

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Laura Raicovich, "A Cookbook That Relishes the Impure and Adulterated," *Hyperallergic*, August 19, 2019

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### A Cookbook That Relishes the Impure and Adulterated

The *Bastard Cookbook* is more than a collection of recipes; it is a form of resistance against nationalism and xenophobia — and an homage to co-creation rather than assimilation



Laura Raicovich August 19, 2019

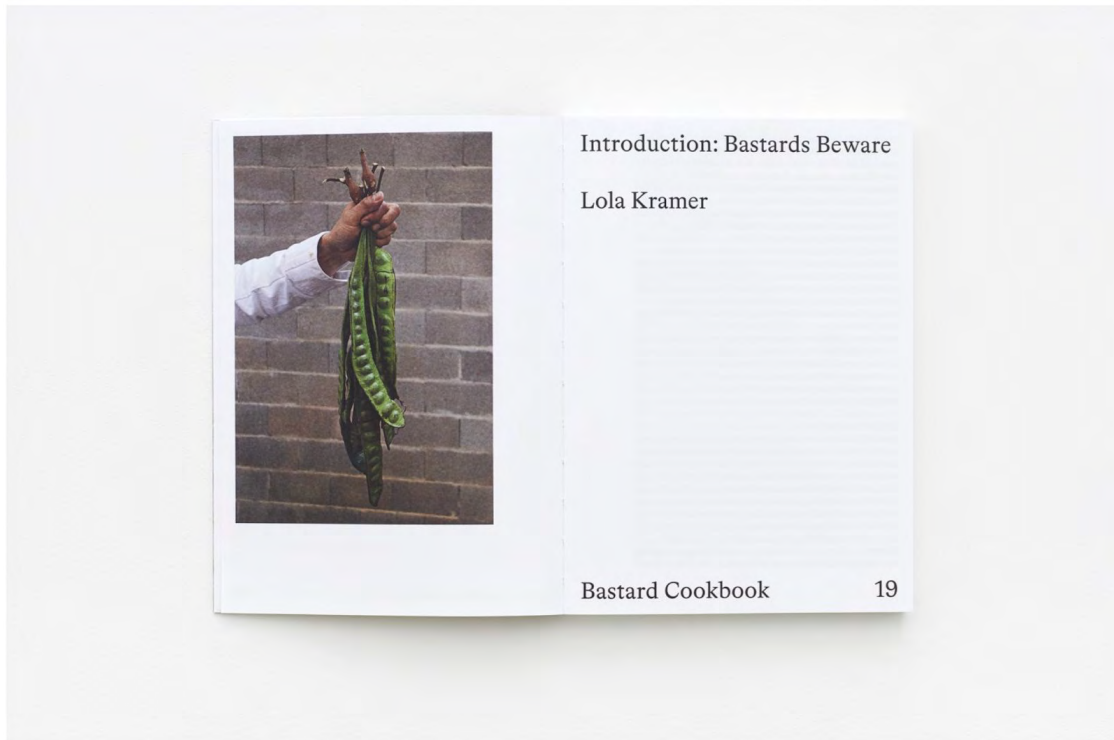


The cover of *Bastard Cookbook* (all photos by Petter Löfstedt)

Given the swagger of the title, when I opened the golden cover of Antto Melasniemi and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Bastard Cookbook*, I braced myself for the bravado of the chef, who is so often male in the professional kitchen. In spite of appearances, however, the recipes make clear that experimenting in the kitchen, for both of these cooks, is about the boldness of subtlety, the paradoxes of sameness embedded in difference, and the un-ironic pleasures of hospitality. If the flavors and traditions seem to clash, this is an intentional idiosyncrasy that is not an opportunistic device, but a vehicle that pulls together difference through shared pleasure and food.

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This cookbook is a collection of recipes that the Thai and Finnish duo banged out together in various locales across the globe. It is more too. The *Bastard Cookbook* is also a form of resistance to the seemingly insatiable two-headed monster of nationalism and xenophobia. It is an homage to co-creation rather than assimilation, and calls for the ultimate mashup of foods that may not have grown up together, but can certainly make friends without losing their respective identities. Indeed, the through thread of the various essays and interviews included take care to differentiate between the narrow category of the outdated (and much-maligned) “fusion” trend in favor of these less polite bastardizations. While fusion cooking may have called for a certain purity of ingredients to be recognized as such and respected for their traditional use, Melasniemi and Tiravanija call for a more instinctual synthesis of cooking methodologies and ingredients resulting in some pretty great sounding recipes — as well as some others that I would definitely taste, but might not go out of my way to cook up myself.



Lola Kramer's introduction in *Bastard Cookbook*

Soups kick off the recipes, with light Nordic salmon soup and tom kha kai soup galangal chicken, both respective staples of Finnish and Thai cuisine. This section ends with “Bastard Bouillabaisse,” not so much a recipe but rather a challenge to “Explore the alchemy of the soup by combining the ingredients and methods of the previous recipes as you dare. One should always cook and live without fear.” While this kind of language makes me resist an eyeroll, I appreciate the encouragement to experiment, which I think is the real aim of the book’s practical side. What follows is Tiravanija’s

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grandmother's pad Thai with egg, and a recipe for makaronilaatikko, or Finnish oven-baked macaroni casserole, each of which I would gladly sample. These are each, according to the book, the "most popular" dishes of Thailand and Finland, which are subsequently mashed up into kind of pad Thai mac and cheese. The fish section is perhaps the most compelling with a Thai cured salmon followed by Finnish cured fish and then the Bastard dish of Kaew's kaeng tai pla with fish sauce ice cream, which is evocatively described as "painfully spicy and has a full-bodied taste from the tai pla's fermented fish. Eating this dish can be an emotional experience." I believe it!



Chef Antto Melasniemi with Ms. Dedduang Jindafueng in *Bastard Cookbook*

If the mash ups are not universally appealing, the intermingling of narratives about Ms. Dedduang Jindafueng's return to her grandmother's recipe for artisanal fish sauce after losing her job to the 1997 Asian financial crisis, and the Moroccan baker who is renowned for his top-notch rye break in Helsinki, speak to the more philosophical contributions of this book. These stories are accompanied by straightforward and well-done photography that variously reveal the food being cooked, some glamour shots of ingredients, scenes from outside the kitchen, and, most compellingly, the environs where the cooking took place.

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The rice porridge recipe in *Bastard Cookbook*

In this context, the search for the “authentic” food experience is not only de-fetishized, but also rendered impossible. The bastards cook anything they want, whether or not (or maybe especially when) it sounds wrong, impure, contaminated, or adulterated. Early in Lola Kramer’s introduction, she refers to art historian Jörn Schafaff’s characterization of some of Tiravanija’s works as “reverse assimilation,” which is an apt description of what the Thai artist and Finnish chef attempt here. Most of their mashup recipes are relayed after first describing a “classical” version. But in many cases the classical is a bastard too. Consider the makaronilaatikko, made with elbow pasta, which came to Finland in the late 19th century: it’s ostensibly from Italy, or China, depending on who you talk to. The reality emerges that purity in cuisine (as well as in nationality) is a profound fiction. The deeper I waded into the book, the more I thought that Melasniemi and Tiravanija are telling us a story that is as old as dirt. The minute people meet they exchange their cultures, very commonly through food and hospitality, and some stuff sticks, becoming indecipherable from the “classical.” I’m thinking of the 16th century introduction of the tomato to Italian cuisine, from the indigenous Aztecs of South America via Spanish colonialism — it is difficult to imagine Italian cuisine today without the pomodoro. Tiravanija labels the hybrid “too polite” and Melasniemi calls authenticity “absurd” and yet they both play with these categories to fascinating, if sometimes hyperbolic, culinary and cultural ends. It’s a great read, and don’t be surprised if I test out the fish sauce ice cream on you next time you’re over for dinner.

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Finnish archipelago bread recipe in *Bastard Cookbook*

*Bastard Cookbook* by *Antto Melasniemi and Rirkrit Tiravanija* was published this year by *Garret Publications* and the *Finnish Cultural Institute in New York*, and is available from *Idea Books* and other online retailers.