



GRAY

NAVIGATING
THE SPACE
BETWEEN LEGALISM
& LIBERTY

MAT-

TERS

BRETT McCracken



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Introduction

Into the Gray

Let me tell you about two friends of mine—both twenty-something Christians who grew up in the evangelical subculture and graduated from Christian colleges several years ago. The first—we’ll call him Lee—is a deeply pious, Bible-toting conservative who believes there’s pretty much no value in secular music, movies, and television. He’s something of a wet blanket at parties, always giving disapproving grimaces when he sees fellow Christians (gasp!) watch R-rated movies or (horror!) sip a fermented beverage. He’s well intentioned and a nice guy if you get to know him, but his indifference to art and culture (unless it can be purchased in a Christian bookstore) is bothersome, and his legalistic stance on media consumption can be downright noxious.

My other friend—let’s call him Lance—grew up in a household that espoused many of Lee’s legalistic views. However, in college, everything changed for Lance. He was introduced to secular music and foreign films, and he hung out mostly with art and sociology majors. He came to view his old fears of secular culture as ludicrous. He threw away his “Christian”

CDs and threw his arms wide open to any and every bit of envelope-pushing secular culture he could find. He started smoking—first cloves, then cigarettes, then pot—and especially relished lighting up when he was around more conservative fellow graduates of his evangelical college. He got drunk at any party where liquor was on hand. He learned to cuss with the best of them. No outside observer would have ever guessed that Lance—painfully desperate to distance himself from his legalistic youth—was a follower of Jesus Christ.

Between Legalism and License

Among the many things the divergent paths of Lee the Legalist and Lance the Libertine demonstrate is this unfortunate fact: Christians have a hard time with nuance. Gray areas are not our strong suit. It's way easier to just say yes or no to things, rather than "well, maybe, depending. . . ." But simple responses to complicated questions are exactly what lead to extremists like Lee and Lance.

Certainly there are *plenty* of places where a clear yes or no is absolutely appropriate, even necessary. But there are also many areas where it's not that black and white. God gives us minds with the capacity for critical thinking so that we might navigate the complexity of these less-straightforward areas of existence.

Culture, including what we consume or abstain from within culture, is one such gray area. The Bible doesn't give us easy answers about whether this or that HBO show is okay to watch, or whether it's appropriate for Christians to enjoy the music of Outkast. Scripture contains no comprehensive list of acceptable films, books, or websites. Contrary to what some Christians maintain, the Bible neither endorses nor forbids all sorts of things it could have been clearer about.

But scriptural silence about the particularities of twenty-first-century media habits is no reason to just throw up one's hands and indulge in an "anything goes" free-for-all. Rather, it's an invitation to think about the gray areas more deeply, to wrestle with them based on what Scripture *does* say and what we've come to know about the calling of Christians in this world. The gray areas matter.

Christians have a tendency to approach secular culture from one of two opposite extremes. On one extreme you have Christians (like Lee) who separate from it completely, opting instead to hide away in an alternative "Christian culture." They fear the corrupting influences of the secular realm and, out of fear (some of it well-founded), try to regulate it through legalism or else avoid it completely.

The other extreme (the Lance type of Christian) emphasizes "arms wide open" Christian liberty and exercises little discernment in what, if anything, is unsuitable for Christian consumption. This approach—pretty widespread among my generation of millennial Christians—tends to overcompensate for the stifling excesses of "hands off!" legalism but in the end is just as problematic for its uncritical embrace of things that are hardly worthy or edifying for the Christian life. In the introduction to the fantastic book *Everyday Theology*, theologian Kevin Vanhoozer writes,

We must therefore do all that we can to resist two opposing temptations, each equally dangerous inasmuch as each compromises the integrity of the church's mission. The first is an uncritical acceptance of and fascination with the newfound religiosity and spirituality of popular culture. The second is to write off popular culture as one more symptom of sinful rebellion.¹

I would concur and add that both of these extreme positions toward culture err in that they both tend to look at

culture as a monolith—either one big vice factory or one big funhouse of goodness. Both of these positions lack nuance and critical thought, and both have a tendency to turn culture into something that can be used to make a point rather than something that can truly enrich lives.

I've seen so many Lance-type Christians my age who, after having grown up in a somewhat legalistic, church-centric environment—usually where drinking and dancing and all manner of potential vice were outlawed—make a point of showing themselves to be *anything but* legalistic in their adulthood. They gamble, they smoke, they carry flasks; they tell people how much they love the (envelope-pushing) films of Todd Solondz and Pedro Almodóvar. Certainly some of them probably do find pleasure in these things and approach them with intentionality, but I suspect that a lot of their cultural consumption is driven by a concerted effort to distance themselves from the legalism of their youth. In this way, they *use* culture to shore up a part of their identity in which they have issues or vulnerability (in this case, the “Christians are legalistic” chip on their shoulder).

Likewise, I've seen plenty of Christians who *use* culture in another way. Perhaps a film is family friendly and contains some sort of moral lesson. Christians, pastors, and churches are often quick to embrace films like this through which they can make a point or evangelize. Or maybe a famous actor or musician turns out to be a Christian. Soon they show up on the covers of evangelical magazines, make the youth group speaking circuit, and become “owned” by Christians as a sort of signal to secular culture that “Christians can be just as successful in media as anyone else.” In these instances, the cultural objects themselves are given little critical attention; they are merely used by Christian consumers for their own personal agendas.

In *An Experiment in Criticism*, C. S. Lewis has plenty to say about “using” versus “receiving” art and culture. Using art, says Lewis, deprives us of the true benefits we might enjoy if only we relinquished our insistence on control. “We are so busy doing things with the work,” says Lewis, “that we give it too little chance to work on us. . . . ‘Using’ is inferior to ‘reception’ because art, if used rather than received, merely facilitates, brightens, relieves or palliates our life, and does not add to it.”²

Tragically, culture is frequently relegated to the “facilitates, brightens, relieves, palliates” realm. We use alcohol to soothe our nerves or to numb our pain, food to satiate hunger, movies to titillate, fashion to make a point, and so on. But is there more in culture to appreciate beyond these surface-level satiations? What can be discovered about the world, about the beauty of creation, if we dare go deeper into the gray? It’s a risk, going deeper—to plunge into the depths, the complexity, the potentially hazardous ocean of culture. But there are so many treasures to be found.

Culture Making and Culture Consuming

When I was a kid, I wanted to be an architect. I loved drawing pictures and floor plans of buildings. I spent weeks designing everything from houses to high schools to amusement parks themed around Old Testament stories (my “Plagues of the Nile” white-water rafting ride would have been awesome). As a fifth grader I read *Architectural Digest* while my mom stood in line at the supermarket. But alas, when I opted to go to a college that didn’t have an architecture program, my creative ambition to be the next Frank Gehry faded.

That’s when I thought I might want to be a filmmaker. Movies had been another great passion of mine, and ever

since the moment in high school when I first saw Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, I dreamed about becoming a director. I started writing scripts. I took film classes and spent a semester in Los Angeles learning the ropes of "the industry." All the while, I was writing film reviews, something I'd been doing since my freshman year of college.

At some point I realized that when it came to my passion for the art of film, perhaps what I enjoyed even more than making films was the process of closely *watching* films, thinking deeply about them, and writing about them. It was a hard thing to give up on the dream of being the next Terrence Malick, but I realized that perhaps being the next Roger Ebert was just as noble a goal.

I decided to go to graduate school in cinema and media studies at UCLA, which happened to be the same program that a film theorist I admired—Paul Schrader—attended. During the two years I was there, countless people asked me what I planned to do with my master's degree. Will you be a director? Screenwriter? Producer? Some gave confused looks when I answered that no, I didn't want to make films; I just wanted to be a better consumer of them.

Perhaps this could be an activity just as God-honoring as my dreams of building skyscrapers and directing Oscar-winning films might have been. Perhaps the activity of discerning culture—sifting through it to highlight its most worthy and discard its most unredeemable—is as essential as the activity of making culture.

Thus this is not a book about *making* culture. It's a book about *consuming* culture well: discerningly, maturely, thoughtfully. It's about being so intentional, so careful, so passionate about getting the most out of the cultural goods we consume that those around us can't help but wonder: Why do we care so much?

I'm a big believer that if anyone is going to be a good *creator* of culture—whether filmmaker, musician, poet, chef, or writer—they had better first be a good *consumer* of it. Great filmmakers can discern important films from mediocre ones. Great chefs appreciate exceptional food and, over time, develop a refined palette that knows which cheese goes best stuffed in which kind of dried fruit and with which kind of garnish.

But we live in a world that beckons us to create. To be a consumer of culture is no longer good enough, it seems. And it's easier than ever to be a creator. Get out your computer and go to work on Pro Tools or Final Cut. Start a blog. Film a movie on your cell phone and upload it to YouTube. Launch an Etsy page for your handcrafted stationery. Become a Twitter journalist. A Pinterest wedding planner.

Meanwhile, social media like Facebook and Twitter reinforce our sense of self-importance, urging us to say whatever is on our minds because some audience, somewhere, really wants to know. On top of this, we've grown up being told by parents, teachers, presidents, principals, and most everyone else that we can be or do whatever we wish. The horizons are infinite. So *of course* we're not satisfied to just appreciate other people's creations or consume other people's products. We believe we too have something to contribute.

In many cases this is true. We do have things to contribute. We are all, each of us, imbued with creativity by a Creator. We have minds and abilities with immense potential for making beautiful things and for making sense of the world around us. Each of us does have something to add, but it doesn't always have to be in the form of a new created work. Sometimes what we contribute is just our thankfulness and understanding. Sometimes the most significant thing we can do for culture is simply to seek it out passionately and thoughtfully, to receive

it well, and to support the further creation and appreciation of it. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to consume a piece of culture in moderation, or not at all.

Being Better Consumers

This book is for any Christian who lives in an environment where the commodities of popular culture (clothes, music, movies, food, alcohol, television, etc.) are ubiquitous and consumed on a regular basis. Which is pretty much every Christian. Ours is an ecology of cultural consumption.³

It has been well established that Christians can find value in exploring secular pop culture. Boatloads of books, conferences, and blog posts in evangelical circles have offered a needed corrective over the last few decades, making the case that Christians should actually care about engaging pop culture rather than separating from it or ignoring it. That's great. We've come a long way.

What I'm interested in is not so much making the case for the good of culture (because the case, I believe, has already been made—see the sidebar “15 Books on Christians and Culture”). I'm interested in making the case for a more *mature consumption* of culture. It's not enough to just affirm the value of “engaging culture.” That's black-and-white thinking. We must do the work of engaging it *well*. Consuming culture is something we do every day and won't stop doing. So why not do it better?

My goal in this book is to help us think about how a healthy consumption of culture honors God, enriches the Christian's life, strengthens community, and advances the Christian mission. I intend it to be a guidebook for anyone who wishes to better integrate their Christian identity with their habits of cultural consumption.

15 Books on Christians and Culture

- Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941)
- Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (1951)
- Francis A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible* (1973)
- Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (1980)
- Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action: Toward a Christian Aesthetic* (1980)
- Jeremy Begbie, *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation Through the Arts* (2000)
- Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2001)
- Robert K. Johnson, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (2000)
- William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Pop Culture* (2007)
- Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Charles A. Anderson, and Michael J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (2007)
- D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (2008)
- Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling* (2008)
- James K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Kingdom Formation* (2009)
- Makoto Fujimura, *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* (2009)
- David O. Taylor, *For the Beauty of the Church: Casting a Vision for the Arts* (2010)

What Is Cultural Consumption?

Consumer is a four-letter word to many in the world today, mostly because of its association with the concept of “consumerism,” the great bogeyman of capitalistic society that

leaves a trail of trash, credit card debt, high-fructose corn syrup, and candy wrappers wherever it goes.

But at its most basic level, *consumer* is a neutral word. It refers to those people who buy things (i.e., everybody). It's about commerce—the exchanging of money for goods—and it doesn't have to be a bad thing. We are all consumers. Almost daily we participate in economic transactions for goods and experiences that we consume for a price.

One of this book's aims is to rehabilitate the term *consumption*, which in our world today most often connotes something indulgent, reckless, and altogether unseemly: capitalism run amok. But when done well, consumption—the receiving of a product at the other end of production—can be a healthy, wonderful activity that contributes to personal growth as well as broader human flourishing.

Part of why *consumer* enjoys such a poor reputation is because we've cheapened the process of consuming. We've been bad consumers. We've been reckless in both the scale (overindulging) and the selectivity (undiscerning) of our consumer habits. We've been too prone to fall for glossy advertising, too undisciplined to resist what we know isn't good for us, and too willing to make consumer choices based mostly on questions like “Will it make me look cool?”

But now, of all times, we should not be haphazard in how we consume. Why? Because consumerism is now irrevocably bound up with identity. Technology has made our consumption all the more conspicuous. Our consumer lives are fully on display on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Amazon, Instagram, and other sites yet to come where we willingly, deliberately identify ourselves by the brands, books, bands, and products we like. On our “profiles,” we are defined by our “likes,” so that who we are to the world appears mostly

as an ingredient listing of consumer tastes and preferences. Regrettable though it may be, consumerism has become the front line of our witness, the outer layer of identity.

Therefore, in this fast-paced, consumerism-as-social-media-identity world, we as Christians must be more intentional about being present, active, and critical in our consumer choices. People are watching. We are observed, processed, known through our consumptive habits. What message are we sending?

We should also be passionate about engaging culture well because we want to know God more through his creation. We should live our consumer lives with the overarching goal of wanting to “taste and see that the LORD is good” (Ps. 34:8), understanding that God speaks to us everywhere—in food and drink, in melodies and rhythms, in the multiplex and the church sanctuary, on the beach or atop a mountain. Indeed, “The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it” (Ps. 24:1).

We should be better consumers because at the end of the day, the very activity of consuming is an extravagant gift of God. We don’t deserve it. But we have it nonetheless. So let’s make the most of it.

Ways We Cheapen Consumption

- By consuming solely to satiate temporary desires
- By consuming as a means of escaping our lives, fleeing problems
- By consuming too quickly
- By consuming primarily as a status-marking activity
- By consuming as a means of rebellion
- By overindulging
- By amassing “stuff” just to have more
- By discarding things when bored with them

Cultured Christians

We need more cultured Christians—not in the sense of being fashionable, well-heeled aristocrats who frequent the opera and attend gallery openings but simply in the sense that we take the consumer role seriously and approach culture with nuance, intentionality, and an open mind.

Cultured Christians are willing to explore all sorts of things in the realm of art and culture, even if they ultimately don't accept all of it. They're brave enough to try new things but wise enough to know that not everything is valuable or edifying.

Cultured Christians recognize how complex, ambiguous, and personal words like *edifying* and *discernment* are, and they accept that there is no easy formula or checklist for Christians wondering whether something is or isn't appropriate. Nevertheless, they recognize that the question is important, and they accept the challenge.

Cultured Christians don't treat culture as a mercenary, using it only to improve their own status in the world (by wearing fashionable clothes, name-dropping esoteric indie bands, etc.). They love culture for its inherent goodness, truth, or beauty. Not for what it can do for them.

Cultured Christians don't care about "the scene." They don't choose a bar or restaurant because it's a hot spot but because of its quality. They aren't ashamed to like Coldplay, college basketball, superhero movies, or any number of other consumables just because they have mass appeal. They embrace culture because they deem it valuable, regardless of what the "in crowd" says.

Cultured Christians don't rush to judgment. They don't look at something fancy on a menu and say, "No thanks. I'll go with what I know!" They don't walk out of a difficult, complex film saying, "I didn't get it. What a waste of my time." They understand that good things in culture rarely

lend themselves to immediate and easy understanding. It takes time, effort, the development of taste, and a patient sensibility to get the most out of culture.

Cultured Christians recognize the global impact of healthy, thoughtful consumption. They consider factors such as sustainability, fair trade, and the origins of the products they consume. Beyond trendiness, they take time to learn what “grass fed” actually means and why “locally grown” may be a good thing.

Cultured Christians don’t separate the realm of culture from the realm of faith. They don’t pit their Christianity in opposition to culture or understand their faith as being uninformed or uninfluenced by culture. They avoid looking at things in terms of sacred/secular dichotomies, recognizing that common grace lends dignity to all manner of cultural activity—even while they recognize that common grace isn’t the same as *saving* grace.

Cultured Christians recognize that there are good things within culture that, when recklessly received or abused, can become evil, but that in moderation, these things can still be good. For cultured Christians, moderation is key—moderation not in the sense of compromise or lukewarm tepidness but in the sense of knowing that the best of things often comes in small doses.

Cultured Christians are not pendulum people. They aren’t always reacting against some bad iteration of the faith by going too far in the other direction. They embrace the stasis of the middle—the pendulum at rest—because it is in that nonreactive space where a true, deep, rewarding appreciation of culture can occur.

Eating, Drinking, Hearing, and Seeing the Glory of God

Part of living as a Christ follower in the here and now is recognizing—sometimes all too painfully—that the here and

now is not what we were made for, that the world as it is only offers glimpses of the world as it is meant to be (and will be again, in the new creation). But within the bittersweet, keenly felt absences of the heart lies a stirring hope—an inkling that our present and future pleasures are linked, that the experience of great-tasting food, transcendent music, or beautiful images now is but a practice for our future enjoyments.

As C. S. Lewis writes in *The Weight of Glory*,

At present, if we are reborn in Christ, the spirit in us lives directly on God; but the mind and, still more, the body receives life from Him at a thousand removes—through our ancestors, through our food, through the elements. The faint, far-off results of those energies which God’s creative rapture implanted in matter when He made the world are what we now call physical pleasures; and even thus filtered, they are too much for our present management. What would it be to taste at the fountainhead that stream of which even these lower reaches prove so intoxicating? Yet that, I believe, is what lies before us. The whole man is to drink joy from the fountain of joy.⁴

One day we will drink from the fountainhead, but that we can even now drink from the lower reaches means that consuming good things has a purpose in this life. Enjoyment of food exists. Why? A recognition of pleasant-sounding harmony exists. Why? Because God receives glory when we take pleasure in his creation. Thus, we must take that project seriously: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). We must live for the glory of God *now*, as a foretaste of the life to come.

This book is about pursuing God and giving him glory as mature, nuanced consumers of the “gray areas” of culture. I’ll be focusing on four areas of pop culture that we don’t often think about as necessarily theological: food, pop music,

movies, and alcohol. Indeed, some of these areas have had a historically volatile relationship with evangelical Christianity.

The book begins with food, because we all eat food. It's a daily activity of cultural consumption (whether or not we think of it as "culture"), and by considering what it means to "eat Christianity," we will set the stage for further explorations in the book. This section then gives way to a discussion of popular music—one of the most explosive and emotional areas of contested culture within Christianity, but also one of the most widely beloved. Pretty much everyone listens to music and bonds with others over it. The third area of culture we'll explore is film, often a flashpoint for debates about what is and isn't appropriate for Christians' consumption. And finally we'll tackle the ever-controversial and highly debated topic of alcohol. Younger evangelicals largely affirm alcohol; in many cases their parents do not. Is there an appropriate, moderate balance when it comes to the Christian consumption of alcohol?

Seven key themes will guide this discussion of consuming culture well. First is the recognition that partaking in culture is part of our *mission*. Kevin Vanhoozer says, "The most compelling reason I can give for learning to read culture is that the mission of the church demands it."⁵ As missionaries tasked with the spreading of Christ's kingdom and the stewardship of God's creation, we simply cannot make a dent if we are lazy cultural interpreters. The world watches Christians and how they interact with culture. Do we protest it? Boycott it? Fund it? Abuse it? Learning to be healthy, thoughtful creators and consumers of culture is vital for our witness as ambassadors of Christ on earth.

A second theme is the idea that mature cultural consumption requires wise *stewardship* of resources. Consumer power is economic power, and what we choose to support with

our money says a lot about the kind of consumers we are. Third is the recognition that *community* plays a vital role in our partaking of culture. Most of the time, consuming culture isn't just an isolated activity but rather takes place among other people; this is a blessing that gives consumption another layer of meaning. A fourth theme is the notion that enjoying God's good creation is an act of *worship*—that more than culture being just banal, everyday diversions or enjoyments, receiving culture is in some sense the receiving of grace, which is something for which we should praise God. Fifth is the value of cultivating *taste* in the process of consuming culture. It's the idea that we get the most out of culture when we take the time to refine our taste and expand our palates. A corollary to taste is *discernment*, the ability to critically assess the relative merits, truth, goodness, and beauty of a complicated aspect of culture, which also takes work. The final key theme is the notion that the healthiest enjoyment of culture requires *moderation*—the idea that too much of anything good can become bad, just as wholesale abstinence from something wonderful can also be a bad thing.

My hope is that each of these themes will equip us to be better navigators of cultural gray areas, resisting the polarities of legalism and absolute liberty by becoming more discerning both in *what* we consume and in *how* we consume it. My hope is that we will each come to a fuller appreciation of the finer things in life, the glories and goodness of God's common grace, and that we would worship the Creator ever more through receiving the fruits of his creation.

So often we blaze through life, moving from temporary enjoyment to temporary enjoyment, haphazardly consuming things so that none of it ever grows us in any significant way. But I know we can be better. And I know that if we take

the time to really dig in and do the work of being the best consumers of culture we can be, it will not only enhance our faith and witness but also glorify God. He's the source of everything good, after all, and he makes everything good taste, sound, look, and feel all the more magnificent.



PART 1

EATING

We all eat. We eat to live. It's required for survival on this planet. In that way, this section is unique among the four parts of this book. We can survive without music, without movies, without alcohol. But we cannot live without food.

That food is necessarily a part of our day-to-day lives means that the question of how we consume it is incredibly important. If we are spending so much of our lives doing this thing—ingesting various plants, animals, sugars, and grains, multiple times a day—shouldn't we take at least some time to consider how this activity does or does not edify our lives, or whether or not it brings us closer to God and to other people? Is food simply a necessary evil, a bodily requirement that annoyingly requires lots of money, time, and (occasionally) indigestion on a weekly basis?

Are we consuming food in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ? That may sound like a silly question, and indeed, for many of us the whole notion of food as a spiritual discipline or missional activity might be a new idea. But if we are talking about being cultured Christians—believers who receive culture well and consume things in a healthy and mature manner—we should not neglect a discussion of food.

Food is the ultimate in global pop culture. Every day, across the world, billions of people eat. Each person receives food as sustenance, but sometimes also as a meaningful pleasure. They receive it around tables, with friends, after a long day of work, as part of festivals or celebrations. They taste it and savor it, satiating not only their physical body but their emotional and spiritual being. Food brings us pleasure, sometimes even joy. How can we get the most out of food? Is there a biblical approach to food? Why does food simultaneously bring about such pleasure and such stress, and what does a healthy approach to consuming it look like? The following two chapters ask those questions, first by looking at biblical themes related to food and then by applying them to our modern world.

* * * * *

Interlude

Food as Worship

* * * * *

It may sound lofty and pretentious to describe food as worship. All I know is that when I took my first bite of chicory-rubbed filet mignon in bordelaise sauce on a Sunday afternoon in 2010, it felt like tasting a little bit of heaven. It felt like the pleasure of God.

That filet mignon was one course of a ten-course dinner prepared by my friend Jessica Kemp, who does things with food I've never seen done before. And this meal, in which each course was creatively inspired by one of Jessica's favorite songs of the year, was unsurpassed in the pantheon of great meals I've ever had.

At this dinner, which probably lasted six hours or more, seven friends and I enjoyed mind-blowing homemade delicacies: quail confit with poached kumquats, tempura basil and sage, blue cheese ice cream with Madeira poached fig and wildflower sage honey, and a strawberry rose milkshake with rose-laced cream.

How could I not experience God through food like that—sitting in good company, enjoying never-before-tasted flavor combinations, anxiously awaiting the next carefully concocted course, and never getting full? (The courses were all nearly bite-sized.)

Dinners like this can be worshipful experiences. In community, with hours and hours of conversation and exquisite cuisine, how can our thoughts not orient us toward God in thanksgiving for friends, creativity, and the fact that he gave us tongues to taste and not just stomachs to fill?