Why Food Matters

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We who read this journal know food is important. There is in fact nothing more basic than food. Food is the first of the essentials of life, our biggest industry, our greatest export, our most frequently indulged pleasure, and also the object of considerable concern and dread. What we eat and how we eat may also be the single most important cause of disease and death. On the positive side, food is central to our personal and cultural identities. In Kitchens, his elegant study of the culture of restaurant work, Gary Alan Fine writes: "Food reveals our souls. Like Marcel Proust reminiscing about a madeleine or Calvin Trillin astonished at a plate of ribs, we are entangled in our meals. The connection between identity and consumption gives food a central role in the creation of community, and we use our diet to convey images of public identity" (1996:1). Food reveals who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be. As the old saying goes, we are what we eat, and we also are what we do not eat.

Food also has tremendous historical importance. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues that the domestication of plants and nonhuman animals for food in the Neolithic era (10,000 years ago) was "probably the single greatest technical achievement in the human record, more important than the internal combustion engine or nuclear energy. It was, from the beginning and long before these other triumphs, a remarkable way to capture and control energy" (Mintz quoted from Hirschoff and Kotler 1989:115–116). We also know that the European exploration and settlement of the Americas had a lot to do with food. As Henry Hobhouse writes in Seeds of Change, "The starting point for the European expansion out of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic continental shelf had nothing to do with, say, religion or the rise of capitalism—but it had a great deal to do with pepper. The Americas were discovered as a byproduct in the search for pepper" (Hobhouse 1985:xi). And out of that search for pepper came the foods of the Columbian Exchange—corn, potatoes, beans, tomatoes, chocolate, and so on—that revolutionized the diet, economy, social structure, and politics of the entire world (Viola and Margolis 1991).

I think we all know this. And yet not long ago, at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, I spoke at a session whose title—"Why American Studies Scholars Should Study Food"—implied a certain defensiveness about the subject at hand. Looking at the ASA program I did not see any panels devoted to justifying the study of gender, race, movies, or music. I think those battles were won long ago, or at least I hope so. But when it comes to telling others about our interests, we food scholars may still evoke a sense of surprise. It is not really a matter of outright disrespect, but rather, bemused wonder. In part, some people are surprised when academics do anything that touches on daily life. Thus I have received a similar reaction when I tell people that I have taught courses about the automobile (perhaps the single most important technology organizing the American landscape, economy, and social life) and television (one of the most powerful cultural influences). And there are, of course, those conservatives who regret any academic deviation from the canon of political history, classic literature, and dominant Anglo-American values (see Levine 1996).

But it is more than that with food. I sense people are not just amazed or amused, they are also threatened. They fear I might spoil their dinner. Now that I have developed a reputation as the one and only "food person" at my university, I have noticed that at every reception I attend, people almost dare me to analyze the hors d'oeuvres, to tell them how bad those chicken fingers and pigs-in-blankets really are. I guess thinking seriously about food in our times is a little dangerous. Considering how complex and chemicalized our hyper-capitalistic global food system is, it is so much easier to enjoy dinner in peaceful oblivion.

I suspect that all "food people" face similar responses at their respective institutions. But what about my own research discipline, history? It is safe to say that food has been largely invisible in academic history. True, there are many amateur antiquarians and enthusiasts who have written histories of particular foods, dishes, cooks, or traditions. While such accounts perform invaluable service in preserving information and traditions, these histories rarely pay much attention to the things that interest professional historians: power, social relations, and context. But you could look through ten years' worth of programs of the annual meetings of the Organization of American Historians or the American Studies Association and not find more than a handful of sessions (out of thousands) devoted to food.1

The great French naturalist Jean Henry Fabre (1823–1915) wrote, "History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby
we thrive; it knows the names of the King's bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. That is the way of human folly." To be sure historians are a lot more interested in social history these days—life at the grassroots—but they still largely ignore the grass itself that makes life possible. And young scholars who are interested in food history are routinely advised not to go near the subject until their second book, after tenure.

Recently I was reminded of my profession's inattentiveness to food as a factor in history when I was doing some research on my new project, which I call "A History of the Future of Food"—an examination of the way the future of the food system has been represented over the past two hundred years. As part of this project I am looking at what is certainly one of the heavier issues: will we ever run out of food? This is the old Malthusian question of whether population growth will outstrip gains in agricultural productivity. For the most part Americans have been quite optimistic, indeed Cornucopian, when contemplating the future. But there have been at least four cycles of neo-Malthusian gloom over the last century: the turn of the century, the 1920s, the 1940s, and the 1960s. In looking at the neo-Malthusians of the 1920s I, like other historians, was struck by how racist many of them were in their advocacy of birth control, eugenics, and immigration restriction. So for background on their bigotry I turned to fine historians like John Higham (1955) for perspective on nativism, Linda Gordon (1974) and Carole McCann (1994) on birth control, and Daniel Kevles (1985) on eugenics. While these scholars had much to tell me about the neo-Malthusians' cultural and political context, not one mentioned a persistent theme in all the primary documents I read: a deep-seated fear that in an overpopulated future world, Anglo-Americans would be reduced to what they called a "coolie diet"—an Asian peasant cuisine heavy on grains and light on Anglo-American beef (e.g., East 1924; Pitkin 1921; Pearl 1922). It might be a stretch to argue that American nativism or the birth control movement was just a do-or-die struggle to defend the right to eat beefsteak, but I am impressed (and depressed) by my colleagues' blindness to that fundamental belly issue.

To be sure a few of us are writing about food, but often for reasons related to other research agendas. Food is not always the primary motivation for the inquiry. Thus, labor historians writing about unionization might get involved with food when they look at migrant farmworkers, slaughterhouses, or canneries (Barrett 1987; Levenstein 1988). Women's historians might look at housework, home economics, or anorexia to illustrate gendered power relations (Strasser 1982; Brumberg 1988; Shapiro 1986; Bentley 1998). Agricultural historians will obviously tell us about farming, but like many farmers, they are often more interested in economics and politics than in nutrition and cuisine (Fite 1981; Hart 1991; Coclanis 1998). As one agronomist told me, most conventional farmers are concerned with "production," not "food." Social historians, like sociologists, may be interested in organizational dynamics, stratification, or social construction (Mennell 1996; Gabaccia 1998). Cultural historians, like folklorists and literary analysts, are often less interested in food itself than in the role of food as a metaphor, symbol, an agent by which people communicate and interact (Nissenbaum 1980; Green 1986; Camp 1989; Marling 1994: 202–283).

I myself took this indirect path into food studies when I began the project that became Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry (1993). I started to look at the counterculture's critique of mainstream American cuisine not because I wanted to study the food system, but because I was interested in the hegemonic process: the way mainstream culture deals with subcultural dissent and deviancy. Originally I intended to treat the organic and natural foods movement as just one chapter in a series of case studies of "retailing revolt:" blue jeans, rock and roll, bikers, and so on. Only after I started the food chapter did I decide that issues of food production and distribution are important in themselves, and not just because they can illuminate some other dynamic or theory (in my case, hegemony). But my own repositioning of food from useful medium to primary focus is relatively rare. Many of the food scholars whose work I admire have moved on to other, non-food subjects, as if to say that food alone is not enough to sustain a scholarly career.

Why this puzzling shyness about food? Even though most historians seem to be avoiding food, I do think history has something to tell us about why people are surprised that food can be studied seriously, and more important, why people are so oblivious to food, especially to where it comes from and to the wider social, political, and psychological implications of our food behaviors.

The Protestant Ethic?

If this were the 1950s and if I were a classic "myth-and-symbol" Americanist (Smith 1950; Ward 1962; Lewis 1955), I might argue that our Puritan heritage renders us too guilt-ridden to consider such profane matters of the flesh. This is indeed a thesis suggested in Harvey Levenstein's two-volume history of modern American eating (1988, 1993) and in Peter Stearns's cultural history of fatness and body image (1997): that Americans are so hung up by Protestant prudery to enjoy their food and thus they periodically dive off the deep end into orgies of self-flagellating health food faddism and futile dieting. My response to this idea is two fold: First, whose Puritan heritage? (My family comes from eastern Europe.) And, second, if only this were true! Considering the environmental impact of this country's unrelenting consumerist self-indulgence, perhaps we need more Puritanism, not less.
But a part of me does believe in myths and symbols, so I will allow that there may indeed be some archetypal, dualistic disdain for something as mundane, corporeal, indeed animalistic as eating. "Put a knife to thy throat," urges Proverbs 23:2, "if thou be a man given to appetite." "Govern thy appetite well," advised the arch-Puritan, John Milton, "lest Sin Surprise thee, and her black attendant Death" (Milton [1667/1971] quoted from Egerton 1994). To some extent, we may still live with our Victorian (if not Puritan) heritage. The Victorians constructed many elaborate dining rituals partly because they harbored a deep suspicion of eating, which, like sex, they viewed as basically uncivilized (Brumberg 1988; Grover 1987; Ames 1992). The novelist Joyce Carol Oates puts it nicely: "Civilization is a multiplicity of strategies, dazzling as precious gems inlaid in a golden crown, to obscure from human beings the sound of, the terrible biochemistry of, their jaws grinding. The meaning of man's place in the food cycle that, by way of our imaginations, we had imagined might not apply to us" (1993: 25). In other words, food is gross.

Feminization of Food

Another factor has to do with the feminization of food and the food professions that have closest contact with the public: dietetics, home economics, and nutrition education. The care of food has been long been within women's sphere (as gatekeeper and cook), and women just have not been taken as seriously as men. The food professions, too, have long suffered from that gender bias. Attending conventions of the predominantly female Society of Nutrition Education, I have noticed a decided effort to be as positivistic and quantitative about food as the male biochemists are. The result is a lot of statistical reports on dietary intake, not all that much talk about eating (in complete defiance of Roland Barthes's much-quoted observation that food is more than a collection of nutrients). In the history of those professions we can find substantial middle-class/moralistic intolerance for the food practices of ordinary people, and the distrust is often mutual—thus there is strong popular resistance to prissy admonitions to "eat right" (Levenstein 1988:44-59, 98-108; Strasser 1982:206-207; Shapiro 1986:127-190).

Even though many more women are now in academia, many of them do not want to be associated with the traditional female ghetto of food studies. Feminists who do treasure their cooking heritage and skills may risk the skepticism and even scorn of colleagues. For example, when soliciting contributions to Through the Kitchen Window, a marvelous collection of women's writings about food and cooking, women's studies scholar Arlene Avakian was criticized for threatening women's "liberation" from the kitchen and was condescendingly asked how her "cookbook" was going (1997:1-9).

Technological Utopianism

The association by some feminists of cooking with enslavement leads to another major reason for food's relative invisibility: technological utopianism (Segal 1985). For millennia food has been associated with drudgery, especially for women and farmers. Since at least the early 19th century there has been a strong drive, in a sense, to "disappear" food, to make it less visible and less central as a burden or concern. Thus, at the turn of this century many feminist utopians embraced almost any idea that would get food out of the home and thus free up women: the meal in a pill (Dodd [1887] cited in Hayden 1981:134), foods synthesized from coal (Lane 1880), centralized kitchens (Hayden 1981), and "self-service" electric appliances and convenience foods (Kessler 1984; Strasser 1982:67-84). Similarly, farmer-utopians dreamed of push-button, fully automated factory farms as a way to save their children from back-breaking labor and rural isolation (Roemer 1976; Sweetland 1976). Today we can recognize that those dreams came true, in a perverse sort of way, but the result was further distancing from the traditional rituals and practices of food production.

Corporate Mystification

Even more important in distancing us from nature and tradition have been the efforts of the food industry to obscure and mystify the links between the farm and the dinner table. While these efforts were stepped up at the turn of the century, they actually date back much earlier, at least as far back as the first multinational food conglomerate, the East India Company, which was dedicated to bringing exotic foodstuffs to the British dining room and whose annual report in 1701 observed that "We taste the spices of Arabia yet never feel the scorching sun which brings them forth." In other words, this food company was rather proud that thanks to its noble service in distant lands, the average British consumer did not have to experience the strenuous (and sometimes violent) production processes by which his sausage got peppered or his tea sweetened.

Perhaps the most vivid recent example of how we no longer have to feel the "scorching sun" of food production is the meatpacking industry, whose main thrust over 150 years has been to insulate consumers from any contact with the disassembly of warm-blooded mammals into refrigerated, plastic-wrapped chops and patties. In his magnificent environmental history of Chicago, Nature's Metropolis, William Cronon writes that the meatpacking industry thrives on "forgetfulness." He observes, "In the packers' world it was easy not to remember that eating was a moral act inexorably bound to killing" (1991:256).
Today the "forgetfulness" applies not just to spices, tea, or meat, but to virtually everything we consume: tomatoes, bread, pasta, shrimp, and the like. Food is so vague in our culture in part because, thanks to processing, packaging, and marketing, it is an abstraction. As Wendell Berry writes, the ideal corporate customer today is the "industrial eater . . . who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical" (Berry 1989:126).

**From Critique to Praxis**

Now what do I think about this? After all, I do teach and write about food, and feel quite fulfilled and even respected for doing it. Here I cannot speak as an historian. I know of very few people who teach food history courses regularly. But in my American Studies department, almost anything goes, even food. Specifically I teach two courses: "American Food," and "The American Food Chain."³

"American Food" is an overview of the American food system: why do we eat what we do, what are the personal and social consequences of what we eat, and where are we going? What follows is a brief outline of the key questions and issues.

The first section is called "Food and Identity." If we are what we eat, what are we? What do our meals reveal about personality, ethnicity, gender roles, sexuality, family vitality, subcultural loyalties, and political commitments? In what ways are our meals the source of considerable pleasure (e.g., ritual feasts)? I call this the enchantment stage of the course, an attempt to build a sense of wonder about the magical power of food, the way that sharing food transforms social relationships, and the fact that it is very hard to have a meaningful social encounter without exchanging some food or drink. We also look into the role of food as a lush creative metaphor—its place in literature, painting, film, and music. The connections to sexual desire are particularly clear in popular music, and since sex and music are two areas of particular interest to undergraduates (and maybe graduates, too), we spend a class or two analyzing song lyrics, as well as the more intimate eating scenes of films like *Tom Jones* and *Babbit's Feast*. Readings include a rich sampler of literary and anthropological sources (e.g., Trillin 1979; Visser 1986; Camp 1989; Grover 1987; Rozin 1982; Williams 1984; Avakian 1997).

Then, just when we are feeling pretty good about food—a sense of "oh wow"—we move to what I call the disenchantment phase. The latter begins with an overview of "dietary ambivalence"—the way that food can be a source of both pleasure and fear, identity and affliction. Food disorders are of particular interest to undergraduates, of course, so we look at Henry Jaglom's insightful pseudo-documentary, *Eating* (1991), to examine attitudes about body image and dieting (Newman 1993; Counihan 1985; Stearns 1997), and read historical perspectives on anorexia nervosa and fatness (Brumberg 1988).

Disenchantment deepens in the next section titled, "The Morality and Ecology of Meat." Reading Elizabeth Rozin's *The Primal Cheeseburger* (1994) and Jim Mason and Peter Singer's *Animal Factories* (1990), we ask: When we down a cheeseburger, what exactly are we doing? What are the health effects of an animal-based diet? Does a meat-centered diet contribute to worldwide environmental problems, such as energy shortages, pollution, tropical deforestation, the greenhouse effect, and ozone depletion? And what about the ethical implications? Do farm animals have rights? Are vegetarians too self-righteous? Is killing a cow worse than killing a carrot? Many lively debates ensue, and after watching a film about the meatpacking industry—Frederick Wiseman's stark *Meat*, many students claim they will never eat a hamburger again.

After all this hammering of the meat industry, the veteran vegetarians among us do start to feel a little too self-righteous, so we then shift away from animals to other aspects of what I call the "Corporate Cuisine"—the business of food. First, through various updates of Edward R. Murrow's classic exposé, *Harvest of Shame* (1960), we look at the conditions of the farmworkers who tend and pick our fruits and vegetables. This is a good opportunity to look at issues related to pesticides, farm mechanization, and migrant labor. Then we move forward on the food chain, where we look at films about supermarket and fast-food workers, and also sample the sociological literature on restaurant work (Fine 1996; Leidner 1993). Since many of my students have worked in those areas, the connections between what they have been reading and their own experiences are very clear.

And then it is into the executive suite, where we role play in what I call the "New Product Development Game." I divide the class into three or four teams, each of whom is charged with the following assignment:

You are the new product development team for the Gigantic Food Corp., a subsidiary of the Carcinogenic Tobacco Company. Your principal competitors are Kraft-General Foods (a subsidiary of Philip Morris), R. J. Reynolds-Nabisco, and Stouffer's (a subsidiary of Nestlé). As the smallest and most ambitious of the major food processors, Gigantic would like to be ultra-aggressive in developing new products, but since Carcinogenic just went heavily into debt to acquire you for $15 billion (in its attempt to diversify away from cigarettes), you do have a rather limited budget for research and development, engineering, and marketing. Your challenge is to concoct and name a new microwavable convenience food product that uses a given set of ingredients that we happen to have around the warehouse, including things like...
on a theme of Stouffer's stuffed peppers—usually with a Mexican theme. Since students have so much experience with this sort of food, they have little trouble envisioning the end product (except for the string beans) and the advertisement. And the exercise gets us into a variety of issues: the international sources of so many basic food commodities, the conglomeration of the food industry, the dilemmas faced by marketers trying to balance the competing interests of top management, engineering, and demographics, and the uncertainties involved in developing new products in a highly volatile, fad-conscious consumer market.

The last section is called, simply, "The Future." What will our grandchildren be eating in the year 2050? Who will control our food supply? What role will biotechnology or sustainable agriculture play (Mather 1995)? Will there be enough food for 10 to 15 billion people? Is the party over (Brown 1996)? These are also the questions I am writing about (Belasco 1997), so our discussions are particularly valuable for me—a good case for the inseparability of teaching and research.

My other course is a research seminar for seniors titled "The American Food Chain." In this course, students select a single food product and trace its fate from farm to table, field to fork—how it is grown, processed, packaged, marketed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of. Academics call this "commodity chain analysis" (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994), but my students call it just plain hard, since in our globalized food system, it is nearly impossible to find out where things come from (Ryan and Durning 1997). A can of apple juice can be drawn from the apples of six countries, from Chile to Australia. Yet, even though my students come into the semester knowing virtually nothing about agriculture, nutrition, food history, or marketing, four months later they produce sophisticated (and often indignant) reports with titles such as, "Chocolate: From Bean to Bar" (Lipman 1994), "The Invisible Workers: The Connection between Migrant Pickers, Mott's Applesauce, and American Consumers" (Cunningham 1994), "Fishing for Trouble: Sustainability and the American Seafood Industry" (a paper on Mrs. Paul's grilled fish fillets) (Poff 1997), and "Tastykake's Butterscotch Krimpets: Short-Term Convenience, Long-Term Consequences" (Meissler 1997).

**Conclusion**

In closing, I would like to offer four pedagogical rationales for teaching about food—reasons why studying food has great educational value even for students who do not have a professional stake in the subject and will never take another food course.

First, studying food is interdisciplinary. To study food you must integrate data and analyses from a wide variety of disciplines, from agronomy, literature, and nutrition and to economics, biology, and history.

Second, I emphasize the liberal arts generalist nature of the inquiry. I help ordinary humanities undergraduates try to understand and confront the experts, the specialists who have led us astray—especially in food-related matters—as in, for example, the post–World War II period, when much-revered experts with endowed chairs at gold-plate universities assured us that DDT was perfectly safe, that the "Basic 4s" were the only way to go nutritionally, or that in the near future we would be licking world hunger forever with steaks made from algae, yeast, and coal dust. Specialists are useful to have around, of course, since modern life is far too complex for us to understand everything. But the problem with relying entirely on specialists is that sometimes they are wrong. Or worse, they disagree. So to help us sort out the issues and gain some perspective, we need generalists like Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, and Wendell Berry, people with a decent grounding in science and poetry, agriculture, and philosophy. This argument goes over well with those who think universities are too specialized (e.g., Orr 1994).

Third, I emphasize writing. I assign many papers, ranging from personal memoirs about family feasts and childhood foods, to moral debates about meat and environment, to research reports on farming and food marketing, to literary-style analyses of the role of food in movies, songs, and poetry. Students like this sort of writing. And since hardly anyone else outside my department takes the time to teach writing, it earns us the gratitude of our president, who is constantly trying to convince parents and legislators that research universities do teach basic skills.

Finally, I emphasize values. Thinking about the food system forces us to ponder questions about responsibility (Gussow 1978; Curtin and Heldke 1992). According to Thoreau, "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run" (quoted in Orr 1994:172). Being responsible means paying the true costs, the full "amount of life . . . exchanged" for the banquet. What are the personal and global consequences of my eating this tomato, this chicken nugget, this ice cream cone? Thinking about the food system leads to great moral debates about animal rights, body image, hunger, farmworkers, and health care. And it is all so tangible. At the end of the term (in both courses) I ask students to plan a menu for a festive meal that will satisfy all the authors we have read over the term—a wide assortment of gourmets, vegan, consumer activists, feminists, aggressive carnivores,
and Malthusians. It is a tough challenge, but they do it, and then we all eat that meal in the last class.

When it comes to food there is no mind-body separation. You eat your ideas. As one of my countercultural sources from 1969 put it, food is "digestible ideology" (Belasco 1993: 22). And for those of us who still think of ourselves as radicals, what could be more subversive than investigating the world's largest industry? As Joan Gusow, longtime food activist and nutrition educator at Columbia, writes: "Someone out there is growing you. Someone is going to produce and subsequently manipulate the materials out of which each of us is made. Are people really prepared to trust that responsibility to Philip Morris [the nation's largest food corporation]?" (Gusow 1991:116). We relics of the 1960s often complain about student apathy, but I have never had a student who has answered "yes" to that question.

Notes

1. With all due respect to my editorial hosts, I should note that while the fields of anthropology, sociology, and folklore are somewhat more attentive to food matters, my colleagues in those fields do report similar skepticism from their respective disciplines.

2. This quotation is one of the dozen or so wise sayings chiseled into the interior dome of the Library of Congress's Main Reading Room.

3. Syllabi and other teaching materials for these courses are available from the author c/o Department of American Studies, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore MD 21250. In addition, excellent samples of food-related course syllabi are available from the Association for the Study of Food and Society and in issues of The Digest, the journal of the Food Section of the American Folklore Society.

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