

God Loves Eating and Drinking

Tyson Stelzer

Le Mesnil-sur-Oger

It was the last place I expected to be that night. And yet, in the most unlikely way, it was familiar, warm, and so very inviting.

Fluoro lights flickered under the galvanised iron roof of the besser brick council shed on the showgrounds at the bottom end of town. High walls were lined with ceiling-high pallet racks, stacked high with water tanks, ladders and dusty old Christmas displays.

The floor was set with trestle tables, complete with disposable plates and plastic cutlery. The spitroast was firing out the back. Men arrived with armloads of baguettes; women with giant Tupperware containers brimming with salads and desserts.

It was dinner time, to the roar of a hundred conversations, hoots of laughter, bad karaoke and wine. So much wine. Swigged out of tiny, mismatched glasses, forever topped up, regardless of how empty or how full they were, or of what happened to be in them at the time.

And for the first time in two weeks, I felt at home. The scene was familiar but for the language. They could hardly speak mind and I was hopeless at theirs. Our charades were worse than the karaoke. But there were more broad grins and bellows of laughter than I'd ever seen in this country.



It was the final day of my first trip to Europe alone, at the invitation of a kind chef de cave at the conclusion of my final appointment in France. And not just anywhere in France. Le Mesnil-sur-Oger, the tiny village in the middle of Champagnes famed Côte des Blancs that has a decent claim to the title of Champagne's greatest grand cru of all.

This is the home of Salon, the champagne house that makes just one cuvée and sells it for \$700 a bottle. In the middle of town, just a moment away, is Krug Clos du Mesnil, the most famous sparkling vineyard in the world. Its fruits sell for \$2,000 a bottle. Vineyard turf is priceless here. It's worth whatever the highest offer happens to be, never less than 2 million Euros a hectare and it's currently inflating at the pace of real estate in Paris. This is the most famous and the most prized sparkling wine land on the planet.

And here I am under a galvanised roof, in the middle of this place, sharing a trestle table with jovial vigneron, winemakers and village folk, scoffing a spit roast with a plastic fork. I could hardly speak their language. I knew the name of just two people in the room. But I felt at home.

And that night, I learnt something about church.

Arriving here tonight, you might have imagined that this dinner was just a social night, an afterthought to the real business of synod. Or perhaps a chance to raise funds and awareness for a vital and noble cause far away. And it is.

But when it comes to getting together over food and wine, I can't help but wonder if God doesn't have a higher purpose in mind.

Jesus

Just take a look at Jesus' social calendar.

His first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding banquet. And it was better than the wine they'd served first.

Matthew 11: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'"

Was Jesus a glutton and a drunkard? Of course not. But so vital was the ritual of eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners for Jesus that he was mistaken for a glutton and a drunkard.

In Jesus' culture, far more than in ours, eating and drinking with someone was a big deal. A defining moment. An identity stamp. When you sat at a table with somebody, you were identifying with them and you were allowing yourself to be identified with them. To eat and drink with somebody in that culture was to publicly extend to them acceptance, friendship, love. A shared table was a shared life. And the religious leaders of the time were very careful about this, because they had a reputation to uphold. Jesus was not careful about this at all. In fact, he was purposely promiscuous in his dining and he ate and drank with the most unlikely, unrespectable and unholy candidates. And he did this all the time.

When Jesus met Zacchaeus in a tree, he didn't say, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately and sort your life out." He said, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." Zacchaeus, I'm coming for dinner, and you're cooking! We don't know what was said that night, but we do know that before the end of it, Zacchaeus announced that he would turn his life around.

Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus arrived at his house for dinner. Before dessert was over, Matthew was a disciple.

The Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples why he ate with tax collectors and sinners. They queried why he didn't fast. They criticised his disciples for picking and eating grain on the Sabbath. And they even welcomed Jesus to eat in their own houses countless times.

Jesus threw out their legalistic restrictions on what one can and cannot eat.

And Jesus knew all about hospitality.

When 5000 men plus women and children were hungry, Jesus fed them all with five loaves and two fish. Another day, he fed 4000 men with seven loaves and a few fish.

When Jesus sent out 72 apostles, he told them to visit houses and to stay there and eat and drink whatever they were given.

When the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, what did he do? He cooked them a BBQ on the shores of Lake Galilee.

How did Jesus describe heaven? Like a wedding banquet and a great feast.

On the night he was betrayed Jesus did not say to his disciples, "I have eagerly desired to spend an evening with you before I suffer." He said, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer." I don't think it was any accident that he chose bread and wine and the ritual of a meal as the one way that he communes with us in the most intimate manner. He could have chosen any experience in life, any element of creation. And he chose bread and wine in a meal as the most sacred and the most intimate touchpoint with the creator of the universe.

You see, I believe in a God who loves eating and drinking.

Old Testament

And he always has. Food and wine are central to the festivals and sacrifices of the entire sweep of Old Testament history. Since the dawn of creation, it's been through food and wine that God has had his most intimate communion with his people.

Way back in Israel's history they put together a tent to show that God wanted to be with his people. It had hardly any furniture but it did have a table. It had a pitcher of wine and the bread of the presence of God.

In Exodus 25, God instructs, “Put the bread of the Presence on this table to be before me at all times.”

The “bread of the Presence”. Such rich language. God is present in what we eat and drink.

In Leviticus we are told that there were always to be 12 loaves of bread, and every Israelite understood immediately, that that meant one for every tribe of Israel. God always has enough for everybody. Everyone is welcome. Every tribe, every nation.

When God visited Abraham, his immediate response was to instruct Sarah to bake bread and roast a choice calf from the herd.

In Psalm 23, God prepares a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You know, I’ve always got that verse completely wrong. I always imagined it meant that God would bless me, while my enemies looked on in envy. No! Aaron Eime, one of our members here, a missionary in the Middle East. He revealed the profound truth of this verse to me. God will prepare a table to sit me down with my enemies and in sharing a meal with them he will affect reconciliation. This is not about eating and drinking for the fun of it. This is a profound ritual, with far-reaching implications.

And it is about fun, too.

Ecclesiastes 9:7 “Eat your food with gladness, and drink your wine with a joyful heart.”

You see, God loves eating and drinking.

The science of smell

And he has set us up to love it, too.

Of all the miraculous complexities of our bodies, scientists tell us that smell and taste are the deepest mysteries of all. Not just that no one knows how we smell, but that we should not be able to do it at all.

Despite everything, despite the billions the secretive giant perfume corporations have riding on it and the powerful computers they throw at it, despite the sorcery of their legions of chemists, their years of toiling in labs and all the famous neurowizardry aimed at mastering it, the exact way we smell things - anything - remains a complete mystery.

We understand the human sense of vision intimately, we know hearing in exquisite detail, but smell, smell is one of the most important secrets of modern day biology.

It was only in 1991 that scientists finally discovered the smell receptors in the nose. And yet we still don’t know how they work.

From everything we know about evolution and molecular biology, smell does the impossible.

It remains a mystery to scientists that smell is instant and yet unlimited.

We can smell everything. We instantly smell even brand new synthetic aromas created in laboratories every day for the first time in history. Scientists tell us that according to evolution, that is impossible.

The human nose can smell and instantly identify the actual atoms hidden inside a molecule. And we never, ever get it wrong. A rose always smells like a rose. You would never mistake the fragrance of a ripe mango or the aroma of baked bread.

What's more, we can tell every molecule apart from every other. When you encounter rotten egg smell, you know there's sulphur in there. No other atom smells like that. Scientists now believe that we can distinguish between one trillion different smells.

A controversial recent proposal suggests that smell is a microscopic electrical mechanism operating inside the human body, made of human flesh that detects the very vibrations of molecules themselves.

This is so revolutionary that one scientist recently fumed that you might as well propose a new theory of digestion through tiny nuclear reactors in people's stomachs. Smell is literally that complex. And this is the best theory we have.

The story that led to its discovery is as far-fetched as the theory itself. A gripping novel is devoted to the findings of perfume critic Luca Turin. I've read every one of his books because I am fascinated with smell.

Smell is such a strong sense. It evokes more memories than any other sense. A single aroma can instantly transport you back to your childhood, to your grandmother's kitchen, to that seaside holiday on the Mediterranean, or in the words of Luca Turin, "to briefly turn the most arid mind into a fairy garden, to make us lament the passing of loves and losses we know full well we never had."

Scientists recently discovered that an astounding one percent of human genes are devoted to smell. One geneticist said, "Smell must be incredibly important for us, to devote so much of our DNA to it. The only comparable system is the immune system."

Smell must be incredibly important for us.

And taste is simply the physical manifestation of smell. Evolution cannot explain it. God has engineered your nose as one of the most complex mechanisms in all of creation.

Why?

To keep us from poisoning ourselves by eating horrid things? No. Arsenic, deadly. Completely odourless, completely tasteless.

Why then?

Because God loves eating and drinking.

As Lutherans, we get that, don't we?

Food, wine and hospitality are in our DNA. We love it, we laugh about it and our ecumenical friends wink, smile and joke about our love of food and wine.

But what if it's more than that? What if there's something in it? Really something. What if our generous, unconditional hospitality could communicate the grace of God to our broken country more dramatically than anything we could ever say? What if our open invitation to our homes and our tables could create connections with our neighbours and our colleagues like we have never imagined? What if we could extend our hospitality beyond our borders and put food in the mouths of every tribe and every nation who need it most? What if we could reverse the alarming decline in the Lutheran church of Australia right here, in our own homes, and in our dining rooms? What if the media stereotype of the global church as irrelevant, disconnected, judgemental, hypocritical and child abusing could be dissolved by the image of church around a dining table?

What if our tables could recreate the setting in which Jesus himself conducted some of his most powerful, life-changing ministry? Not in synagogues or on street corners, but around tables, BBQing fish on the shores of a lake, sharing bread at the biggest hillside picnic you could ever imagine .

And what if those opportunities could trigger Cana moments? Psalm 23 reconciliation? Matthew transformation? Zacchaeus turnaround?

I believe they can. Because I've seen it for myself, right here.

Homegroup

My wife Rachael and I have had the privilege of hosting homegroups here at Our Saviour congregation for some 20 years. Seven years ago when we moved to a bigger home we changed the format of our Wednesday evening gatherings to always begin with dinner. We figured the last thing young professionals and students want is to rush home and gulp down dinner so they can hurry out at 7:30, flop onto our sofa and all of a sudden get all deep and spiritual. But there is something about eating and drinking together. Sharing the triumphs and defeats of the week. Connecting. And when we do retire from the table to the lounges and open our bibles, there is an altogether different level of intimacy and sharing.

It's a model that attracts newcomers, too. Our group of ten quickly became 25, outgrowing our home, and we blessed half our number into another home. Two groups became three and three became five, with some fifty members. Two of our number moved to South Australia and established our first interstate outpost.

As Lutherans we often dread sharing the gospel in words. But what if we spent more time sharing loaves and fishes with our neighbours than we did discussing theology? What if we devoted more energy to sharing shiraz with our friends than we did to debating church politics? What if God is calling us to share the gospel in bread, in wine and in chocolate slice?



Anne Kotzur

In our congregation there is a dearly loved grandmother named Anne Kotzur. She has many spiritual gifts, but the one she is perhaps best known for is what we affectionately call her spiritual gift of chocolate slice. Every week she bakes and every week those recycled ice cream containers brimming with chocolate slice find their way to all those in our community who need them most.

And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then makers of chocolate slice. Never underestimate the spiritual power of chocolate slice.

I believe in a God who loves eating and drinking.

This is why we have established the Lutheran Winemaker's Club.

This is why the Longest Lutheran Lunch is coming up next month.

Because our God loves eating and drinking.

And you see it everywhere.

Dom Pérignon

It was another trip to Champagne. Another final meal after long weeks far from home. But this one could not have been a greater contrast to the last. On a fortuitous cancellation of a meeting in Paris, Dom Pérignon Chef de Cave Richard Geoffroy invited me to lunch at the finest restaurant in Épernay, the Michelin starred Les Berceaux. It was truffle season and the foie gras and truffle menu was on. Richard brought not one vintage of Dom Pérignon but four.

There's probably no higher position in Champagne than chef de cave of Dom Pérignon, the prestige cuvée of Moët & Chandon. Richard Geoffroy has held the honour for 25 years. If anyone has earned the right to be egotistical or snobbish about champagne, surely it's Richard.

This was my first meeting with him, and by the end of lunch, 4500 words in my notes were testimony to three hours of intense conversation. But one thing that he said stayed with me above everything else.

"It's about the people," he told me. "That's what wine should be about. There are too many egos and too much snobbism in the wine world. But wine should be about bringing people together."

Bringing people together.

The world gets it.

How much more can we get it?

Because we have a God who loves eating and drinking.

