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The Menu Poet

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Plotnik: The Menu Poet

THE MENU POET

Arthur Plotnik

Her early work appeared at Ed's Diner
(Akron), where she married the phrases
chicken-fried and *cheese-stuffed*
to the steak and omelette entries.

She knew that such savory items
as butternut squash, rack of lamb,
forest mushrooms, mousse and flan
could levitate menus on their own,

but Ed's menu lay flat in its grease
until she imagined dishes animated
by action verbs—energetic participles
of preparation, some topped by nouns

as in her first inspired couplet,
Pit-roasted thigh of wild antelope
in sesame-thickened mustard sauce,
for which uninspired Ed canned her.

In wintry midwest bistros she knew
dark times, as seen in the curious lines,
black corn masa-crêpes steamed and
rolled around inky corn mushrooms.

Mixed appetites met these efforts;
then, like fiery La Mancha wine sauce,
an epiphany came upon her, of verbs
to signal *fussing* on behalf of diners;

not the moiling of *baked* or *fricasseed*,
but the *crusting*, *dusting*, and *dotting*
once reserved for moguls and maharajas;
delicate actions of the *chefs de cuisine*.

In New York such participles as *doused*
and *brushed* caught the critics' notice,
and with her *Thai green-chili-rubbed*
fennel-marinated bass she dazzled them.

But the poet wrote not to please critics;
only to delight beloved diners, for whom
her menus sang of breasts *jalapeño-glazed*,
and loins *pistachio-cruste*d, *citrus-planked*.

Legend, doyenne of menuists, she aged
as gracefully as cognac until the year
she wilted like warmed salad leaves,
leaving for her epitaph these words:

No fruit but macerated,
no pear but maple-laced;
no torte but three-milk-soaked,
no death but ash-dusted,
earth-layered,
and dotted with tears.