

# Food as a Storyteller in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Life without a Recipe*

Zuzana Tabačková

Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies, Faculty of Education,  
Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra

**Abstract:** Drawing on literary food studies, the paper focuses on Diana Abu-Jaber's latest work, her 2016 memoir *Life without a Recipe*. By exploring Abu-Jaber's food aesthetics and comparing it with well-known cultural (food) metaphors of the melting pot and the salad bowl, the paper aims to point to a distinct role that food plays in the narrative. In Abu-Jaber's writing, food is a storyteller whose tale revolves around the search for memory and the search for identity. It helps the author recollect her past memories and negotiate her Arab-American in-betweenness, which she does through cooking and baking a text by means of Western and Eastern ingredients that are never written and always unique. As a result, Abu-Jaber creates an individual and distinctive concept of (not only American) identity—the concept of “we-are-what-we-crave-for.”

**Keywords:** Diana Abu-Jaber, food studies, Arab-American literature, melting pot, salad bowl, food aesthetics.

## 1 Introduction

Twenty years after the Declaration of Independence, in 1796, Hudson & Goodwin published a book authored by Amelia Simmons, also referred to as “an American Orphan.” The book's title read *American Cookery or The Art of Dressing Viands, Fish, Poultry and Vegetables, and the Best Modes of Making Pastes, Puffs, Pies, Tarts, Puddings, Custards and Preserves, and All Kinds of Cakes, from the Imperial Plumb to Plain Cake. Adapted to this Country, and All Grades of Life*. The word “adapted” in the subtitle pointed to Simmons' technique adopted in the first American cookbook—traditional English recipes were adjusted to an American culinary setting. In her work, Simmons substituted ingredients used in original English recipes for the American ones (e.g. cornmeal or maize for oats). This technique of intermingling European and American ingredients suggested the culinary future of the newly established United States—the future of mixing various spices, techniques of preparation, and ways of serving and eating. This process of mixing ingredients was permitted by the process of mixing cultures. Every newcomer to the United States who got an Ellis Island permit stamp in the passport left an imprint in the American cuisine. As Donna R. Gabaccia (1998, p. 6) suggests, “food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily

lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve, similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort.” In other words, like language, food is a cultural marker, an emblem that defines one’s cultural roots; it is nutrition for the body as well as a nourishing foundation for one’s identification with a particular cultural milieu.

Surprisingly, the book of “an American orphan” proved to have a long line of descendants who have begun to appear in masses throughout the last century. Nevertheless, the plethora of “food books” occupying the shelves of American bookstores did not include only the publications with recipes listing ingredients and describing procedures of preparing particular meals. In addition to these, new genres of food writing emerged, including, as Bardenstein (2001, p. 357) suggests, “multiple ‘genres,’ or at least differently inflected subgenres within this rubric (referred to as cookbook memoirs, memoirs with recipes, culinary memoirs, collective memory cookbooks, nostalgia cookbooks, etc.).” Often penned by the “ethnic other,” these works describing the processes of food preparation and consumption prove to be about something larger—recollections of family stories and histories, narratives about home, loneliness, and belonging. In other words, these food recipes or “nostalgia cookbooks” (Sutton, 2001, p. 18) are recipes for constructing identities or, rather, identifications. A choice of a specific recipe reflects one’s personal longing to belong and remember. Following the recipes of the past, the ethnic other longs to recollect the tastes of homeland. On the other hand, trying new recipes reflects one’s present struggle to find home and by means of food, to identify oneself “among the shelves of the American cuisine.”

As a second generation immigrant, Diana Abu-Jaber (a daughter of an American mother and an Arab father) complicates the notion of identity and belonging. Throughout her childhood, she “eats between” her grandmother’s sweet pastry and her father’s *shish kabob*. As an adult living in the multicultural milieu of the United States, she tries her hand at traditional Italian, Chinese or Caribbean recipes in addition to the ones that she knows from her childhood. This “eating between” or, rather, “eating among” different cultures has a twofold effect—it enables the author to recollect her memories and it helps her search for her identity.

## 2 Food as an Ingredient of Literature

Food studies is not a new area of research. It is rather new to the academic interest. As Ken Albala (2013, p. xv) suggests, during the last decades, “a critical mass of professional academics have devoted a significant proportion of their energy to questions of food supply, patterns of eating, in fact, all aspects of food culture or foodways.” Eventually, food studies penetrated into different scholarly fields including psychology, sociology, or literature. In literature, it is now a burgeoning area of research covering a broad range of topics whose common denominator is the concept of food as a sign and a literary device. Joan Fitzpatrick (2013, p. 122) maintains that literary scholars focusing on food believe that

its use in literature “can help explain the complex relationship between the body, subjectivity, and social structures regulating consumption” and the authors writing about food “are usually telling the reader something important about narrative, plot, characterization, motives, and so on.” Literature in the context of food studies includes fiction, poetry, drama as well as cook memoirs or memoirs with recipes. Food in these genres is studied in relationship to social rank, national, gender or ethnic identity. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik explain that the emergence of scholarly publications in food studies in the first decade of the 21st century has three distinct reasons. First, gender studies helped to develop food studies “by legitimizing a domain of human behavior so heavily associated with women” (2013, p. 2). Second, the politicization and the social movements related to food brought about a new understanding of the link between consumption and production. Third, the emergence of food studies as a distinct scholarly field created new associations between food and other discursive practices (ibid.).

In *Toward a Psychosociology of Food Consumption* Roland Barthes equals food with “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” (2013, p. 2). Should it be a system of communication, then it necessarily implies the process of signifying. As Barthes maintains, “food has a tendency to transform itself into situation” (ibid., p. 7). Thus, consuming a particular kind of food might point to a specific situational context, e.g. in some cultures and historical periods, coffee indicates that someone is taking a break. Though Barthes mentions America, his core focus is France. In the US context, understanding food as a cultural marker becomes more problematic due to its multicultural history of migration, immigration, dominance, control and submission. These processes left their traces in American “recipes” and these recipes found their way to American literary pursuits. Even though Pierre Bourdieu takes a social approach to food, studying the “opposition between the tastes of luxury and the tastes of necessity” (2013, p. 31) in connection to social classes, he also maintains that food and its way of presentation carry a symbolic significance. By comparing different social classes, the author comes to a conclusion that there are two distinct approaches to food and eating: the first considers food “a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and gives strength”; the second prefers the form, “to all appearances, all the fine words and empty gestures that ‘butter no parsnips’ and are, as the phrase goes, purely symbolic” (ibid., p. 38). Considering taste “a class culture turned into nature” (ibid., p. 34). Bourdieu finds parallels between the selection, preparation, consumption and beliefs held vibrant in social stratification (e.g. eating fish in working classes is considered inappropriate as it is too light to fulfill a man’s body; besides, men eating fish might seem awkward and child-like).

In the US context, the best-known cultural metaphors have used food to express the concept of belonging. As early as the 18th century, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (n.d., p. 3) interprets the meaning of an American as a “western pilgrim” willing to leave behind “all his ancient prejudices and manners” and to accept “new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds.” By doing so, he turns into an American of America where “individuals of all nations are melted into

a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world” (ibid.). The idea of melting individuals into a new race gave rise to the concept of America as a melting pot where different ingredients are added, stirred, mixed and melted together to create a completely new, American taste. Nevertheless, not all people held the belief that the ingredients used in “cooking American culture” would lose their original flavors. The proponents of the salad bowl theory suggested that each ingredient would retain its original taste. In other words, they viewed America as a nation of different cultures coexisting next to each other and maintaining their cultural specifics.

William R. Dalessio (2012) studied eating as a reflection of cultural behavior in multiple writings of American ethnic writers. Drawing on Werner Sollor’s concept (1986, p. 5) that ethnicity has to do with both descent and consent relations, Dalessio claims that individuals may “work out” (ibid., p. 7) to assert their identity in four different ways. Interestingly, in literature these four approaches are expressed by four ways of eating. An individual’s desire to change from an ethnic other to an American prompts him to “consume ‘American’ foods as a way of assuming an ‘American’ identity free from prejudice and discrimination” (ibid., p. 7). By consuming “American”<sup>1</sup> food and refraining from the ethnic cuisine of his parents, an individual wants to get assimilated to American culture or, in other words, to be melted in the American pot. The second alternative is a reverse process—individuals “assume identities of ethnicity, in part by consuming the appropriate ‘cultural emblems’ both inside and outside of their homes” (ibid., p. 7). By engaging themselves in eating ethnic food, individuals want to express their desire to belong to a specific ethnic group. In addition, Dalessio identifies two less frequent alternatives—some individuals might “swap one ethnic identity for another” (ibid., p. 8). In culinary terms, individuals might switch from one ethnic cuisine to another so as to satisfy their hunger for belonging. The last possibility is, according to the author, the most fulfilling one because it refers to “constructing a multicultural identity that is based on both descent and the ability to consent” (ibid., p. 9). In this case, a hybrid, hyphenated identity is retained and reflected in one’s culinary preferences; these may point to one’s descent relations to the same extent as they might demonstrate one’s subjective identification with a particular group.

In contemporary Arab-American writing, food is a recurrent motif and an articulate literary device. The best known anthologies of Arab-American literary works even include it in their titles. Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa’s anthology of Arab-American poetry is called *Grape Leaves*. Also, Joanna Kadi’s 1994 anthology of Arab-American and Arab-Canadian feminists bears the name of *Food for Our Grandmothers*. The writing of Lisa Suhair Majaj, Therese Saliba, Naomi Shibab Nye—to mention just a few—is salted with food metaphors. Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Life without a Recipe* is not her only work which revolves around food. For example, Sirine, the protagonist of her 2003 novel *Crescent*, is a professional cook who had worked as a “sous chef in the kitchens of French, Italian, and ‘Californian’ restaurants” (2003, p. 9) before she took on a job at Um-Nadia’s Middle Eastern café

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<sup>1</sup> I use inverted commas so as to stress the ambiguity of the expression *American food*—where *American* encompasses a variety of different cultures and minority groups.

where she “went through her parents’ old recipes and began cooking the favorite—but almost forgotten—dishes of her childhood” (ibid., p. 6). Returning to her parent’s cuisine was a comeback to her childhood memories. Food in Sirine’s view was a means of belonging somewhere. Similarly, in her memoir *The Language of Baklava* (2005) Abu-Jaber<sup>2</sup> records many stories from her childhood that most often revolve around food, which eventually turns out “to be about something larger: grace, difference, faith, love” (ibid., Foreword). The food, a recurring literary device in the writing of the first, second or third generation of Arab-American writers is, in other words, a storyteller narrating the tale of home, belonging, exclusion, and roots.

In the paper, I am going to interpret food as a marker of two distinct processes: the process of reconfiguring memories and the process of self-identification. Abu-Jaber’s *Life without a Recipe* will serve as the primary source of my analysis, which will draw on close reading the food-related segments of Abu-Jaber’s memoir. The crucial aim of the paper is to identify the link between the selection of food, its preparation and consumption and the discursive practices of restoring memory and constructing identity.

### 3 We Are What We Remember: Storytelling Recipes

In the writings of first generation Arab-American immigrants like Aziz Shihab<sup>3</sup>, food is a representation of exilic longing. By recalling and recording the recipes from their homeland, the authors are trying to reconstruct the cultural fragments (in this case culinary fragments) of their past. Their memoirs, thus, play the role of cultural recordings which might be later used by their children living in a new land (America, France, etc.). Diana Abu-Jaber is a second-generation immigrant who was, together with her two sisters, born in America to an Arab father and an American mother. Therefore, in her writing, food does not embody exilic longing (in this case longing for Jordan, her father’s homeland). It is rather a device which helps her recall the past. If, in case of first generation immigrants, food writing is initiated by displacement (which may or may not be voluntary) to a new (culinary) setting in a new land; in case of second/third generation immigrants, the dislocations resemble what Bardenstein refers to as “normative ruptures” (2001, p. 361), which are natural: “in many societies, most people eventually experience the dislocation of being removed from their mother’s kitchen as part of the ‘normal’ or customary progress of the life of a family, in which grown children move out to create households, and kitchens, of their own” (ibid.). Similarly, for Diana Abu-Jaber, food is a storyteller that helps her understand the past and move on in life.

*Life without a Recipe* opens with a crack—Abu-Jaber’s daughter cracks an egg into a bowl for the first time on her own and wonders at what she sees, which makes her mother think: “Tilting the ceramic bowl, she might be considering the beginning of life, the end of the cosmos. The whorl at the center of the batter. A bowl is a place to find meaning, I think.

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<sup>2</sup> See also *Arabian Jazz* (1993) and *Birds of Paradise* (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Aziz Shihab (1927 – 2007), a journalist, writer, public speaker, well-known for his two books: *A Taste of Palestine* and *Does the Land Remember me? A Memoir of Palestine*.

Stir the spoon and wait, all sorts of things rise to the mind's surface" (2016, p. 16–17). Through this egg story, the author remembers the time when her grandmother gave her an egg to crack and the book evolves. The egg that her daughter cracked thus serves as an "appetizer" or, in Freytag's terminology, as an inciting moment for the story to evolve. The memoir follows the same structure—food tells a story about food that tells a story about food that tells a story.

Growing up in America, in an extended family of her Arab father, his brothers and their families and participating in family dinners, Abu-Jaber is from an early age aware of two distinct stories that she is told—an American and a Jordanian one. These two stories are not always in symbiosis. As she turns into a teenager, Bud (an American name of her father) is concerned about who she meets: "The idea of letting America tamper with us, lure his children away, the idea of growing up into Americans, is a little unbearable. So he's vigilant" (ibid., p. 32). As a guardian of his daughter, he wants to make her vigilant as well and he does so through a story. As he is combing the bulgur wheat, he says: "You have to search for bulgur carefully. [...] The tiniest, hardest stones hide inside the grains. Bits of sand that look just like bulgur" (ibid., p. 32). In other words, stones in the bulgur represent the danger (in this case American boys) that his daughter is warned against. A simple process of preparing bulgur is subsequently transformed into a process of storytelling:

*I sit with him, helping him comb. When you cover the grains with water, a kind of starchy mist swirls around your fingers: I see goats with fishtails, all sorts of creatures from my relatives' stories. Oryx, unicorns, fairies. Which are real and which aren't? The metamorphosis of cooking mirrors that of story-imagining. I learn to watch carefully for the stones, and sometimes stories come to me, emerging out of the starch, and explaining things (ibid., p. 33).*

Sometimes, adults recreate traditional fairy-tales just to give their children their own food-related interpretation of the story. Having seen Snow White, Diana's grandmother takes her to a café and murmurs: "Those dwarves, they only wanted her to stay after she offered to cook for them" (ibid., p. 20). The function of the stories accompanied with the process of food preparation or consumption is to give advice. When children cross the path of adults in the kitchen, the adults would "lean down, lifting an instructional finger" (ibid., p. 30) and provide them with a piece of advice for their future: to work hard and save money, to "drink the best wine first" (ibid.), to have or not to have kids, etc. The Arab uncles would often feed the children *min eedi* (from their hand), in a Bedouin style: "We open our mouths to be fed these occasional bites, too hot and too much food at once, and you can't refuse such a special honor, but at the same time you also don't really want it. [...] Advice is offered like flood from the hand—a loving, unwanted gift" (ibid., p. 31). In other words, through food stories, adults are giving their children recipes on how to cook a perfect life. Hundreds of different recipes for meals that cannot be digested at one sitting. Through recalling the bygone senses and tastes, Abu-Jaber is later able to recall a story that accompanied the preparation or consumption of food. Food is a device for recording and transmitting the past, for recalling the advice. However, as Abu-Jaber grows

up, she gradually discovers that the recipes that her parents, her grandmother, or her uncles gave her, just do not work in a “follow-the-recipe-and-the-food-will-turn-out-delicious” kind of way.

Third-time married with an adopted daughter Abu-Jaber learns the constraints of preparing the food of her own (*A Food of One's Own* is also the name of the second part of her memoir). The expression does not necessarily denote food prepared by herself, though. Again, food is an emblem of something larger. It is an unpredictable storyteller. In Arab countries, recipes were never written, they were told and retold, remembered and thus every cook would recreate the recipes from the bits and pieces that s/he remembered. The same thing applied to stories. Stories were told, not written. Thus, every storyteller would “spice” his or her narrative with some addition to the plotline. Eventually, Abu-Jaber learns that the recipe-and-story-rule also applies to life. Once, 40-year-old and married for the third time, Abu-Jaber asks her aunt Aya to write down one recipe for her—a request that confuses her aunt: “You learn food by feel, not on a paper. [...] Why would you write down how to cook? [...] It’s like learning to speak French. You don’t do it in a *classroom*. You do it running around Montmartre, calling for cabs, drinking Pernod” (ibid., p. 260). Abu-Jaber asks her aunt for the recipe at the time when she is considering parenthood. Thus, her request for the recipe could be interpreted as a request for advice: “If there was a way to inscribe such things, I would have asked Aya for her advice, to describe the steps she’d taken toward attaining courage [...] But by this point, I was already beginning to suspect you couldn’t write it down: You had to do it by feel” (ibid., p. 263). Recipes are not written and because they are not stationery, they are not stationary either. The same rule applies to stories—the stories about the food that we crave for, the stories about the meals that we prepare and the stories about the dishes that we serve and consume. The storyteller whose name is food always tells a different kind of narrative about what we eat and who we are.

#### **4 We Are What We Crave for: Living without Recipes**

In addition to its commemorative function, food, in Abu-Jaber’s writing, also reflects the author’s ontological anxieties. The selection of food, in other words, portrays Abu-Jaber’s search for who she is, her strife for self-identification. Living in an Arab-American family in the multicultural milieu of the United States, the search for her identity does not agree with more or less straightforward contours of the melting pot-salad bowl theories. Her search for identity is translated to the food that she is served as a child and the food that she prepares on her own as an adult.

As a child, Abu-Jaber often “eats between.” The cold war between her Arab father Bud and her American maternal grandmother Grace is transferred to the food battles that the mother-in-law perpetually fights against her exotic and eccentric son-in-law. On her father’s side, there fights cooking; on her grandmother’s side, it is baking. The cooking uses oriental flavors, spices, meat, and vegetables as its soldiers. The baking, in contrast, relies on sweet sugar, fruits, and cream. Both “troops” aim to activate the children’s taste buds

so as to lure them on their side. The ingredients and ways of preparing meals point to a cultural division which separates them on the outside: “Before they’d met, neither Grace nor Bud could have imagined each other, not once in a million years. They came with their ingredients like particles of lost and opposing worlds, the dying old divisions—East and West” (ibid., 21). Food is sometimes served as a punishment; if the girls do not behave properly, their father would run into the kitchen and prepare “cauliflower seething in olive oil and garlic, the bitter, sulfurous ingredients he hacks up when he’s in a mood. Stuff that tastes like punishment to an eight-year-old” (ibid., 19). Grace fights Bud’s lamb-stuffed zucchini and cauliflower with homemade cookies. Cookies are the culture: “Only higher civilizations bake cookies. [...] I don’t know how you people would celebrate Christmas if I wasn’t around. Run wild like savages” (ibid., p. 17). The cookies equal the West that equals the civilized. In contrast, Bud is “suspicious of sugar” (ibid., p. 252) and often claims that “he never ate ‘white food’” (ibid., p. 252). To tease grandma, he would often ask her why “cookies always [came] in circles” (ibid., p. 19) which only increased her rage.

When Grace takes her granddaughter to Paris to “get culture” (ibid., p. 42), the trip turns out to be a pastry sightseeing. Instead of museums and cathedrals, they visit French patisseries. Getting culture is in fact getting food. It is at this point that young Diana comes to realize: “When Parisians bowed before the oven, I felt they were doing something more than merely baking, something important and secret” (ibid., p. 44). Once, when they buy a box of pastries, they take them to the riverbank and sit on the grass: “The moment intertwined with the bolt of French blue sky, the warm summer air, the smell of the Seine. When we bit into them, the pastries were crisp, then bright puffs; they were clouds and bridges and fine art in gold frames and old books in leather bindings and weightless days to come” (ibid., p. 46). Here, food denotes culture and civilization; it nourishes the body but also the soul. Eating fine French cakes on the bank of Seine might seem to be in sharp contrast with eating lamb *min eedi* but in her inside, Diana likes both, she likes to be in between the two. This eating in-betweenness can be viewed as a parallel to the geographical in-betweenness of the family which adores to be on the way somewhere: “I want to be constantly on an airplane, because nothing fills the air with more exciting feelings, nothing lights my parents up more than when we’re on a plane pointed either to Jordan or back to the States. When we get to either place, the lovely feelings go away, but in the air, things are very good” (ibid., p. 52). Translated to food terms, it is not the food itself but the desire for food that satisfies her.

As Diana turns into a teenager, the “eating between” gradually changes into “eating among.” Apart from the dichotomy between Middle Eastern *shish kabob* and German American cookies there appear new meals. It is, however, not only the selection of food that is changed but also its way of serving. As a child, Diana was served food that was prepared by someone else (though she might have assisted in its preparation), now she prepares and serves food on her own. The eater turns out to be the chef responsible for selection, preparation, serving, and consumption. Living with her boyfriend Jeremy, they try their hands at various recipes from the *Moosewood Cook-book* or *The International*



*Cookbook*—whole-wheat bread, Italian carbonara, the Peking duck, etc. Their kitchen is a “cooking lab [...], an exploration of the creative process” (ibid., p. 35). Searching for and trying out different recipes suggests the search for their identity, which accompanies the process of coming into adulthood.

Abu-Jaber accepts her role as the one who cooks in the same way as she accepts various recipes and ingredients into her cooking attempts. In her world, both men and women prepare food. That is why, she can just silently laugh at the girls from a feminist reading club who criticize her for writing a story about a man as “we can’t afford to have women writers idealizing male protagonists” (ibid., p. 57) and who also consider the puree of roasted eggplant with pita that she brought to the meeting: “a display of domestic labor [...], a billboard for women’s objectification” (ibid.). For Abu-Jaber, food does not signify woman’s inferiority or subordination; it is a physiological as well as spiritual need for women as well as men. Serving food feels like honor. When she and Scott, her third husband, hire a babysitter for their adopted daughter, Diana is happy to serve food for the girl. The babysitter’s name is Soledad, her mother is from Cuba and her father from Nicaragua but Soledad is a “one hundred percent Miami-girl” (ibid., p. 173). Soledad’s family is threatened to be evicted from their home, so Diana decides to give them solace through food. First, she serves her “Cuban Mary Poppins” (ibid., p. 173) and her family the food she knows: “carbonara, meatballs, spicy chili, lentil soup” (ibid., p. 177). After some time, Soledad begins to ask for meals that Diana does not know: *ropa vieja*, *empanadas*, *guava pastelitos*, *tres leches*, etc. The cookbook *Eat Caribbean* guides her in her cooking explorations. However, her readiness to cook Caribbean meals is not the result of her effort to swap identities (Dalessio, 2012, p. 8); it is, rather, a reflection of her desire to help someone in need: “The ones with the problems always have their arms out for hugs” (Abu-Jaber, 2016, p. 177), she says.

In the writing of Diana Abu-Jaber, the question of who we are does not fit in the melting pot or the salad bowl. It is somehow too big for these containers. Years after her grandmother’s death, Diana would see her father secretly feeding her daughter with sugar, “the white food” that Bud claimed never to have eaten (but he always did). After her father’s death, she tries to concentrate but cannot. Every time she tries to write, she ends up in the kitchen baking or eating sweets. The advice, so unwanted before, is now wished for but it does not arrive. Following the model of her grandmother and father, Diana becomes the food fighter in her battle against grief; her major weapon is sugar:

*I take out my soldiers—flour, brown sugar, vanilla, salt—wisps of powder like magical capes. I don’t know what I’m making until I’m into it, sighing and stirring. Tonight an apple crisp; tomorrow, caramel bars; the next day, angel food. Here is the last sanctuary: The cool, methodical steps will clear the air, the recipes soothe me with their calm voices, and the sugar brushes away sorrow (ibid., 239).*

Sugar is a way of how to handle sorrow and bring back the past. Cake is not made according to a recipe; its preparation is just felt. And the answer to the question of who we are is not that much what we eat as what we crave for: “You are what you crave and fear and what you want” (ibid., p. 255). Identity, or rather identification, stems from desire and

fear—what one wants and what one is reluctant to do. It flouts above ethnic borderlines as it results from an individual taste which is always unique... as is a story that recalls a different taste in each and every reader.

## 5 Conclusion: On Memory and Desire

Food in Diana Abu-Jaber's writing has a twofold function—it recalls memories bringing alive the people who are no longer with her and it is a device for self-identification. The former corresponds with Bardenstein's concept of reconfiguring memory; the latter complies with Dalessio's and Gabaccia's assumption that food is a reflection of one's identity. Memories are recalled through tastes that are always accompanied with stories—fairy tales about dwarves who accept Snow White only after she promises to cook for them; stories about stones in bulgur or French cathedrals. These stories are never written; they need to be felt or lived—like recipes which are neither stationery, nor stationary. They help the eater remember where s/he came from. In other words, they point to one's descent. Furthermore, Diana Abu-Jaber maintains that the food that we prepare, serve and consume or, on the other hand, the food that we do not prepare, do not serve, and do not consume, discloses something about who we are. Very often, however, it is not the food itself but the desire that counts. The desire to punish someone might be carried out by a cauliflower and the desire to do away with sorrow might be fought with sugar. One's desire is something unique and individual—something that cannot be labelled as one thing. In Werner Sollor's terms, it stems from the descent as well as consent relations. It cannot be cooked in a melting pot, nor placed in a salad bowl (though “a bowl is a place to find meaning”); it is forever created and recreated without a recipe—just “[s]tir the spoon and wait” what rises to the surface.

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## Contact

PhDr. Zuzana Tabačková, PhD.

Department of Language Pedagogy and Intercultural Studies  
Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra  
Dražovská cesta 4, 949 74 Nitra, Slovak Republic  
ztabackova@ukf.sk