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'A gourmet who thinks about calories is like a tart who looks at her watch.' —JAMES BEARD

Why Do We Need James Beard?

The Man Who Ate Too Much
By John Birdsall
Norton, 449 pages, $35

BY RIEN FERTEL

CLAUDIA D'ALESSANDRO/NORTON; ON C5: YALE JOEL/THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

TASTE MAKER James Beard outside the Seagram Building, 1980.

DOES ANYONE read James Beard any more? Do home cooks still crack open one of his many voluminous recipe collections in search of how to prepare a roast chicken or design a dinner-party menu? Beard's contemporaries—Julia Child, M.F.K. Fisher, Edna Lewis—we still delight in, reading their prose, cooking their food and suffering through that blasted recipe for beef bourguignon. But the man once dubbed the dean of American cookery, the culinary personality whose name graces the "Oscars of the food world"—his books survive as fussy old-fashioned mementoes of a gastronomic era gone by. Why do we need James Beard?

In "The Man Who Ate Too Much: The Life of James Beard," John Birdsall makes the case that though perhaps we shouldn't rescue Beard's books from the dollar bin, we should honor the debt we owe him for making us a nation of smarter, savvier, more adventurous eaters. Mr. Birdsall's book builds on "America, Your Food Is So Gay," which won a James Beard Award in 2014. That essay—part memoir, part rallying cry—argued that homosexual men, notably Beard, New York Times food editor Craig Claiborne and Francophile gastronome Richard Olney, transformed our bland, postwar national palate into one that was "unflinchingly, unapologetically, magnificently queer."

A precocious boy born in Portland, Ore., in 1903, Beard was a big kid with "a face as plump and pale as milk-poached meringue," according to Mr. Birdsall, who paints his subject's early years with similar Proustian flourishes. Beard's memories contained countless madeleines: his father's skillet-fried, gravy-smothered chicken; the golden chicken jelly sublimated by his family's Chinese-born cook; and especially his mother's smoked ham, soaked for days then simmered for hours in a baby's tin bathtub.

Born in Wiltshire, England, the future Elizabeth Beard stowed away aboard a steamer to Canada when she was 17, working as a governess before settling in Portland at 21. Like her only child, Elizabeth loved food more than anything else. James Beard later came to understand that his mother, too, was queer. Separately, unconsciously, mother and son learned "how to ascribe to food all the thoughts and feelings too dangerous for one to avow openly." In a nation hostile to homosexuals, Oregon ranked among the most savage. A 1917 state eugenics law forced sterilization upon men convicted of sodomy (the law was not abolished until 1983). Less than six months into his freshman year, Beard would be kicked out of Reed College for being caught *in flagrante delicto* with a professor.

In 1922, Beard fled to London, then Paris, where he trained for the operatic stage. He returned to the U.S. to tour with a theater troupe and landed gigs as an extra in Hollywood productions—he played a Roman soldier in the crucifixion scene of Cecil B. DeMille's "King of Kings" (1927). In 1937, he relocated to New York, where his theatrical dreams fizzled out.

Beard couldn't sing and he couldn't much act, but he knew how to entertain. "Papa," as his acquaintances called him then, quickly developed a reputation for the "boutique cocktail parties" he gave the city's affluent—and often gay—high society. His hors d'oeuvres came with a story, real or invented: the Duchess of Windsor's fried corned-beef-hash balls, say, or the same vichyssoise first prepared for the Sun King himself, Louis XIV. Beard foraged through the city, sniffing out the finest, then-unheralded ingredients—German sourdoughs, Genoa salamis, creamy Roquefort. Nearing the age of 40, his life suddenly fell into place: The city hungered for what James Beard could provide.

Cookbook contracts swiftly followed. In the 1940s, he published books on appetizers, outdoor grilling, fowl and game, as well as a collection of 1,200 recipes called "The Fireside Cook Book." Books on Paris, economizing, fish, casseroles, barbecuing and another titanic compendium, which included a recipe on how to boil water, appeared the following decade. He possessed an uncanny ability to recollect most any "taste memory," as he called it in his 1964 memoir, "Delights and Prejudices," arguably his only title still worth reading for its twinning of recipes and reminiscences. Forget Falstaffian: Beard's breadth of knowledge, like his appetite, was, well, nothing but Beardian.

That knowledge, Mr. Birdsall reveals, was often called into question. Beard frequently printed unattributed recipes purloined from associates and plagiarized from other cookbooks. He cannibalized his own recipes throughout his career, sometimes publishing the same recipe in two different cookbooks, for two different publishers, in the same year. He squandered friends and exploited business partners, occasionally wrote dreadful cookbooks and sexually harassed subordinates. But the public trusted James Beard when it came to culinary matters.

There were no national celebrity chefs pre-Beard, no American food gurus—Child's "The French Chef" wouldn't air until 1963. Beard had to invent the role from scratch. He premiered the nation's first television-network cooking show, NBC's "I Love to Eat," in 1946. He penned columns for several magazines. And he shilled for most any brand name that would have him: Pernod, O'Quin's Charcoal Sauce, Benson & Hedges.

All the while, the food world forced Beard to tip-toe around his sexuality. His books were campy, maybe even queer-signifying, but only if one read closely between the lines. His byline in the pulpy men's magazine Argosy read "Jim Beard," the nickname a low-key concession to all-American masculinity. This came soon after Gourmet's founder, Earle MacAusland, banished Beard from the magazine's pages after the writer openly discussed his homosexuality with the editorial staff over martinis. Beard hosted cooking classes in his Greenwich Village home, where he and his longtime partner, the pastry chef Gino Cofacci, kept separate apartments. When the time came to draw up a will, Beard stipulated that Cofacci keep his apartment, along with a monthly stipend. But most everything else—liquidated assets, rights and royalties—went to Reed College, the same institution that had expelled him for being queer.

He made America a nation of smarter, savvier, more adventurous eaters.

Beard publicly came out in 1990: "By the time I was seven, I knew that I was gay. I think it's time to talk about that now." Those words appeared in a posthumously published cookbook. He had been dead for five years.

Even in death, Beard's life remained what Mr. Birdsall calls an "open secret." Previous biographers have mentioned Beard's queerness as an afterthought, if at all. In his final days, Beard confided his desire to vanish—sell everything, destroy any incriminating papers, with no celebration of life and certainly nothing resembling the James Beard Foundation, established by admirers months after his passing. And yet his name remains most associated with the foundation's annual restaurant and media gala awards, with his face "fixed on a medal," Mr. Birdsall writes, "like a soul trapped in a mirror, restless to be freed."

"The Man Who Ate Too Much" is more than a story of one man's existence; it is a portrait of 20th-century gay life and aesthetics. "So much of the public face of American culture," Mr. Birdsall writes—our literature, music, movies, television and, especially, food—"was shaped by those compelled to live behind walls, nursing half-open secrets." Like the life of James Beard, this biography is big and beautiful, heartbreaking and true. It is the celebration that Beard deserves.

Mr. Fertel is the author of three books, including "The One True Barbecue."

Wanderers Of the Stone Age

Kindred
By Rebecca Wragg Sykes
Bloomsbury Sigma,
400 pages, $28

BY ADRIAN WOOLFSON

IN "The Library of Babel" (1941), the author Jorge Luis Borges imagined an infinite library of books. Each was unique, and despite containing great swaths of irrelevancies, the library represented all possibility, including accounts of the past, present and future. One might similarly imagine another kind of infinite library, comprising not books but the genomes of all possible types of humans. While just one encodes our own species, *Homo sapiens*, vast numbers would encode different human species that have never existed; others would address precursors such as *Homo erectus* and *Homo habilis*.

Every species is the product of both chance and natural selection—if the tape of life on Earth could be rewound to its starting point over 3.5 billion years ago and replayed, the emergence of modern humans would not be inevitable. H.G. Wells, in his "The Time Machine" (1895), speculated about the nature of future incarnations of humankind. Since then, the discovery of potentially habitable planets beyond the solar system has made it increasingly likely that human-like life may exist elsewhere in the universe.

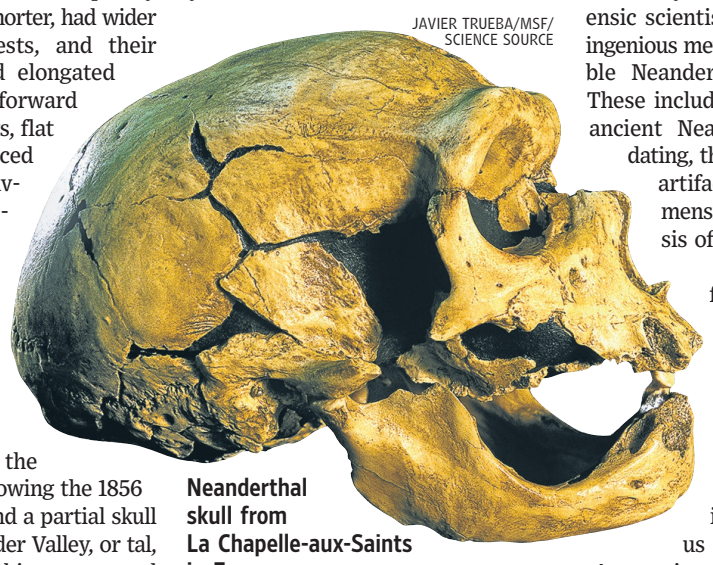
Fortunately, we do not need to wait for space travel to transport us to distant exoplanets to identify new examples of human existence. We can interrogate the ground beneath our feet, replete with a disparate kaleidoscope of clues that may help us comprehend nature's various experiments on being human. For as the British archaeologist Rebecca Wragg Sykes reminds us in her intriguing book "Kindred," "until incredibly recently, the world was sparkling with hominins."

Like the dodo, woolly mammoth and pterodactyl, all prior forms of human are extinct. One, the diminutive, hobbit-like *Homo floresiensis*, flourished in Indonesia until around 50,000 years ago. *Homo denisova*, on the other hand, is known from a finger bone found in a cave in Siberia. The subject of Ms. Wragg Sykes's book, *Homo neanderthalensis* or "Neanderthal man," is unique: Despite lacking the complex social organization of modern humans, this nomadic species achieved a transcontinental distribution reminiscent of the Roman Empire's. Neanderthals are scattered across geographies from the north of Wales to the borders of China and the fringes of the Arabian deserts.

Neanderthal communities spread from the British Isles to the deserts of Asia.

Through painstaking forensic analysis of an eclectic collection of fragmented artifacts, and in a manner at times achieving the suspense and excitement of a Hollywood thriller, Ms. Wragg Sykes makes a bold and magnificent attempt to resurrect our Neanderthal kin. In doing so, like a conjurer channeling a reluctant genie, she generates a window into a strand of alternative human possibility that originated 400-450,000 years ago and came to an abrupt end around 40,000 years ago. Through such devices the author enables us to confront a sliver of Borgesian possibility.

Although clearly recognizable as our near relations, Neanderthals had multiple anatomical peculiarities distinguishing them from contemporary humans. They were shorter, had wider waists, broader chests, and their skulls were flat and elongated with a large pushed-forward face, sloped-back jaws, flat foreheads, pronounced brow ridges, and cavernous eyes and nostrils. Their teeth had short roots and large pulp cavities, while their bones were thicker and heavier, their limbs characterized by eccentric proportions.



JAVIER TRUEBA/MSF/SCIENCE SOURCE

Neanderthal skull from La Chapelle-aux-Saints in France.

First coming to the world's attention following the 1856 discovery of bones and a partial skull in a cave in the Neander Valley, or tal, east of Dusseldorf, this unexpected manifestation of human antiquity challenged the creationist paradigm of a world intentionally created for a single incarnation of mankind. There was resistance: One detractor, the eminent physician Rudolf Virchow, dismissed it as reflecting the anatomical idiosyncracies of an injured Cossack. The 1886 finding of two near-complete Neanderthal skeletons at the Betche-aux-Roches cavern in Belgium provided unequivocal evidence of a unique human species.

Our current understanding of Neanderthals derives from thousands of fossilized bones and fragments from multiple sites, including a number of significant "anchor" sites. These are the remnants of some 300 individuals, around 40 of whom are represented by near-complete skeletons. One of the most spectacular sites, Shkaft Mazin Shanidar in Iraqi Kurdistan, yielded more than 10 nearly complete skeletons. Studies of their bones have yielded information about Neanderthal morphology. Malformations and injuries in some suggest a life permeated by excruciating pain.

Neanderthals were inventors: Artifacts found at various sites include libraries of stone tools known as "lithics," wooden spears, beeswax and pine-resin glue, birch-tar adhesive for composite tools, and the residue of coal fires. Although they made no representational art, there is evidence of the type of symbolic thought characteristic of modern humans. They used red-ochre pigments to adorn shells, collected pigment sources and mixed colors, and engraved notches on bones. The discovery in 1990 of a monumental Neanderthal construction in the Bruniquel cave in southwest France, comprising two rings of more than 400 snapped-off stalagmites, suggests the possibility of Neanderthal spiritual life.

The unsung heroes of this detective story are undoubtedly the forensic scientists who helped develop ingenious methods for bringing invisible Neanderthal existence to life. These include the ability to recover ancient Neanderthal DNA, carbon dating, the use of lasers to record artifact positions in three dimensions and even the analysis of tartar on teeth.

Regardless of what future research reveals, the Neanderthal mind is likely to remain an enigma. We may never know how their nature differed from our own or the reason for their demise. But as the polar ice shelves melt around us and vast areas of the Amazonian rainforest are consumed by fire, one cannot help gazing forward to return the stare of the empty eye sockets of the vanquished Neanderthal specimens encased in museum glass cases, and pondering: If they became extinct, then why not us?

Mr. Woolfson is the author of "Life Without Genes."