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Hoosh

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ROAST PENGUIN, SCURVY DAY, *and*
Other Stories of **ANTARCTIC CUISINE**

JASON C. ANTHONY

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS
LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Set in Minion by Kim Essman.
Designed by Nathan Putens.

For my parents, Vaughn and Joanne Anthony

Hooshes to-day have been excellent in spite of a
decided tang of penguin guano.

—Raymond Priestley, *Antarctic Adventure*

I think that the palate of the human animal can
adjust itself to anything.

—Sir Ernest Shackleton, *South*

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PROLOGUE

A RECIPE FOR SOMETHING

A day before I flew by Twin Otter from Ross Island into the Transantarctic Mountains for a three-month deep field assignment, my friend Robert Taylor led me quietly into the McMurdo Station kitchen and surprised me with a dozen loaves of his exquisite bread. A slender, soft-spoken baker with a penchant for mischief, he knew he was helping me escape to the hinterlands with some of the best food in the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP). Into my knapsack went bundles of illicitly made olive, sweet potato, and plain sourdough, moist but with a firm crust.

“This is beautiful, Robert,” I said. “How can I repay you?”

“You can’t,” he said, and smiled sweetly. “Just have a good time, and when you come back tell me some stories.”

Ask anyone for stories of Antarctic cuisine, and they’re likely to go as blank as the ice continent itself. Antarctica lies somewhere beyond their imagination, or exists as the strange white mass smeared across the bottom of their cylindrical-projection world map. Often they’ll confuse it with the Arctic, where polar bears and Santa Claus roam the sea ice. With a little prompting, they may at least know Antarctica as the media depict it—the frigid home of penguins, icebergs, and undaunted scientists.

For me, it has been both a second home and a dreamlike otherworld of ice. For eight Antarctic summers, I lived and worked in the starkest landscape on Earth. I slept on a mass of ice larger than India and China combined, woke up flying over glaciers that overflow mile-high

mountains, and ate meals in a tent shaken so wildly by katabatic winds that I thought its destruction was imminent.

Antarctic ice is three miles deep in places. The growth of sea ice around the continent each winter is the greatest seasonal event on the planet, while the largest year-round terrestrial animal is a centimeter-long wingless midge, and plant life is confined to a few stony pockets within the 0.4 percent of Antarctica not covered in permanent snow or ice. Ninety percent of the planet's ice sits in Antarctic ice caps so hostile to human life that *nobody* stood on them until the twentieth century. The existence of Antarctica, the only significant realm actually discovered by colonizing Europeans, was not proved until 1820, and the continent's coastline was not fully sketched until the late 1950s.

Therefore, you may ask, is there really such a thing as a venerable Antarctic cuisine? In a word, no. Since the dawn of time, as far as we know, no human ate so much as a snack in the Antarctic region until Captain James Cook and his frostbitten sailors nibbled on biscuits as they dodged icebergs below the Antarctic Circle in 1773. Seal hunters made the first brief Antarctic landings by the austral summer of 1819–20, but no one sat down for a regular meal on the continent until 1898. Then, as now, what visitors to the Antarctic—and we are *all* visitors—sit down to are imported meals. There is no Antarctic *terroir*. The land does not provide, cannot provide, because there isn't a square foot of arable soil on the entire 5.4-million-square-mile continent in which to plant a garden. There have been, however, two other sources for the Antarctic diet: the flavors people bring with them, and the flavors of the Southern Ocean, meaning the flesh of seals, penguins, and sea birds raising their young on the Antarctic shoreline. Antarctic culinary history is a mere century of stories of isolated, insulated people eating either prepackaged expedition food or butchered sea life. In recent decades, with kinder, more complex menus, each nation's research base enjoys a limited version of its own home cuisine.

If the mother of Antarctic cuisine was necessity, its father was privation. Hunger was the one spice every expedition carried. As Lieut. Kristian Prestrud of the 1911–12 *Fram* expedition said, “To a man who is

really hungry it is a very subordinate matter *what* he shall eat; the main thing is to have *something* to satisfy his hunger.” Rations for sledging expeditions were minimal and monotonous.

Sustenance ruled over sensitivity. Thus, the heroes and stoics of Antarctic history scribbled in their journals about seal steaks and breast of penguin, about pemmican and biscuit crumbs boiled in tea. About dog flesh and caches of pony meat. About “hoosh,” the bleak Antarctic soup of meat and melted snow. About scurvy and dying hungry.

Properly defined, hoosh is a porridge or stew of pemmican and water, often thickened with crushed biscuit. Pemmican was originally a Native American high-energy food made of dried, shredded meat, mixed with fat and flavored with dried berries. Antarctic pemmican differed in substance—commercial beef and beef fat rather than wild meat—and appearance—compacted, uniform, measured blocks.

The word *hoosh* is a cognate of *hooch*, itself a corruption of the Tlingit *hoochinoo*, meaning both a Native American tribe on Admiralty Island, Alaska, and the European-style rotgut liquor that they made. Hooch became common slang throughout North America for bootleg liquor, particularly during Prohibition, while for British polar explorers, hoosh came to mean the meat stew of the ravenous. Etymologies for hoosh have assumed a strictly Antarctic usage, but I’ve found it used comfortably in British naval documents of the 1875 Nares Arctic Expedition. No doubt it has earlier Arctic usage as well. By the time it reached southern polar waters, it resonated. “Hoosh—what a joyous sound that word had for us,” said Frank Worsley, captain of the *Endurance*. And indeed, the onomatopoeic sound of it—like the *whoosh* of the Primus stove bringing their stew to a boil—must have been music to their ears.

All of which shows how Antarctica’s sad state of culinary affairs has been framed by a truly rich history on this terra incognita. Here, at the bitter end of terrestrial exploration, where year-round occupation preceded the invention of the microwave oven by only a few years, food has rarely had a more attentive, if helpless, audience. Cold, isolation, and a lack of worldly alternatives have conspired to make Antarctica’s captive inhabitants desperate for generally lousy food.

My Antarctic captivity—quite voluntary—occurred between 1994 and 2004. I worked various jobs in the USAP—waste management specialist, fuels operator, cargo handler, field camp supervisor—as part of the U.S. community from which scientists ventured out to gather data. Occasionally, I worked more closely with these researchers, but like most Antarctic residents, I had little to do with science. This surprises most people to whom I tell my Antarctic stories. They hear in the media that Antarctica is lightly populated with teams of bold researchers, funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) to bring home information for the benefit of humanity. There is some truth in this, certainly, as the entire population of the continent in the busy summer research season (nearly five thousand) is less than a small town back home, and there are many bold and useful science projects being done by brilliant scientists under difficult conditions. What few people know, however, is that only 20 percent of residents are there for scientific research. The rest of us create and maintain the infrastructure that makes this science possible. In Antarctica, where children are as rare as flowers, it takes a village to raise a scientist.

By far the largest “village” in Antarctica is McMurdo, the USAP hub on Ross Island in the Ross Sea, 2400 miles due south of our deployment point in Christchurch, New Zealand. (The second largest base, the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station—with up to 240 summer residents—is also an American installation.) Most Antarctic bases are populated by ten to one hundred multitaskers. McMurdo, however, bustles with up to twelve hundred people in the austral summer months (October through February, when the northern half of the planet is in winter), the vast majority of them dining-room attendants, carpenters, plumbers, general assistants, shuttle drivers, and so on. They bake the bread, clean the dormitory and office toilets, operate bulldozers, handle radio communications, and shovel snow. For the most part, my experience was their experience. While by the end of my decade I’d had my share of excitement in the Antarctic wilderness, most of my time was spent in McMurdo, working ten hours a day and six days a week with friends in a workaday triangle between dormitory, job, and cafeteria.

And though it seems strange to say, this mundane experience makes my perspective on Antarctica unusual. While most books from the Antarctic have been written by explorers, journalists, historians, and scientists, those notables have made up only a small minority of Antarctica's inhabitants. Many of the working residents have stayed longer and seen more, but over the last century, only a few support workers (out of tens of thousands) have published books. In the history of the U.S. Antarctic Program, the largest group of humans on the ice, only two have done so. Jim Mastro's *Antarctica: A Year at the Bottom of the World*, in 2002, and Nicholas Johnson's *Big Dead Place*, in 2005, were the first to give voice to our neglected majority. These books stand apart from the typical Antarctic travelogue, wherein the usual facts of harsh weather and cute penguins ornament a rare journey (expeditions) or an irrelevant one (a journalist's three-week tour). Rather, Jim, Nicholas, and I have written from the wealth of experience we gathered during long austral stints, returning year after year to a community rich in oral history and deeply connected to the strange Antarctic landscape.

We share our occupation of the barren landscape with the ghosts of early exploration. Men (and they were all men for the first eighty years) from four different expeditions during the early twentieth century struggled across the volcanic gravel McMurdo has since bulldozed for its roads and buildings. The wind-worn wooden shed on Hut Point—just beyond our massive cargo pier—is a remnant of Robert Falcon Scott's 1901 *Discovery* expedition, complete with rusting tins of meat on the interior shelves and a ninety-year-old seal carcass outside. As if in response, across town from Hut Point and looming over McMurdo like the final note in a fugue, a large jarrah-wood cross standing atop Observation Hill commemorates the deaths of Scott and his men on their 1912 *Terra Nova* expedition. On that final journey, starvation, malnutrition, and severe weather laid the men down just one hundred and thirty miles south of the hut and eleven miles away from their next depot of food.

In between *Discovery* and *Terra Nova*, Sir Ernest Shackleton led his *Nimrod* expedition across Hut Point en route to the South Pole, which, in the end, lay just ninety-seven miles beyond his grasp. He struggled

and starved his way back to the hut, just in time to set a shed ablaze in order to signal his northbound ship. Later, in 1915, the men of the *Aurora* (the second ship of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition, which planned to cross the continent to Ross Island via the Pole), passed under the shadow of Ob Hill as scurvy and storm claimed three of their lives.

Some forty years later, the modern age of Antarctic exploration began in earnest and the roots of McMurdo were laid in a massive operation by the U.S. Navy. Thousands of burger-fed sailors from several steel ships moved the makings of a tent city, and eventually a small prefab town, onto the ice-free shores of the southward-pointing Hut Point peninsula of Ross Island. Like the wood-and-canvas explorers that preceded them, the navy commanders appreciated that McMurdo provided the southernmost port on Earth. Antarctica was at their doorstep. From the late 1950s through the 1990s, the navy supported the NSF's science operation and established large camps in remote sites across the Antarctic, including the South Pole.

During my time on ice, our banter around the dining tables in McMurdo's galley (as the navy-built cafeteria has long been called) often includes reference to these outsized stories of Antarctic exploration. The early tales of men like Shackleton, Scott, and Roald Amundsen, and the navy's hard-won settlement of the ice, remind us of the harshness of the place in which we now eat soft-serve ice cream.

Antarctic history also provides an ethical framework for all our striving, and for a consideration of why we inhabit the ice and what good might be derived from our actions. Douglas Mawson, an Australian who knew more about Antarctic suffering than most, said that, in the midst of deprivation, "cocoa was almost intoxicating and even plain beef suet, such as we had in fragments in our hoosh mixture, had acquired a sweet and aromatic taste scarcely to be described . . . as different as chalk is from the richest chocolate cream." Are we Mawson's descendants or his antithesis? Either way, we revel in a cozy existence in a place that once sponsored such raptures over the benefits of starvation.

As on other frontiers, the successes, the failures, and the noble and ignoble exploits of our pioneers become essential narratives for those

of us who have settled into their footprints. As we find opportunities to leave McMurdo for more remote parts of the ice, and then sense the same human insignificance and fragility they experienced amid the Antarctic austerity, their storied past provides a literary and historic language by which to understand our experience.

My little exploit, the one Rob's bread was meant to feed, took place in the austral summer of 2001–2. I had been asked to take the lead in a new two-person camp in the Transantarctic Mountains, where we would build and maintain a runway on a minor seven-mile-wide thread of ice called the Odell Glacier.

I was told to pack everything we'd need for the full one hundred days on the Odell, because no one knew if there would be a resupply plane or helicopter available to send out an extra stick of butter. Still reeling from the task of planning three hundred meals—plus snacks—ahead of time, I was particularly pleased when Rob led me between the oversized cauldrons and gleaming bread racks of McMurdo's industrial kitchen toward his secret cache of sourdough. Looking surreptitiously behind us, he slipped into the walk-in freezer to grab two large bags.

I just stared at him. "This is real food, Robert. We may have to make an altar out of cardboard or ice or something and worship this while we munch on granola bars."

Rob rolled his eyes and smiled. "I hope you find a better use for it than that, Jason."

"I'm sure we will. Let's see, twelve loaves over a hundred days, that's . . . a loaf every eight days. Oh man, we are all set. This is great. Thank you so much."

"Of course. I'm happy to help. Just be careful out there and let me know how it goes."

I knew I'd have stories for Rob. Something was bound to happen. Two guys, three months, four tents, one glacier, and fifteen boxes of food. It was a recipe for something.