Mark: Welcome to “The Endless Knot Podcast,”

Aven: Where the more we know

Mark: The More we want to find out!

Aven: Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives,

Mark: And across disciplines.

[intro music]

Aven: Hi!  I’m Aven.

Mark: And I’m Mark.

Aven: And today, we’re asking the question: What is a recipe?  This episode is part of the The Recipe Project’s virtual conversation, on the topic of “What is a recipe?”, which started on June 2nd, 2017, and is continuing until July 5th.  Bookended by two panels of speakers that are being streamed online, it features a wide range of contributions on the topic, in the form of blog posts, videos, podcasts, Instagram posts, Twitter conversations, and more.  We'll put a link to The Recipe Project's blog in the show notes, or you can search the #recipeconf to join in the conversation. We are participating with this podcast episode, and with a video of the history and etymology of "The Recipe", which will be released on June 27th on our Youtube channel, Alliterative.

Mark: Today then, to discuss the topic of "What is a Recipe?", and in particular some of the historical developments in recipes and cooking, we have the great pleasure to be joined by one of our favorite podcasters, Laura Carlson, host of "The Feast Podcast".  Laura has degrees in history and medieval studies, and a wide ranging interest in food.  Welcome Laura!

Laura: Hello!

Aven: So let's start there, with your podcast, because I know we've mentioned it before to our audience, but it is really, genuinely one of our favorites.

Mark: Indeed!

Aven: So, tell us a little bit about it, for anyone who hasn't had a chance to listen to it yet.  What is, The Feast?

Laura: Well, The Feast, I believe our tagline is, "Meals That Made History".  What we'd really like to do is look not just at a food, but in particular an event, or where food interacted with an event or an event interacted with food.  So, we'll take a snapshot, if you will, of either a specific meal, or a particular tradition involving food and tell the story really, I mean it's really a story based podcast.  We've been up and running for, I think, exactly a year, we just passed our one anniversary, so we've done everything from, oh, I think our earliest one went back to the story of King Midas, and the origins of beer, and brewing in general.  We've done papal feasts that have involved thousand pound sugar sculptures.  I think we both actually covered this at one point, but it remains one of my favorite stories ever: the massive, giant cheese that Thomas Jefferson received for his Inauguration, which, I still think is just a hilarious story.  And why we don't have a tradition anymore of presidential cheese, I don't know.  So that I think is it in a nutshell, that every episode we take one of those, either specific moments, like Thomas Jefferson and cheese, but go back and explore why exactly Thomas Jefferson would have been getting cheese.  What kind of cheese should he receive, and why on Earth did they keep it in the White House for what seems to like multiple years.

Aven and Mark: [Laughing]

Laura: Oh my!

Aven: Yeah, that combination of things, the fact that it's stories, which are just fascinating to listen to, and the fact that you, every time are drawing those connections between really and trusting straight food history, and all of the context and the social and political and historical relevance of that food is why I love the podcast.

Mark:  Yeah, like the dinosaur episode, that was one of my favorites.

Aven: Yes.

Laura: Oh, thank you!

Aven: Dining inside the dinosaur.

Laura: I know, it has all these amazing, I mean, as you both clearly do all the time, these connections between very early history of paleontology, evolutionary science, and then of course you have this, this crazy meal, inside a dinosaur cask in the middle of a London park, which I think is fantastic. So, yeah, we try and, as you yourselves do, pick up those little connections, specifically with food, but that relate to almost every discipline or interest under the sun.

Aven: Yeah, and every topic takes you into directions...

Mark: Food is such a universal you know...

Aven: Exactly!

Mark: You can connect it all these things.

Aven: Exactly!

Laura: Very rarely is any event in history done by  people who aren't eating food.

Mark and Aven: [Laughing]

Laura:  Precisely!  Exactly there's always food or drink, sometimes both, often both in the background.

Aven: Now, no before we go on, on that topic I have one question for you.   You've just been on a trip that ties into your podcast.  You've just come back from Spain.

Laura: Yes. Uh, yes, it's actually quite hard to get back into, kind of, Canadian weather and not having, you know, Spanish ham and cheese and wine on a daily basis.  Yes, we were walking a bit of the Camino De Santiago, we actually have been doing it, chipping away at it, for the last five years.  It's actually hard to believe we've been doing this for half a decade.

Aven: Oh, I see!

Laura: Yeah, so we will do just as vacation allows us, about a week a year, or a week every time we can get away and do another chunk, so we're getting close.  This time we did from Burgos to Leon which was our longest bit ever. It was about, I think, one hundred fifty, two hundred k I think?  Two hundred kilometers I think.

Aven: Wow.

Laura: You get up in the morning, you walk four or five hours through beautiful fields, vineyards, cows, things like that.  And then, of course, you get to have a gigantic, traditional Spanish lunch, or comida and take a siesta.  Maybe go out and have a little more wine, cheese, and ham.  Sleep, and then do the exact same thing all over again the next day.

Aven: That sounds pretty good.

Mark: Yeah!

Laura: I gotta say, I recommend it highly as a holiday lifestyle.  Because, you get to go to these towns. I mean, the average population size would be something along the lines of one hundred, two hundred, so these very tiny towns, everyone is just so welcoming in, because the Camino has been there for, you know, upwards of 1000 years, and it's a very peaceful way of, all you have gotta do is walk every day.  Walk and then eat, and then drink.  It's quite nice.

Aven: And then you have goal every day too.  So you know what you're doing, you aren't feeling like you're wasting your time or "what should I pack my life with, what activities".

Laura: Exactly.

Aven: Somehow I feel like our kids would complain fairly hardly about that as a vacation style though.

Aven and Mark: [Laughing]

Aven: The six year old is very hard to get even on a ten minute hike at the moment.  But, we'll keep it in the mind for the long run.

Laura: Definitely.  There's always the bicycle option too, apparently you can now bicycle through the Camino, so, it just depends on what kind of vehicle, I mean, you can even do it the old school way of horses or mules or things like that, so you see everything and anything.  A guy was carrying his cello across the Camino, which I would never do, but hey, good job to him.  So, you really do get everyone and anyone on the Camino, walking it or riding it their own individual way.

Aven: That's amazing. And I'll post a link in the show notes too, the specific episode I was referring to, because you did an episode about pilgrim food on that journey, which I thought was really fascinating, about the bread...

Laura: Yes! And the chicken pastries…

Aven: Yes!

Laura: The town devoted entirely to chickens, which as we found out this last time we were there, it is not just limited to that one particular town.  We went through another town that has chickens as their, well, official, I was going to say unofficial, but I think it is their official mascot, that someone saved all the chickens sometime in the year 1200, and so now they also have chicken pastries of another kind, celebrating this chicken miracle.

Aven and Mark: [Laughing]

Laura: So, apparently chickens in Spain, is a thing that happens. I don't know!

Aven: Well, I guess they're important if they're major food stuff.

Mark: Yup.

Laura: Exactly, exactly!  You see, I was thinking that it was going to be ham, and lots of pigs and things like that, but the chicken.  The chicken is an important Spanish animal, apparently.

Aven: These are the things that you just can't find until you do the research on the ground, right?

Mark: [laughing]

Laura: Exactly! The serious research, you know, walking through Spain.  This is what has to happen.

Aven:  It's important to be able to dedicate yourself so strongly to your historical, you know, calling, that you sacrifice yourself.

Laura: Exactly. A lot of sacrifice.  A lot of, you know, tasting and trying things, but I can a big thumbs up on the chicken pastries.

Aven:  Well that sounds amazing, and I'm sorry that you have to be welcomed back to a climate that is not quite sure what season it's in yet.

Laura: Oh goodness.

Aven: This week here, anyways, we've finally seemed to have turned the corner towards summer.

Laura: Yes, thankfully.  Yes, I think today and maybe yesterday were the first days that it actually did feel like things were warming.  May be summer, maybe soon.

Aven: Yeah, so, hopefully, we'll have a little bit something that will make you feel nostalgic of Spain, if nothing else.

Laura: Yes, yes exactly!

Mark: But you know, Canada does have its own culinary interests.

Aven: Yeah, it does. So, segue from that, what is it that drew you to food history in particular?  Like, what's your background in, what subjects have you been interested that you ended up in this particular set of overlapping set of interests?

Laura: It's very interesting, and you know, when you look back I had no idea that I was eventually going to end up focusing in food history or food studies or culinary history, but when I look back I think, "Well of course, this just makes perfect sense."  I was trained, or I did my early research in early medieval history.  I looked at the Carolingian, Charlemagne, and I was doing more things on the lines of intellectual history, textual history, things like that.  And, you know, I hadn't really come across a lot of people doing food history, particularly from the medieval side of things, and it was only the big yearly conference that they hold up in Leads in England one year that they were holding a special event in the conference that was medieval food.  It was a chance, for, if you wanted to go to one of these medieval feasts, as they were kind of billing it, and a food historian had prepared all the foods, and had a great discussion about each one of the courses, or about each one of the dishes that she had prepared, talking about how it was incorporated or epitomized an element of medieval society or medieval culture. So ranging everything from, you know, what a king would have had in the twelfth century, to, of course, what I found so interesting, was Lenten foods, the idea that foods were really, specifically made, obviously, for fasting and the whatnot during the Lenten season, but things like blancmange that you actually needed to focus on the color of the food.

Aven and Mark: Right.

Laura: And it really started just fascinating me, but I really didn't know how to plug that into my research, and it was only when I came to Queens University and started teaching and when I was starting to teach medieval courses there, and trying to get the students a little bit more engaged in some of the topics we were doing.  We were doing a Mediterranean course, and one of the big themes was, of course, interconnectivity, trade, exchange throughout the Mediterranean, and again and again, it just came up, you know, naturally, "Why not food?".  Or course, you Roman olive oil trade, salt trade, things like that, but then, of course, you have the spice trade, and there had been that fantastic book, I think by, oh is it Paul Freedman, who did an entire book about, kind of the medieval spice trade, including recipes.

Aven:  Ok, right.

Mark: Oh...

Laura: And, it was just a perfect, on one level, academic article about the nature of the spice trade, but also specifically food applications of that that included recipes.  So, I just threw it out to some of my students that, you know, if you want to try making some of the breads, or, I think most people were making breads, but some of the other elements that were mentioned by Freedman  in this article, go ahead and do it.  And people just went nuts for it!  Students just, I mean, grabbed onto it, whether they were making breads, they were making, like, what was it, like the ginger bread and things like that, yeah the ginger bread, and just all these other things that all of a sudden, they were firing on all so many more levels than they had been before.  And, I had been cooking and doing kind of a recipe blog and whatnot before then, and it just was that moment of "Why have I always been keeping these elements of my life separate?"  Of doing history on one end, and my interest in food and cooking and whatnot on the other end, and it was that moment in the classroom that I, of course, this, of course, could be a united element that I do and focus on and research and whatnot.  And it went from there, and I had been listening to podcasts for years, I was a big fan of things like 99% Invisible and whatnot, and that story driver narrative that I love so much, things like the Memory Palace as well.  I thought, well this seems crazy that there isn't one dedicated to food, because, as we were saying, food is inherent to all these historical moments, these events, these transformations, and yet no one seems to be focusing on this thing that is the same throughout all these events, or, that is, on the sidelines of all these events. And sometimes, you know, it's just in the background, but then at other times they can be right in the middle of things, such as Thomas Jefferson's massive cheese, and have all these connections.

Aven: Yeah, and it's such a point of connection.  It's a place where people, just like your students, can see themselves and can imagine themselves in that moment because...

Mark: It's so relatable.

Aven: They know what it’s like to eat, even if they don't know what it’s like to eat that that you're talking about, it's something easier to connect to than warfare, or politics, or figures on the world stage...

Laura: Absolutely

Aven: When you're none of those things.

Laura: Right, exactly, I mean, especially, I think, you know, a lot of times with medieval history, it is such a, looking back a thousand years or something like that, I mean, students have an interest in the topic, but getting it to be relatable or more directly engaged that well, "They had bread?  I have bread!" and, I mean, it sparked all these stories that one of my students had grown up on a commune and they had made, you know, wild, fermented bread, and she was looking at this recipe for medieval bread, and she's like "Oh, well this is the exact same thing." I mean, it just launched so much more rich discussions than I had gotten when trying to talk to them about, you know, the Crusades, or, you know, legislative policy or something like that, all of a sudden food...

Aven: Primary sources of other types, yeah, no.

Laura: Exactly, it just sparks so much more, and I thought, "Well, this is something common to everyone." It has that relatable element.

Aven: There was a talk at the very beginning of the virtual conversation they streamed a panel from the Berkshire Women's History Conference, and one of the people presenting on that panel was talking about using, not exactly the same way, but using food in teaching about the Columbian Exchange, and she challenged all of her students that their project was basically to have every student choose a recipe that would not exist without the Columbian Exchange, that, in other words, took elements from both, you know, obviously, both sides of the Columbian Exchange, in terms of food, and to do some research on it and then to cook it and then do, you know, some presentation or report on it.  And many of them chose ones from their own ethnic heritage that they hadn't really thought about the way those ingredients had been incorporated, or the tomatoes were so integral to their Italian grandmother's recipe, but, of course, they were an element of the exchange.  Or, things about, there was a Puerto Rican who, I think, who looked at how all of the various threads that went into the indigenous and enslaved peoples backgrounds, and the immigrants, and the Spanish, and all of that came together in the food, and she said exactly the same thing, that the students were just, some of them thought going in that it was a make work assignment, but by the end of it they were just, you know, utterly enthralled by what they were discovering, and how they could share it with their families, and how much it meant to them, to be able to look into their own eating patterns, and see so much history in it, and I think that it just shows the power of that, that connected thread.

Laura: Oh, absolutely!

Mark: And I love these approaches that try and relate the content to your everyday life, because it shows why it matters.

Aven: Yeah, but without trivializing it and saying, "Oh, we're just the same as them," or whatever, because one of the things it can do is show you the difference too.

Mark: Yeah.

Laura: Oh, absolutely!

Aven: I mean, you look at medieval bread, you say, "They ate bread, I eat bread, we all eat bread," and then you actually make their bread, and think, "Oh, it's not quite the same," and that is that important job for historians to try and make the connections, but also the differentiation and the uniqueness of every period as well.

Laura: Absolutely, and how much is folded into it, I mean, not to belabor a bread analogy, but, I mean, in terms of, you know, these elements where the, what kind of materials were they using?  I mean, you have an economic element there.  Or, what kinds of...

Aven: Technology.

Laura: Oh, exactly, exactly, or a religious element, that they would or wouldn't use a particular ingredient, or a particular ingredient at a certain time of year.  I mean, there is so much that's contained on a plate, that we can say, yes, it's all bread, but the meanings and how meanings shift, or are applied can differ so radically.  And, yes, absolutely, illustrate historical context or differences, or just elements of exchange that are all folded into either one dish, one recipe, etc.  It is just so fascinating.

Aven: One of the questions we always ask people when they come on the podcast, is about unexpected connections in their life, or connections and how they see it important, but I'm not going to ask you now, because you made that very clear!

Laura: [Laughing]

Aven: Your stories are perfect illustration of that.  But, I think that what you were saying is completely right.  I mean, food itself, is an example of that, of the connectivity of everything, where you can look at anything that we eat or drink in isolation and just talk about it as purely culinary because it doesn't work.  You have to think about the economics, or the geography, or the history....

Mark: The symbolism.

Aven: The symbolism.

Mark:  Ritual, food as ritual.

Aven: Community.

Mark: Community and, yeah.

Aven:  National identity and ethnic identity, and language, and all of those things come in.  It doesn't matter how basic or exotic or trivial the piece of food or drink is.

Laura: Absolutely, I mean, there is something always built into what goes onto your plate.  I mean, nothing can just be without meaning, or context, or another layer of something.  Which, again, is why I find food so fascinating, because it's never just food.  There's something always more to it, to how it ended up on your plate or why you are or even aren't eating or drinking it.

Aven: Exactly!  Even when there is an absence of food, that is meaningful.

Laura: Exactly!

Aven: So, you've partly already answered this question too, but let's, to move into discussing recipes more specifically, you started by asking some of your students then, or suggesting to your students, that they could use these historical recipes to cook from.  Had you done much historical cooking before that?  Had you cooked from, you know, older recipes before that point?

Laura: I'm trying to think of the timeline for it, but I think it was right around the same time.  I've loved cooking for years, and so had been experimenting with different recipes, but it had never been from a historical angle though, I wanna say, but right around that time, I think it was the University of Redding, was holding an online, you know, like, one of those giant MOOCs, the massive open online courses, and I want to say, I'm probably going to get the name wrong, but it was something called, "Feasting in the Elizabethan Court".  It was an entire online course where you watched videos that were filmed at Hampton Court Palace, some of the other royal residences and things like that, that were instructed to, you know, show you how food was both prepared and also the social economic role of food, particularly at the royal level, at that point in time. One of the major components of it was to do at home was, here were some Tudor Elizabethan recipes.  Not only were they, you know, for people who were unfamiliar with that era of recipes, you know, there was very little in terms of quantities or measurements, but, of course, as well, you're not dealing with modern ovens or stoves, things like that, how would you prepare...and, of course, the combination of ingredients, in and of themselves, would be very unusual probably to modern pallets. So, I remember one of the first ones they asked us to make was, I think was a tart of peas?  So, it was a pastry, I'd say, like, and open faced pie situation, with, you know, regular kind of peas, English peas, but it was with grape must and sugar as well. And, you kinda just baked this thing, and, of course, there were no measurements for the pastry, and I'm not an experienced pastry chef, and the peas just had to be put with "grape must”, which I didn't have, so I was using, just, Welch’s Grape Juice.  It was an eye opening experience into actually applying these recipes, not just reading them as texts, seeing them, obviously, as a product of historical context and whatnot, but actually trying to make these in my own oven or on the stove and things like that.  Tasting this very unusual combination, to us at least, of peas and, well, grape juices....

Aven: Sweetness…

Laura: Yes, exactly. I was hooked, because, I thought, again, "Here we are."  Of, being able to take this historical document, which so often, you either see as a photo copy, or if you're very lucky in a manuscript, maybe digitized, but it is this thing on the page, but recipes have that ability to go and, with some modification obviously, there is an ability to bring them to life in a way, and I found it fascinating that I was there when, of course, you could compare to everyone else's pea tartlet thing, and there were about a thousand and one variations on it.  I was hooked.  So, after that, we started, because my husband brews beer, I got him to try and make Sumerian beer which...

Aven: Yes!

Mark: [Chuckling]

Laura: I can not necessarily recommend as a taste experience, as a historical experiment absolutely, but it was, again, another fascinating way of, my husband had been brewing beer, so he knew the standards of, "This is how beer is made," and then I presented him with this recipe where you basically have to make Sumerian bread, and then that bread gets mashed up, in combination with some honey and dates, and so it ends up being this mead/wine/beer concoction, and ends up being a science experiment as well because of these elements of brewing, plus the ingredients.  So, after that, every time we find a recipe, I have to convince my husband that he will try and at least enjoy this.  We've had about a seventy-five percent success rate of enjoying the recipe, but it's always been really fun to at least attempt the recipe, maybe not finished results, but...

Aven: Process and product are two different parts of the fun.

Laura: Exactly!  Exactly! I keep trying to emphasize the process rather than the product, although we've had some surprisingly delicious things.  You know, there's always the thing we think, "Well, maybe we won't finish this particular dish, we'll just..."

Aven: Stay clear of that one, an interesting experiment, but a noble failure, yeah?

Laura: Exactly!  Exactly! Many noble failures.

Aven: Well, we came to, sort of, historical cooking in some ways the same way, that is through scholarly/academic interests in the beginning, and through a background of both just liking to cook, but we started when we were grad students.

Mark: And there was one particular book for me anyways that really kicked it off, "Pleyn Delit" by Constance Hieatt, Brenda Hosington, and Sharon Butler who were University of Toronto scholars.

Laura: Oh really?

Mark: Yeah, and, you know, I was there, and we had this book, and we just started experimenting cooking these. They do a lot of the work of translating to this, sort of, modern recipe, you know, how to make these in an oven.  They supply quantities and modern techniques and that sort of thing to make it work.

Aven: But they do include a transcription of the original.

Mark: Yeah, so you can read the original recipe and then try it for yourself.

Laura: And then they give you their updating, and they're mostly from English and French cookbooks, I think?

Aven: Yeah, we just started cooking them because it was interesting, and because Mark was doing his degree in medieval studies at the Center For Medieval Studies in Toronto, and we were surprised, among other things, to find out how tasty a lot of them were.  Now, they do, as Mark said, they do the job also of giving you potential substitutions of some of the things that...

Mark: Hard to find.

Aven: Are hard to find, or that we technically found that are poison now, or things like that!

Mark: They do also, though, tell you some sources for tracking down unusual spices.

Aven: And this was back, I don't want to say, pre-internet days, but it was the early days of the internet.  We're very old!  It was in, like, 99', probably, just before 2000.  So they had in the back these mail order, and the first spices, because we wanted to buy some of the spices that you just could not possibly get, we mail ordered from this place in the states that is since online, and now you can order, of course, things online, but at the time we had to do the mail order, and we still have some of the spices from that because you don't go through them that fast.  I'm sure they're not that good anymore, like mastic  and grains of paradise.  Mastic is a type of resin...

Mark: It's a resin, yeah.

Aven: From a tree.  You use it ground up.  Grains of Paradise are these, sort of pepper-like things, but they're not, and a bunch of other stuff...

Mark: Long pepper.

Aven: Long pepper, that's right.

Laura: Wow, it's amazing to watch the trends of spices, or herbs and things like that, things that would have been a staple in a pantry four hundred years we have to mail order.

Aven: Yeah!  When we did the same thing, we ordered from...we were so proactive and energetic in those days weren't we? Looking back it seems very hard work we did.  We were living in a house in downtown Toronto, and we ordered from a local herb place, Richtors Herbs, I'll give them a shoutout because they're an amazing herb emporium in southern Ontario, that we ordered, again, all these strange herbs and grew them in our garden so that we could have them for cooking. Because, you don't use them anymore!

Laura: Yeah!

Aven: They dropped out...you can't buy them at a grocery store and you can buy them dried.  And, anyway, you want them fresh half the time so, the number of things, and we just recently...

Mark: Started doing that again.

Aven: After a long hiatus, caused by jobs and children and tiredness, we picked up the books again last summer really, and I've ordered rue and pennyroyal and calamint and dittany, vervaine and grew them on our porch.  And, you know, it's fun, but it shows you the distinctions or differences, as you say, things have become a lot more homogenized, there are certain herbs you can buy in the store, and that's it.

Laura:  Yes.  It was fascinating, because I was listening to the BBC Food Program podcast, and they were talking about, they were talking a woman, and I wish I could remember her name, but she's known as, basically, the "Herbal Queen" of England.  The reintroduction, and I hadn't realized this was so recent, of fresh herbs in, kind of, the English pantry, that up until the 60's and 70's, you know, you would maybe buy dried basil or maybe dried parsley, but the idea of using fresh cilantro/coriander or even fresh parsley or basil or rosemary, things like that, had kind of fallen by the wayside for a lot of British chefs or British home cooks, and this one woman who kind of started as a wholesale trader to places like Fortnum and Mason  and whatnot had really needed to sell the idea of using herbs again in the British pantry. And, now, of course, people like Nigella Lawson  and Jamie Oliver, I mean, they were all about fresh herbs and you take this and whack it in, and now it’s back with a vengeance, but I thought it was so fascinating that even over the last, like, thirty years that there has been a transformation of bringing just these, what we would might consider basic herbs, back to the home cook, and using them again fresh in one's cooking.

Aven: I wouldn't say, in fact, that that was restricted to UK cooking.  I think that was probably true in North America to a very large extent as well, even with some of the dried stuff, but certainly with fresh stuff.  It's a real change!

Laura: Yeah, she was, she was talking about just the diversity of herbs that she has in her back garden, which, of course, you know, she has eighty kinds mint and things like that, and how still, that even with, you know, when I go to my Loblaws or my metro, there is a nice fresh herb section, which I now know to be very appreciative of, that even still, it's such a small proportion of the vast range of the kinds of, you know, herbs or plants in general, that people have been putting in cooking for thousands of years.

Aven: Yeah.

Laura:  And, now I want to go, and now that you've told me that, did you say it was Richtors Herbs?

Aven: Richtors.  Richtors Herbs.  Go online and you look, you will be lost for days!  You will want....you will be very happy about that.

Laura: I was just looking at my condo balcony and thinking we needed a few more herbs in our little, tiny condo balcony.

Aven: Oh yeah, the varieties they have of every, and, that's as you say, like, when we go to the store I can buy basil, sure, there's one kind of basil.  Richtors probably doesn't have everything there is, but has probably forty types of basil on its list, so yeah.  And, just to add, I won't, not to belabor the point, but there is one story that I have to tell, which is when we were living in New Brunswick, just a few years ago...

Mark: Oh yes.

Aven: Ten years ago now, the local grocery store in Sackville, New Brunswick, very little, small town, but a university town, I got a tip from one of the faculty members when we were there, he said, "If you want parsley," he said, "they don't sell fresh parsley.  But, if you go to the counter, to the deli counter or the fish counter, and say, 'Do you have any parsley,' they'll go to the back, and bring you out a bunch, and they'll give it to you for free."  Because, they keep it to decorate the cases...

Laura: Oh...of course...

Aven: As a decorative green...

Mark: But people don't cook with it.

Aven: but they don't sell it, and nobody here buys it, so they'll give it to you for free.  Sure enough, I went, and I looked, and it was not out, there were no herbs on sale, and I went to the back, and I said, "Do you have any fresh parsley?" And they said, "Oh yeah," and gave me a bunch of it, wrapped it in a paper towel, handed it to me, and I wasn't charged for it.

Laura:  I love this idea that, "Oh, we were just using it to decorate, not to eat at all! Just for decoration."

Aven: Well, to be fair to the people of Sackville, it's possible that people grew it in their homes and gardens and stuff, of course, it was a very rural area, but I think in general, most people would just never think to use it.

Laura: Right.

Aven:  That's now, essentially.

Laura: Right, right, exactly, very reasonable.

Aven: It's small-time Canada, yeah.

Laura: Wow.  I was wondering if you had any memories of, well I was going to say noble failures, but maybe noble successes from historical cooking?

Aven: Well, we sort of probably have both.  I think one of our absolute favorite successes is a lamb dish...

Mark: Oh yes.

Aven: Which is in that "Plain Delight" cookbook.  It's clearly a North African, you know, it must have come from the Spanish area.

Mark: It has yogurt and preserved lemon.

Aven: Yeah, yogurt and preserved lemon....

Mark: The other, sort of, I think, success that was rescued from the jaws of defeat was, we brewed mead, and it was not drinkable for a long time, but it really needed to be aged, like, a decade.

Aven:  Yeah, when he says not drinkable for a long time, he means....

Laura: A decade!

Aven:  We carried it from house to house as we moved three times in four years...

Laura: Oh my!

Aven: And finally, when it got to this house we opened it....it really was a decade wasn't it?

Mark: Yeah, it was.

Aven: It was a decade old.  We'd been opening a bottle from time to time, and I consistently hated it.  Mark kept saying, "No, it's not that bad." And then we opened it after a decade, and it was....

Mark:  Good.

Laura:  It was delicious?  Ohhhh.

Aven: Not totally sold on delicious, but it was good.  Mark really liked...

Mark: I really liked it, yeah!

Aven: I, uh, I liked it quite a bit!

Laura:  Maybe that's a problem with our Sumerian beer, it just hasn't aged enough. Maybe I should just leave it in the back of our fridge for another, maybe, decade or so.  Maybe it'll be phenomenal.

Aven: Though, what I gather from those ancient beers is that they were not made to be aged, they were made to be drunk fresh.

Laura: I know...

Aven: I'm not even sure the mead was ever really meant to be aged, but, it did definitely change over time.  One of the other great dishes that we really, really enjoy is Paris Pies, and it's basically a meat pie, you know, in a pastry, except the meat filling has ground meat of various types: pork, veal, beef.  It has also minced dates and currents in it, and ginger, sugar, and salt, and then they say "Optional: pinches of ground pepper or cubebs", that's another one of those ones we ordered, "and or mace or ground clove."  You cook that, and then, you know, cool it, and add it to the pastry and cook it as one big pie or a small pies.  Again, it's just a meat pie, but it's really good.

Laura: That spice blend adding a little bit of the flavors.

Aven: With the fruit too!  Yeah.

Laura: Of course, yes the fruits!

Aven: And that reminds us, of course, of things like mince meat...

Mark: Mince meat, yeah.

Aven: Which used to have meat in it, and doesn't anymore, but comes from that combination of fruit and meat.

Mark: And I like those sweet spices.

Aven: With the meat.  I think that is one of the great things about going back and looking at these recipes is both that you see those good recipes, but, like you were saying Laura, you end up realizing how you can change your own cooking to take advantage of combinations that you didn't think of that have fallen out of favor, or that are from a different place, or....A lot of these recipes, I think, probably, use the spices, yes, because they taste good, but, because, of course, it was a way of showing conspicuous consumption and showing off, so you can add spices to everything.  Savory, sweet, doesn't matter!

Laura: Yes, yes.

Aven: Gotta find a way to use it!  And, also, for medicinal reasons, as one of the things that Mark will be talking about in the video that is going to be coming out is the overlap of food and medicine, and so sometimes these spices are added because they're thought of as medicinal.

Mark: And thinking about the humors balancing the humors.

Aven: Yeah, so you'd add them...

Mark: The right spices.

Aven: ...these hot spices, for instance, or warm spices to food that you were going to serve in the winter so that you'd medicinally warm people up and ward off illnesses and things.

Laura: Yes...

Aven: So the purposes may not have always have been purely culinary, but they can instruct us in the way we cook.

Laura:  Absolutely, and I think it's something that I've only started realizing has, perhaps, I don't want to say, has never gone away, but seems to be experiencing a resurgence even in the last, maybe, ten to fifteen years of again looking at food as, well, obviously, nutritious, but this element of a lifestyle that can either enhance or detract from a particular element of your health.  You know, with cold press juice, things like that, that there seems to be a new push again for this integration of food or food products into medicine or into this element of quote-unquote "healthy lifestyle".

Aven: The idea of super foods, I think....

Laura: Exactly!

Aven: Is part of that, the idea that, "Oh, well, if you drink pomegranate juice it will ward off these six diseases and it will fix these seven conditions," and, you know, it's not just "Oh its healthy because everyone needs to eat fruit," say, or "it has 'X' vitamin," no, but there is particular medicinal quality to this.  So you eat kale for this reason or, you know, salmon will do this, and they have this particular problem that it is going to solve for you, medicinally.

Laura: Precisely, I think, you know, that I have seen about three thousands hair ads saying, you know, "Avocados, you have to have avocados!"  It seems that you either have to eat them, or you can smash them on  your head....

Aven: Yup!

Aven and Mark: [Laughs]

Laura: That they will improve, some sort of thing with your hair, it always seems to be a positive thing.  So, absolutely.

Aven: There's a hair product out there that talks about nutrition for your hair.

Laura: Yes, yes!

Aven: And it does not mean eat these things, it means put it on your hair, and somehow your hair....the dead cells of your hair, let us just all remember that, will absorb...

Mark: Well, maybe it's the follicles?

Aven: [Laughing] I don't think so...will absorb the food, the nutritious qualities of this particular hair product that has food in it.

Laura: Exactly!

Aven: That has, what we would consider, edible products in it.

Laura:  Yes!  So there's always that very blurred line between like, what, if this is food, but also has a very particular purpose or restorative quality?  Quote-unquote.

Aven:  Yeah.  The other type of cooking that we've gone to is also ancient food, just to round off that discussion.  Because I do Roman and Greek things, we've also got a number of books on ancient cookery, and so we've done that, and that can be even that much more complicated because we are battling not only different ingredients and different thoughts about food, but problems with translation of the terminology because we don't know exactly what species or what plant something is referring to.  So, there's a lot of guesswork and we only have a very small handful of recipes compared to what we have from the medieval period.  So, that can be fun too, but it can be a little frustrating because of how far you have to go in terms of trying to reach for any kind of authenticity with the ingredients.

Laura: Can I ask you a question about that?  Because, I was actually just thinking about it, because I know a lot of times, particularly with Roman cooking, we have a Apicius, and that's kind of the "big guy" because he's been translated a bunch of times and he kind of stands out of the Roman cookbook, I mean, for better or for worse, but I was wondering, I just haven't encountered it, is there a similar source that is usually upon for Greek cooking?  Or ancient Greek or classical Greek cooking?

Aven: Well, not as direct as Apicius, so, not somebody who is sort of "Here's a cookbook!"

Laura: Right, ok....

Aven: But, I have a book that was given to me, in an online Twitter Santa exchange by an anonymous gifter, well I found out who it was afterwards, but it's published by the British Museum and it's called "The Classical Cookbook" and is actually one of the reasons we did get back to cooking, was because I was given this two Christmases ago, and I thought, "Oh, I have to start cooking from it."  It talks about where the Greek ones come from, and she draws a lot of inferences, so she goes to the Odyssey's description of food and feasts and tries to explain what some things would be, so there's a lot of guess work.  There's a document from 400 BC called the "The Banquet of Philoxenes” which is a poetry, but describes a literary dinner party, so it sort of describes everything in detail.  It has lines like, "A casserole with noble eel with a look of the conjurer about him; honey glazed shrimps; squid sprinkled with sea salt; baby birds in flakey pastry and a baked tuna." So, there's a lot of, again, expansion from that, "Sweet pastry shells; crispy flapjacks; toasted sesame cakes drenched in honey sauce; cheesecake made with milk and honey; a sweet that was baked like a pie."  So, those aren't recipes...

Laura: But dishes at least.

Aven: Back to that, are they recipes, but they're descriptions of enough ingredients that you can give some ideas of what you would do with them and how they were cooked, and so she goes with that.

Laura: Ok, ok....

Aven:  But there is not really the same instruction manual that we have with the Apicius, so she's had to draw from a number of other literary sources that just mention these things.  There's also Athenaeus and Archistratus and there are fragments from papyri that have some cookbooks, so there's no, sort of, one go to source for Greek cookery the same way, but there's a number of scattered references and a few actual recipes that you can draw from.

Laura: Ok.

Aven:  But it is much more complicated to find than the Apicius.

Laura: Oh, ok, yes, it is nice at least that we have something resembling, it is really a cookbook.

Aven: Resembling, yes.

Laura: Yes.  I was just wondering, because I haven't found anything, let's say, the Greek equivalent of Apicius so I was wondering if there was a source that people were relying on more than another.  It seems like it's a combination of, kind of, epic, plus...

Aven: Yeah.

Laura: Papyrus sources and things like that.

Aven: Yeah, so I think that's one of the reason that you don’t, well, there are a couple of reasons, but one of the reasons you don't hear as much about recreations of Greek food, is we don't have the same kind of, you know, we have Cato and Apicius for Roman food, and between them you can do quite a lot of, you know, pretty close approximations of what they did, and then we have things like Pompey that give us actual physical remains, and lots of wall paintings, and so the sources are much richer for giving us that kind of information for Rome than they have for Greece.  So you have to do a lot more guesswork with the Greek stuff.

Mark: Now, what I'm curious about, is if there are any modern cooks recreating Roman cookery who have tried to do door mice.

Aven: I bet you there are.

Mark: Because where do you source the door mice from?

Laura: [Laughing]

Aven: Well that is an issue!

Laura:  Well, you know there are, like, you can order anything online, right?

Aven and Mark: [Laughs]

Laura: Because...

Aven: Google it!

Laura: Exactly! Well, you know, there was that, this just shows how many podcasts I've listened to, but there was that fantastic, I think it was a "Planet Money" episode, where they cooked, I think it was a 16th Century recipe of a peacock?

Aven: Yes, yes, I remember that, yes.

Laura: Yes, and so I want to say that, whatever meat source they used there, where you can buy a peacock you might be able to buy a door mouse.

Aven:  Mhmm.  They used to raise them in pottery jars, so if you can buy one door mouse Mark...

Laura: Exactly, exactly.

Aven: It wouldn't be very long before you could have enough door mice.

Laura:  A fleet of door mice, whatever the collective noun.

Aven: Sorry, let me put that better, TWO door mice.  You have to buy two door mice.

Mark: [Laughing] Two, yes!

Aven: Then you can have enough for a feast in a few, a few months probably.

Laura: Yes, yes!

Aven:  So, actually, that question about the Greek sources, though, I think is a good segue into what I do want to, sort of, talk about before we finish, which is that question that we started with, and we've circled around it already, but the question that the Virtual Conversation was posing, "What is a recipe?"

Laura:  Hmmm....

Aven:  How do we define it?  I don't think we need to come to any final conclusion about it. The three of us will rule on it!

All: [Laughing]

Laura: That's it, the end of discussion.  We have decided.

Aven:  Conversation over!

Laura: Exactly!

Aven, No, but one of the things about, and you've already brought this up, about looking at historical recipes, is it makes you realize that the genre is not fixed.  Recipes from the Elizabethan period, recipes from the Roman period, don’t' look the same from, like, Canadian Living magazine now.

Laura: Right.

Aven: So, as a genre, what defines it, do you think?

Laura: [Sigh]  I think, you know, from already our wide discussions of it, I was mulling this over in my mind, and something that just seems to at least to pop out as far as how would I distinguish between, as you were saying, in the epics of a description of, like a tart or something that was enjoyed at this specific feast, you know, Odysseus enjoyed X,Y, and Z.   I think that, for me, I'm inclined to think of a recipe as something that, when written down, or transcribed in any way, there's an authorial intention to be replicableble, and I'm going to try and say that again, replicable.  There we are!

Aven and Mark: [Laughing]

Aven: I think that's a really good definition, or element of a definition.  You're right, because that gets around one of the tricky questions, or many of the tricky questions, one of which is, is a recipe a list of ingredients or a list of instructions, or does it have to have both?  I can immediately think of...

Mark: Exceptions, yeah.

Aven: Counter examples of either, right?

Laura: Right, right.

Aven: Like, there are recipes that are only instructions and that really don't' give you quantities certainly, but even may not even give you, really, much guidance on what the ingredients are.

Laura: Right.

Aven: But then there are other recipes that are just lists of ingredients, and don't give you instructions on what to do with them.  Because they think....or very, very little.  But, if it's about, "Here's something that is intended to give you a way of replicating the end product..."

Laura: Exactly.  I mean, that's at least the starting point in my head because, as exactly you were saying, there's so much cultural knowledge or assumption of knowledge often [fake laughs] "baked in" to recipes.

Aven and Mark: [Laughs]

Laura: That's right. I'll never forgive myself, okay, but, I mean, that's the only thing that I think is a thread that I think is malleable enough to be applicable to these very, very distinct, I can't even call them genres, so we'll put recipes as, well a question mark genre, but let's say, kind of a section of, let's say information communication text, what have you.   That there is at least from the person who is writing it or painting it or however they were transcribing it, there was the intent that whoever is accessing this information will go away and be able to recreate this tart, or this lamb dish, or this beer.  Perhaps...

Aven: Or, I might even expand it slightly from that, that the intention on the authorial part is to give someone a means to replicate the desired effect even?

Laura: Ah, yes!

Aven: Because I think a lot of recipes are not, "Here's how to make this exact tart."  But, you know, the recipe might be a tart for celebration, say, or a tart for a fast day.  And what they're going to give you is a set of instructions or some kind of information that will allow you to produce a tart for a fast day...

Laura: Absolutely.

Aven: That doesn't have meat and doesn't have this and doesn't have that in it, because I'm thinking of the many, many recipes that say, you know, "Take this kind of meat, or that kind of meat, and add this or don't add this and add these greens or add some of whatever greens you have on hand," or, you know, whatever.  So, very clearly, the intention is not that you're always going to come up with the same exact result.

Mark: But then you'll produce something appropriate.

Aven: That you're produce the result that is for this health benefit, or has, can be served at this occasion, or will do this in your meal...

Laura: Yeah.

Aven:  Will do the right thing in your meal.

Laura: Right, and I think that's a much better way of looking at it, because I think that if we were only to look at, even, let's say, the latter 20th century in a very limited context, I think there was this, and, you know, getting back to that, you know, pea tart that I was doing with the giant MOOC, that there as this false, I don't even want to say assumption, but there was this element of the scientific nature that recipes could embody, that if you followed this exact teaspoon plus this exact cup of whatever plus this exact liter of whatever, I don't even know what this recipe is making, but let's just go with it.  That, no matter where you are, who you are, that it will always come out the exact same way, and I think that was a very, very minor, tiny blimp in the history of recipes, because I think that you're absolutely right that for so long, it wasn't about your pea tartlet must look exactly like my pea tartlet, we're doing a much broader thing here in saying, "Well, we are making a tart for a feast," or, "We are making a tart to improve circulation," for example.  That even drawing in that medicinal element that we were talking about before.

Aven: And that's not to say that some recipes don't want you to get an exact result, I mean...

Laura: Oh, yes.

Aven: You get it from some medieval ones or whatever, certainly some of them may have a very precise result, but I don't think it's integral to the idea of a recipe, that you'll be trying to replicate exactly the result....

Laura: Absolutely.

Aven: In the way that we tend to now. You're quite right, now there's a success and a failure for a recipe.  If you do the recipe right, it will produce only this one result.

Laura: Exactly that.  Your...

Aven: That's what I think of recipes now.

Laura: Your dish must look like the picture!

Aven: And if it doesn't, you've done something wrong, or the recipe failed.

Laura: Exactly, exactly.

Aven: And the one last question that I had, just because it came up, just before we were starting, it suddenly occurred to me to think, because somebody on Twitter, in the conversation brought this idea up: does a recipe have to be written down? Is there an element of literacy?  Or, to put it a different way, what is an oral recipe?  Is it a recipe or not?

Laura: Oh my, that is a very interesting question.  I mean, from an oral perspective, I'd be inclined to say that at the very stereotypical, you know, your grandmother teaching you how to make cookies or something like that, from something that has not been written down, if ever, for the last century or something like that, I mean, saying, "You take a pinch of this, and a can full of that," or something like that, I would include because I think that, as a recipe, because I think it adheres, sticking with our replicable definition...

Aven: Yeah.

Laura: That that is!  I mean, you're learning to make chocolate chip cookies or stew or something like that, so it is a replication, again, of someone's idea of a dish.  Hmm, I don't know, what do you think?

Mark: I would agree with you, that, in the same way that we can talk about oral literature, I think it's, you know, the genre can exist apart from the medium...

Aven: Right.

Mark: In a sense the idea is, if we think of it in, sort of meme terms, right, it's the sort of, it's an idea, that the recipe itself is a replicable idea, whether that's passed down through an oral tradition or through a literary medium, I think it still counts as a recipe in a sense.

Aven: Yeah, because, I think if it doesn't, then you need to figure out what it is that allows foods to have a traditional form.

Laura: Yes.

Aven: Because, you know, so many, when we think....the first thing we think of, almost, when you think of traditional, is food.  I mean, there's other stuff too!  But it's a major element of what we consider. Traditional cultures have traditional foods. Traditional societies have traditional foods. And they don't just have the ingredient, but they have a way of cooking it.  And there is some way in which those things are replicated in each generation successively.  Successive cooks know how to cook the thing in the same way.  If you think of it, Italy and its myriad of very specific ways of making certain sauces that are regionally specific, and you have to know your way from your town of making that thing, or you don't belong there.  Essentially!

Laura: Yeah, oh yeah!

Aven: But that means that there has to have been a continuity, of course it will have been changed, but there has to have been a continuity, and if you don't have something you can call a recipe, then what is it?

Laura: Yes!

Aven: Do we just say it's tradition?  And then what distinguishes it?  Because, there has to have been somebody, you know, all the way through, there has to have been at least a somewhat conscience desire to pass on a particular form of something to the next person.

Laura: Absolutely. I think, you know, that it plays on an element of experiential knowledge, of that, you experience a dish, or you experience making a dish, and that knowledge that you've acquired, both through tasting and/or making, you can then pass down orally or pass along orally to someone else, either you're standing over them watching them stir the polenta, saying, "No no, you're gonna have to do that about a hundred more times."  Or, another method that I think, I mean, fundamentally I think a recipe is conveying this experience of either making or experiencing some way this dish, and already we're getting quite blurred, because I'm thinking well, yeah, alright, food, drink, medicine, everything, but...

Aven: Well, yeah, I was just gonna say, in fact, logically, then if we say that, and we say, "Ok then that cal be an oral and that can be experiential," because maybe, maybe it's not even oral, maybe you literally watch somebody do it...

Laura: Right, right?

Aven: But you don't take part in it, but they don't never give you even a verbal instruction...

Mark: You just sort of watch and learn, yeah.

Aven: You just watch what they do and you watch and learn.  As soon as we've expanded it to that, now we're saying a recipe isn't even necessarily verbal.

Laura: Yes!

Aven: And, really what's the difference then between that and learning a craft, any craft?  You know, a potter, making a pot, and having an apprentice learn how to make a pot, because obviously they're trying to replicate the same result.

Laura: Absolutely.

Aven: And, they're being instructed on it.  And that's not to say that I think that undermines the definition of the recipe, I think what it does though is that it tells us, can we use the word "recipe" to describe things that aren't food?

Laura: Yes.

Aven:  And that's already been a discussion point in this conversation...

Mark: Uh-huh.

Aven:  I know, I mean, some of the things that are often brought up are things like: knitting patterns, you know, is a knitting pattern a recipe?  By our description, of, that it's something where somebody has an intention to communicate to someone else so that they can replicate the result, and in a knitting pattern absolutely a recipe.

Laura: Wow, yeah.  I mean, I absolutely see them along the same spectrum, and I think there is that element again, focusing back on the replication element, and that can be quite broad in an of itself.

Aven: Because there's going to be replication with variation of course, and there's always room for the individual cook and the individual maker to change.

Laura: Exactly.

Aven: But then they've changed the recipe too.

Laura:  True, true.

Aven: The original recipe doesn't disappear, because the next cook makes it differently.

Laura: Exactly.

Aven:  And that, maybe is also something about there has to be some sort of, I don't know if the definition needs to involve some sort of permanence or lasting element?  That would then step us back from purely non-verbal or even verbal.  You know, does a recipe have to exist past the moment of transmission.

Laura:  Right, right.  I think that is a really good point, because then you can then move from, well there was the original authorial intent of replicating this, this thing.  But, does that necessarily mean that whoever comes upon it, hears it, reads it, whatever, just because they might use it and produce a different result, that doesn't necessarily disqualify the original...

Aven: As a recipe.

Laura:  Exactly, exactly.  Interesting.  Oh man, semantics!  Ok!

All: [Laugh]

Aven:  Well, we have to bring it back to linguistics somehow on this podcast [laughing].

Laura: Of course, I'm really going to go away and think about this for about four hours.  Like, "Is this a recipe?"

Aven: "IS this a recipe?  I don't know, is that a recipe?"

Mark:  And we can get into the whole question of what authorial intention matter in a sense.

Aven:  But I think it's possible to define a genre by authorial intention.  That is distinct from saying, "How does it function in the world?"

Mark:  "In the world," yeah.

Aven:  But a genre is created by authorial intention, I would suggest, as well as by end result.  I mean, I think, that's not the same as saying, "What is the meaning of the text?"

Laura: Right?

Aven:  "What is the meaning of a recipe?"  Of course, convey...

Mark: The conveying can be quite different.

Aven:  Right, I mean, all the stuff we were talking about the role of food.  All of that is contained in a recipe when the writer writes it down, they aren't trying to convey elements of their social class, their economic position, the technology of the time, and all of that.

Mark: Because, of course...

Aven:  That's still in the meaning.

Mark:  The purpose for the person going to the recipe can vary widely.  You can be going to it for a lot of different reasons.

Laura:  Yeah.

Aven:  That will depend also on your pos...you know, you'll go to a recipe for inspiration or for something to follow literally down to the detail, depending on your level of cooking ability for instance.

Laura:  Yeah.

Mark:  There's a technical point of the preparation technique, you know.  How long, how long do I need to let it cook for it to be tender?  But I'm going to use different flavoring.

Laura: Exactly, exactly.  Yeah, I mean, it's just so fascinating because you can approach this one thing if we're going to call it "The One Recipe" from so many different angles, I'm just using the example, for examples, like, Julia Childs beef bourguignon, right, of, there's so much packed into how, and why, and when, and the context in which Julia Child wrote one recipe for beef bourguignon...

Aven: Yes.

Laura:  But then billions of people who have gone to Julia Childs’ beef bourguignon have ranged from anywhere from "I'm going to make a shrimp bourguignon," to, "I'm going to make it as part of a blog and eventual movie series...

Aven: [Laughing] Yes!

Laura: "Illustrating my transformation as a cook," or something like that!  Right? I mean, so there's so much, so many different angles to approach both Julia Childs writing this thing down and her own experience of cooking it and what have her, and coming to that one recipe, and then the transmission of that to the billion and one chefs who then go and for many different reasons use it, adapt it, change it, that don't at all, perhaps, relate to or look anything like Julia Childs original.

Aven:  Yeah.

Laura:  If there even was an original, I mean, that's a whole different question.

Aven:  Well, absolutely.  And then you get into things like, when Apicius wrote his cookbook, there is quite a lot of discussion among classicists about whether he ever thought anybody would ever cook those recipes.

Laura:  Right, exactly!

Aven:  That is, was he in fact writing a recipe?  Or was he writing....there's a lot of purposes.  He could be writing a critique, or demonstrate the levels of excess and, gourmandizing of his period, or was he just trying to show off what he knew about food because it is a way of showing his status?  Or, was it a literary and/or academic, scholarly exercise?  You know, lots of questions about it because we don't actually know.  We can't talk to Apicius, we still don't really know his intent.  And, of course, they are cook-with-able, that is, you can produce food from his recipes, so they're not completely fantastic, but that doesn't mean he was doing the equivalent of somebody trying to write The Joy of Cooking".

Laura:  Right, exactly.  I mean, you even see these today, of, like, "Game of Thrones" cookbooks, or...

Aven and Mark:  Yeah.

Laura: Cookbooks kind of taking and bending the genre a bit of are these really cookbooks like "The Joy of Cooking" or are these, kind of humor pieces, things like that?

Aven:  The Terry Prachet book, "Nanny Ogg’s Cookbook" for instance.

Laura:  Ah!  Yes!  Yes!

Aven:  You know, it has some things in it that could count as recipes and probably would taste fine, and it has things in it that are nothing to do actually trying to produce food, and it's all part of world building and narrative and entertainment value and things like that.

Laura:  Ah, exactly.

Aven:  Recipes can be a lot of different things.

Mark:  And you could probably say that about a lot of contemporary foodie magazines, is that, yeah, maybe...

Aven:  Some people could cook from them.

Mark:  Some people do cook from them, but a lot of readers, and I think that magazine producers know this, just get them to experience the reading of it.

Aven:  And the imaging...

Laura: Yes!

Mark: The imagination of it, yeah.

Laura:  The lifestyle that's portrayed, yeah.

Mark: Exactly.

Aven: And there you could get back to my point that a recipe could be intended for you to reproduce the effect, not the....

Mark:  Not the particular.

Aven:  Not the thing.  So, that is, you could write the recipe, knowing that nobody's going to ever make the food, but the effect you're trying to produce is a particular effect that you want to reproduce in various people.

Laura:  Right.

Aven: An it has to do with the food, but, it does start to push at the boundaries at what you'd call a recipe...

Laura:  Yes.

Aven:  At that point.  Because, you're getting a little metaphysical.

Mark:  Yeah.

Laura:  Yeah, absolutely.  The emotion that is produced or the sensation...

Aven:  Sense of belonging and a community!

Laura: Yes!

Aven:  Or the sense of literary knowledge, or the sense of class participation.

Laura:  Exactly.  Absolutely, oh my!  See, we started with such an, I was, oh my god.  This is my one sentence definition and this is gonna work.  And now, we've just pulled it in so many directions...

Aven:  I know!

Laura: But it's absolutely true though, that all these things we call recipes, but what are their....what are the intents behind them?

Aven:  This gets into that semantic, or linguistic, that there is no definition for a recipe.  What there is, is a cluster of meanings, and some things are peripheral, and some things are central.  So, some things, you could say, "Well, obviously, everybody agrees this is a recipe," and there are other things that share elements with the core recipe, but share other elements with it.  So, it's a cloud, of definitional possibility...

Laura:  Yes.

Aven:  And things have a center are closer to the center or closer to the periphery, but there's no black and white between what is a recipe and what is not a recipe.

Laura:  Yeah, I like that idea, much more than a spectrum; I like the idea of the cloud.  I think that that encompasses much more of what we've been talking about, and the humor recipes, the lifestyle recipes, the medicinal...

Aven:  It's not that there's two poles between which you can move...

Laura:  Exactly.

Aven:  But there's lots of different axes on which you can be closer or further from, sort of, the most essential recipe-ness of something.

Laura:  Exactly.

Mark:  And, of course, it also becomes a metaphor.  So, we do talk about a recipe for a health life...

Aven:  Or a recipe for success...

Mark:  Or a recipe for success.

Laura:  Or a recipe for disaster...

Mark:  Or a recipe for disaster.

All: [Laughing]

Laura: Add a mythic element of it there!

Aven: Yeah, yeah...Alright, I think we should probably wrap up before we get ourselves so metaphysical that we can never find our way back to the food.

Laura:  Lost in the semantic cloud somewhere!

Aven:  But this has been absolutely fascinating, and so much fun to talk to you Laura.

Mark:  Yes, absolutely.

Laura:  Yes!  It's been lovely.  I was just listening to your King Arthur episode and now I want to go and watch, because I'm also on the fence about Guy Richie, so I'm intrigued about what he's going to do with King Arthur.

Aven:  Well, he could use your viewership, I think.

Laura and Mark:  [Laughter]

Aven:  [Laughing] It's not been a terribly great success, unfortunately!

Laura:  Yeah, I've heard that, you know!  There may not be the inevitable sequel!

Aven:  There may not be the six movies he was signed on to do a deal for, but thank you.  Before we go, what are the upcoming plans for The Feast?  What does the new season start?  And, do you want to tease any of what you're going to go on to do?

Laura:  Oh sure!  For the month of June, we're going to be trying something a little bit new, giving back to the community of Santiago , we're going to be releasing a mini-series, detailing our trials and travails, mostly related related to food, but also walking, much walking...

Aven and Mark: [Laughing]

Laura: On the trail.  And the things that happen to you on the trail when you're, kind of in the middle of rural Spain for four to five hours a day in the beating sun.  And, I'll actually be at a radio workshop at the end of June, but after that our new season will start in earnest, and this season, or at least this upcoming year on The Feast, we're going to be doing mini-clusters of themed feasts, shall we call it? So we have one always teased called "The Forensic Feast", you know, dinners or foods that are based slightly around the land of crime, I mean, we're not going to get too far down the too crime podcast rabbit hole, but certainly as I've been researching, there are actually quite a few foods, dinners, eating events that circle around crime in some way, shape, or form, so we'll be doing those, kind of, mini-cluster on that.  We'll be doing foods of the gods, legendary foods, so these will be more, you know, four or five episode clusters that share a particular theme, and then after every cluster we'll be doing, kind of, one of the big feasts that we were doing, more along the lines of, or that stand on their own, like we were doing last season.  But, very much still on a similar story, narrative driven style, but just with a little bit more clustering, shall we call it?  I may have to think of a fancier name for it, but, right now....

Aven: Semantic cloud....no, wait, that's not correct!

Laura:  Exactly!  Yes, "The Feast's Semantic Cloud"!  But, yeah, we're right now in hard researching, I'm putting together the mini-series for the Camino de Santiago, and then things should be back up and rolling with feast episodes regularly by July, so that's the plan for right now!

Aven:  Well, that sounds great, looking forward to it!

Mark: And, perhaps, you can remind everyone how they can find all this wonderful material online?

Laura:  Oh yes!  We are at TheFeastPodcast.org, we're also on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, our handles are @Feast\_Podcast, and, of course, you can find us on Apple podcast, at The Feast Podcast.  We're on Sticher, Acast, Radio Public, basically anywhere and everywhere good podcasts can be found.

Aven:  And, so, if people want to follow on anything you've said, I'm sure they can contact you there @Feast\_Podcast, as you said.

Laura: Oh, absolutely!

Aven:  So, thank you so much, again, and, to remind everyone, this is part of The Recipe Project Virtual Conversation, and you can follow more information about that at #recipeconf, and look online for all of this, because it's kind of scattered across a lot of different sites, but there is a lot of interesting content.  Just before we started, Laura mentioned one that we are also very fond of, which is the Spuddingly Farming  project...

Laura:  Oh yes!

Aven: Creating an experiment on potato growing.  But, it just has the best name.  But there's a whole range of stuff, and some of it about recreating recipes as well, so it ties in with what we're talking about today!

Laura:  How wonderful, and thank you so much for having me!  This has been so much fun,.  I think, as you said, we could be talking about recipes for about the next two days or so!

Aven and Mark:  Yep yep!

All: [Laughing]

Aven:  So, thank you for listening everyone, and don't forget to look out for our video on "What is a Recipe?"  Which will be coming up on June 27th, and we'll be back soon with a conversation about Wonder Woman!

Mark: For more information this podcast, check out the website, alliterative.net, where you can find links to the videos, blog posts, sources, and credits.  We've also got all the ways you can follow us.  Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, G+, a mailing list, and Instagram!  And please check out our Patreon, where you can pledge this show and our video project.

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Mark:  Bye!

Aven:  And we'll be back soon with a conversation about Wonder Woman.

Laura:  [Gasps]  Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to gasp in joy!

All:  [Laughing]

Laura:  I'm just so excited!