a little more culturally distinct, a little more memorable.

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

Today we're going to look at what food can reveal about a fantasy world – beyond whether the characters have a sweet tooth or not.

Spoiler alert – by the end of the episode, you're probably going to feel very hungry because there's a feast of ideas ahead, just after the break.

BREAK

Fran Wilde hosts the podcast *Cooking the Books*, which is about food in fiction. She's also a sci-fi author and a teacher. And when she runs writing workshops, she has a particular way of teaching students the importance of food in fantasy worlds.

FRAN: I have people do quite often when I teach classes, is I have them do an exercise where I ask them to boil water.

Not literally. She asks them to write out the steps their character would take to boil water. Since I'm not a fiction writer, she asked me what was the last book I read was. It was *Alchemy of Stone* by Ekaterina (YUK-et-tserina) Sedia, which took place in a steampunk world, where the main character is

a robot named Mattie, who is wound up like a clock. So she asked me to list all the steps that character would take to boil water.

FRAN: OK. So you've already set a whole series of worldbuilding things in motion and if this was your own story you would have to say okay there needs to be a well and if there's a well is it a manual you know crank well or do they have a pump because if they have a pump then they have engineering.

Yeah no in this, this is a steampunk world. So they would probably have some kind of way in which they've automated the water coming up from the well.

FRAN: So and then you have to determine the heat source and you have to determine is this a stove or is this a fire? And every single choice that you make as you tell your character how to boil water is a worldbuilding detail.

She says one of the books that influenced her thinking on this subject was “The Tough Guide to Fantasyland” by the late writer Diana Wynn Jones, which went after all the clichés of genre fiction – including tropes about foods like stew.

FRAN: This is the book that sort of says, let's talk about stew because stew was sort of ever present and it was always being served you and in when you read books and still was very boring and very brown and it has been boiling for a while and you can't exactly cook it on the on the road and run you know it takes forever to cook a stew. This is the worst possible choice for someone in a fantasy universe to be cooking while they're on the road. Sam and Frodo, I'm looking at you.

SAM: What we need is a few good taters

GOLLUM: What's taters, precious? What's taters?!

SAM: Potatoes! Boil 'em, mash 'em stick 'em in a stew! (FADE OUT)

That book, The Tough Guide to Fantasyland, was also a big influence on the novelist Elizabeth Bear in her thinking about the reality of eating in fictional worlds.

ELIZABETH: People who are hiking long distances don't eat stew they don't eat bread. Those are those are things that require you to be stationary

And there's another trope that really bothers Elizabeth: potatoes. Potatoes are all over medieval fantasy worlds from Lord of the Rings to Game of Thrones. Even George R.R. Martin had an opinion about them:

ELIZABETH: He famously proclaimed that that nobody cares where the potatoes come from and I care where the potatoes come from. Like I want to know why this, this England analogue has potatoes in a world with no America.

But potatoes are in real Ireland, so wouldn't fake England have a fake Ireland close by?

ELIZABETH: There wouldn't be potatoes in fake Ireland before there was fake America.

Okay that was news to me – from 500 years ago. I didn't know potatoes came from South America originally. They were brought to Europe by Spanish conquistadors.

Now I should say that both Fran and Elizabeth Bear are really like the way Tolkien and George Martin use food symbolically. They just feel that the big picture of food should be just as important in worldbuilding as all the care attention to put into fantasy maps or constructed languages.

ELIZABETH: Even if you live in a fantasy world with potatoes, anyone in a scarcity economy care where their food comes from. You know I grew up, I was a child of a single mother in the '70s. I cared about where my food came from and I feel like sometimes when you're writing characters who are living a subsistence life who are hungry who don't know where their food is coming from. That's a thing that they should be caring about more than they often seem to. If you're writing a world in which food is plentiful as our world is then you're going to end up writing a situation where it's not the quality of food that indicates social castes, it's the difficulty of obtaining the ingredients, where if you're wiring a world where food is scarce than bounty is going to be the economic indicator.

Now the use of food in SF worlds has gone through phases as our society has thought about food in different ways. In the early 20th century, Tolkien was nostalgic for a pre-industrialized past – and a lot of writers were influenced by them. But then came the atomic age, which made sci-fi writers think about food very differently.

JASON: You know eleven guys in white lab coats all staring into a oscilloscope and then there has to be this perfectly clean stainless kitchen and they have to push a button and food pills come out.

That is Jason Sheehan. He's a chef, a food critic and a sci-fi author.

JASON: The rebellion against that took so long it went from that to you know stories of scarcity and then from that to the sort of like the cyberpunk thing where nobody ingests anything except you know cocaine and Japanese beer.

Jason thinks the portrayal of food in SF has gotten much better in the last 15 years because the food movement opened up our palettes and made a lot of us think differently about where our food comes from, and the hidden costs of convenience.

For example, he really likes the 2015 novel Gold Fame Citrus by Claire Vaye (VAE) Watkins, which takes place in a near future when California is going through a slow motion ecological apocalypse. And there's a very evocative scene where the character stop a Farmer's Market.

JASON: There's are all these beautiful Farmer's Market foods that have all been ruined somehow by the future that they're living in now. And the one that I always remember is they tried to get raspberries but the hearts of the raspberries were all full of gassed aphids. No reader gets past that line. I mean that's fishhooks in the eyes, man, like you don't get past that. You know exactly the world you're in

He says that's another thing food can do in genre fiction -- especially dystopian fiction. It can take something ordinary and make it extraordinary. Like in Cormack McCarthy's The Road, there's a touching scene where a father and son find the last can of Coke in the world. Jason's favorite example is a scene from The Road Warrior, featuring his childhood hero, Mad Max.

JASON: And he pulls a can of dog food out of his bag and he's got like some old fashioned can opener that he opens with a giant wooden spoon and he sits there and he eats the dog food while he's looking through like his binoculars down into the valley below him. And you see that he's not he's not grudgingly eating the dog food he's relishing every bite of it. And so like that one moment to me defines you know Max Rockatansky as this sort of perfect machine built for surviving in this world.

And he says the great thing about that scene is that food is being used for world building and character building. Max isn't humiliated by eating dog food. He's chowing down like it's the best meal he's had in weeks. In fact – for young Jason – that scene actually made dog food seem cool.

JASON: That's so seriously hooked me -- I'm not going to say that I didn't actually try eating dog food after seeing that because I did. And not just once I was and seriously even today I love corned beef hash from a can because it reminds me of that.

Now, I've never been a big fan of dystopias because I know I would never survive in those worlds. I tend to like the other extreme --- where an abundance of food can be used as a social critique – like the Pixar film Wall-E, or Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. I remember I wanted so badly to eat those candies in real life, and then I bought an everlasting gobstopper, and I was like, this can't be what they tasted like in the book.

ELIZABETH: Yeah. Like when I got my hands on an everlasting gobstopper and then I was like well this is not this just. I was sold a bag of goods.

Elizabeth Bear said the great thing about that novel is the way it plays with both ends of the spectrum, scarcity and abundance. Like in the beginning, Roald Dahl describes the thin cabbage soup that poor Charlie Bucket has to eat – and that's what makes the candy seem so tantalizing later on.

ELIZABETH: And I wonder how much of that grows out of the rationing culture in England during World War Two, which also has a huge effect on C.S. Lewis's *The Lion the Witch and The Wardrobe*, which revolves heavily around food. We don't talk about food at all when we're in England but once we get to Narnia everything is food food food food food

Oh, that's so interesting I never thought about that.

ELIZABETH: I mean just and it's lavishly described there's the feast that Lucy has when she first meets Mr. Tumnus. And of course the infamous Turkish Delight. Another thing I was disappointed by when I encountered it in real life. I mean it's OK but I wouldn't sell my soul for it.

JENN: Now these are spicy in a buzz your lips kind of away. So we're going to crush...

SFX: JENN CRUSHING PEPPER

Meanwhile, back to the real world, in the kitchen of Jenn de la Vega, she's crushing up Szechuan peppercorns for the oil that's going to cook our pears and sausages based on the books by Scott Lynch.

SCOTT: There's a reason why I try to add so many interesting encounters with food and drink. It's punching up the sensory experience, it's creating a sensory landscape, it's engaging senses of the reader that may not be commonly engaged in a tale that's otherwise about intrigue, and running around scaling walls, wearing cloaks, shooting people with arrows, etc.

As we were cooking, Jenn was telling us that for all the good things food can do in sci-fi fantasy worlds – there's one trope that really bugs her. Fantasy foods can sometimes be used as a way to express xenophobia – especially science fiction where food can be literally alien.

JENN: There are a lot of these moments throughout sci-fi and fantasy and see something unfamiliar and they're like, you eat that?! And they get disgusted and as a Filipino American I grew up bringing my lunch to school and my mom would send me fragrant chicken adobo which is actually when you think about it. You know it's not crazy it's chicken simmered in soy sauce and vinegar and garlic and sometimes were the bones and when I get into the lunchroom I got stares and wrinkled noses and you know what's that. And it's really frustrating to sort of see that in the books that I read.

Although Fran Wilde thinks those types of scenes can be used for good.

FRAN: When you have characters eating different things, you can turn the tables in a way that is still OK. This character's being put in an uncomfortable position and then has to eat a food that they're unfamiliar with and they do it badly. It is an opportunity to show people coming into contact with the unfamiliar rather than the alien and how they react is a character building moment.

And Jason Sheehan thinks food in fantasy worlds should remind us how often we underestimate the diversity of cuisines on Earth.

JASON: The stuff we eat right here is so bizarre to anybody who didn't grow up within 20 miles of where we were sometimes within five miles sometimes.

Even our own past can feel alien to us. Jason loves to read food item lists from 18th century sailing ships – the dried meats and hard biscuits the men ate to survive.

JASON: You know men on 18th century sailing ship and 30th century generation ship – they're exactly the same stories.

In other words, as people today are trying to figure out how we could live on the moon, or Mars or in space cylinders, food in fantasy worlds is a great to reimagine how we eat. Elizabeth Bear has thought about that in her trilogy, *Jacob's Ladder*, which has a generation ship adrift for 500 years

ELIZABETH: If you are you're going to be concerned about complete proteins if you have animal protein at all it's probably going to be things like insects or tilapia that are very resource efficient.

And her spaceship is packed with wild kudzu.

ELIZABETH: Because it turns out that kudzu it would be a pretty good thing to take into space it's edible and it grows under almost any condition.

Wow I never thought of that.

ELIZABETH: Yeah apparently it tastes like spinach. I haven't actually tried it myself.

JASON: One of the things that makes that makes food such a powerful thing in science fiction beyond its beyond its humanity beyond its relate ability beyond all the obvious things is also sort of the reason that I became a food writer in the first place is because food is it. It's like magic. Because if you're writing about food you can literally write about anything. Food is politics. Food is talking about supply chain and which sticks. It's class warfare it's anything that you want it to be because food permeates sort of all levels of all discussions. It's the, you know, it's the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down.

Also, we're facing an environmental crisis on Earth, so in the future, re-imagining food might be more than a creative challenge. It might be a survival mechanism, so we don't have to resort to chowing down cans of Purina, no matter how cool it seemed in *The Road Warrior*.

But in the meantime, back in Jenn's kitchen.

JENN: Would you like some?

ME: Of course, I'm dying to!

We were finally ready to eat pears and sausages, on a bed of arugula.

ME: Oh my God! This is so good my Boston accent is coming out! This is wicked good!

Seriously, it was wicked good!

Well, that is it for this week. Special thanks to Jenn de la Vega, Jason Sheehan, Fran Wilde, Elizabeth Bear and Scott Lynch – who, full disclosure, are married! By the way, Scott still hasn't tried cooking pears and sausages. Although he says there is something in a fantasy world he's always wanted to try.

SCOTT: You know the Cordial of Imladris, the Elvin wine from LOTR sound like it would be absolutely wonderful to abuse! (Laughs) I would have less than cordial uses for that!

Now I could've filled up several more episodes with every example of food in fiction that I didn't get around to talking about. So tell me your favorite examples on the Imaginary Worlds Facebook page. I tweet at emolinsky or imagin worlds pod.

Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. I'm posting the recipe for Jenn's recipe for pears and sausages in oil on my website, imaginary worlds podcast dot org.