Alicia Rios

Tailor of the Body’s Interior

an interview by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett

In the damp grayness of a Welsh winter, we found ourselves digging for our food. It was time for lunch on the third day of “Points of Contact: Performance, Food, and Cookery,” a conference organized by the Center for Performance Research in Cardiff (13–16 January 1994). Responding to the summons “please be prompt,” we assembled at 1:30 P.M. for a “performance buffet.” Its creator, Alicia Rios, was ready for an afternoon in the garden. She wore a large apron, scarf, rubber gloves and boots, a hose around her waist, and gardening tools in her pockets. A watering can and wheelbarrow were close at hand. A vision in green and white, she ushered us upstairs into the “gastronomic space” she had arranged in what was otherwise a painting studio.

Flooded with natural light, the long room had become a greenhouse. Two tables ran the length of the space. Each was set with flower pots, trays, and boxes filled with “earth,” “cactus,” “flowers,” and “shrubs.” The “scene direction” stipulated: “First we are going to observe the greenhouse, and afterwards taste its elements. The tables are covered with a false fertilizer of tea and coffee dregs. This represents the ecological ‘ad hoc-ery’ and economic sense which nowadays form a major component of our anxiety.”

With respect to sauces and drinks, Rios wrote in her program notes, “I suppose that some of you, like plants, need watering by immersion. Others among you only need water when it is hot, while some are drinkers without conditioning factors. If anyone needs pulverisation, they can do it with orange-flower water, as people in Spain have been doing since the sixth century” (1994). Watering cans filled with beverages and dressings were on the tables. Each of us received a little rake, hoe, and trowel, an invitation to dig around for our food. We were signaled to begin with the words:

1. Alicia Rios, dressed for a day in the garden, goes over the plan for A Temperate Menu before ushering the guests to the loft upstairs, during the “Points of Contact: Performance, Food, and Cookery” conference in Cardiff, 1994. (Photo by Jaakko Rahola)
“Get ready to harvest your edible garden.” The plants were neatly lined up by
category and appropriately labeled with little white plastic markers. Warbles
and chirps filled the airy space, which was misted with scented water.

The installation only partially realized the full architectural plan, which was
to include six sections, as follows:

1. Facilities: napkins, plates, glasses, oil cruets, cutlery basket.
2. Aperitivos: cactaceae (gerkins, pickled onions, olives, sausages, skewered on
toothpicks) and vegetables.
3. Entrances: tuberaceae (potatoes, carrots) buried in earth (barley, rice) and
fungii (mushrooms) in compost (coffee dregs).
4. Main Dishes: graminiae, aquatics (celery in water), bonsais (broccoli), and aro-
matic herbs.
5. Sweets: seed beds, fragarias, rocaille (a rock garden made of black lava rock,
pebble candy, cereal, marzipan fruits and vegetables, and jelly insects).
6. Ornamentals: dried flowers (snack food, Japanese rice crackers, wired to
stalks). (1994)

An art of contingency, culinary events like this one are adaptations to local
conditions—the season, budget, space, time, facilities, and cultural context. As
Rios explained in the interview she granted at the end of the conference,
technical difficulties are part and parcel of her creative process.

This installation is not to be confused with a theme dinner or literal simula-
tion. As she stated unequivocally in her program notes, “We do not want to
get caught up in the rules of realism or classic vegetarianism. Rather, this is a
game in which the product looks like the real thing without actually being
it.” There was to be no “easy realism” like bean sprouts, and no artificial
plants. Instead:

the governing principle for making this arrangement is the use of edible
elements, which in their contrast, are the least natural and the furthest re-
moved from their natural origins. The contrast lies in artificialising what
is most similar to nature while naturalising the most artificial. This com-
pletes the cycle of nature in a formal whirlwind where human ingenuity
imposes its rhythms and changes the roles while respecting their mean-
ing. It is the eternal game of the equivocal. (Rios 1994)

Equivocation of this kind exemplifies the surreal moment in Rios’s work, a
theme she also takes up in the interview.

A scientist, cook, restaurateur, world expert on olive oil, poet, and per-
former, Rios envisions herself as a geisha and a midwife. Her task is to deliver
us to our pleasures through the medium of food. She calls herself “a tailor of
the interior of the body,” which she accomplishes through an orchestration of
the senses and an appeal to the imagination. Rios insists that there are no pro-
tagonists—or that everyone is a protagonist—in her provocative food events.
Her role is to set them in motion.

Rios was born in Madrid in 1943. Educated first in a school run by French
nuns and then at Madrid University, she studied philosophy and psychology
and later taught the history of psychology. She reacts against the preoccupa-
tion of psychologists with pathology and focuses instead on the pleasure of the
senses through the medium of food. She has been fascinated with food since
eyarly childhood and has made food the focus of not only her scientific but also
her artistic work. Blurring the line between them, she brings the sensibility of
the artist into the laboratory, the precision of the scientist into the kitchen,
and both into the classroom. In her creative confounding of boundaries, she is
2. & 3. Architectural plans for *A Temperate Menu*. Top: The general view of the greenhouse. Bottom: The design for the table setting. (Drawings by Francisco Garcia de Paredes)

a priestess in the “cult of daily life,” which, under her direction, mutates into art or science at will (see Zeldin 1994).

More than a hundred of us had come to *A Temperate Menu* after hearing papers on everything from “Banquets as Gesamtkunstwerk” and “The Archaeology of the Trifle” to “How the French Played with Their Food: Carême and the Pièce Montée.” We had sampled durian, a large Malaysian fruit with a thick prickly skin and creamy lobes of flesh—it exudes an elusive aroma of vanilla, rotten eggs, almonds, turpentine, and old shoes. We had seen the East Coast Artists’ *FaustGastronome*, directed by Richard Schechner, violate the boundaries of the body when performers passed chewed food from mouth to mouth. Bobby Baker had already performed “Drawing on a Mother’s Experience,” in which she recited the painful story of her life, while flinging onto a white sheet the contents of her shopping bags—cold roast beef, tomato chutney, sponge fingers, brandy, black treacle, sugar, eggs, Guinness, flour, skimmed milk, tinned black currants, frozen fish pie, and Greek strained sheep’s milk yogurt—finally rolling herself up in the sheet. We had feasted at Happy Gathering, a nearby Chinese restaurant, sampled Welsh cheeses, and alternated roasted meat and rounds of polyphony at a Georgian banquet in a local church. We had watched an instructional video on how to slaughter and
4. Architectural plan for A Temperate Menu. (Drawing by Francisco Garcia de Paredes)

butcher a pig and another of street vendors in Thailand flinging morning glory leaves high into the air. We were yet to cook our own Welsh breakfasts of sausage, laverbread (seaweed), and eggs in iron skilllets on stoves brought into the conference space for the purpose—preceded by a lecture-demonstration, of course.

Now, we were milling about a greenhouse, hungry for our lunch and mystified by its presentation. We took little flower pots and lifted their contents to our lips with our little trowels, watered our meal and ourselves, and tried to carry on a sensible conversation. The pleasures were several, not least of which were conviviality warmed by sensory engagement and the presence of a master whose mission was our intelligent pleasure.

Preceded by her edible hats and clothes made of garlic, an erotic funeral menu, and a concert of aromas, A Temperate Menu is one in a series of pro-
vocative food events, as Rios calls them. She created her first one, *Organoleptic Deconstruction in Three Movements*, for the 1993 Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery. Responding to the directive from the conference organizers that participants *not* read papers, Rios decided to substitute actions for words and thereby sidestep the challenge of improvising a speech in English. *Organoleptic Deconstruction in Three Movements*, according to her program notes, explored "the texture, sound and appearance of various substances out of their usual context." Paul Levy, reporting on the conference for the *Wall Street Journal*, described the event:

Ms. Rios was arrayed in white—daringly, as it turned out. In the first movement, Ms. Rios placed bowls of 10 or so foods, which had in com-

5. A large Galician-style sandwich-hat, with mixed vegetables, cold cuts, and cheese—one in Rios's series of edible hats and clothes. (Photo by Alejandro Pradera)
mon only that they were coloured pink and white, on the lecture table. [...] She proceeded to “chew” each of these foods, but with her fingers, not her teeth. Thus the strawberries were reduced to a squishy pulp, and the moderator of the session sprayed her fingers with cream from the can. [...] Ms. Rios had taken the act of masticating food out of its context, by using the larger, external sensory organs, the fingers, instead of the smaller, internal ones, teeth, tongue, and palate. She had thus made public an act which is essentially private [...]. (1993)

The second act amplified the sounds of chewing and swallowing, while Rios pinned up slick advertisements of food and drink. In the third act, Rios lay on a transparent mattress filled with potato chips, which she “chewed” by rolling around on it. A year later she staged *Organoleptic Deconstruction for 25 Painters*, a development of the Oxford work, in collaboration with Bárbara Ortiz, at the Galería la Kábala in Madrid.

Two more gastronomic conferences provided occasions for provocative food events. *Something Must Change for Everything to Stay the Same: Desperate Ills Call for Desperate Measures* (Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, 1995) synthesized “the historical future of cooking.” *Mediterranean Symphony of the Senses: Sensory Variations in Concert* (Australian Symposium on Gastronomy, Adelaide, 1996) attempted to use the “essences of the Mediterranean [...] in synergy to activate random creativity among all those involved,” according to the program notes. Guides served as “a kind of musical score” to
help participants orient themselves to sensory paths configured in the space through stationary and mobile stimuli, addressed to the chemical (smell and taste), auditory, visual, and haptic senses. Aromophores carrying olfactories were among the performers. The guides also helped participants explore their own personal sensory maps.

Rios designed *A Temperate Menu* as a one-time event for the 1994 Cardiff conference. During our interview, she said that while the script was fully developed, it had not been fully realized. The chance to come closer to her original plan arose in 1996, when Victoria Combalu, a Catalan art critic and professor of aesthetics at Barcelona University, invited Rios to re-stage *A Temperate Menu* for the opening of the Centre Cultural Tecla Sala in Barcelona. Combalu thought this installation would appeal to a Catalan sensibility, which she identified with nature and aesthetics. This time there would be 450 people in a much larger space. Rios also had more time and help and better facilities. She was assisted by mechanics and electricians, 15 of Combalu’s students, and a professional chef, Rosa Esteva Grewe, and her team. The food was prepared in the kitchen of El Tragaluz, one of the top restaurants in Barcelona. According to Rios, the Barcelona installation was a literal restaging of the Cardiff event. It did not depart from the Cardiff event, but improved on it.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You said you made this piece for this conference and this conference only. How did that happen?

RIOS: When I got the invitation, I realized I had only a month and a half to organize the event, and it was going to be in January. I thought about England as a country of natural beauty that people liked to visit. Expecting the other conference participants to be nature lovers as well, my intention was to
create an ambiance of well-being. So I thought a culinary metaphor on a nature theme would be nice. I would create a season within another season and bring the anticipated spring into winter. That would draw us toward a world that does not yet—but will soon—exist. The work would anticipate events.

I began with the idea of the greenhouse as something both real and familiar. A greenhouse is an appropriate space because it provides heat, nature, a little bit of anticipated spring, a little fantasy and realism, and the possibility for everyone to participate in the event. I have no desire to be the protagonist. There are no protagonists. I consider everything on an equal footing, a distribution of identities. I translate. I am a culinary interpreter.

Since my intention was to engage the possibilities of a “creative food event,” I inclined immediately toward a “provocative food event.” I wanted to create something familiar, yet somewhat surrealistic. It would be metaphoric, poetic, and naturalistic. It would operate in culinary-performative terms.

The moment the idea arrives, my imagination starts working. I have a visual imagination, like a film, and start to see the details almost photographically. I visualized my costume. It would match the theme. I thought about how to convey the greenhouse effect to the participants and how to interact with them myself.

The greenhouse presented difficulties and problems, which is always nice, because they prompt the imagination to find alternatives. It’s always interesting to solve technical difficulties while transferring these difficulties to the interlocutor, who also has to work and to cultivate. In Spain, we say that problems aren’t solved, they’re transferred. If we’re working, the viewers also have to work. They must actively confront the situation themselves.

The greenhouse metaphor is complex. You begin to imagine, of course, that the guests are gardeners, so it’s normal for them to work in the field, in the nursery, with tools. Somewhere along the line, the metaphor makes the natural artificial—not to the point of converting the event into something artificial, but rather into something metanatural.

It’s what I call, in somewhat postmodernist terms, a sensory deconstruction. You have a theme. You expand it, take it out of context, modify the elements. You distort them. Then you give them an appropriate dimension, a meaning, and a plastic translation, and always in culinary, olfactory, or gustatory terms. That’s basically the process. Like an ant or a piece of embroidery, you’ve got the basic design, then you have the threads, and all the colors, and you think about getting started. Of course, the design has to be perfect so that in the end the product matches it. You can do a setting for three, eight, twelve, so that you get a banquet. At first, I thought in terms of an event for 50 people. I didn’t know how many people would be there.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: How did you know what kind of space you were going to be working in?

RIOS: I didn’t. I just thought of a table for 50 people. I started buying the flower pots, all out of my own pocket, but they told me, “No, it’s for a hundred.” I had to start all over again from scratch and broaden the scope. This returned me to the ideal, to something abstract, without space. When it was more fleshed out, I sent a fax asking how much space I would have. I presented a rough sketch of the idea and offered to adjust it if need be. They said, “Great, that’s really good.” I had a lot of fun thinking about it. The most interesting moment is the euphoria of creation. The phase of the visual image is a gestation period.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Are there things you wanted to do in this installation that you were not able to do?
rios: Yes. I would have wanted more meat. I didn’t want a naturalist, vegetarian metaphor. In Spain there are these little sausages and also black puddings. They’re beautiful, they look like cactuses. But I had problems. Let me explain.

I don’t like to improvise. Rather, if you have an idea, you break it down into its components, you develop the technical part, the provisioning of your elements. I bought almost all the elements in Spain, because I thought I had to. Also, I didn’t want to depend on a car here, in Cardiff. Besides, I prefer the plastic contrast of the Spanish objects. The Spanish style always ends up a little more “kitsch.” The English are more elegant, their designs are more perfect, more utilitarian. The Spanish way is a little absurd, more crude.

Because I had a lot of luggage, I decided against carrying the meaty ingredients. I didn’t want to risk problems at Customs. I thought that once I got to England I would buy sausages there. I went to the supermarket, but I saw nothing appropriate there.

kirschblatt-gimblett: What was the problem? They don’t have cured sausage, but only raw ones, so you can’t eat them without cooking them first?

rios: Sure, hot dogs, but...

fernandez: The Spanish sausages, chorizos, are usually smoked, hard, and you can eat them, just like that! They’re jewellike; the ones here are very soft.

kirschblatt-gimblett: What did you bring with you from Spain?

rios: What was sketched out, the props.

kirschblatt-gimblett: The flowers, the rice flowers...

fernandez: Which she made watching CNN...

rios: Trying to practice English by listening to the phonetics a bit, while trying to bear the situation with as much dignity as possible.

kirschblatt-gimblett: Now what else would you have liked to have done that you couldn’t?
RIOS: The hydraulic installation, because that was more hyperrealistic, with
the water pipes and the spigots.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: All these things you wanted to do and
could not do suggest that there's something very contingent about the work.
It is specific to a site, to a country, to a season. It would be a very different
work if you were to do it four months from now, five months from now. I
remember you said this piece is a season within a season, that it anticipates the
spring.

FERNANDEZ: Yes, Alicia was also thinking that it is winter in Cardiff, so
why not bring a little bit of spring, that's why the greenhouse idea.

RIOS: If it had been spring or summer, we wouldn't have required a closed,
heated, humid, springlike place. Of course, the cook always thinks in terms of
what's available, what's in the market at the moment. The market is nature.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: How did budget limitations affect you?

RIOS: I knew that the Centre for Performance Research didn't have a very
big budget. You couldn't permit yourself the luxury of buying expensive
things that you wouldn't end up using. Also, the English are very thrifty. Two
English people took me shopping to Tesco, the cheapest, most basic, least so-
plicated supermarket in Cardiff. Obviously with a low budget, the control-
ing factor is what's cheapest. There's a certain determinism at work here. In
addressing technical problems, you're limited to what's available. If it had
been in London or New York or somewhere else, I could have found every-
thing, including chorizos. You go to a Greek or Indian store and immediately
you see all the visual possibilities for creating a garden. They suggest hyperrealistic metaphors. There is absolutely nothing metaphorical at Tesco. It
was all carrots, potatoes, lettuce. The most basic things.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Were there any surprises? Did you find
anything in the supermarket that you had never anticipated using, but because
you found it there, you decided to use it?

RIOS: In Tesco it's impossible for the imagination to be stimulated. White
and red sausages, completely neutral products. Everything so basic. It's practi-
cally impossible, isn't it? And if you don't have much time...

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Speaking of basics, I found it interesting
that you didn't use beans. Why not?

RIOS: Because I didn't have the right conditions. In Spain, they sell cooked
garbanzos and lima beans, just in water and salt. So these are very nice, very
visual, very fabulous. But here they only had "beans in tomato sauce."

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: No dry beans?

RIOS: Sure, but we didn't have adequate kitchen facilities for cooking them.
They did rent two improvised kitchens, but all the burners were taken up
with cooking rice, cereals, couscous, and barley. Look at our shopping list.

FERNANDEZ: My goodness, 110 radishes, 60 hearts of lettuce...

RIOS: Beets, we couldn't find any beets, and then...

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: So, one limitation was what you could find
at the supermarket and what was in season. The second was what you could
cook, because of the limited kitchen facilities. Nothing was baked, for ex-
ample, nothing was fried.
RIOS: The rice was cooked in olive oil. It was fried, Cuban style.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: And there were no beans. I'm trying to get at what else you couldn't do, what else you were contending with, the challenges, the contingencies.

RIOS: The budget, the burners, the space, the ingredients, the time frame.

FERNANDEZ: The assistants?

RIOS: No, the assistants were quite adequate. The city, Cardiff. The limited supply.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: The season?

RIOS: The season—it's part of the theme and in Cardiff it means that nothing's in stock. At least in Tesco. Tesco in winter in Cardiff is sheer death! The people with whom I went shopping were obsessed with buying everything as cheaply as possible. They only took me to Tesco.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: That seems like an important part of the project. It's like poor theatre.

RIOS: Of course.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You have to be very creative to work with what's there. It's finally not about money. Even with limited means, there are rich possibilities.

RIOS: Sometimes the very combination of limited space and time makes it still harder, because more time, even the same space and the same ingredients will give you more possibilities. Our time was limited to a morning because two assistants went to hear papers. They were volunteers. They had not been paid to help me.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Did you encounter anybody who did not understand what you had done, that didn't get it?

RIOS: Oh, no. I was very satisfied because everybody understood it perfectly. It's wonderful to have good interlocutors, that's the ideal.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Please continue.

RIOS: One aspect of cooking that I like is a condition that I believe is common to theatre and cookery. I consider the role of the cook in somewhat philosophical terms as maieutic. The mother of Socrates, the Greek philosopher, was a midwife.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: A midwife?

RIOS: He called his method "maieutic."

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Oh, midwifery.

RIOS: The philosopher, in his dialogs, acted as a midwife because by asking...

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: ...he helps deliver.

RIOS: Yes. A cook is engaged in a maieutic process. So are performers. After you have been to the theatre, you aren't the same. The actors are maieutic in that they're bringing things out of you. The cook also "delivers" people. Some of them may have felt like gardeners for the first time that day. Perhaps they've never used field implements before. Or if you think in terms of another kind of menu, Chinese cuisine for example, it may be the first time that some people feel themselves to be Chinese.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You distributed a “menu” for the garden. It says:

So the menu is a portrait in which you read, you translate into edible terms, you choose an aesthetic code—colors, textures, flavors—and you deconstruct it, get it out of its context, manipulate and bring it to realization, empower the idea, and choose the right language. I always look for happiness or integration, I reject association with frustration. Since to me food is looking forward, and forward one feels more free, just grasping the instant and projecting it free from morals, just for enjoyment.

RIOS: One of the cook’s potentials is to produce pleasure.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: That’s very interesting. With one exception, all the food performance pieces at the conference were about pain.

FERNANDEZ: Especially the ones by women...

RIOS: I too was surprised that all the solo performances were by women. No men did solo performances. We didn’t get to know the masculine subconscious.

FERNANDEZ: I was saying in our discussion group that the women’s performances were about painful aspects of food—you are overweight, you are underweight, you have cellulite, you have cholesterol, etc. They were all facing pain. All the performances by men were about pleasure, for example, the futurist banquet, Sempronio’s Lunch, presented by Günter Berghaus, and Franco Taruschio’s demonstration of melanzane in carrozza. Theirs is the pleasure. The women have to face the problems. Alicia also said in that discussion that as a psychologist, she doesn’t feel she has to confront pathology all the time.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: In our discussion group, a woman who’s more into the visual arts said that what she loved about Alicia’s work was how it closed the gap between art and everyday life. I would say that A Temperate Menu operated in the space between them. She said it closed the gap.

RIOS: I believe that there must be intentionality in art. You work on an abstraction. You give this abstraction an aesthetic dimension. You convert it. In
the end the outcome has a certain aesthetic value. What I do in Spain, in Madrid, does not have the aesthetic value that it has in London or New York. Even though much depends on what is valued in each context, ultimately the result is independent of reception. It is a style. It is a form of conceptual art that invites an appreciative mind or eye.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Earlier you said that you could not, you would not, do an installation like this in Madrid because it would not work as well there.

RIOS: Perhaps because in Spain, in my local milieu, people’s expectations are different. Spaniards have a greater sense of the ridiculous. But they also approach the phenomenon with greater indifference. They are prouder. That, too, depends on the milieu.

I did some really nice things in the Círculo de Bellas Artes, which is a building in Madrid, an old casino, where there are art and cinema workshops and exhibitions. At the opening reception for a painter’s exhibition, I interpreted his work by translating it into comestible terms. It was a big success, but it was an isolated event.

FERNANDEZ: I guess what she’s done in this Círculo de Bellas Artes is feed it to the Spanish audience.

RIOS: Yes, but the Círculo is an exception. Perhaps gastronomic or artistic circles in Madrid don’t recognize or appreciate all this. I wouldn’t have such receptive interlocutors.

FERNANDEZ: You have to have the sense of humor to see this too.

RIOS: Sure, that’s also true. An olive oil producer I know gave me oil to bring to Cardiff. His brother owns an art gallery. When I explained the project to him, he liked it a lot and he told me, “Now when you come back, you must do it in the art gallery in Madrid.”

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: So will you?

RIOS: Well, I’m not so sure he really meant it.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You had a restaurant in Madrid. How long was it open?

RIOS: Five and a half years.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Did you have an opportunity in your restaurant to do anything, not exactly like this, but with the same kind of intelligence and imagination and aesthetic ideas?

RIOS: Yes. The restaurant was located on a street that is now called San Vicente Ferrer. I was curious about the history of the street and looked up an 18th-century map of Madrid. To my surprise and delight, I discovered that the original name of the street was “The Seven Gardens,” because there used to be seven palaces with seven gardens and orchards there. It was the perfect name, the perfect idea and symbol, and the perfect number for structuring my menu with a theme. Every menu was a garden in itself.

I like menus to have a theme. It’s absurd to list dishes randomly. A theme is the key to the harmonious selection of specialties. Without it, how can you select dishes? How can you decide what is more or less appetizing? The menu must have an internal logic, a meaning.

I structured the menu in seven parts. Each part was a garden for the pleasure of the senses, like gothic polypychs or a set of three or seven painted
panels. Each depicted several episodes of an event. The first course was the entrance to the garden. The second course was the sojourn in the garden. The dessert was the exit from the garden.

It was just right amount—seven starters, seven main dishes, seven desserts. Plus some classic specialties that our customers kept asking us to rescue from our bygone gardens.

I changed my gardens according to the season, state of mind, or events. A very nice menu consisted of the seven deadly sins, during a carnival before Holy Week, with the gardens of lust, envy, sloth, and avarice. I invented no dishes. Instead, I searched the classic cooking literature for dishes associated in some way with the meaning of the sins. A very simple but eloquent solution to Envy was the appetizer of fried eggs with chorizo. It’s a very simple dish, but everybody who had asked for something more complicated got envious when they saw it. The fried eggs aroused envy. For dessert—I don’t remember the main dish—we had “single woman’s natillas,” because married women always envy single women and single women always envy married women.

FERNANDEZ: Natilla is a soft custard dessert.

RIOS: On other occasions I had the seven seas—the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea—and dishes appropriate to each. Once, when I was suffering a bit from kitchen claustrophobia, I organized a menu around Castile, and its hills, mountains, valley, and river. In the valley, ducks; in the hills, cows; and for dessert, in the valley, a poppyseed tart. When you have a theme, the dishes organize themselves automatically, because fish goes with the island off the coast, and so on.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: How many people could you seat in your restaurant?

RIOS: Sixty.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: When were you open?

RIOS: Lunch from 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. and dinner from 9:30 to midnight, every day, except Sundays.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Were you closed any time of the year?

RIOS: During some vacation seasons, I took 15 days’ vacation, and then another 15. Before I opened, I studied and taught the history of psychology at the University. I used to organize banquets for doctoral theses, introducing a few artistic elements into academic life. We also entertained at home around a theme—light lunches for romantics or passionate people, or the 1920s or ’30s, or kitsch of the ’40s. This involved introducing a cultural element into cooking. Without a theme, a criterion, you can’t proceed. You must have guidelines.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: A Temperate Menu is not a theme meal per se. The menus at your restaurant were not historical reconstructions, right? When I think of a theme meal, I think of—well—Disneyland, where everybody dresses up in Louis XIV clothes and they have Louis XIV music and serve Louis XIV dishes, and readings from the period. That’s a theme. In a reconstruction, you literally, very meticulously reconstruct a medieval banquet. Are either of those aspects in your work or does your work reject those aspects?

RIOS: I work within a nonhistoricist mode. I interpret freely. I can invent. I can adapt myself to a theme, but without being exhaustively historicist.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: What were the years of your restaurant?

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Do you have a desire to do a restaurant again?

RIOS: Yes. I identify with Alice Waters, your American chef, because my name is Alice Rivers and she’s Alice Waters. I think about going to California and working with Alice Waters. A restaurant is a lot of work, but it’s also very satisfying and very skilled work. At the same time, there are many other possibilities for treating the food theme.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You made a wonderful statement earlier, that you are a “tailor of the interior of the body.”

RIOS: It was the fruit of this conference.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: From the perspective of the inside of the body, what’s the difference between eating the food that you’ve prepared for the greenhouse, in the greenhouse form, and the exact same food simply served as a normal buffet, on platters? From the perspective of the inside of the body, does it make a difference?

RIOS: Yes, because the medium is the message.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Tell me more.

RIOS: If people enjoy themselves more through ritual, their internal experience is richer than if these same ingredients had been converted into a salad and laid out in the most simplified terms.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Right. But consider possible reactions of novice eaters. Some people find such events a challenge because they don’t normally think about them. It is harder for them to receive the complexity and subtlety of what you have created. One response is, “It’s a theme meal. The theme is ecology.” What’s your reaction?

RIOS: They are right. I’m not going to ask the elm to bear figs. Everyone makes sense of what they experience in their own way. I respect all opinions. Some people have greater ability to understand. They have greater visual or aesthetic maturity. Others have less. Everyone has their own standard and their own experience.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: What about the response, "I thought we were really going to harvest. To harvest, we should really dig up vegetables from the earth, we should have to pull them out, we should have to scrub them. We're not really harvesting."

RIOS: That is true. We didn't have enough time to cook enough rice to bury the crops. We had planned a more ambitious project, but the kitchen was occupied until the previous afternoon.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: So actually you wanted things to be more deeply buried.

RIOS: Yes. The scallions were supposed to be buried, and the asparagus too. I wanted the asparagus to be buried so deep that only the tips would be visible, just like in the fields. My idea was more complex.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: I see. These responses made me think that A Temperate Menu was very unnatural. We encountered nature in its most unnatural moment. There was nothing natural about it. Cooked things are not raw things. A lot of the food was processed. There was even junk food, industrial food. The further down the table you went, the more processed, the more synthetic, and the more unrecognizable it became, to the point of parody—the little dish of water with leaves was not really hydroponic gardening. I experienced artifice that was built on the language of nature. This was no health fair to promote organic gardening or the ecology movement.

RIOS: That was deliberate. The artificiality of dried flowers. But it was also due to the limited possibilities. If I had been less curious, I wouldn't have been so busy going to the other performances at the conference. I told myself I'd better simplify things. Nor did I have a big enough kitchen to allow me to develop the project fully. You also have to take my assistants into account. Helpers take initiatives. I couldn't say, "Not this, not this, not this." Since we were forced to rush, some people did things I would otherwise not tolerate.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Like what?

RIOS: The cabbage. It was beautiful but it didn't belong.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: In a way it did. One of the principles was that nothing should be exactly what it is. There shouldn't be real flowers, but something else, something that's even strange, like making a flower out of a cabbage. Cabbage is so plain, cabbage is so low. Yet, we did not end up with vegetable garnishes. It wasn't ornamental. I liked all that the installation refused, all the things it did not do. It had the potential to be very decorative, but it wasn't.

RIOS: My intention was for it not to be decorative.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: No, of course not.

RIOS: It was a little overdecorative.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: And the cabbages?

RIOS: Sure, they didn't belong to the project, but I couldn't say "no," because it was a worthy initiative.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: But the helpers didn't understand?

RIOS: No. That's the conflict between individual personality and collaboration.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Mind you, when we got to the end of the table, where you had the cereal and the candies, that was very pretty.
RIOS: Yes.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: The cactus was also very beautiful.
RIOS: Yes.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Though still not decorative in the way that cakes are decorative or carved vegetables or garnishes are decorative.
RIOS: No, because the “cactus” only pretended to be real cactus, to resemble real cactus as closely as possible.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: When you use the word “surreal” to describe this work, what are the elements that make *A Temperate Menu* surreal?

13. *Genus cactaceae, species pickle*, in *A Temperate Menu*, Cardiff, 1994: “the ‘cactus’ only pretended to be real cactus.” (Photo by Jaakko Rahola)
RIOS: The idea in itself. The surrealist aspect, of course, would be to convert the natural elements into artificial ones and back again into natural ones.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Yes, that was very much apparent.

RIOS: It’s natural in a greenhouse, in a nursery, to have earth, fertilizer, water, and plants. The surrealist dimension is earth which becomes food, but food is once again earth. Surrealism means converting a natural element, earth for example, into something artificial, like food. Rice and cereals were earth. I turned earth into food into earth into food. The surrealist element would be from the natural element to the artificial and from the artificial to the natural.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: I also was reminded of images of Paradise, where the garden is cooked. Everything is ready to eat. Basically, Paradise is no work, which means the cooking is already done and the food is ready to eat. But in those fantasies, the prepared foods are usually confections—candy and sugarplums hang from trees—or they’re favorite foods like hams. You created a little utopia of a garden in which everything was ready to eat. But what we harvested were not the fantasy foods of Paradise.

RIOS: It’s like Adam and Eve after the expulsion from Paradise.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Yes. The eating was a form of harvesting. The mouth was a harvesting machine. To carry the metaphor even further, we used our hands and the gardening tools, but when we took things to our mouths, what was the machine into which we were putting them? Was it a threshing machine? Was it a mill? The body was a farm machine. It was very unnatural to become a grinding machine.

RIOS: I don’t know the answer, but I like your commentary.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: One person, also coming from theatre, not from the food world, said that what she missed was physical movement. For her, *A Temperate Menu* was very still. She said that when she thinks of harvesting, she thinks of movement. How can it be a performance if there is no movement?

RIOS: The performers were the guests. The performance is the space. I’m also a performer in the sense that I belong to the group, but I’m just one more person. I’m not a protagonist. My role is to set a show in motion.

There was an activity I could have done, and didn’t. My intention was to make a Zen garden, a Zen rice garden, including a public raking, just like in a classic Zen garden.

FERNANDEZ: *Ryoanji*...

RIOS: I would set up the boundary markers, the stones, with aioli.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Were you planning that for here?

RIOS: Yes.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: What other unrealized plans for here did you have?

RIOS: The difference between what was planned and what was realized appears on the plan. This project is a general rehearsal of a utopian ideal. The plan designates three levels. There’s the water and there are many more food possibilities than I could realize. I wanted more cactus. The vegetables were to be asparagus, lettuce, and beets, all buried. The bonsai, cauliflowers, and broccoli could have been more virtual, more metaphoric, and not so realistic...
because a bonsai is more than a broccoli. Of course, this is a simplification. But I’m not a virtuoso.

Between perfection and virtue, I aspire to virtue. Virtue is always a force, but this force can be controlled. Maybe with more experience and more money—or with a sponsor behind me—I would do something with greater technical possibilities. Both quantitatively and qualitatively, the original project envisioned more options.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Were there any other events that you wanted to do, but could not?

RIOS: No. From the standpoint of events, no.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Your husband made the architectural drawings. Does he collaborate with you?

RIOS: Yes. Paco helps me translate my ideas by solving the technical problems they present. I need help, a good interlocutor. He is wonderful. He also helps me pack all the materials.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: You’re a psychologist, you work on the psychology of food.

RIOS: On sensory evaluation, tasting.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: What’s the relationship between your work as a food artist and your work as a food scientist/psychologist?

RIOS: There is no clear boundary. Last year I held a seminar in the Department of Psychology of the Universidad Computense Madrid on “Sensory Memory and Olfactory and Gustatory Neophilia and Neophobia,” which was very interesting. I presented the participants with questions about sensory memory, and we created a somewhat autobiographical olfactory-gustatory profile. Afterwards there were a few foodstuffs to taste and ways to quantify the data.

I also enjoy giving concerts of smells. I create aromatoriums or olfactoriums, as well as little suitcases or sensory boxes. They have therapeutic value. If someone has problems related to smell or taste, you create a set of stimuli, like a toybox.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: No doubt the artist part of you would be as responsive to the science as the scientist part of you figures in the art.

RIOS: As a psychologist, I apply an analytical method to data and draw conclusions with a certain rigor. I have an organized mind. I am capable of comparing. I’ve given classes in the history of psychology and find that a global vision of a historical period encourages interdisciplinary analysis. As an artist, I find that historical context lets me enrich fantasy with information. We can draw on knowledge of cultural, artistic, or musical movements. We can use a creative, or somewhat irrational approach. We can choose cultural, aesthetic, or natural metaphors. It’s a rather personal matter.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: When did you discover your interest in food?

RIOS: In my childhood. I had a very privileged childhood from a sensory standpoint, because my mother is completely eccentric and very hedonistic, and she wanted her daughters to be pretty, healthy, and happy. My father on the other hand is a geologist, so we went to the countryside a lot and we learned how to read nature geologically and botanically. Then there was my sensory education—the Mediterranean diet, the seasons. I feel like a Neolithic
woman, because I've lived close to the earth, eating with my hands, living by
the Mediterranean. That was the sensory education of my childhood.

I also went to a convent school, which was oppressive and fascist for obvi-
ous reasons. Horrible. In my case, the school kitchen was a space of freedom.
There I studied the spirit of prayer—care, affection, pleasure, freedom—which
always had something to do with the life of the kitchen and of nature. One
can find a means of escape and a way to meet one's emotional needs by ma-
nipulating food. It was the place where I could drift towards an aspect of anor-
exia or bulimia; my education was more towards bulimia, towards a vision of
excess, towards giving yourself up to nature rather than confronting nature.

This principle is a very wise and useful one. You disappear. You melt into
nature. Nature is wisdom, and it's more the interpretation of what's external
than it is a matter of inner conflict or guilt. My education was not very good
for developing feelings of guilt or punishment. It was more the other way
around: disappearing, sinking into nature and finding the keys in nature.

Another guiding principle is the laws of thermodynamics, which are funda-
mental to both life and cooking. Energy does not exhaust itself, it transforms
itself into another form of energy without exhausting itself. Herein lie many
creative and liberating options. You transform a conflict into euphoria. You
flee the conflict to find a liberating solution outside yourself. You transcend
and integrate yourself with the ingredients, the forms, the tastes, the colors.
Removed from yourself through aesthetic experiences, you are more free.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: When did you do your first conceptual
food work?

RIOS: On my wedding day, July 1971. We made a Paco, a savory man, and
an Alicia, a sweet woman. It was an anthropophagic situation, because I like
the ephemeral. Nothing remains. I like cooking because it doesn't accumu-

14. Bushes of rice crackers, seed beds of candy, charcoal
and pebble sweets, olive oil
torte, and citron cakes are
part of the surreal garden in
Alicia Rios's A Temper-
ate Menu, Cardiff, 1994.
(Phot by Jaakko Rahola)
late. There were to be no plates or containers. We designed a savory man to
scale, a portrait of Paco, and a sweet woman, whose breasts were pies; her
belt, a rectangular tart; and the skirt, flowers, fruits, sweets of all types; and
around the whole thing, an aura of flowers. Then came the act of cannibal-
ism. Paco disappeared first, and then Alicia. The left-over sweets were carried
away for the people who didn't come.

KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Did you have any artistic training at all?
RIOS: No.
KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT: Better that way.

—in interview translated by Christopher Winks

Note
1. I interviewed Rios with the help of food scholar Doreen Fernandez, who studies food
in the Philippines and translated for us. I have edited the transcription and translation
by Christopher Winks of the recorded interview.

References

Levy, Paul

Rios, Alicia
1994 Program notes for A Temperate Menu. Conference on “Points of Contact:
Performance, Food, and Cookery.” Centre for Performance Research,
Cardiff, Wales, 13–16 January.
1996 Program notes for Mediterranean Symphony of the Senses: Sensory Variations in
Concert. Australian Symposium on Gastronomy, Adelaide.

Zeldin, Theodor
1994 “Why There Has Been More Progress in Cooking Than in Sex.” In An Inti-

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is Professor of Performance Studies, Tisch School of
the Arts/NYU, where she offers a course on food and performance. She chaired the con-
ference on “Performance, Food, and Cookery” in Cardiff, Wales, where A Temperate
Menu took place. An avid cook and cookbook collector, she is currently writing a social
history of Jewish cookbooks. Her most recent book, Destination Culture: Tourism,
Museums, and Heritage, is forthcoming from University of California Press.