

ASPIRATIONAL EATING: CLASS ANXIETY AND THE RISE OF
FOOD IN POPULAR CULTURE

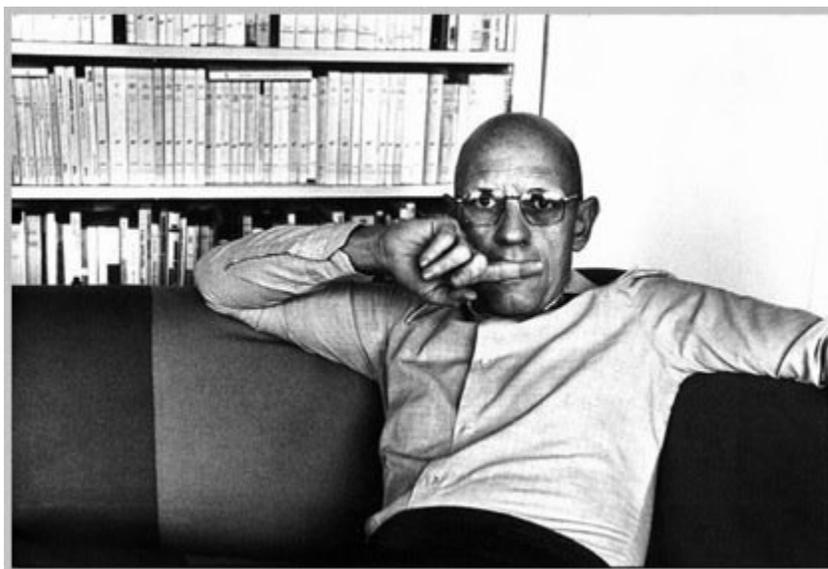
by

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Shaka Freeman, “#4,” *Michael Pollan or Michel Foucault?*

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To my parents

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INTRODUCTION:

THE POPULAR APPEAL OF THE FOOD REVOLUTION

Popular culture is one of the sites where th[e] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle.

—Stuart Hall¹

From Winos to Wine Snobs

My mother called me in the Spring of 2005, distressed about a conversation she'd had with one of her coworkers about wine. She had started “getting into” wine after I left home for college in 1999, perhaps partially in celebration or mourning of her newly empty nest, but probably also because of the wine-drinking trend sweeping the nation at that time. Between 1991 and 2005, U.S. wine consumption jumped 50%,² “cocktail hours” were increasingly replaced by “wine and cheese receptions,” and words like Shiraz and *terroir* became part of the popular American vocabulary. My mother's participation in that trend was relatively casual. She purchased most of her wine at the supermarkets where she did the rest of her grocery shopping, she stuck mostly to a handful of varietals and national brands she knew she liked, and she rarely drank more than a glass or two per week. However, after one particularly stressful day at work, she had gone home and consumed approximately half a bottle by herself. When she confessed this minor indiscretion to the librarian at the public elementary school where she does tech support, the woman asked what kind of wine she had been drinking. My mother told her it was a White Zinfandel—one of her favorites—and the coworker sneered, “Oh *no*, that's the *hot*

¹ Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” *People's History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981: 239).

² According to The Wine Institute, a trade association that represents the California wine industry. Wine Institute/Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates, “Wine Consumption in the U.S.,” 5 April 2010, *Wine Institute*, Web (accessed 3 January 2011).

dog of wines.”

“Well,” my mother said to me, “*I didn't know that. Did you know that?*” I did, as she must have known I would. Although I had not yet started studying food, I had also “gotten into” wine after I left home for college. My interest was driven more by my discovery of the pleasurable and socially-useful effects of intoxication; however, even as an undergraduate with little discretionary spending money, I favored wine over cheaper drinks like beer and vodka because it seemed to impart the kind of sophistication and worldliness I longed for. In pursuit of that sophistication, and largely thanks to a series of waitressing jobs at increasingly fancy restaurants, I learned to eschew not only White Zinfandel but also everything else sweet, Merlot and Chardonnay (too common), and any bottle with an animal on the label (pandering to the masses³). I had not anticipated that by looking the other way as my mother drank mass-produced California blush, I would let her embarrass herself.

Even though my mother never aspired to be a connoisseur and did most of her wine drinking in the privacy of her home with no one around to impress, her interest in wine and the pleasure she derived from it were inseparable from its cultural significance—the idea that wine is a refined pleasure, something aesthetically and perhaps even morally superior to other kinds of food and drink. It's true that my mother probably liked the taste, too; her enjoyment of White Zinfandel was probably genuine. She may also have enjoyed the psychological effects of the alcohol, as suggested by the fact that she used it to relax after a stressful day. However, the idea that White Zinfandel was *declassé* overwhelmed whatever other pleasures she was deriving from it. I have never seen her drink a blush wine of any variety since—in fact, she stopped drinking wine almost

³ These are sometimes referred to as “critter wines.” Market research firm ACNielsen seems to have coined the term “critter label” in 2006 to describe the growing trend of wines marketed with animals. According to their study, approximately 18% of new wines released in the previous three years featured some kind of animal on the label, and the sales generated by new brands featuring a critter outperformed non-critter wines more than two to one. They estimated the annual sales of critter-branded wine in the U.S. at over \$600 million. Rob Walker, “Animal Pragmatism,” *The New York Times*, 23 April 2006, Web (accessed 27 January 2011).

entirely a few years later when her doctor told her that all forms of alcohol were merely empty calories she ought to avoid. The idea that wine is sophisticated and that sophisticated foods and drinks are desirable may seem like common sense too obvious to merit further examination. However, the obviousness of those statements has less to do with anything inherent to wine or to sophistication than to historically and culturally-contingent constructions of the meaning of wine and the desirability of sophistication. At least at the time of this writing, the belief that wine is a high class drink and that it is a good thing to have access to and knowledge about is widely believed to be true. It was not always so.

From the repeal of Prohibition through the early 1960s in the U.S., wine was associated primarily with impoverished alcoholics and immigrants. Inexpensive fortified wines made up the vast majority of the commercial wine market. Unlike table wine, they are produced by blending brandy or grain alcohol with cheap wine or sometimes just fruit juice and artificial coloring, resulting in a drink between 15-20 percent alcohol by volume (ABV). In 1940, the first year when sales reports differentiate between fortified or dessert wines⁴ and table wine—defined as non-sparkling wines with less than 14 percent alcohol—the latter comprised less than a third of annual wine sales (27 million out of 90 million gallons total).⁵ National brands of fortified wine like Thunderbird, Wild Irish Rose, and Night Train first became popular during the Great Depression, due to their high alcohol content, low price, and sweet taste (which made them more palatable than grain alcohol on its own).⁶ Unfortified “table wine” was primarily consumed by immigrant families from Southern and Eastern Europe, who often made their own at home. These associations were reflected in derogatory terms like “wino,” and “Dago

⁴ This category also includes more expensive fortified wines like port, sherry, and vermouth and sparkling wines; however, those were not as popular or widely-available as the lower-end fortified wines.

⁵ Wine Institute/Gomberg, 2010.

⁶ Kevin Zraly, *American Wine Guide* (New York: Sterling, 2006: 38).

red”.⁷

In the same time period, Champagne and table wines imported from France still graced the tables of the American elite. However, there's little indication that wine was seen as a luxury that less affluent Americans were eager to acquire; instead, its unfamiliarity and foreignness was widely seen as unappealing, much like other foods associated with France like frog legs and escargots. When the Gallup Polling agency asked Americans about their idea of the “perfect meal” in 1947, those who said they would start with an alcoholic beverage mostly said they'd prefer a “gin cocktail or plain Manhattan.” The same year, approximately 60 percent of Americans said they drank alcohol at least occasionally, and most said they preferred beer or liquor.⁸ By 1960, fortified and dessert wines were still outselling the more “sophisticated” table wines two to one.⁹

However, beginning in the 1960s, the consumption of table wine in the U.S. (both total and per capita) began to increase. By 1970, table wine sales made up nearly half of the 267 million gallon wine market. By 1980, they constituted three-quarters of the market, which as a whole had grown to 480 million gallons sold annually.¹⁰ In 1992, Gallup introduced a question in their annual survey of drinking habits about whether respondents who drank alcohol “most often” drank beer, wine, or spirits. In 1992, beer still had a significant lead over wine—47 percent of American drinkers preferred beer compared to 27 percent who preferred wine. But wine steadily ate away at beer's lead

⁷ “Dago” is an ethnic slur originally derived from the name Diego and initially used as a disparaging term for any foreigner. By the 19th and 20th Centuries it was primarily used to refer to Italian immigrants. According to the OED, the first references to “Dago red” in the OED appear in 1906 and 1910, and feature the phrase in quotes: ‘Dago red.’ Later references dated in the 1960s drop the quotes and sometimes the capitalization, suggesting broader acceptance. “Dago,” n. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, November 2010, Web (accessed 23 December 2010).

⁸ For both questions, the published record does not provide detailed results, so the size of the majority is unknown. George Gallup, *The Gallup Poll, 1935-1971* (Wilmington, DL: Scholarly Publishers, 1972: 636). See also, Harvey Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993: 119).

⁹ Wine Institute/Gomberg, 2010.

¹⁰ Ibid.

until 2005, when it surpassed beer as the national drink of choice.¹¹ [Figure I.1]

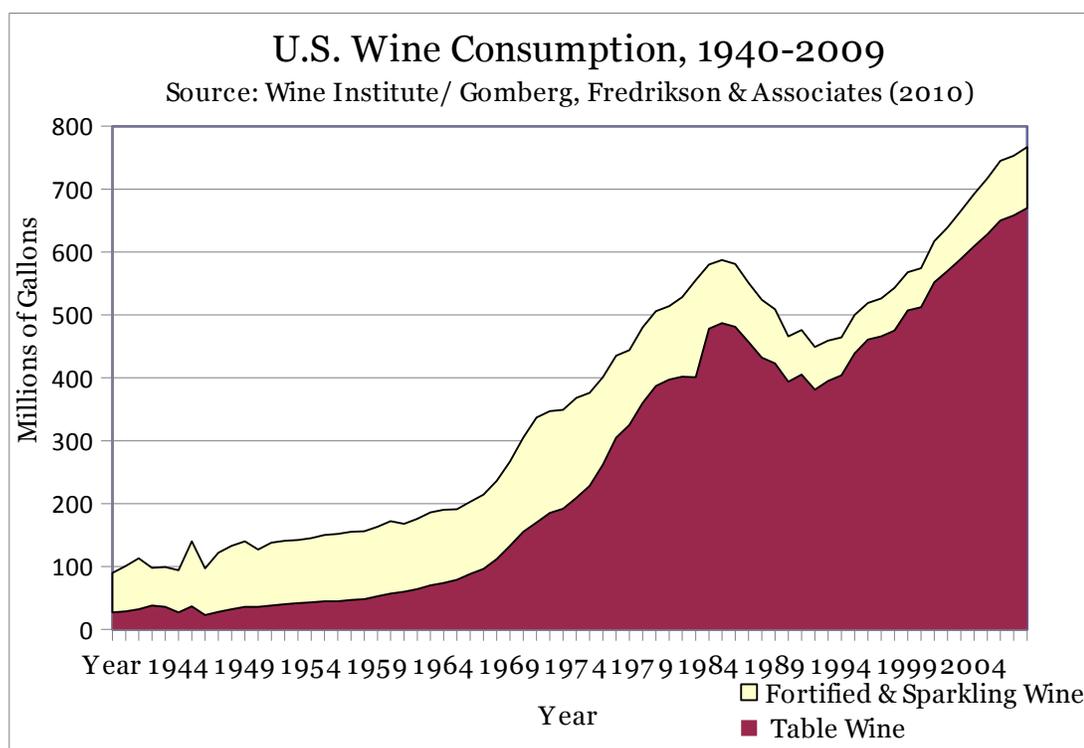


Figure I.1/ Sales of Table Wine and Fortified & Sparkling Wine¹²

The growing popularity of table wine was accompanied by changes in the cultural significance of wine. The association with immigrants and vagrants faded and was replaced by a widespread belief that wine is gourmet or sophisticated and that being “into” wine is a sign of admirable refinement instead of a likely indication of alcoholism or the lack of self-control and dangerous (if sometimes alluring) sensuality associated with immigrants and their foodways.¹³ After a *60 Minutes* episode on the “French

¹¹ Beer recovered a slight lead the following year, but per capita consumption of the beer produced by the three breweries that dominate the U.S. market—Anheuser-Busch, Miller, and Coors—has been flat or falling since 1981. Imported beer began to claim an increasing share of the market in the late 1990s, and the fastest-growing segment of the beer market since 2000 has been microbrews, or beer produced in the U.S. by firms with annual production levels between 5,000 and 10,000 barrels. Martin H. Stack, “A Concise History of America’s Brewing Industry,” 01 February 2010, *EH.net* (Economic History Services) Web (accessed 24 January 2011).

¹² Original graph based on data published by Wine Institute/Gomberg, 2010. The dip in the late 80s and early 90s is usually attributed to the “baby bust” following the “baby boom,” which meant fewer people were reaching the legal drinking age during those years.

¹³ This was especially reflected in Home Economists’ writings and efforts to reform urban immigrant women’s cooking and discourage the consumption of anything seen as “stimulating,” including pickles, alcohol, and spicy foods. See Donna R. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000: 124).

paradox” aired in 1991, which suggested that higher rates of red wine consumption were one of the reasons rates of heart disease are lower in France despite higher rates of saturated fat in their diets, wine also became associated with good health.¹⁴

Wine has never had just one meaning. Even in the 1940s, a small number of non-immigrant Americans drank unfortified wine on a regular basis, which they likely referred to as either “Bordeaux” or “Burgundy,” after the regions in France where they were produced rather than the grape varietals used. Those wine consumers may have seen drinking wine as a marker of their wealth and cultural sophistication, for there are some indications that wine was already seen as potentially elitist. For example, a cookbook called *Dining for Moderns* published by the New York Women's Exchange in 1940 includes dinner menus with suggested wine pairings and criticizes hosts who serve wine “simply to show off” rather than carefully selecting them to complement the food.¹⁵ The broader shift in popular attitudes towards wine could be seen as a process of democratization: both as a material commodity and as a signifier of sophistication, wine became more accessible for a wider demographic.¹⁶ However, the result was not a simple trickle-down process in which upper-class beliefs and practices involving wine were adopted by increasingly less affluent people. Some people began to think of wine as *categorically* sophisticated and desirable whereas others might have agreed that wine was *generally* more sophisticated than other alcoholic beverages but that there were important distinctions between styles and varietals. Many others rebelled against the new trendiness of wine, an attitude that major American beer companies continue to

¹⁴ I'm indebted to Solomon Katz for this insight.

¹⁵ Mrs. G. Edgar Hackey, *Dining for Moderns with Menus and Recipes: They Why and When of Wining* (New York: New York Women's Exchange, 1940) quoted in Megan J. Elias, *Food in the United States, 1890-1945* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2009: 38). Women's exchanges were commercial operations run by and for wealthy women who needed to earn money but wanted to avoid the stigma of working for wages or entering the “masculine” world of business. Kathleen Waters Sander, *The Business of Charity: The Woman's Exchange Movement, 1832-1900* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Owing in part to the growth of the domestic wine industry, especially in California. Thomas Pinney, *A History of Wine in America: From Prohibition to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005: 225).

cater to and cultivate by portraying wine and wine-drinkers as effeminate, elitist, boring, and un-American.¹⁷ However, by and large, the construction of wine as sophisticated and the construction of sophistication as desirable became dominant.

In this dissertation, I will attempt to account for some of the multifarious ways that different groups of Americans adopted, negotiated with, or pushed back against dominant food ideologies. However, my primary concern is explaining the elevation of particular cultural narratives to the status of common sense. When and why did the U.S. transform from a nation where alcoholics were called “winos” and table wine was called “Dago Red” to one of the world's leading consumers of table wine—a country where, at least in 2005, more people in Gallup's nationally-representative sample said they preferred wine than beer? How did the ability to make distinctions not only between different styles of wine but also between previously-ignored grape varietals become a part of the social judgments that people who identify as “middle class” make about each other? What are the pleasures and rewards of investing in the idea that wine is sophisticated, especially for people whose knowledge about wine is relatively limited? What are the benefits of attempting to become a more sophisticated wine drinker and the consequences of resistance or failure?

The case of wine is not unique. The shift in attitudes towards wine is part of a broader transformation in how people in the U.S. buy, cook, eat, and above all *talk about* and *imagine* food. In mainstream American popular culture, that transformation has happened mostly since 1980. The danger in trying to explain a phenomenon that broad is that the complexity of individual experiences must be left out. However, extracting a single trend—the rise of wine or weight-loss diets or Thai food or cupcakes—might not

¹⁷ For example, in a commercial that first aired during the 2010 Super Bowl, young couples arrive at a “wine and cheese” party. The men disappear into a kitchen where they reveal bottles and six-packs of Bud Light and small televisions for viewing “the game” hidden in wheels of cheese, baguettes, and cases of wine. Beer is portrayed as the fun, masculine Other to wine, which is portrayed as stuffy and feminine. “Bud Light Wine and Cheese Party,” Commercial. *YouTube*, uploaded 01 February 2008 by BudBowlXLII, Web (accessed 19 March 2011).

get at the larger forces at work. Focusing on just the rise of “natural foods”¹⁸ might expose interesting aspects of the broader phenomenon, but would not explain why the rise of “natural” foods paralleled the rise of gourmet foods, the dramatic increase in weight-loss dieting and concern about obesity, and the growing interest in international, ethnic, and fusion cuisines. Journalists and popular writers have sometimes hailed these trends as separate revolutions (the “gourmet revolution,” the “weight-loss revolution,” the “Organic revolution,” etc.) but have also referred to them as a kind of gestalt: the “American food revolution.”¹⁹ This dissertation analyzes the discourses that have emerged as a part of that revolution, contextualizes some of its main preoccupations in the longer history of U.S. foodways, and explains why all of these competing and contradictory ways of eating “better” simultaneously became mainstream beginning in the 1980s.

The Place of Food in American Studies: Methodology and Contribution

Food has historically been neglected by most scholars, especially in the humanities and social sciences. For centuries, philosophers and historians largely shared the attitude expressed by Aristotle in the fourth century B.C. that food was a debased bodily pleasure and thus less worthy of serious contemplation than the loftier pleasures of the mind.²⁰ Food and foodways²¹ began to garner more scholarly attention after the mid-twentieth

¹⁸ “Natural foods” is used in the popular vernacular, marketing, and food industry literature to refer to a huge swath of products and their retailers from corporations like Whole Foods Market and Trader Joes to non-profit food co-operatives; from the pre-washed and bagged lettuces available nationwide from California producer Earthbound Farms to the heads of lettuce sold at farmers markets; from meat and dairy substitutes made from soy grown overseas to pastured beef and dairy; from tropical superfruit smoothies to eggs from backyard chicken coops, and etc. I will discuss the origins of the term and contradictions in its use at greater length in Chapters One and Two.

¹⁹ See, for example, Andrew Martin, “Is a Food Revolution Now in Season?” *The New York Times* 22 March 2009, Web (accessed May 26, 2009) or the article by political science professor Jerry Weinberger, “America’s Food Revolution,” *City Journal* 2009. Web (accessed 07 February 2011).

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988: 40-1). See also Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2008: 2).

²¹ “Foodways” is a term coined in the early 1960s by folklorist Don Yoder to refer to the entire range of food habits, behaviors, customs, stories, and practices associated with food production and

century “anthropological turn” in the humanities.²² However, the scholarly literature on the history, politics, and culture of food is still often seen as fluff. At a 2007 conference on food and gender at Harvard, culinary librarian Barbara Haber noted that even feminist scholars remained hesitant to devote substantial attention to foodways, despite their willingness to tackle other topics related to women's labor and the private sphere like child-rearing, sex work, romance novels, and cosmetics. There was a tacit understanding, she said, that “no one was going to get tenure by writing about cupcakes.”²³

Despite a lingering sense in the humanities that food is too mundane to merit scholarly attention or will eventually be dismissed as a fad, the academic literature about food is growing. So far, scholars have generally focused on only one kind of food, ethnic group, or region at a time, leaving the “big picture” to journalists and popular writers. The result is a divided literature with scholars producing nuanced accounts of particular foods and concepts like artificial sweeteners, the idea of “freshness,” and the role of chicken in African-American communities²⁴ while journalists produce sweeping accounts about American fast food, gourmet food, and fatness.²⁵ There have been no scholarly attempts to describe the phenomenon popularly recognized as the food revolution.

My argument is that contemporary ideologies about food encapsulated in the food revolution answer needs produced by social relations, political structures, and economic

consumption. Jennifer Berg, Marion Nestle, and Amy Bentley, “Food Studies.” *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon H. Katz. Vol. 2 Gale Cengage, 2003. eNotes.com 2006 Web (accessed 9 Feb 2011).

²² The move away from traditional canons and “high culture” and embrace of a wider range of texts and behaviors as legitimate objects of scholarship.

²³ Barbara Haber, “Studying Gender, Studying Food: Intersections, Obstacles, Opportunities,” Women, Men and Food: Putting Gender on the Table, a conference held at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study. Radcliffe Yard, MA. 13 April 2007, Web (accessed 16 February 2011).

²⁴ Respectively: Carolyn de la Pena, *Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners From Saccharin to Splenda* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), Susanne Freidberg, *Fresh: A Perishable History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), and Psyche A. Williams-Forsom, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

²⁵ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the American Meal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001); David Kamp, *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006); Greg Critser, *Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World* (New York: Mariner Books, 2003).

realities. I use an interdisciplinary approach that integrates methods and theories drawn from literary criticism, history, anthropology, and communications studies. Using the tools of close reading and deconstruction, I analyze mass media texts, including television shows, advertising campaigns, films, newspaper and magazine articles, best-selling books and and highly-trafficked websites. I place those texts and the ideologies they reveal in historical context using a broad assemblage of primary and secondary sources. I also read secondary historical sources and journalistic accounts of U.S. food culture critically, with an eye to their omissions and how they too have been shaped by dominant ideologies. In order to supplement the picture of recent trends painted by mass media, I analyze market research, public opinion polls, Nielsen ratings, blog entries and comments, discussions in online communities and media and food industry publications. The process of assembling many forms of evidence about how media audiences and consumers are using, creating, and responding to representations and discourses about food often takes the form of ethnographic description or “found” audience reception study.²⁶ Throughout, I use theoretical frameworks drawn primarily from Critical Theory and Cultural Studies²⁷ to try to explain how the rise of food in

²⁶ I say “found” audience reception because rather than performing survey research or interviews with audience members, I use responses to texts that audience members are generating spontaneously online. One disadvantage of found audience reception data is that the responses are not generalizable. The people who participate in online forums, who review films on websites like *IMDb*, and who write and comment on blogs are probably not representative of the whole audience either demographically or in terms of how they watch and respond to mass media texts. They might, for example, watch more carefully and critically than most viewers or, as self-identified “fans,” be more likely to read the text in dominant or preferred ways. However, found reception data has the advantage of reflecting how people interpret texts on their own in whatever viewing communities they already participate in without the framing or prompting of a researcher's questions.

²⁷ Critical Theory represents two distinct intellectual traditions. The first is associated primarily with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt and characterized by 1) the insistence that truth, knowledge, and being are the products of specific human actors, not universal or infinite characteristics of humankind, 2) the moral commitment to human emancipation from all forms of oppression, and 3) the goal of unifying thought and practice by integrating philosophy and the empirical social sciences to produce theory that could both *explain* the whole of society and *transform* it. Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996: 45-81). The second tradition associated with Critical Theory is the rise of structuralist and post-structuralist theories focused on language, discourse, and the study of signs and symbols (or semiotics), which became widely influential in the humanities and especially literary criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. That tradition is “critical” in the sense that it seeks to expose biases in texts and discourses and often requires scholars to be self-reflexive about the

popular culture connects to historical changes in class formation, structures of power and oppression, and possibilities for resistance.

This approach bears the strong imprint of American Studies. Although the field theoretically embraces a wide range of disciplines and inter-disciplines, in practice it has largely been represented by the intersection of literary criticism and history with a particular focus on the texts and life experiences historically excluded from the disciplines of English and History. In the early part of the twentieth century, that included most American literature.²⁸ More recently, the focus has been primarily on texts produced by marginalized racial and ethnic groups. Studying a debased subject like food thus follows in a long American Studies tradition of taking seriously what scholars in other disciplines have historically ignored. My theoretical debts reflect the turn towards Critical Theory and British Cultural Studies in both American Studies and the Humanities more broadly the 1980s.²⁹ In *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*,

limitations of their own norms and reliance on language. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, 2nd edition, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 1990 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995: 1-3). Cultural Studies as a field was inaugurated in 1964 by the founding of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture where scholars like Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige sought to understand and explain the relationships between culture and political economy, with a particular focus on the British working-class and youth subcultures. Their work and the broader intellectual movement inspired by the Birmingham School drew on both of the intellectual traditions associated with Critical Theory and on the writings of Antonio Gramsci. My scholarship and thinking has been shaped by ideas and scholarship from all three traditions, and especially the contributions of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Jurgen Habermas, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, Raymond Williams, and Stuart Hall.

²⁸ One of the hallmarks of early American Studies scholarship is the attempt to argue that American history and literature are worthy of study. A quintessential example is F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, which argued that American writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman represented true literary greatness on par with European literary canons, and that their work reflected and could thus illuminate the unique culture, politics, and history of the U.S. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

²⁹ The relationship between Cultural Studies and American Studies is a matter of some debate. Michael Denning argues that American Studies is the U.S. analog of British Cultural Studies, but that American scholars shied away from overt Marxism especially before the 1980s because of the taint of Stalinism. He portrays the "myth and symbol" school of American Studies as a politically-sanitized version of British "ideology studies." Michael Denning, "The Special American Conditions: Marxism and American Studies," *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (New York: Verso, 2004: 169-192). Patrick Brantlinger, on the other hand, portrays American Studies and Cultural Studies as distinct fields. He defines Cultural Studies as an attempt to use and unite the various strains of Critical Theory, including Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and ethnography without submitting to the "reification of the disciplines." In contrast, he suggests that American Studies was a separate discipline that was *similar* to Cultural Studies in the sense that it attempted to do interdisciplinary or

George Lipsitz argues that that turn was largely a response to the Reagan revolution and conservative politicians successfully wielding cultural symbols for their political ends. Lipsitz is somewhat critical of how that shift has played out, arguing that since the 80s, "dominant paradigms have suffered from an overemphasis on what has been articulated from within the profession, and a consequent underemphasis on the voices, power struggles, and ideological conflicts outside it."³⁰ He argues that American Studies scholars should pay more attention to grassroots movements and take up the "important role [of] analyzing and interpreting the changes that are taking place around us."³¹

Studying food and the "food revolution" may be one way to fulfill Lipsitz's mandate to produce academic research that is accessible and relevant to political movements and readers outside the traditional reach of the academy. The rise of Food Studies in the last decade or two³² is at least partially a response to the emergence of grassroots activism centered on sustainable and ethical food production and consumption. Jamie Oliver, Alice Waters, and Michael Pollan have achieved celebrity status by attempting to reform

counterdisciplinary work, but should serve as a "cautionary example" for Cultural Studies, suggesting the latter would not have the ability to reform the Humanities or "American life." He notes that American Studies began to shift away from literary criticism and patriotic cultural history to producing more oppositional work in the 1980s, but suggests that was driven by the same factors that influenced the development of Cultural Studies, i.e. that American Studies changed *in tandem* with the rise of Cultural Studies, not as a result or primary institutional home for it. Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America*. New York: Routledge, 1990: 15-33. The difference in these accounts probably owes to a difference in what Denning and Brantlinger count as "American Studies" scholarship. My graduate coursework in American Studies was influenced far more by the Cultural Studies tradition than by the American Studies tradition Brantlinger references (e.g. Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx). The latter were part of a disputed canon that was occasionally gestured to as part of the field's history but generally not assigned.

³⁰ George Lipsitz, *American Studies in a Moment of Danger*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 114).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 229.

³² Food Studies is an umbrella term for research on the historical, cultural, political, economic, and geographic aspects of food distinguished from the agricultural and nutritional sciences. Although scholarship that fits that description dates back to antiquity, the field is generally considered to be 15-25 years old. The Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), a professional organization run primarily by and for academic scholars, was founded in 1985 and began holding annual meetings in 1987. Its flagship journal, *Food, Culture, and Society* was first published in 1997 and is now widely recognized as the benchmark journal in the field of Food Studies. The New York University Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health established undergraduate and graduate degree-granting programs in "Food Studies" in 1996 and Boston University also established a Masters of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy in the 1990s. "Association for the Study of Food and Society: Home." *Food-culture.org*, Web (accessed 08 February 2011).

public school lunch programs and calling on consumers to think of themselves as citizen-eaters with the power to “vote with their forks” for the kind of communities they wish to inhabit. Although this dissertation offers a critical analysis of the food revolution, which may at times seem to challenge some of its aims and tactics, I hope it will also serve as a resource for people who want to understand why food trends come and go and what has motivated so many Americans in the last three decades to want to eat “better,” perhaps to harness those energies for social change.

Additionally, I hope to call attention to the continued importance of class difference as both a source of inequality in the U.S. and as a useful analytical lens. Some scholars, most notably the sociologist Paul W. Kingston, have argued that classes do not exist in America in any meaningful way because most Americans do not form stable identities around or engage in even a minimal level of collective political action based on shared economic positions. Kingston acknowledges that objective economic positions continue to shape Americans' life chances, but argues that in order for classes to be real, there must be statistical proof that class divisions “correspond to the collective realities that people experience and perceive.”³³ As critics like Harold R. Kerbo have noted, that reasoning resembles the argument that cancer may have real consequences, but is not real unless and until the patient perceives it.³⁴ Class *consciousness* in the U.S. may be low,³⁵ but unequal economic conditions continue to reproduce unequal life chances and hierarchies in ways that cannot be reduced to other forms of social difference like race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, citizenship status, religious affiliation, age, or ability. Class analysis is necessary to identify power relationships that cut across racial and gender divides, national borders, and ideological persuasions.

³³ Paul W. Kingston, *The Classless Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000: 3).

³⁴ Harold R. Kerbo. “Review: The Classless Society,” *Contemporary Sociology* 31.4 (2002): 267.

³⁵ As both Kingston and Kerbo note, survey data over the last three decades has consistently shown that most Americans are not aware of the fact that income inequality in the U.S. is higher than in almost any other industrialized nation, or that mobility between income quintiles is among the lowest, or that as a nation, Americans work more hours per year for lower wages and fewer benefits. *Ibid.*

Despite the apparent lack of class consciousness or organized working-class politics, class distinctions continue to loom large in American popular culture. Concerns about elitism, access, democracy, what counts as “good taste,” and what it means to live “the good life” are all expressions of cultural hierarchy related to class. The declining emphasis on class in academia is exemplified by attempts by scholars like Erik Olin Wright to “revitalize” it. Especially since the rise of Critical Race theory and Critical Ethnic Studies, class has frequently been reduced to a footnote in scholarship that focuses far more intently on race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality.³⁶ In light of the dramatic increases in income inequality and decreasing income mobility in the U.S. over the last thirty years, a renewed focus on class is overdue.³⁷

An Overview of the Argument and Chapters

My central argument is that the food revolution became mainstream in the 1980s primarily because it appealed to Americans whose income and wealth began to stagnate or decline in comparison to the soaring fortunes of the super-rich.³⁸ As other markers of class mobility became harder to come by, foodways constructed as more sophisticated, healthier, more ethically responsible, and more cosmopolitan became increasingly important markers of middle class status. Everything from grocery shopping to cooking to entertaining to dining out to talking about food to private acts of consumption took on greater significance. Foodways became charged with new anxieties, and offered new rewards and pleasures. For many Americans who consider themselves “middle class” and culturally part of the mainstream, food became an arena of class aspiration.

In the first chapter, “No Culinary³⁹ Enlightenment” I argue that the food

³⁶ See Erik Olin Wright, *Approaches to Class Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 2).

³⁷ I discuss the changes in income structure and mobility in greater detail in Chapter Five, “Aspirational Eating.”

³⁸ Approximately the wealthiest one percent.

³⁹ Although the term “culinary” typically refers to things that bear a relationship to cooking, I’m using it here and throughout the dissertation to refer to the broader conceptual and discursive fields

revolution is characterized by four main pillars: 1) gourmet food, 2) weight-loss dieting 3) “natural” food, 4) cosmopolitan eating. Using the coverage of President Obama as an eater and potential food reformer in U.S. mass media and the food blogosphere during his 2008 campaign as an example of recent food discourse, I show how these four pillars provide an analytical framework for analyzing the food revolution. Although the four pillars are often constructed as a gestalt, I show that they actually compete and conflict, undermining efforts to portray Obama as an ideal eater. The conflicts between (and within) the pillars challenge the prevailing popular and scholarly explanation for the food revolution, which I call the “Culinary Enlightenment Thesis.” According to the Culinary Enlightenment Thesis, the growing interest in eating “better” is due to the inevitable forward march of progress in food production, nutritional science, global trade, and respect for racial and ethnic diversity. I describe several manifestations of that thesis and its counterpart, the narrative of national Culinary Decline, and explain why I find both of them inadequate. Lastly, I explore how the representation of Obama as a model eater, and sometimes a bad role model, illuminate the role of food in the construction of the liberal elite.

The second chapter, “The Rise, Fall, and Return of 'Enlightened' Eating” argues that all four pillars of the food revolution were also *mainstream* concerns at the turn of the twentieth century. After the Civil War—especially during the period from 1880-1920—the elites who served as national taste leaders began holding dinner parties with plated

encompassing food and drink and the practices of eating and drinking. A case could probably be made for the superiority of the term “alimentary,” which Michel Foucault favors in *The History of Sexuality Volume II: The Use of Pleasure* to refer to the realm of food and eating; however, that carries an equally undesirable connotation of nutrition or digestion, especially as its most common use is to refer to the digestive tract or “alimentary canal.” Alimentary is probably more appropriate to Foucault's discussion of the bodily pleasures of food and drink than to the concern with purchasing, preparing, and consuming food and drink. I also prefer culinary because I attempt to build on the work of Kathleen LeBesco and Dean Naccarato, who use the term “*culinary* capital” rather than “alimentary capital” to refer to the value attached to particular kinds of foods and food practices, including but certainly not limited to cooking. Kathleen LeBesco and Dean Naccarato, “Julia Child, Martha Stewart, and the Rise of Culinary Capital,” *Edible Ideologies: Representing Food & Meaning*, eds. Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007: 223-238)

courses modeled on the cuisine developed by the Second Estate in France (also known as “dining *à la Russe*”), following slimming diets in pursuit of the new bodily ideal of thinness, dabbling in the “natural” diets developed by people like John Harvey Kellogg to promote spiritual and physical well-being, and hosting “exotic entertainments” showcasing their increasing knowledge about the fringes of the expanding American empire. These practices were emulated by the emerging professional-managerial class and portrayed as superior to the foods and practices associated with the working classes. All four trends and discourses receded in popularity during the Great Depression as the plain foods associated with the Home Economics movement were established as the national cuisine. Thus, they seemed new when they re-emerged in the 1980s.

In the third chapter, “Meritocracies of Taste and the Upwardly-Mobile Body,” I analyze the critically-acclaimed animated Disney Pixar film *Ratatouille* (dir. Brad Bird, 2007) and NBC's competitive weight-loss reality series *The Biggest Loser*. Both have been extraordinarily popular with American audiences but have received little attention from scholars. I argue that a large part of their popular appeal is that they reinforce meritocratic ideologies that portray “enlightened” eating as something everyone can and should do. “The Biggest Loser” carefully constructs weight-loss as the result of individual willpower despite the fact that the show's contestants also have professional experts to assist them and still achieve inconsistent, short-lived results. *Ratatouille* espouses the explicitly meritocratic motto “everyone can cook,” despite the fact that the protagonist's culinary skill is portrayed as largely dependent on his uniquely sensitive palate. Using audience reception data drawn primarily from online sources, I show how popular media texts about food get people to say “yes” to the idea that anyone can and everyone *should* be sophisticated, thin, healthy, and adventurous eaters.

In the fourth chapter, “The Legitimation of Culinary Capital”⁴⁰ I analyze how the

⁴⁰ The term “culinary capital” comes from LeBesco and Naccarato, see note 39. LeBesco and Naccarato, 2007.

famous Grey Poupon Rolls Royce advertising campaign, the film *Sideways*, and the rise of the term “foodie” negotiate with the specter of elitism that haunts the construction of meritocratic taste hierarchies. Elitism poses a serious threat to the four pillars and the Culinary Enlightenment Thesis because it implies that taste hierarchies are arbitrary and that people who invest in those hierarchies are dupes or social climbers rather than truly “enlightened” eaters. The primary strategies for neutralizing this challenge and incorporating it into dominant ideologies are to distinguish bad *snobbery* from genuine *connoisseurship* and rely on the low status of food to ridicule the idea that culinary practices could ever be truly elitist. I argue that one of the reasons food has become such a powerful form of cultural capital is, paradoxically, because of its low cultural status, which gives it plausible deniability as a source of social judgments and basis for class distinction.

In the fifth chapter, “Food, Flourishing, and Class,” I explore the implications of my analysis of the food revolution for the scholarly literature on social class and Michel Foucault's theory of the desiring subject. I explore the role of self-denial in bourgeois constructions of the “good life,” and offer a critical review of the competing definitions of “class.” I argue that neither materialist nor cultural models of class are adequate to account for the experience of class in late capitalism. Instead, I advocate a model of class difference that acknowledges the social construction of class difference but also retains the notion of hierarchy as a defining characteristic. Food has been used to define social classes since the emergence of capitalism, but “aspirational eating,” or the use of food as a means of performing and embodying the “good life” is a quintessentially middle-class practice that emerged in Anglo-American culture in the 18th Century. Its relative importance in different historical and cultural contexts has varied primarily based on the changing nature of middle-class status anxieties. I explore some of the implications of this alternative theory about the causes of the food revolution in the conclusion, “Stop

Feeling Good About Where You Shop.”

The Class Politics of “The Popular”

I have been using a number of vague or contested terms as if their meanings are simply understood. In this section, I will explain what I mean by three of the terms that are the most important to my argument: popular culture, hegemony, and class.

Popular Culture

Since the 1960s, it has become the norm in the Humanities to use an anthropological definition of “culture” referring to a whole way of life, which encompasses art, knowledge, beliefs, morals, laws, habits, customs, institutions, and commodities—in short, all the practices and objects through which humans create and convey meaning. However, *popular* culture often relies on a competing definition of “culture,” referring to a superior reality or a certain standard of excellence in the arts, exemplified by the quote from Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*: “culture [is] a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world.”⁴¹ The term “popular culture” is often used to distinguish mass texts like reality television and *Cosmopolitan* magazine from highbrow culture like opera and *Pride and Prejudice*.⁴²

However, in the Cultural Studies tradition, “popular culture” has generally been used in a nearly-opposite sense to distinguish cultural forms that are *not* mass-produced

⁴¹ Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism* (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1869: vii). Digitized March 20, 2006 by Google, original from Harvard University (accessed 03 February 2011). See also Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1958).

⁴² This use of “popular” to essentially mean “mass produced” is also reflected in the use of “popular music” or “popular literature” to refer primarily to nationally-distributed recordings and publications. For example, a textbook designed for introductory undergraduate courses titled *American Popular Music* defines its subject as “music that is mass-produced and disseminated via the mass media,” and thus analytically distinct from musical practices that would be classified as classical, art, or folk. Larry Starr and Christopher Waterman, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to MTV* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003: 2).

(including vernacular or folk traditions, subcultural styles and practices, and the ways subordinated groups *use* cultural commodities) from the products of the culture industries.⁴³ According to this latter definition, reality television shows and pop songs would not count as “popular culture,” but the discussions people have about them, parodies of them, and ways of reading them against the grain would. John Fiske offers an example of the second definition in the introduction to *Reading the Popular*:

Popular culture is made by various formations of subordinated or disempowered people out of the resources, both discursive and material, that are provided by the social system that disempowers them. The resources—television, records, clothes, video games, language—carry the interests of the economically and ideologically dominant.... Popular culture is always a culture of conflict. It always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology.⁴⁴

Fiske's definition follows in the Marxist cultural studies tradition of using “popular” to refer to *the people*, defined as anyone in the classes opposed to the power-bloc. Similarly, Stuart Hall's definition of “the popular” (from the same essay as the epigraph) is that which pertains to the oppressed and excluded classes, and thus for him, “popular culture” is the culture of those classes, constituted in continuing struggle with its Other, “dominant culture.”⁴⁵

In practice, people rarely fit neatly into a single dominant or oppressed group. Most people have complicated relationships to white, patriarchal capitalism.⁴⁶ As Hall notes, there is no necessary relationship between class position and oppositional meaning-making. The oppressed people who make up much of the audience for mass media texts may not be cultural dupes who uncritically accept the version of reality portrayed in those texts, but neither do they all subversively re-interpret mass media

⁴³ Although later scholars like John Fiske argue that *all* industries are “culture industries,” the term as originally coined by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer referred specifically to industries devoted to the mass production of “high art” forms—music (radio), drama (film), literature (magazines), etc. Thus, their definition of “culture industries” also relies on the idea of culture as a separate sphere that dates to the Eighteenth Century (Williams 1958: xvi).

⁴⁴ John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Winchester, Mass.: Unwin Hyman 1989, p. 1-2).

⁴⁵ Hall 1981: 235-8.

⁴⁶ “White patriarchal capitalism” is Fiske's description of the “dominant” culture. 1989: 1.

texts and reject any ideologies that work to reinforce the system that subjugates them. Both the oppressed subjects of white, patriarchal capitalism and the people who make up the dominant classes (or Gramsci's "power bloc") use mass-produced texts and objects in heterogeneous ways. Their myriad ways of using, creating, and deriving pleasure from culture may not always align with their personal class (or race or gender, etc.) interests.

Although the power to create cultural meaning may still be concentrated in the hands of rich white, men,⁴⁷ they do not have an absolute monopoly. Not only are there non-white, non-male, non-wealthy authors and producers of mass culture texts, but the masses respond selectively, often unpredictably to the products of the culture industries. As Fiske notes, "The culture industries, by which I mean all industries, have to produce a repertoire of products from which the people choose. And choose they do; most estimates of the failure rate for new products—whether primarily cultural, such as movies or records, or more material commodities—are as high as 80-90 percent despite extensive advertising"⁴⁸ Rather than excluding mass texts, elite audiences, or dominant readings, I use "popular culture" to encompass the whole range of texts, objects, and practices encompassed in both definitions: mass culture (or texts and commodities produced primarily for profit) as well as the myriad ways that people of all classes *use* those texts and objects and all of the other objects and practices they use to make meaning. In terms of food, that includes representations of food and eating in magazines, television shows, films, songs, newspapers, and websites (which might be collectively called "food media") and foodways.

⁴⁷ For example, top-grossing films are almost all directed by white men. According to Martha Lauzen of San Diego State University, in 2008 only 9% of Hollywood directors were women. Kira Cochrane, "Why are there so few female film-makers," *The Guardian*, 31 January 2010, Web (accessed 09 February 2011). In 2001, *People magazine* reported that only 3.5 percent of the screen writers guild members identified as African-American and only 5.4 percent of guild directing jobs went to blacks, despite the fact that African-Americans make up 25 percent of moviegoers. Samantha Miller, "Hollywood Blackout: The Sequel" 02 April 2001 *People*, Web (accessed 09 February 2011). There are no statistics available on the number of directors born in the lowest two or three income quintiles or who identify as "working class," but it seems probable that most come from middle or upper-class backgrounds.

⁴⁸ Fiske, 1989: 5.

I believe this definition of “popular culture” has both practical and theoretical advantages. In practical terms, it is much closer to how the phrase is used outside of the scholarly literature, where the term “popular” is applied to anything that lots of people do or like, whether or not they are oppressed and whether or not their behaviors and pleasures reflect their class interests. Theoretically, it allows for a more diverse range of uses and responses to mass texts and a more diverse range of subject positions, motivations, and pleasures. The definitions favored by Fiske and Hall suggest that only oppositional readings and resistant cultural forms are legitimate or authentic to the working classes. However, in many cases, the political valence of how someone responds to a text might be unclear or ambivalent. For example, when someone watching a cooking show decides to make something instead of buying it ready-made, they may be resisting or evading consumer capitalism in some small way; however, that act may also reinforce pejorative beliefs about the morality or intelligence of people who do buy the ready-made product, which may reinforce social hierarchies.

Like Hall, I believe that studying popular culture is important precisely because it is one of the primary sites of struggle between the interests of the powerful, which include preserving the current structures and prevailing social hierarchies, and the interests of the oppressed, including equality and justice. It is also, as Hall says in the quote in the epigraph, “the stake to be won or lost in that struggle.” Mass media forms play a significant role in creating common sense. Those beliefs usually support dominant groups and prevailing political and economic systems. However, popular culture is also an arena where more equitable and just systems could be imagined and ideological support for them could be won.

Hegemony

The role of culture in the creation and maintenance of power is expressed in the

terms “hegemony” and “ideology” as they were articulated by twentieth-century Marxist theorists who turned to the study of mass and popular culture to explain why the rise of industrial capitalism in Western Europe failed to produce an international working class revolution. Antonio Gramsci used the word “hegemony” to describe the consolidation of power in a provisional alliance of classes achieved by eliciting the *consent* of subordinated groups as opposed to using force or coercion. Hegemony is not universal or given. It faces constant challenges from emergent cultural forms, which may include resistant working class groups or other forms of subversive subcultures, and must also incorporate residual forms that remain from previous social formations.⁴⁹ For example, the hegemonic belief that wine is sophisticated and sophistication is desirable had to overcome the residual belief that wine was a low-class drink consumed primarily by alcoholics and immigrants. The dominance of this belief continues to struggle against the oppositional belief that sophistication is elitist or unpatriotic.

As described by Louis Althusser, “ideology” is very similar to hegemony in its attempt to replace the Marxist theory of the state as a purely repressive force with a more nuanced model that includes the role of culture. Althusser argues that the state works not only through institutions like the military and police that use violence to control people but also through institutions like schools and churches. The latter, which he calls Ideological State Apparatuses, operate by shaping the way people understand the world and their relationship to it; thus, he defined ideology as the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their material existence.”⁵⁰ This definition departs from older Marxist models of Ideology as the lies devised by scheming authors intentionally conspiring to enslave the masses (the “false consciousness” or Priests and Despots theory) because it works “on its own” by producing subjects who “freely accept [their] subjection.”⁵¹ Where

⁴⁹ The idea of dominant, emergent, and residual cultures is further developed by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977: 121-7).

⁵⁰ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster 1969 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001: 102-10).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

this theory differs from the theory of hegemony is in its insistence that there is no “outside” of Ideology and subjects are always-already *interpellated*—hailed, recognized, and constituted as subjects—within ideology. I prefer the theory of “hegemony” because it presupposes the active involvement of both the oppressed groups and the dominant classes and not only allows for, but *depends* on the possibility of resistance.⁵²

I use the term “ideology,” too, but not in Althusser's sense of ideology proper, or the whole imaginary relationship of individuals to their material historical conditions. Instead, I use it in the more general sense of “a set of ideas or values.” For example, one of the ideologies I am the most interested in is meritocracy, which encapsulates both the moral conviction that hard work, talent, and virtue *should* be rewarded and the belief that such a system actually prevails, perhaps with some qualifications, in a particular realm. Many of the characteristics of Ideology proper described by Althusser still apply: ideologies generally have their own internal logic; they consist of systems of representations that are “instantiated” (or become real) in behaviors, institutions, and practices; finally, they often have a quality of “taken-for-granted-ness.”⁵³ Although Ideology has no history, *ideologies* are always specific to the particular context in which they develop.

Ideologies never displace each other neatly or emerge whole and fully-formed. Instead, the relative weights of different elements in ideologies shift, with different aspects coming to the fore or receding in importance in different historical periods.⁵⁴ However, mere shifts of emphasis can result in major ideological transformations. The

⁵² See, for example, the definition of “hegemony” in the glossary of *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgacs 1947 (New York, NY: New York University Press 2000: 422-5).

⁵³ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster 1965 (New York, NY: Pantheon Press, 1969: 231).

⁵⁴ Hall quotes Gramsci on the process of transformations in the “collective will.”: “What matters is the criticism to which such an ideological complex is subjected by the first representatives of the new historical phase. This criticism makes possible a process of differentiation and change in the relative weight that the elements of old ideologies used to possess. What was previously secondary and subordinate, or even incidental is now taken to be primary—becomes the nexus of a new ideological and theoretical complex” (Hall 1981: 237).

belief that body size is related to diet and health has existed in some form since antiquity, but the preference for thinness, the popularity of slimming diets, and the relative importance of different body parts—waist, breasts, hips, thighs, abdominal muscles—have varied significantly over time and space. My primary concern is the transformation of dominant or *hegemonic* ideologies, terms I use interchangeably to refer to the sets of beliefs, values, and aesthetics that are so widely accepted they are taken for granted as “common sense.” Frank Lentricchia argues that “ideology...is revealed to us *textually* and therefore must be grasped (read) and attacked (reread, rewritten) in that dimension” (emphasis original).⁵⁵ As a literary critic, Lentricchia's focus is literary texts, but visual, material, and audible texts also reveal ideologies. Indeed, the most revealing texts are often non-literary texts. Shows like “The Biggest Loser,” films like *Sideways*, and advertising campaigns like the Grey Poupon Rolls Royce commercials are especially useful for revealing the process by which the masses are compelled to say “yes” to ideologies that might oppress them. Reception data can reveal oppositional readings, the contradictions within dominant ideologies, and the struggle for popular consent, but they also reveal widespread assent to the preferred reading. Most successful commercial texts support the status quo, and their success implies that they have elicited assent for the ideologies that reinforce prevailing hierarchies.

The Middle Class

Both “popular culture” and “hegemony” are related in complex ways to the conflict between the powerful and the oppressed represented by the term *class*, originally theorized by Karl Marx as the term for a group of people with shared interests based on their relationship to the prevailing means of economic production. He argued that in capitalist societies, the critical distinction was between people who own the

⁵⁵ Frank Lentricchia, *Criticism and Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983: 24).

means of production (the bourgeoisie) and workers who own only their labor (the proletariat).⁵⁶ Marx's bifurcated class structure does not characterize either the actual relationship of most Americans to the means of production or their perceptions of class hierarchy and their place in it. Since the mid-nineteenth century, many Americans who sell their labor have had much more autonomy and economic security and a higher standard of living than the “proletariat” Marx described. Especially since the late nineteenth century, a growing number of Americans have been recognized and chosen to self-identify as *middle* class. Some critics have argued that the middle class is not real, either because the people who identify as middle class have no unifying experience or relationship to capital or because the lifestyle portrayed as middle class in most mass media texts is out of reach for Americans who make anything close to the median national income. Not only does that reflect a too-literal interpretation of middle, it also follows the same logic as saying blackness is not *real* because people who identify as black have no unifying life experience or because blackness has no basis in genetics. Income and wealth are real, but like the physical characteristics associated with race, they are meaningless without context.

I define class as an organizing principle of social relationships based on perceived differences in access to life chances. It operates at the micro-level as an identity category that structures individual behaviors and practices and at the macro-level as one of the structuring logics of institutions and social relations. The unequally-distributed determinants of life chances are called “capital,” and come in many forms, including economic capital like wealth and income, social capital like relationships and access to networks, and cultural capital like skills, credentials, and forms of knowledge.⁵⁷ Like

⁵⁶ That includes both of the major definitions of “popular culture.” The Cultural Studies definition is entirely predicated on working class resistance, but even the definition of popular culture as “mass produced” culture relies on a division between highbrow and lowbrow that emerged in the late nineteenth century to distinguish cultural forms and public spaces belonging to the wealthy from the debased pursuits of the masses. See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁵⁷ Pierre Bourdieu defines these in “The Forms of Capital,” *Handbook of Theory and Research for the*

other categories of social difference, including race and gender, class and particular classes like the middle class are socially constructed, contested, and constantly shifting.⁵⁸ In an important sense, then, class is imaginary; however it is real in its effects. The construction of classes is itself ideological—it reflects and works to reinforce the prevailing political and economic systems—and class also influences the construction and transformation of ideologies.

The idea of “middling” or in-between classes predates capitalism—in Early Modern Europe, terms like “bourgeoisie” and “burgher” referred to urban-dwelling craftsmen, shopkeepers, and traders with more capital than commoners (servants, farmers, and craftsmen without property) but not as wealthy, influential, or privileged as the gentry.⁵⁹ With the rise of capitalism, the number of people identified as middling increased and social ranks became more fluid. In *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, Karen Halttunen argues that a new usage of the term “middle-class” emerged in the nineteenth century in the U.S. in conjunction with the cult of the self-made man: “by the 1830s, middle class no longer meant a point of equilibrium between two other fixed classes; to be middle-class was to be, in theory, without fixed social status.”⁶⁰ This new conception of the middle-class as liminal and mobile was expressed in a growing array of

Sociology of Education, ed. J. Richardson 1983 (New York: Greenwood, 1986: 241-258). In *Distinction*, he proposes a fourth form that he calls *symbolic* capital, which he refers to as the resources available to people based on honor or prestige, like the political advantage that accrues to a war hero. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* 1979 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984: 291).

⁵⁸ I offer an extended discussion of competing definitions of class in Chapter Five, “Aspirational Eating.” Although the definition I offer here is similar to E.P. Thompson’s definition of class as a “process,” he claims that process arises out of the sphere of production rather than taking cultural determinants of class into account. My definition also departs from most “cultural” definitions of class in its insistence on stratified access to life chances. The idea of class as primarily an “organizing principle of social relationships” is based largely on Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s definitions of race and racial formation in *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 1986: 66-9).

⁵⁹ “burgher, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford University Press, November 2010, Web (accessed 12 February 2011). The descriptions of pre-capitalist social ranks comes from the introduction to *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2001: 4).

⁶⁰ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986: 29).

folk stories that imagined the middle-class as the majority or default class identity in the U.S. The American everyman was middle-class and imagined to be on an exclusively upward-moving social escalator, even though in reality, Americans who identify as middle-class have always been at least as likely to slip into poverty as they are to move into the elite.⁶¹

The dominant representation of middle class Americans has long conflicted with the fantasy that it represents a majority of the population. In an editorial written in 1858, Walt Whitman describes the middle class as consisting of salaried, white-collar suburban men and their families. The editorial begins, “The most valuable class in any community is the middle class, the men of moderate means, living at the rate of a thousand dollars a year or thereabouts,” which Stuart Blumin notes was “a level of income denied to nearly all who worked at the manual trades and less skilled jobs that Whitman so often celebrated in his poetry.”⁶² When national mass media began to emerge at the turn of the twentieth century, they also represented the middle class as urban or suburban, white, home-owning, headed by a man employed in a white-collar job and probably wealthy enough to employ at least one domestic servant part-time. Sentimental literature, advertising-driven magazines, and radio programming that catered to that class reflected abiding concerns about propriety, manners, and emulating the lifestyle of the super-rich.⁶³ This contradiction between the construction of the middle class as vast and inclusive or relatively wealthy and exclusive is part of what makes it difficult to define

⁶¹ Noting the gap between the fantasy of the “middle class” and statistics about mobility in antebellum Philadelphia, Stuart Blumin argues that “the American Dream [of upward mobility] is fed, not by such mundane matters as mobility matrices but by isolated cases of spectacular success.” (Quoted in Halttunen, 1986: 29). For more recent examples, see Katherine S. Newman, *Falling From Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1989) or Daniel Aaronson and Bhashkar Mazumder, “Intergenerational Economic Mobility in the United States,” *Journal of Human Resources* 43 (1) 2008: 139-172.

⁶² Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989: 1-2).

⁶³ Richard Ohmann calls this demographic the Professional-Managerial Class (or PMC) and argues they were the main audience for national, advertising-driven magazines, which he claims constitute the first truly *national* mass culture form. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York, NY: Verso, 1996: 11-31).

and analyze.

Despite its elusiveness, the idea of the middle class has a powerful hold over how many Americans imagine themselves, their culture, and the United States as a nation. As Blumin argues, Whitman's adulation was characteristic of the popular attitude towards the middle class that has prevailed for most of the last century and a half. In most public polling data since the 1930s, a majority of Americans have identified as middle class.⁶⁴ The *Wikipedia* entry on the "American middle class" claims that they "encompass the majority of voters, writers, teachers, journalists, and editors" and that "most societal trends in the U.S. originate within the middle classes."⁶⁵ In her 1989 book about middle-class status anxiety, Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the middle-class stands in for the nation:

Most books, and especially those which make large claims about the American character and culture, are in fact about this class and about it alone.... in our culture, the professional, and largely white, middle class is taken as a social norm—a bland and neutral mainstream—from which every other group or class is ultimately a kind of deviation.... Their lifestyles, habits, tastes, and attitudes are everywhere, and inescapably before us.⁶⁶

In other words, the middle class is hegemonic in U.S. popular culture. Its beliefs, assumptions, tastes and habits are normative; its values constitute the "common sense" of the nation. However, the middle class is also heterogenous, shifting, and potentially vast. Transformations in the popular representation of the middle class and the

⁶⁴ Bledstein and Johnston, 2001: 1.

⁶⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "American middle class," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia* 12 Feb. 2011, Web (accessed 14 Feb. 2011).

⁶⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1989: 3). She excoriates the middle class for developing a "meaner, more selfish outlook, hostile to the aspirations of those less fortunate." Although opposed to the generally favorable opinion of the middle class in the general public, Ehrenreich's book represents a long tradition of intellectual attacks on the middle class. Robert Johnston describes scholarship on the middle class as a remarkably one dimensional "trashing" dating back to 1908 when Rives La Monte described the American middle class as "sycophants and vampires." All the most notable studies of the middle class by people like C. Wright Mills, Sinclair Lewis, Max Weber, and Robert Bellah portray the middle class as at best "cheerful robots" and at worst as ignorant, racist, irrational, politically backwards, morally and spiritually bankrupt yuppies. Johnston suggests that this tradition may reflect intellectuals' "guilt over their privileged backgrounds" or their "lack of democratic faith." Robert Johnston, *The Radical Middle Class: Populist Democracy and the Question of Capitalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003: 1-5).

aesthetics, values, and practices associated with it reflect structural changes in the distribution of capital.⁶⁷

Confessions of an Aspirational Eater

I began with the “hot dog of wines” anecdote because I hoped it would provide a concrete example of how taste (in the literal sense of what people like to eat or drink) can form the basis for social judgments that in turn influence how people perceive and use foods and beverages. However, I also wanted to start with a personal story because I agree with the claim Warren Belasco makes in the introduction to *Appetite for Change*: “food virtually demands self-disclosure.”⁶⁸ Everyone has a personal relationship with food. Everyone eats, has opinions about food, and makes choices every day about what and how to feed themselves. Just as this dissertation has been shaped by my education and my position in intersecting social hierarchies,⁶⁹ it has also been shaped by who I am as an eater.

I was born in 1981, so in many ways I grew up with the food revolution. As a child growing up in rural Nebraska and Wyoming, my favorite foods included Campbell's Tomato Soup, Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and short-grained Japanese sticky rice with soy sauce or *ochazuke nori*⁷⁰—reflecting the continued influence of industrial food

⁶⁷ My focus on social class formation also partially explains my exclusive focus on U.S. culture, despite the fact that the food revolution is global in scope, and the histories of all diets and foods are fundamentally trans-national and poly-cultural. Some of the key factors that have shaped class in the U.S. are specific to the electoral politics and federal policies that affect U.S. citizens and U.S. popular culture in particular ways. Those factors are not necessarily unique, and a comparative study of class formation and popular food culture in other countries—particularly Australia and the UK, where income inequality has also increased and mobility decreased since the 1980s or between different groups in the U.S. like the black middle class versus the Asian middle class—would likely provide additional insights about the relationship between mobility, inequality, and aspirational practices; however, that kind of comparative inquiry was beyond the scope of this dissertation.

⁶⁸ Warren Belasco, *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry*, 2nd ed. 1989 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007: 5).

⁶⁹ In the interest of situating my knowledge: I am a fourth-generation, heterosexual, abled, non-religious, Japanese and Irish-American woman, and I identify as upper middle-class now but my background is working/lower-middle class.

⁷⁰ A dehydrated green tea and seaweed soup mix that often includes rice crackers and pieces of dried fish.

products and ethnic heritage in most Americans diets. Most nights, my mother cooked dinner using mostly “from scratch” ingredients, relying heavily on the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* she had received as a wedding present and tried-and-true recipes she learned from her mother or got from other women in her family and social circle. For most of the 1980s, the only aspect of the vast changes in American foodways gathering steam on the coasts and cities that reached us in the rural Mountain West was the diet and fitness craze. The year I was born, Olivia Newton-John's single, “Physical” reached the top of the Billboard charts and was made into a music video that showed Newton-John working out in a gym with overweight men who transform into muscular hardbodies.⁷¹ Some of my earliest memories involve tagging along with my mother to her aerobics classes when I was three or four years old, at which point I had probably already developed a nascent sense of the great importance of being thin.

As a teenager in the 1990s heyday of low-fat dieting, I subsisted largely on lean turkey breast, plain bagels, and sugary breakfast cereals—which my mother had forbidden when I was a child, except as an occasional treat. However, I also enjoyed baking rich, sweet treats, largely to give them away. Beginning in my junior year of high school, I began making elaborate holiday cookie baking plans involving at least a dozen different recipes, including favorites handed down from my grandmother and novel “gourmet” and “traditional” recipes I found online. I also began to develop other new tastes, like an affection for coffee I carefully cultivated despite initially finding the taste repulsive. I eased myself in with sweet, milky espresso-based drinks at the newly-popular Starbucks and eventually “graduated” to black coffee at Denny's, where my friends and I would spend hours on weekend evenings, smoking cigarettes and imagining ourselves to

⁷¹ The men act indifferent to Newton-John's sexually-suggestive dancing, which is “explained” at the end by interactions suggesting that they are gay. The video was banned by some Canadian and British broadcasters, and MTV generally cut the ending. Despite—or perhaps because of—the controversy, it won the Grammy Award for Video of the Year in 1983. Soraya Roberts, “Olivia Newton-John tried to stop 'Physical' music video from being released in 1981,” *New York Daily News* 20 April 2010, Web (accessed 17 February 2011).

be rebels. Food choices offered the possibility of projecting a whole range of identities—childish or adult, provincial or worldly, self-indulgent or disciplined.

Towards the end of high school, inspired in part by the lessons of biology classes that impressed upon me that plants are machines for storing solar energy whereas animals are machines for burning it, I began to contemplate the ethics of eating meat.⁷² When I got to college, I decided to try following a vegetarian diet on the vague hunch that it might be better for the environment, less likely to promote animal suffering, and healthier. Besides which, the meat in the cafeteria was nowhere near as tempting (or obligatory) as my mother's superb stir-fries and fried chicken. I met other vegetarians, and tried Thai and Indian foods for the first time. I began attending and eventually hosting potlucks where bringing meat was a definite faux-pas and we idealized foods that evoked “authenticity,” a quality we were as likely to see in “white trash casserole” (frozen vegetables coated in margarine and processed cheese and baked under a topping of crumbled saltines coated in more margarine) as in Indian curries or the seemingly-ubiquitous hummus. Relying on a combination of knowledge and skill passed down from my mother, tricks I learned in restaurant kitchens, the growing array of mass media texts about food, and lots of trial and error, I gradually became a more confident cook. I also

⁷² The caloric inefficiency of animal protein compared to vegetable sources of food is one of the most common arguments in favor of vegetarianism, articulated most famously by Frances Moore Lappé in *Diet for a Small Planet*. When Lappé started doing the research for *Diet* at the library at UC Berkeley, she discovered that it takes 21.4 pounds of feed protein to produce 1 pound of beef protein, 8 pounds of feed to produce 1 pound of pork, 5.5: 1 for chicken, and 4.4: 1 for milk. Lappé 1971, paraphrased in Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: The History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006: 4). Since then, others have argued that these calculations are based on the assumption that animals are raised on food that would be suitable for human consumption, which is a fairly recent development in animal agriculture. For example, Simon Fairlie argues in *Meat: A Benign Extravagance* that instead of comparing the amount of food animals in concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) consume to the calories of meat produced, we should be comparing the amount of land required to grow meat with the land needed to grow plant products of the same nutritional value to humans. He argues that if pigs were fed on residues and waste, and cattle on straw and grass from fallows and rangelands, meat becomes a very efficient means of food production in many ecosystems. According to his calculations, if people stopped feeding edible grain to animals, they could still produce around half the current global meat supply with no loss to human nutrition: in fact it would be a significant net gain compared to a vegetarian system that would not have a way to turn those crop residues and food waste into edible protein. Simon Fairlie, *Meat: A Benign Extravagance* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co., 2010: 35-44).

gained five or ten pounds more than I had weighed in high school, so I started counting calories and exercising regularly until I lost them and then proceeded to regain and relose the same five to ten pounds for most of the next decade.

In my first year of graduate school in New York City, I took the leap into veganism, cutting out all remaining animal products, which had the immediate effect of turning cheese and ice cream into fetish objects. Although I was convinced that veganism was the most humane and sustainable way of eating, I endeavored not to be self-righteous or sanctimonious. The only form of evangelism I engaged in was feeding people baked goods designed to elicit what became the highest form of culinary praise: “I wouldn't have even known it was vegan.” A few years later, I gave up veganism and then vegetarianism when I could no longer reconcile the nutritional and ethical implications of eating processed soy, tropical fruit, vegetable oils, and chocolate grown in the third world but avoiding grass-fed dairy, oysters, and local pastured eggs. I was also sick of feeling like a constant inconvenience and implicit scold at social get-togethers involving food. Although my restrictions on animal products relaxed, I continued to pay more for eggs labeled “free range” and sometimes for products with the USDA Organic label. I tried to shop at farmers markets when it was convenient (which wasn't very often), and eventually joined a Community Supported Agriculture program, which involved getting a box of seasonal, locally-grown produce once a week in the summer, at least half of which always seemed to be kale.

As someone who has participated to some degree in all four of the pillars of aspirational eating, I was surprised by many of the things that I discovered in the process of writing this dissertation. Some of the surprises were delightful, like finding out that one of Campbell's first canned soup flavors—introduced at the turn of the last century—was “Mulligatawny.”⁷³ **[Figure I.2]**

⁷³ Although Mulligatawny soup had become a part of British cuisine due to their colonial presence in India, Hoganson argues that it was still seen as “exotic,” and included ingredients like coconut, chutney, mangoes, curry sauce, and cayenne pepper that were not a part of standard British-inspired American

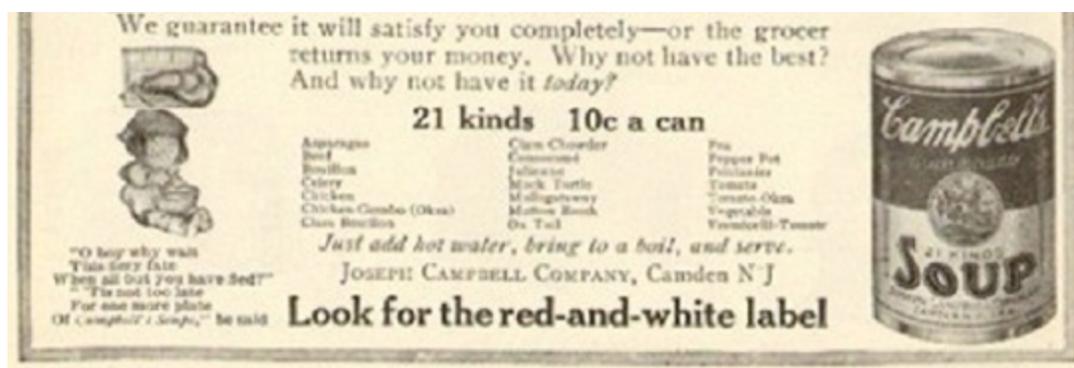


Figure 1.2 /1911 Advertisement in *Everybody's Magazine* with Mulligatawny Soup⁷⁴

Until reading about the cosmopolitan tastes of the antebellum upper-middle class in Kristin Hoganson's *Consumer's Imperium*, I thought the popular interest in exotic and ethnic food was exclusively a recent development in American culture.

Other surprises were more difficult to swallow. As a serial weight loss dieter, I was especially resistant to the literature that challenges the popular associations between dieting, self-control, thinness, and health. When I first encountered the statistical evidence in Paul Campos' *The Obesity Myth* that Americans in the BMI range currently defined as “overweight” actually live *longer* than people in the range defined as “normal” and that being “underweight” is associated with greater mortality risk than being “obese,” I refused to believe it. But then I encountered the same claim in J. Eric Oliver's *Fat Politics* and Michael Gard and Jan Wright's *The Obesity Epidemic*, and I was eventually convinced by their exhaustively-researched, rigorous, and remarkably similar accounts of the political, economic, and cultural factors at work in the manufacture of the “obesity crisis.”⁷⁵

fare. Kristin Hoganson, *Consumers' Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity* (Chapel Hill, NC: 2007, 192). The 1911 advertisement below also lists French-inspired flavors like “Mock Turtle” and “Consommé” and a nod to Louisiana creole, “Chicken Gumbo (Okra).”

⁷⁴ Reproduced from a digital photograph published online as “1911 Print Ad CAMPBELL'S Soup 21 Kinds 10 Cents a Can,” by Ebay seller “wanewrld” and TheVintagePaperGuy, Ebay Item No. 190500797686, *Ebay* February 2011, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

⁷⁵ Which is not to say people are not getting fatter, on average—both in the U.S. and globally—or that the average increase in weight has no consequences for public health. However, the evidence about the causes and consequences of national and global fatness is complex and contradictory and does not explain or justify the ferocity of anti-fat stigma and or the tenor of the discourse in the “war on fat” by U.S. nutritional authorities like the Surgeon General's Office. I return to the issue of fatness and obesity in Chapters Two and Three, but I do not reprise the entire case against the description of obesity as an “epidemic” or “crisis.” For more on that, see Glenn Gaesser, *Big Fat Lies: The Truth About Your Weight and Your Health* (Carlsbad, CA: Gürze Books, 2002); Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth: Why America's*

I am still negotiating with the implications of other challenges to the dominant ideologies about food that I had internalized, like the studies showing that even the judgments of trained *sommeliers* are vulnerable to manipulations of color and price,⁷⁶ or that lamb imported from New Zealand by plane⁷⁷ and produce driven halfway across the country in a truck⁷⁸ may have lower carbon footprints and lifecycle inputs than locally-grown meat and fruit. I have had to admit that my taste perceptions may be shaped more by expectation and contextual clues than objective, material properties of the food I eat.⁷⁹ However, I still believe that I *can* taste differences based on objective qualities of foods and beverages, appreciate a creative or skillfully prepared meal, and learn to select foods and cook in ways that that will genuinely give me more pleasure. I am more skeptical now than I used to be about claims regarding the “sustainability” or ethical superiority of local, “natural” and organic foods, but I also remain skeptical that global, industrial agriculture and especially industrial animal agriculture is the only or best way to feed the world's growing population.

So to clarify: I am not arguing that the personal decisions people make about what to eat have *no* effects on their health, body size, climate change, biodiversity, animal welfare, labor conditions, or the pleasure they derive from food. Nor do I argue that food choices serve *only* to reinforce prevailing social hierarchies and *never* represent genuine resistance to the status quo or attempts to create social change. However, beliefs about what constitutes “superior” eating and broader societal eating trends are driven by factors

Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health (New York, NY: Gotham, 2004); Michael Gard and Jan Wright, *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, morality and ideology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005); J. Eric Oliver, *Fat Politics: The Real Story Behind America's Obesity Epidemic* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), or Esther Rothblum *et al*, eds. *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁷⁶ See Gil Morot, Frédéric Brochet and Denis Dubourdieu, “The Color of Odors,” *Brain and Language* 79 (2001): 309-320 and Jamie Goode, *The Science of Wine: From Vine to Glass* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006: 182).

⁷⁷ James McWilliams, *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* (New York, NY: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009: 26).

⁷⁸ Christopher L. Weber and H. Scott Matthews, “Food Miles and the Relative Climate Impact of Food Choices in the United States.” *Environmental Science & Technology* 42 (2008): 3508-3513, Web (accessed 14 February 2011).

⁷⁹ See the Conclusion for more on the example of eggs.

other than empirical evidence, and in the last three decades, attempts to eat “better” have been driven *more* by anxieties about status and the pleasures of class distinction than objective, rational choice. The clearest case of this is probably in the historically-variable panic about fatness; as I will show in Chapter Two, the medical rationale for the superiority of thinness developed only *after* weight-loss dieting and the preference for the slender body had already become widespread. The same is also true of many claims about better-tasting, healthier, more ethical, and authentic foods: the belief in their superiority often precedes the search for evidence to support the claim and frames how the evidence is gathered and evaluated.

Social, cultural, political, and economic forces always influence how people construct the “common sense” that guides how they eat. My goal is to show that although eating is an inherently political act, it is not always political in precisely or exclusively the way the eater intends. Food is one of the arenas of popular culture where the struggle for domination and resistance to the culture that serves the powerful takes place. The story of aspirational eating is largely a story about how class anxiety and the pleasures and pressures of distinction can twist politically progressive impulses into behaviors that ultimately reinforce class hierarchy. That process illustrates, once again, how extraordinarily adept hegemonic culture is at co-opting oppositional impulses. I admit I am generally pessimistic about the potential for the food revolution to create significant or lasting social change, especially when it manifests primarily as a set of prescriptions for reforming individual consumption habits. However, the mere existence of politically progressive and egalitarian impulses in the discourse and practice of aspirational eating may be grounds for cautious optimism. The struggle for popular culture is ongoing—it is possible that food will become an arena where a culture of equality and justice could be forged.

CHAPTER ONE:
NO CULINARY ENLIGHTENMENT: THE POLITICS OF THE
FOOD REVOLUTION

Must we stereotype those who disagree with us? Do we truly believe that ALL red-state residents are ignorant racist fascist knuckle-dragging NASCAR- obsessed cousin-marrying roadkill-eating tobacco-juice-dribbling gun-fondling religious fanatic rednecks; or that ALL blue-state residents are godless unpatriotic pierced-nose Volvo-driving France-loving left-wing communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan weenie perverts? Yes. This is called “diversity,” and it is why we are such a great nation — a nation that has given the world both nuclear weapons and SpongeBob SquarePants.

—Dave Barry, “Blue State Blues” 2004¹

Obama Foodorama and the Politics of “Enlightened” Eating

At 8:15 PM Pacific time November 4, 2008, just moments after CNN officially called the presidential election for Democratic party nominee Barack Obama, Eddie Gehman Kohan launched a blog named *Obama Foodorama*.² Since then, Kohan has posted new content every day,³ typically in the form of multiple 500-1000 word articles covering everything from whimsical, star-struck reporting about where and what the first family has been seen eating to culinary tributes (like a home-brewed beer called “The

¹ Dave Barry, “Blue State Blues: An Off-Color Rift,” *The Washington Post*, 19 December 2004 Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

² Kohan, a self-described “food writer and agricultural policy wonkette based in Los Angeles” had already attracted an avid readership for *The Haphazard Gourmet Girls*, a blog she and her two sisters started in 2008 named after their father's 1966 cookbook *The Haphazard Gourmet*. She told the *The Washington Post* that she started the new Obama-centric blog because “Hap Girls would've turned into a Barackanalia anyway if we didn't separate the blogs; it's amazing how much Obama Foodorama material there is.” Kim O'Donnel, “Q&A: The Voice of Obama Foodorama,” *What's Cooking: A Mighty Appetite with Kim O'Donnel*, 21 January 2009, *The Washington Post*, Web (accessed 18 June 2009).

³ Still being updated daily as of 22 February 2011.

Audacity of Hops”⁴) to serious, often critical assessments of Obama's positions on food policy issues. [Figure 1.1]



Figure 1.1/ *Obama Foodorama* Screen shot⁵

Kohan declined to provide specifics about her site's traffic, but said that as of March 2009 she was getting far more page views than many other popular food blogs like *Civil Eats* and *The Ethicurean*.⁶ Her blog has attracted the attention of mainstream news media; Kohan has been interviewed by *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, the Associated Press, “The Today Show,” and MSNBC. She told the Associated Press that on the day after the Obamas' May 2009 “date night” in Manhattan, when they dined at Blue Hill, a trendy farm-to-table restaurant in the West Village, *Obama Foodorama* got “millions of hits.”⁷

⁴ A play on the title of the keynote address Obama gave at the 2004 Democratic national convention, which catapulted him to national prominence, and the title of his second book, which reached #1 on both the *New York Times* and Amazon.com bestseller lists in 2006. Garrett M. Graff, “Could Oprah Help Elect Obama?” *Washingtonian*, 01 December 2006, Web (accessed 22 February 2011).

⁵ Screenshot by the author featuring Obama portrait in cupcakes by Zilly Rosen, from Eddie Gehman Kohan, *Obama Foodorama*, 12 November 2008. Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

⁶ Eddie Gehman Kohan, “Re: Traffic Stats?” E-mail to S. Margot Finn dated 11 March 2009. Her estimate may have been hyperbole.

⁷ Jocelyn Novek, Associated Press, “Capital Culture: World Hangs on Obama's Every Bite,” *The Washington Post*, 08 June 2009, Web (accessed 18 June 2009).

News media generally frame Kohan's blog as an illustration of the slightly-hysterical celebrity fan response Obama attracted from many supporters, but her site offers more than a breathless, teen magazine run-down on his likes and dislikes. The blog feeds a voracious curiosity about Obama's eating habits and food politics also reflected in mass media coverage and popular practice. Throughout his campaign, restaurants where he was seen eating and brands he expressed public affection for reported surges in business. On the day of his inauguration, the most visited section of the inaugural website was the lunch menu.⁸ Even before his nomination, farmers, chefs, food writers, environmental activists, and many people simply identifying as “eaters” began calling on Obama for *change* (the key word in his campaign) in U.S. food policy. Presidential eating habits have attracted attention in the past—the first *White House Cookbook* published in 1887 was a popular gift for new brides at the turn of the century and remained in print until 1996.⁹ The first George Bush's antipathy for broccoli became infamous. However, the intensity of popular interest in presidential food preferences catalyzed by Obama's nomination and election is unprecedented.

When asked by *The New York Times* to explain the proliferation of food-related activism and anticipation of food policy reform inspired by Obama's candidacy and election, Kohan said: “He is the first president who might actually have eaten organic food, or at least he eats at great restaurants.”¹⁰ Her conflation of eating organic food, eating at “great restaurants,” and presumed support for a particular political agenda is emblematic of an imagined gestalt: the movement hailed as the American food revolution is widely believed to represent a recognizable aesthetics, ethics, and politics—a unified cuisine. Like their predecessors in the 1960s counterculture, many of whom are

⁸ According to Senator Diane Feinstein, chair of the inauguration committee. Katharine Q. Seelye, “Live Blog: The Inauguration of Barak Obama,” *The New York Times: The Caucus*, 20 January 2009, Web (accessed 10 September 2009).

⁹ “Gilette, Fanny Lemira,” *Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project*, Michigan State University Libraries: DMC: Digital Collections, 21 May 2004, Web (accessed 22 February 2011).

¹⁰ Kim Severson, “How Caramel Developed a Taste for Salt,” *The New York Times* 31 December 2008. Web (accessed 27 May 2009).

part of the new food revolution, contemporary food activists and foodies¹¹ are often motivated by the conviction that their quotidian individual choices about what and how to eat are integral to political and cultural reform. The idea that every time you make a decision about what and how to eat, you cast a vote with your fork¹² suggests that even seemingly private decisions like whether or not to eat a piece of chocolate are part of complex webs of power encompassing international labor conditions, massive industries devoted to food production, and the vexed cultural politics of desire, pleasure, and body size. The result is a hybrid of the maxim attributed to eighteenth century epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, “you are what you eat,” and the second-wave feminist mantra “the personal is political”: what you eat is political.

As in the feminist mantra, “political” here refers to “the broad sense of the word, as in having to do with power relationships, not the narrow sense of electoral politics.”¹³ However, Obama's candidacy inspired many people whose participation in the politics of food was previously limited to voting with their forks to engage in formal political activism—campaigning for Obama, writing direct appeals to him and candidates in state and local elections, gathering signatures for petitions, etc.¹⁴ Meanwhile, pundits and participants in online communities used Obama's eating habits and opinions as the basis for assumptions about his politics and personality. Because of the interest in Obama as

¹¹ I use this term to refer to people who take an interest in food that they or others perceive as notable or in excess of “normal” interest in food. There is an extended discussion of the origins, significance, and debates about the term “foodie” in Chapter Four. I use it because it has been embraced by both the mass media and many people who write and comment on food blogs, message boards, and recipe databases and has more contemporary resonance than alternatives like “gourmet” or “epicure.” For more how the term is debated among people who self-identify as highly interested in food, see Josée Johnston and Shyon Bauman, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* (London: Routledge, 2010: 54, 197). Of particular interest is their finding that approximately half of the Toronto “foodies” they interviewed rejected the term as either elitist or demeaning and approximately half embraced it as a better, *less* elitist alternative to terms like “gourmet.”

¹² A metaphor largely popularized by journalist Michael Pollan, reminiscent of the popular European bumper sticker slogan, “Eat Your View.” Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2006: 258).

¹³ Carol Hanisch, “New Intro to 'The Personal is Political,’” *Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000: The “Second Wave” and Beyond*, ed. Sherri Barnes, Judith Ezekiel, and Stephanie Gilmore. Center for the Historical Study of Women and Gender, State University of New York at Binghamton, 2006, Web (accessed 12 March 2009).

¹⁴ Martin, 2009.

both an eater whose food habits presumably reflect his identity and a celebrity politician in the position to make major changes in the American food system whether by legislation or example, discourses about Obama and food provide a particularly productive site for examining the contours and fissures of the recent food revolution.

In this chapter, I outline the four themes that dominate the discourse about Obama as an eater and potential reformer of the U.S. food system. These themes also represent the four pillars of the food revolution. The conflicts that emerged over the representation of Obama as a model eater and the occasional criticism of his eating choices reveal cracks in the presumed gestalt of the new food politics. Instead, the popular discourse about food consists of a wide range of conflicting and competing ideologies. Those conflicts challenge the prevailing explanation for the food revolution, the culinary enlightenment thesis I described briefly in the introduction. I examine several manifestations of that thesis in both popular and scholarly accounts of the food revolution and its counterpart, a narrative of national culinary decline.

The reason that Obama's food preferences and politics were scrutinized and celebrated more than those of previous presidents or his competitors is because the beliefs and practices associated with the food revolution have become a way to distinguish the “liberal elite,” a particular demographic of Americans with left-leaning politics and college degrees who mostly live in cities and/or on the coasts and identify as “upper middle class.”¹⁵ Although the liberal elite is often portrayed as small and unrepresentative, their tastes are broadly influential and portrayed as “normative” in mass media. The widespread perception of Obama as liberal and his embodiment of upward mobility encouraged people to see him as a model eater in ways they did not see

¹⁵ The anxieties and pleasures associated with the food revolution are especially strong for women, both because they perform a disproportionate share of food-related labor like grocery shopping and cooking, are subject to greater scrutiny of their food choices and bodies, and are more likely to be the primary caregiver for children. Like many aspects of “elite” culture, the choices and practices associated with the “food revolution” like vegetarianism, the “natural” foods movement and organic/local/sustainable foods, and gourmet cooking are also culturally feminized.

his predecessors and opponents. However, these expectations were often frustrated. Obama defied stereotypically “enlightened” choices, often in favor of populist foods and behaviors. The conflicted discourse about Obama and food suggests that what unites the disparate ideologies of “superior” eating is not a true culinary enlightenment—which would be represented by real improvements in knowledge and access to *objectively* better foods—but instead a construction of superiority that appeals to historically-specific class anxieties and aggravates class injuries. The construction of Obama as a model eater and the food politics projected onto his campaign, largely without his encouragement, also exemplify the rise of food as a form of cultural capital.

The Four Pillars of the “Food Revolution”

The central concerns in the popular discourse about Obama and food are: 1) *sophistication*, or the extent to which his tastes can be considered gourmet;¹⁶ 2) *thinness*, expressed not only in assessments of his body size but also how his food choices might affect his weight and model “good” eating behaviors (i.e., ones that promote thinness); 3) *natural foods*, primarily represented by the terms organic, local, and sustainable; and 4) *cosmopolitanism*, or the extent to which Obama demonstrates knowledge about and respect for diverse cuisines and especially “authentic” versions. These pillars aren't discrete or mutually exclusive. There's a lot of overlap, for example, in the belief that thinness is an indicator of good health and the belief that a diet rich in organic fruits and vegetables can help maintain a healthy weight.¹⁷ However, many foods that people eat

¹⁶ Even within the food industry, “gourmet” is a contested term. According to Packaged Facts, a market research firm that puts out an annual report on titled *Gourmet, Specialty, and Premium Foods, Beverages, and Consumer Trends in the U.S.*, “Because the terms 'gourmet,' 'specialty,' and 'premium' are all subjective definitions, Packaged Facts has opted to use a broad brush in defining the scope of this market, to encompass premium products sold in mass-market channels such as supermarkets, as well as traditional gourmet products sold through gourmet/specialty retail channels.” Russ Eustice, “Packaged Facts – Response to your request,” E-mail to S. Margot Finn dated 25 February 2011.

¹⁷ “Health” is another vague and contested term; for some people, the primary factors are disease and longevity. For some, it also includes physical attributes related to beauty like body size, vitality or some other measure of energy, mental well-being, physical strength and/or flexibility, etc. At the 2009 meeting of the American Studies Association, Amy Bentley proposed that “health” be defined as a

specifically to promote weight loss, like diet soft drinks or the chocolate-roasted peanut MET-Rx protein bars Obama favored on the campaign trail as occasional meal replacements, are clearly at odds with the idealization of whole, unprocessed, natural foods.¹⁸

Although sophistication and cosmopolitanism are frequently compatible, as both tend to privilege rarefied, novel, or labor-intensive foods and pleasurable dining experiences, they do sometimes conflict. The desire for culinary experiences that are *authentic* to a particular geographical location or historical tradition is different than the pursuit of expensive or avant-garde cooking.¹⁹ Similarly, while proponents of organic, local foods often claim they are better-tasting or more authentic to a particular location or culinary tradition, it's just as often the case that gourmet or ethnic foods are incompatible with the priorities that govern the natural foods movement—particularly when they must be imported. Legal and cultural wars have erupted over foie gras.²⁰ There are conflicts within each of the categories, too, partially because they are constantly shifting. New trends are always emerging and others being declared *passé*, as anyone who has attempted to keep up with what qualifies as sophisticated, healthy,

measure of a person's ability to do all the things they want to do. Amy Bentley, "Food Politics, Sustainability, and Citizenship: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue," ASA Annual Meeting 6 November 2009 Washington, D.C. The Renaissance DC Hotel.

¹⁸ "Obama's Likes and Dislikes: Hold the Mayo," *The New York Times*, 27 May 2008, Web (accessed 23 June 2009).

¹⁹ Philosopher Lisa Heldke offers an example of this in her description of the difference between her approach to cooking dinner for guests and her mother's: "I never know what to cook when I invite people over for dinner. Sometimes I get paralyzed with indecision. The night before the event, the floor of my living room is covered with cookbooks bristling with book-marks. There are cookbooks by my bed and next to the bathtub, even some actually in the kitchen. I've sketched out five possible menus, each featuring foods of a different nationality, most of them consisting of several dishes I've never cooked before. My mom doesn't do this. When she invites guests for dinner, she selects a menu from among her standards, preparing food she's prepared and enjoyed countless times before, knowing that once again they will turn out well and everyone will enjoy the meal. I miss that. I envy that—especially when I spend three hours trying to decide on a menu, or when I try a new dish for company and it turns out to be awful and everyone at the meal has to try to pretend they are enjoying it." Lisa Heldke, "Let's Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism," *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*, ed. Sherrie Inness (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000: 175-6).

²⁰ See Mark Caro, *The Foie Gras Wars: How A 5,000-year-old Delicacy Inspired The World's Fiercest Food Fight* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

ethical, or exotic food can attest.²¹ Nevertheless, these pillars, each of which represents ideals that transcend any single food or trend, provide a useful framework for thinking about the different, often contradictory, ideologies that make up the “food revolution.”

Sophistication

The popular perception of Obama as a culinary sophisticate centered largely on a quote that had nothing to do with his own eating habits. In 2007, his campaign organized a “Rural Issues Forum” at the Van Fossen Farm located about 30 minutes outside of Des Moines, Iowa. Obama spent about an hour there, speaking with a group of local residents about a wide range of issues, and one of the recurring themes in the conversation was farming. After noting that the price of most crops had not increased despite rising food prices, Obama said: “Anyone gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula? I mean, they're charging a lot of money for that stuff.” *The Caucus*, a *New York Times* blog, reported that the line “landed a little flat,” which it suggested may have been due to the fact that the closest Whole Foods Markets were across state lines in Minneapolis or Kansas City.²² Arugula, also known as “rocket,” has been grown in the U.S. for centuries, primarily for use as a salad green and Italian-inspired cooking; however, it has only been available in grocery stores and on the menus at national restaurant chains since the 1990s. It is still unfamiliar to many Americans. Among those who do know what it is, it is generally seen as exotic or gourmet.²³ Obama may have been attempting to criticize Whole Foods, or commiserate with voters

²¹ The ever-changing wisdom about what kinds of foods are “good for you” was also parodied by a 1999 headline in *The Onion* declaring, “Eggs Good For You This Week,” *The Onion*, 28 April 1999, Web (accessed 02 April 2011).

²² Jeff Zeleny, “Obama’s Down on the Farm,” *The New York Times: The Caucus*, 27 July 2007, Web (accessed 23 June 2009).

²³ Arugula is listed among the “exotics” that became popular between 1980 and 1985 in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, along with things like kiwi, blood oranges, lemongrass, and Tahitian vanilla. Silvia Lovegren, “Historical Overview: From the 1960s to the Present” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (e-reference edition), Oxford University Press, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

frustrated by rising grocery bills, but his remarks were perceived as evidence that he was “out of touch” with struggling families and an indicator that his tastes were snobbish.

Washington Post columnist George Will cited the arugula quote on ABC's “This Week” when he denounced Obama for being “elitist.”²⁴ *Wall Street Journal* columnist John Fund referred to it as evidence of Obama's “condescension towards salt-of-the-earth Democrats.”²⁵ Tulsa-area blogger Michael Bates wrote about the incident under the headline, “Typical Liberal Arugulance,” which conservative pundit Michelle Malkin linked to repeatedly on her blog in an attempt to turn the phrase into a meme.²⁶ Even Obama's supporters generally interpreted the arugula comment as an embarrassing gaffe. In a *Huffington Post*²⁷ article titled “Obama Eats Arugula” (notably *not* an accurate description of the quote), Joan Williams, a progressive law professor suggested that Obama and his campaign ought to “recognize the ways Obama is sending out alienating signals of class privilege in an entirely unselfconscious way.”²⁸

Those who defended Obama's comments largely did so by attempting to re-cast arugula as humble and non-elitist. In response to Williams' *Huffington Post* article, Bertha40869” wrote: “I'm not rich and I love arugula! I also know what bruschetta is, know what a panini press is, and risotto is. The problem with a lot of Americans is that they have no sense of culture,”²⁹ paradoxically reinforcing the association of arugula with an implicitly hierarchical notion of “culture” even while denying its connection to class:

²⁴ John Tomasic, “George Will, Man of the People, Misquotes Obama, Pushing the Elitist Tag,” *The Huffington Post* 14 April 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

²⁵ John Fund, “Obama's Flaws Multiply,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 15 April 2008, Web (accessed 25 February 2011).

²⁶ Michelle Malkin, “Flashback: More Obamessiah Fancy Foodie Follies,” Michelle Malkin, 4 April 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011). Michelle Malkin, “Cracker-quiddick Fallout Continues to Haunt SnObama” Michelle Malkin, 15 April 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011). Michelle Malkin, “Introducing Barack 'Arugula' Obama; Update: CafePress says, 'No, you can't,’” Michelle Malkin, 15 April 2008, Web (accessed 23 June 2009).

²⁷ A website launched by Arianna Huffington, Kenneth Lerer, and Jonah Peretti in 2005 as a source of news and commentary, usually considered politically liberal or progressive. Wikipedia contributors, “The Huffington Post,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 24 Feb. 2011, Web (26 Feb 2011).

²⁸ Joan Williams, “Obama Eats Arugula,” *The Huffington Post*, 09 June 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

²⁹ All quotes from online sources are reproduced as published unless otherwise indicated. I have opted not to mark potential departures from MLA style “[sic]” so as not to imply ridicule.

“I’m not rich.” “AxelDC” replied to “Bertha40869”: “They sell that stuff at the Olive Garden, which is not exactly upscale dining. We are not talking Grey Goose vodka and crème brulee here. We are talking about salad and bread,” implying that arugula would be excluded from his definition of upscale dining—apparently based on brand-name liquor and French desserts. Several others noted that arugula had earned a place in traditional Italian peasant cuisine because it grows “like a weed,” thus proving its low status. One commenter even speculated that you can probably buy it at Walmart, the epitome of accessible and inexpensive grocery shopping.³⁰

Obama himself argued that his quote wasn't elitist; instead, the people who criticized it were for assuming that Iowans would not be familiar with arugula. Addressing a crowd in Independence, Iowa later that year, Obama said, “All the national press, they said, 'Oh, look at Obama. He's talking about arugula in Iowa. People in Iowa don't know what arugula is.' People in Iowa know what arugula is. They may not eat it, but you know what it is.”³¹ However irrational, the belief that arugula is “gourmet” persisted and the media and blogosphere coverage of Obama's arugula quote contributed to a lasting association between the president and the leafy green.

Almost a year after the initial forum, a *Newsweek* cover story titled “Obama's Bubba Gap” was represented by cluster of leaves labeled “(a-ru-gu-la)” counter-balanced by a frothing mug of golden liquid labeled “(bîr).” In an introductory note, the issue's editor referred to the popular impression that Obama is out of touch with common voters as “the arugula factor.”³² Although Obama never claimed to eat or enjoy the taste of arugula, the general impression conveyed by the Rural Issues Forum quote was reinforced by anecdotes suggesting he might have personal proclivities for “gourmet” food. On blogs like “Grub Street,” people generally expressed approval of the Obamas'

³⁰ Huffington Post contributors, “Obama Eats Arugula: Comments,” *The Huffington Post*, 09 June 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

³¹ John McCormick, “Obama Talks Arugula—again--in Iowa,” *The Chicago Tribune: The Swamp*, 05 October 2007, Web (accessed 28 February 2011).

³² Jon Mecham, “The Editor's Desk” *Newsweek* 26 April 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

alleged affection for high-end restaurants like Topolobampo and Spiaggia, citing them as evidence of good taste.³³ [Figure 1.2]



Figure 1.2/ Arugula on the cover of Newsweek, April 26, 2008³⁴

Meanwhile, his political opponents exploited every opportunity to charge him with elitism. The *Philadelphia Daily News* reported that during his campaign stop in their city, Obama did not eat a cheesesteak, instead sampling Spanish ham that retails for \$99.99 a pound from a specialty importer at the Italian Market. He later promised a crowd of supporters, “I’m going to get a cheesesteak next time I come.” On her blog, Malkin sniped: “Too late, Mr. Dainty Fingers. You only get one chance to make a first impression. The odor of elitism is like onion breath: Quick to acquire, hard to get rid of. Not that Obama would know anything about onion breath...”³⁵ An article in *USA Today* cited Obama's reported affection for caramels with gray smoked sea salt from Fran's in

³³ Nick Kindelsperger, “Obama Makes Surprise Visit at Topolobampo,” *Grub Street Chicago*, 01 November 2010, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

³⁴ Reproduced from a digital photograph taken by Flickr user “sдобie,” dated 08 May 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

³⁵ Michelle Malkin, “Obama's cheesesteak snobbery: Shades of Jawn “Swiss” Carry,” *Michelle Malkin*, 04 April 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

Seattle, which were included in a gift basket he received when he visited the city, as evidence of his “upscale” tastes.³⁶ Responding to a *New York Times* article about Obama's “likes and dislikes,” including Fran's chocolates, the *Adweek* blog *Adfreak* said, “on the whole, the faves list skews a bit more upscale than seems ideal for a candidate who's trying to strengthen his appeal to blue-collar voters.”³⁷

Even Obama's taste in burger joints—in particular a visit to Ray's Hell Burger that attracted mass media attention—was portrayed as evidence of that he was a more sophisticated eater than his political predecessors. A slideshow on the *U.S. News and World Report* website titled “What Makes Obama a Gourmet President” was introduced thusly:

After eight years of boots and barbecue in the White House, the Obamas have introduced a gourmet atmosphere not seen in several recent presidencies. George H.W. Bush liked Chinese food from a northern Virginia neighborhood. Bill Clinton has a reputation for Big Macs. George W. Bush liked his grill. But the Obamas have instead hired their own chef and dined at the best restaurants Chicago and Washington have to offer. Even President Obama's choice of burger joints, Ray's Hell Burger in nearby Arlington, Va., only serves gourmet sandwiches.³⁸

Conservative pundits also portrayed his request for a spicy or Dijon mustard on the burger he ordered at Ray's as evidence of elitism. On his *Fox News* talk show, Sean Hannity showed a clip from a Grey Poupon commercial featuring men with affected accents talking about Dijon mustard while sitting in adjacent Rolls Royce limousines, and then quipped “I hope you enjoyed that fancy burger, Mr. President.”³⁹ The other examples highlighted in the *U.S. News and World Report* slideshow included the fact that the Obamas had been spotted dining at expensive restaurants, started a vegetable garden on the White House grounds, and had invited celebrity chefs like Rick Bayless to

³⁶ “Obama's favorite things—which will you buy?” *The Chicago Sun-Times*, reprinted from *USA Today* 06 November 2008, Web (accessed 27 May 2009).

³⁷ Mark Dolliver, “A few of Barack Obama's favorite things,” *AdWeek: AdFreak*, 29 May 2008, Web (accessed 26 February 2011).

³⁸ Paul Bedard, “A Tour of the White House Menu: What Makes Obama a Gourmet President,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 3 September 2010, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

³⁹ E.H.H. “Dijon Derangement Syndrome: Conservative media attack Obama for burger order,” *Media Matters for America*, 07 May 2009, Web (accessed 20 June 2009).

cook state dinners.⁴⁰ Especially because vegetable gardens and burger joints are not typically portrayed as gourmet, their inclusion helps illuminate the construction of culinary sophistication.

Obama's tastes are called gourmet or upscale when they can be distinguished from the “norm” by price, novelty, rarity, and the idea that they offer a higher-quality or more enjoyable taste experience. Starting a garden and eating at Ray's Hell Burger are “gourmet” in comparison to barbeque and McDonald's because the latter are more common. State dinners under Presidents Bush and Clinton undoubtedly involved expensive, high-quality catering, but that constitutes the “norm” for a formal White House affair; hiring a high-profile celebrity chef to oversee the menu constitutes a mark of distinction that makes it seem more sophisticated. Similarly, in the debate about the meaning of arugula, the idea that the leafy green was “gourmet” was based on the claim that most people—especially the Iowa farmers he was addressing—would not know what it was or how much Whole Foods was charging for it; those who attempted to argue that it was *not* gourmet emphasized its commonality and cheapness, its prominence in Italian “peasant” cuisine, and the possibility that it could be purchased at Walmart.

The discourse about Obama's culinary sophistication also suggests that although culinary sophistication may elide with concerns about fatness, health, the environment, and authenticity, those are tertiary to the central concern, which is the pursuit a superior taste experience. The problem with arugula was that it was “hoity toity,”⁴¹ not that it was seen as healthier or better for the environment than normal lettuce. Snubbing the Philly cheesesteak for Spanish ham and ordering a burger at an independently-owned restaurant with Dijon mustard were taken as evidence of sophistication (or snobbery) because they suggested the pursuit of a better-than-average culinary experience. The

⁴⁰ Bedard, 2010.

⁴¹ As Maureen Dowd wrote, “Barack Obama never again wants to be seen as the hoity toity guy fretting over the price of arugula at Whole Foods.” Maureen Dowd, “Hold the Fries,” *The New York Times*, 17 June 2009, Web (accessed 20 June 2009).

criteria of superior taste is complicated by the fact that taste is deeply subjective. Many people probably would genuinely prefer the cheesesteak or Big Mac; however, according to the way most people use the word “gourmet,” only the latter would count.

The implication that there is some objective standard of excellence a food must meet to qualify as sophisticated is also reflected in a discussion thread on Chowhound⁴² in response to the question, “How would you define gourmet?” The first post in the thread, submitted by “Lemoncaper” in January 2009, asked people not to rely on a dictionary and to instead use their “own words.” The primary point of agreement among the roughly two dozen people who replied was that this was a difficult or even impossible task. Many of them declared that the word had been “abused” and might have had meaning in the past, but had either been co-opted by commercial interests or diluted by indiscriminate popular use. Several people suggested that the word was so completely subjective and individual that it could not be defined. However, a few contributors noted that however slippery it might be, “gourmet” has widespread currency and pushed for a descriptive rather than prescriptive definition. Writing in that vein, “Kajikit” argued that gourmet generally refers to a specific *kind* of culinary excellence:

It can be good food without being 'gourmet'... gourmet equals the finest quality ingredients (therefore usually, but not always, expensive!)No shortcuts [. . .] Macaroni and cheese made with velveeta or out of a box = NOT gourmet. Macaroni cheese made with hand grated pecorino cheese.... = totally gourmet. Regular made-from-scratch macaroni cheese = not gourmet but still delicious.”⁴³

Kajikit's definition seems to reflect what most people who portrayed Obama as someone with gourmet tastes were getting at. Culinary sophistication and the word “gourmet”

⁴² Now referred to merely as “Chow,” this online message board community focused on food was founded in 1997 by Jim Leff and associated with particularly fanatic food enthusiasts in pursuit of novel and superlative food experiences and recipes. In 2006, Leff sold the site to CNET Networks, a larger internet media company known primarily for reviews of consumer technology products. Richard Siklos, “Death by Smiley Face: When Rivals Disdain Profit,” *The New York Times*, 02 April 2006, Web (accessed 27 February 2011). In 2008, Chowhound was acquired, along with the rest of CNET, by CBS Interactive, the division of CBS devoted to online content. “About,” *Chow*, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁴³ Chowhound contributors, “How would you define gourmet and...” *Chowhound*, 01 January 2009, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

refer to the pursuit of foods constructed as objectively superior to normal, familiar, and accessible foods on the basis of taste and, usually but not always, price.

Thinness

Obama's body size and its relationship to his diet also attracted the attention of news media and elicited commentary in online communities. Given the extent of contemporary anti-fat stigma, Obama's slender physique should have been an unqualified advantage.⁴⁴ Paparazzi photos of him shirtless on a beach while vacationing in Hawai'i were circulated widely to general admiration and featured on the cover of *Washingtonian* magazine with the headline “26 Reasons to Love Living Here: Reason #2 Our New Neighbor is Hot.”⁴⁵ [Figure 1.3]



Figure 1.3/ Obama Shirtless on *Washingtonian Magazine*⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Fatness is widely associated with laziness, ignorance, lack of self-control, and excess sensuality. Children as young as five are less likely to want to be friends with people who appear in images to be “overweight,” and even show a bias against people who are portrayed in mere *proximity* to overweight people. Helen Penny and Geoffrey Haddock, “Anti-fat prejudice among children: The ‘mere proximity’ effect.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* v.43: 4 July 2007: 678-683.

⁴⁵ “What Do You Think of the May Obama Cover of Washingtonian?” *Capital Comment Blog*, 21 April 2009, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁴⁶ Reproduced from *Capital Comment Blog*, 2009, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

Comments on the shirtless pictures when they were posted on *The Huffington Post* ranged from, “Someone has been hitting the gym – way to go—so great to have a fit pres!” to “Hopefully, he’ll be as interested in the well-being of our country as he is in his own “fitness”. We don’t need a playboy-looking type of person, we need a wise, deep-thinking, God-fearing person.”⁴⁷ Even comments of the second type almost universally praise Obama’s thinness as pleasant to look at, and the oblique accusation of narcissism was rare; in general his thinness is portrayed a reflection of good health, good moral character, and good leadership qualities.

Indeed, his political opponents’ attempts to turn his thinness against him provoked mostly negative reactions. At a rally for Republican candidate Senator John McCain, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger said, “I want to invite Senator Obama to the gym.... We have to do something about his skinny legs,” appealing to the “hard body” aesthetic of the late Cold War era when Schwarzenegger and other hyper-muscular men starred in Hollywood blockbusters like *The Terminator* and *Rambo*.⁴⁸ Besides seeming dated, the quip made little sense to voters familiar with Obama’s reputation for exercising frequently (which also made its way into national news stories with some frequency, in large part due to the criticism that also drew from the McCain campaign).⁴⁹ In response to a story about Schwarzenegger’s comments on *Front Row Washington*, the blog run by the Reuters news agency’s Washington bureau,

⁴⁷ Katherine Thomson, “Obama Shirtless in Hawaii,” *The Huffington Post*, 22 December 2008, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁴⁸ Carl Campanile, “Arnold Kicks Sand in ‘Skinny’ Obama’s Face,” *New York Post*, 01 November 2008, Web (accessed 26 May 2009). For more on the hard body aesthetic and Reagan-era Hollywood masculinity, see Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ When the McCain campaign was criticized for a television ad campaign that compared Obama to celebrities like Britney Spears and Paris Hilton, his campaign manager said, “only celebrities like Obama have the time to go to the gym three times a day,” seemingly referring to an AP article titled “Obama Becomes a Gym Rat” which reported that he had made three stops at Chicago gyms in one day. However, the “rat” in the title was a double *entendre*, as the article also noted that he may have been using “workouts” as a pretext for meetings with potential vice-presidential candidates he wished to keep confidential. Further lending support to that theory, he apparently showed up at one gym in slacks and a blazer. Amy Chozick, “Too Fit to Be President: Facing an Overweight Electorate, Barack Obama Might Find Low Body Fat a Drawback,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 01 August 2008, Web (accessed 18 June 2009).

commenters universally rejected the idea that Obama should gain weight. A reader named “Beth” said, “Obama can whip Arnold's thick ass any time on the basketball court” and “Mari” said, “Arnold is just a fake. Obama has a healthier look, very trim and climbs stairs with grace and strenght.” The respondents also rejected Schwarzenegger's metaphorical play on the “thinness” of Obama's policy. Turning Schwarzenegger's suggestion that Obama needed to “put some meat on his ideas” against him, a respondent named “Willie Reigh,” said “California is worse off financially and other ways than before Arnold came on as Gov. Where's the Beef Arnold?”⁵⁰

Obama defended his physique against Schwarzenegger's comments, saying “Listen, I'm skinny, but I'm tough.”⁵¹ However, he also seems to have felt the pressure to mitigate the potentially alienating effects of his thinness by calling attention to his “unhealthy” eating choices. At a campaign stop in Lebanon, Missouri where he visited with voters at a restaurant called Bell's Diner one of the first things he said upon his arrival was, “Well, I've had lunch today but I'm thinking maybe there is some pie.” He ultimately ordered the fried chicken, telling the waitress, “The healthy people, we'll give them the breasts. I'll eat the wings.”⁵² While he might have been responding in part to the pressure on politicians to show their appreciation for the local cuisine, wings aren't especially identified with Missouri. He also he explicitly identifies his food choice as *unhealthy*. Differentiating between the dark meat and skin of the chicken wing and the leaner, often skinless breast meat invokes the idea of “health” associated with the dominant mode of weight-loss dieting, in which high-fat and high-calorie foods are considered “unhealthy” because they supposedly cause weight gain.⁵³ Choosing the

⁵⁰ “Republican Schwarzenegger says Obama needs to bulk up,” *Front Row Washington*, Reuters News Agency, 31 October 2008, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁵¹ Chozick, 2008.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The primary contender in U.S. diet culture is “low-carb” or “paleo” dieting; however there are many other constructions of “health.” Proponents of “natural” diets are often more concerned with whole or unprocessed and unrefined foods, avoiding synthetic agro-chemicals and food additives, and seeking foods rich in particular micro-nutrients like anti-oxidants. Some people advocate vegetarian or macrobiotic diets as healthier, sometimes in part based on the idea that thinness is healthier, but usually

“fattening” choice seems like an attempt to counter the idea that his thin physique is evidence of an abnormal degree of self-restraint.

However, the idea that Obama's thinness might prevent overweight people from identifying with him gained slightly more traction than the idea that he needed to “beef up.” The concern was initially raised by an August 2008 *Wall Street Journal* article written by Amy Chozick, who had posted a query on the Yahoo! politics message board asking if Obama's thinness would affect anyone's vote. Several self-identified Clinton supporters said yes, that Obama “needs to put some meat on his bones,” and “I won't vote for any beanpole guy.”⁵⁴ Chozick noted that the footage of Bill Clinton rolling into a McDonalds for a Big Mac and fries, still drenched in sweat from a jog, was widely believed to have helped him connect to voters in conservative-leaning states like Georgia and Tennessee, which have higher percentages of overweight and obese people than many “blue” states.⁵⁵ Chozick's article was picked up by *The Huffington Post*, where commenters largely replied that they'd rather have a “skinny guy that's in shape” than a septugenarian melanoma cancer survivor, referring to McCain.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, other articles in *The Huffington Post* portrayed Obama's attempts to avoid some of the “fattening” foods he was offered on the campaign trail as “cheating.” A video of Obama handing off a brownie to his aide, Reggie Love made the rounds online, and *The Huffington Post* gave it the headline: “How Obama Cheats on Eats Meet 'n' Greets,” in an ironic twist on the typical notion of what it means to “cheat” on a diet.⁵⁷ *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd criticized him for refusing a slice of chocolate cake at a Pennsylvania chocolate shop, and reportedly not liking ice cream, calling his

also based on an idea of health as avoidance of disease, especially heart disease and cancer.

⁵⁴ Chozick, 2008.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Rachel Weiner, “WSJ: Obama May Be Too Thin To Be President,” *The Huffington Post*, 01 August 2008, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁵⁷ Kerry Trueman, “How Obama Cheats on Eats at Meet 'n' Greets,” *The Huffington Post*, 26 January 2009, Web (accessed 18 June 2009).

eating habits “finicky” and “abstemious.”⁵⁸ Additionally, in segment on MSNBC's Hardball called “Is Obama too cool?” *Bloomberg News* columnist Margaret Carlson said, “sometimes you just want to tell the guy, 'Eat the doughnut.’”⁵⁹

The idealization of thinness and dieting in pursuit of a particular body shape may seem like the odd man out in among the pillars because it is simultaneously far more widespread than practices like vegetarianism or eating at expensive restaurants and also seemingly less important to most self-identified foodies.⁶⁰ However, the emergence of weight-loss dieting as a mainstream practice in America not only corresponds historically with the other trends, it has also become implicated in the moral judgments and status distinctions. Fat Americans have become the primary symbol of everything wrong with the homogenous, unsophisticated, bland industrial food often assumed to be congruent with bad, unenlightened national cuisine.⁶¹ Fatness is also associated with the

⁵⁸ Maureen Dowd, “The Hillary Waltz,” *The New York Times*, 02 April 2008, Web (accessed 27 May 2009).

⁵⁹ Maureen Dowd, “No Ice Cream, Senator?” *The New York Times*, 13 July 2008, Web (accessed 27 May 2009).

⁶⁰ This probably also reflects the shame or stigma attached to weight-loss dieting, not an actual lack of concern on the part of people who identify as foodies in achieving and maintaining a thin body. The idea that “dieting” is a separate pursuit from the kinds of cooking and eating most often associated with the food revolution is also reflected in a separation between journalistic writing about diet and weight-loss and writing about cooking and eating at restaurants. Many professional food critics have written about their efforts to lose weight and struggles with eating disorders, but they usually do so in an explicitly confessional mode cordoned off from their “real” food writing. For example, the food critic who launched the popular food website Serious Eats, began a weekly series called “Ed Levine's Serious Diet” in January 2008. The “diet” posts often refer and link to restaurants and recipes that have been featured in other writing on the site, but those restaurant reviews and recipes very rarely acknowledge his on-going attempts to lose weight. Marlena Spieler, a food columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, detailed how she lost over 100 pounds in a special, confessional column that explicitly noted that she had previously avoided mentioning her weight-loss. *New York Times* food columnist and best-selling cookbook author Mark Bittman has written about the “vegan until dinner” diet he adopted in an attempt to lose weight and combat high blood cholesterol and sleep apnea, but only for the more informal NYTimes.com blogs, not for his more formal columns. Frank Bruni, who served as the chief restaurant critic for *The New York Times* from 2002-2009, wrote articles for Men's Health about his struggle to find exercise routines that would burn off the calories he consumed as a food writer and retired from his post as restaurant critic shortly before the release of a memoir chronicling his struggles with food addiction and bulimia, which was excerpted in the *New York Times Magazine*, not “The Food Section.” Sources: Ed Levine, “Ed Levine's Serious Diet,” Serious Eats, January 2008-February 2011, Web (accessed 22 February 2011). Marlena Spieler, “Roving Feast Columnist Becomes Diet Outlaw,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 01 October 2008, Web (accessed 26 June 2009). Tara Parker-Pope, “Vegan Before Dinnertime,” *The New York Times: Well Blog*, 27 February 2009, Web (accessed 26 June 2009). Frank Bruni, “I Was a Baby Bulimic,” *The New York Times Magazine* 15 July 2009, Web (accessed 22 February 2011).

⁶¹ See, for example, shots of fat bodies used to establish the “problem” with food in the U.S. in

masses, the poor, and stereotypes that have long been associated with the poor like laziness, ignorance, lack of self-control, and sexual promiscuity.⁶² The dominant belief that an ideal body size corresponds with making the “right” food choices is pervasive in the discourses about sophisticated, cosmopolitan, and natural foods.

Like the other pillars, thinness and the diet popularly understood to promote weight-loss are shifting social constructions. The rapidity of those changes is demonstrated in Schwarzenegger's disparaging comments about Obama's skinny legs and body, which reflect beliefs about the significance of body size that were dominant less than two decades ago but now fail to resonate. As some scholars have suggested, thinness is so idealized, especially for women, that it's unclear if there's such a thing as “too thin” anymore.⁶³ The same is increasingly becoming true for men. Nonetheless, the suspicion that Obama's thinness might prevent him from relating to the masses or reflect abstemious, elitist habits suggest some of the ways that body size and diet-conscious eating choices are implicated in social judgments about class.

Natural Foods

The *Obama Foodorama* writer's suggestion that many people thought of Obama

documentaries like *Super Size Me*, dir. Morgan Spurlock, Kathbur Pictures: 2004. and *Food, Inc.*, dir. Robert Kenner, Magnolia Pictures, 2008.

⁶² See Abigail C. Saguy and Kjerstin Gruys, “Morality and Health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders,” *Social Problems* 57: 2 (2010): 231-250.

⁶³ See Campos 2004, 147-152; oan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York, NY: Random House, 1997: 95-139); Roberta Pollack Seid, *Never Too Thin: Why Women Are at War with Their Bodies* (New York, NY: Prentice Hall Press: 1989); Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (London, UK: The Free Press, 1986). The maxim “You can never be too rich or too thin,” probably originated with Truman Capote in an interview on The David Susskind show in the late 1950s, and may have been popularized in the 1960s by Babe Paley, the famously tart-tongued wife of CBS founder William Paley. It is sometimes attributed to the America-born Duchess of Windsor, Wallis Simpson, who allegedly had the saying embroidered on a pillow in the 1970s. Ralph Keyes, *The Quote Verifier: Who Said What, Where, and When* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2006: 180). The preference for extreme thinness may have developed in the very wealthy classes in the mid-twentieth century U.S., but Brumberg, Schwartz and others document a continuing idealization of large breasts, plumpness, and hourglass figures in the middle and working classes during the 1930s-1970s. The more widespread sense that there's no such thing as “too thin” seems to have developed in the 1980s and after. For a recent example, see the Yahoo! Answers thread, “What is considered too skinny? Is there such a thing?” *Yahoo! Answers*, June 2010, Web (accessed 02 March 2011).

as the “first president to have eaten organic food” was driven by his widely-publicized affection for brands like Honest Tea, a USDA Organic-certified version of Lipton (whose slogan is “Nature got it right. We put it in a bottle.”⁶⁴) and his reference to Whole Foods, the world's largest natural foods retail chain, in the infamous arugula incident. The assumption that Obama was on board with the “natural foods” agenda was reinforced by his response to an opinion piece by Michael Pollan published in *The New York Times* about a month before the general election titled “Farmer in Chief.” In it, Pollan exhorted the winner of the election, whether Obama or McCain, to promote “sun-based” rather than oil-dependent agriculture. Bloggers and commenters across the natural foods blogosphere were delighted when Obama referenced the letter in an interview on NPR with Joe Klein. Comments on the website Treehugger.com are fairly representative of the response on food and green blogs: a user registered as “Bodie” says, “It makes me pretty excited that Obama has read Pollan,” and “Patrick” says “Michael Pollan should be appointed as an Obama Agricultural consultant asap. GOBAMA!!!” Blogosphere coverage of Pollan's letter frequently framed it as a “letter to Obama” and interpreted Obama's response as an embrace of Pollan's agenda.⁶⁵

Additionally, Michelle Obama's public advocacy of natural foods, most famously in her decision to establish a pesticide and fertilizer-free vegetable garden on the White House lawn led some people to make assumptions about Obama's food policy agenda.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ “Honest Tea,” *Honest Tea*, Web, (accessed 02 March 2011).

⁶⁵ Jeff Nield, *et al.*, “Obama Cites Michael Pollan's Sun-Food Agenda,” *Treehugger*, 03 November 2008, Web (accessed 23 June 2009). Obama's citation of Pollan received similar coverage and comments on many other blogs and online communities, including *Civil Eats*, *Ethicurean*, *Obama Foodorama*, *GreenDaily*, *Capital Press*, *Chow.com*, and the *People's Food Co-Op Bulletin Board*.

⁶⁶ The Mid America Croplife Association, an industry group representing agro-chemical companies, sent a letter to the First Lady appealing to her to “recognize the role conventional agriculture plays in the U.S.,” and forwarded it to their supporters. The letter was mocked on *The Daily Show* and several sources of news and advocacy of sustainable agriculture, like *Sustainablog*. Ms. Obama has declined to incorporate agro-chemicals into the garden. Elizabeth Balkan, “Pesticide Lobby Bugged by Michelle Obama's White House Organic Garden,” *Sustainablog*, 11 April 2009, Web (accessed 28 February 2011).

He did take partial credit and ownership for the garden at the Annual Conference of the American Medical Association, claiming that “*we* started a White House vegetable garden [emphasis added].”⁶⁷ However, Obama himself has mostly kept silent about priorities for the organic and natural foods movement like reforming the Farm Bill, and many of his appointees to the FDA and USDA had connections to large industrial agricultural interests.⁶⁸

The belief that the Obamas preferred natural foods and supported the natural food movement is exemplified by a letter written by celebrity chef and activist Alice Waters published in *Gourmet* magazine. In the letter, Waters offered her services to the Obamas to “help with your selection of a White House chef. A person with integrity and devotion to the ideals of environmentalism, health, and conservation.”⁶⁹ The implication, of course, was that whoever had served the Bush White House could not possibly be that kind of person. Former White House Chef Walter Scheib came forward to set the record straight, telling both *Obama Foodorama* and the *New York Times* that Chef Cris Comerford, who he had personally hired and promoted to executive chef when he left the White House in 2005, was not only a very talented cook and kitchen manager but was also committed to providing locally-sourced, healthy food for the first family and their guests. Scheib also noted that former First Lady Laura Bush had “insisted” on organic produce. NPR food critic Todd Kliman reported that Waters and Scheib had reached a detente, and then claimed, “But that's [the detente] not the news here. What is? The fact that someone finally had the guts to stand up to Waters' inflexible brand of gastronomical correctness.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks By the President At the Annual Conference of the American Medical Association,” The White House: Office of the Press Secretary 15 June 2009, Web (accessed 24 June 2009).

⁶⁸ Tom Philpott, “Another Monsanto Man in a Key USDA Post? Obama's Ag Policy's Giving Me Whiplash,” *Grist*, 24 September 2009, Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

⁶⁹ Alice Waters, “Alice Waters's Open Letter to the Obamas,” *Gourmet: Food Politics*, 15 January 2009, Web (accessed 10 September 2009).

⁷⁰ Todd Kliman, “Alice Waters Was a Foodie Hero. Now She's the Food Police,” *NPR*, 23 January 2009, Web (accessed 24 June 2009).

These examples help illuminate the distinguishing features of the pillar of natural foods. Elsewhere, Waters and Pollan often gesture to how *pleasurable* eating fresh, whole foods are and claim that they combat overweight and obesity. In their public appeals to Obama, they focused primarily on the social and environmental consequences of “natural” foods. Waters' letter refers to the ideals of “environmentalism, health, and conservation.” Even Scheib's reply reinforced the idea that locally-sourced, organic produce is morally superior by defending Chef Comerford on the grounds that she already uses those ingredients. Pollan's “Farmer in Chief” argued that reforming agriculture would combat climate change, help the U.S. achieve energy independence, and the promote the health of many regional U.S. economies. The inherently moral basis of “natural” foods is also what Kliman chafes against in his accusations that Waters represents an “inflexible brand of gastronomical correctness.” Although frequently tied to superior taste, thinness, and authenticity, “natural food” is ultimately constituted by a concern with the *ethical* implications of food.

Cosmopolitanism

The last of the four major themes in the discourse about Obama and food is how adventurous he is as an eater. Patronizing restaurants like Topolobampo, whose menu is based on Mexican cuisine and passages in *The Audacity of Hope* about his affinity for soul food helped bolster Obama's image as an omnivore with diverse tastes.⁷¹ NPR's Kliman portrayed Obama's taste as “eclectic” with aspects of an “aesthete” (like the 1000-bottle wine cellar at his Hyde Park home) balanced by a “pragmatism” reflected in burger runs and his affection for a a cheap take-out pizza joint near his Chicago home.⁷² The incidents that were seized on as evidence of Obama's omnivorousness⁷³ were

⁷¹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006: 249).

⁷² Traci Vogel, “Predicting Obama, the First Eater,” *Chow: Top Stories: Food Media*, 07 November 2008 Web (accessed 28 February 2011).

⁷³ Johnston and Baumann argue that this is one of the defining characteristics of contemporary foodie

primarily examples of him eating food portrayed as populist, likely because of the contrast they provided for his upscale tastes.

In particular, both news media and blogs seized on his first public restaurant visit in Washington, D.C. which involved meeting Mayor Adrian Fenty at Ben's Chili Bowl, a restaurant with deep cultural and historical significance for Washington, D.C. and the African-American community. Ben's is famous not only for chili-smothered sausages called half-smokes, but also for serving musicians like Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, and Ella Fitzgerald when they used to perform at neighboring U Street venues. It also served as a gathering place for community and political action, especially during the 1968 riots that followed Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Food blog *Chomposaurus* covered Obama's visit to Ben's in an entry tellingly subtitled, "Our New President Knows How To Eat,"⁷⁴ and on *Obama Foodorama*, Kohan said, "We kinda *adore* the fact that Barack's first public restaurant outing in Washington was to a joint that's entirely *of the people*, and also very historic [emphasis original]."⁷⁵ **[Figure 1.4]**



Figure 1.4/ Who Eats Free At Ben's, Before and After⁷⁶

culture. I think cosmopolitan better captures the longer history of interest in international, ethnic, and exotic cuisines, and in Chapter Four will challenge the assumption that foodie culture is truly omnivorous. I argue that it merely uses omnivorousness to ideologically legitimate the use of food as a form of cultural capital. Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 35.

⁷⁴ "Obama at Ben's Chili Bowl: Our New President Knows How to Eat," *Chomposaurus: The Meat Blog*, 13 January 2009, Web (accessed 22 February 2011).

⁷⁵ Eddie Gehman Kohan, "President-Elect Obama Visits Ben's Chili Bowl in DC...A Legendary Joint That's All About Change," *Obama Foodorama*, 10 January 2009, Web (accessed 22 February 2011).

⁷⁶ Reproduced from *Serious Eats* and Flickr users "aliciagriffin" and "Travir." Originally published by

Obama's visit was prefaced by a change in the landscape of the restaurant, which also attracted media attention. For years, a sign hanging behind the counter at Ben's read: "List of who Eats Free at Ben's/ Bill Cosby/ NO ONE ELSE/ -MANAGEMENT" but the day after Obama was elected, the management hung a new sign reading: "Who Eats Free at Ben's: *Bill Cosby/ *The Obama Family." The MSNBC program *Meet the Press* invited Cosby to participate in a round table on the day of Obama's visit to Ben's, and upon hearing that Obama had asked for an explanation of what a half-smoke is when he got to the counter, Cosby joked, "I'm taking my vote back." He also suggested that while the first lady and her mother might "deserve" free eats at Ben's, the president himself hadn't "earned" the privilege.⁷⁷ Cosby's ribbing plays on anxieties about Obama's racial and class identity (i.e. Is he really black? Is he black *enough?*), but despite that and his half-smoke faux pas, Obama's visit to Ben's was widely portrayed as a sign of his respect for the unique culinary traditions of his new home and African-American people. However, his failure to "pass" suggests the touristic nature of his visit to Ben's. Eating a chili dog was not seen as a behavior that was authentic to Obama's identity, it was seen an example of an admirable willingness to seek out novel or exotic and "authentic" culinary experiences. Cosmopolitanism departs from the other pillars in its primary concern with demonstrations of omnivorous or adventurous appreciation of cuisines marked Other.

The Four Pillars

The mass media and popular coverage of Obama and food reveals both the convergences and the fissures between the ideal of thinness and the other pillars of the "food revolution." Thinness and the dominant form of weight-loss dieting do often

Erin Zimmer, "Obama Family Makes the 'Eat Free' List at Ben's Chili Bowl," *Serious Eats*, 27 December 2008, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁷⁷ "Meet the Press Transcript for Jan. 11, 2009: Cosby, Poussaint, Fenty, Waters, roundtable," MSNBC, Web (accessed 23 June 2009).

conflict with what people believe to be sophisticated or cosmopolitan dining. A *New York Times* article on the taste trend of salt and caramel which credited Obama with some of the taste trend's success noted, “one thing salted caramels conspicuously lack is a health and wellness angle.”⁷⁸ The menu for Topolobampo features the rich foods characteristic of restaurants at its price point, which generally are not compatible with most people's ideas about health and dietary restraint—like the ribeye steak served with cheesy chilaquiles and a bacon-laced salad on the Spring 2009 menu.⁷⁹

In addition to the questions asked (mostly in jest) about the authenticity of Obama's performance at Ben's, a few people asked whether or not Obama was setting a good example by eating such “unhealthy” food, exemplifying the conflicts between health and cosmopolitanism. An article by Alicia Villarosa in the online magazine *The Root* specifically juxtaposed his trip to Ben's with the “healthful” choices she hoped he and Michelle would adopt both for their own sake and to “set the tone for our nation”:

We know the new president likes half-smokes from Ben's Chili Bowl and his mother-in-law's sweet potato pie, but how much does he eat veggie-centered meals? Stocking the White house kitchen with organic food could help, too. Even though in these tough economic times many Americans cannot shop organic, nudging people toward food full of natural nutrients minus the chemical pollutants would be an enormous boost to our national health.⁸⁰

Similar comments followed the media coverage of his visits to D.C.-area burger joints; in

⁷⁸ Severson, 2008.

⁷⁹ “Topolobampo Dinner: June 16-July 11, 2009,” *Frontera: Restaurants: Menus*, Web (accessed 19 June 2009). This is not meant to imply that Topolobampo's food is objectively unhealthy; some people would certainly view even the ribeye entree as “healthful” and the entree might even fit within the guidelines of low-carbohydrate weight-loss diets like Atkins or South Beach; however, it would not fit current FDA recommendations for achieving and maintaining a “healthy” weight. Another example that illustrates the conflicts between official nutrition advice and “gourmet” dining: in 2007, a reporter for *New York Magazine* had the famed nine-course tasting menu at the three-Michelin-starred restaurant Per Se analyzed by a nutritional-testing lab and found that the entire meal, including the amuse-bouche, wine, dinner rolls with butter, and chocolate candies, contained 2,416 calories and 107.8 grams of fat. The FDA recommends that the typical adult consume 2,000 calories per day and only 60 grams of fat. Charles Stuart Platkin, “Per Se, Per Calorie: Never Mind the \$250 Bill, What Price Will Your Waistline Pay For the City's Most Extravagant Meal?” *New York Magazine*, 29 April 2007, Web (accessed 20 June 2009).

⁸⁰ Alicia Villarosa, “The Obama Health Challenge: How Barack and Michelle Can Make the Country Healthier,” *The Root*, 27 January 2009, Web (accessed 27 May 2009).

June 2009, the D.C. insider newspaper *Politico* featured as their question of the week: “Are Obama's burger runs a bad example to be setting for America's citizens?” The online version included a video interview with musician and fashion mogul Russell Simmons suggesting that Obama look into healthier, vegetarian options like falafel.⁸¹ In a reversal of her previous critique, Maureen Dowd suggested that Obama should stop using burger runs to “beef up his average Joe image.” Instead, she recommended that he “forgo the photo-op of the grease-stained bovine bag and take the TV stars [Charlie Gibson and Diane Sawyer, who were in Washington D.C. to broadcast a special on health care from the White House the following week] out for what he really wants and America really needs: some steamed fish with a side of snap peas.”⁸²

Given the ribbing—friendly and not—that Obama had gotten for not putting in wholly adequate performances at both Ben's Chili Bowl and Ray's Hell Burger, one can only imagine how negative the response might have been if he had dared to order the nutritional equivalent of steamed fish and peas. Jokes about the president's failure to pass made by both conservative pundits and supporters also highlight the conflicts between gourmet, cosmopolitan, and healthful eating. Ben's and Ray's are both constructed as sources of “authentic” and delicious food that is nevertheless assumed to be unhealthy and unsophisticated. Obama's thinness and stronger association with gourmet prevent him from being a convincing half-smoke or burger eater.

In a *Gourmet* magazine article, “The War on Alice Waters,” food historian Laura Shapiro argues that the controversies concerning the woman hailed as the mother of the natural foods movement and the doctrine she preaches boil down to a charge of “elitism.”⁸³ In fact, the discourse about Obama and food reveals that all four of the pillars

⁸¹ Eddie Gehman Kohan, “‘Politico’ Asks Russell Simmons And Ob Fo The Same Question About Obama Folk Foodways. Natch, The Answers Are Wildly Different...” *Obama Foodorama*, 12 June 2009, Web (accessed 12 February 2011).

⁸² Dowd, 2009b.

⁸³ Laura Shapiro, “The War on Alice Waters,” *Gourmet*, 06 May 2009, Web (accessed 02 July 2009).

of the food revolution are vulnerable to charges of elitism or food snobbery.⁸⁴ The idea that Obama's thinness might distance him from the masses reflects both the real inverse correlation between income and obesity and the cultural association of thinness with class privilege.⁸⁵ For example, *Gawker's* post about the shirtless paparazzi photos was titled “Barack Obama Shames Americans With His Elitist Body.”⁸⁶ The tastes that both his political supporters and opponents identified as upscale like his affection for caramels with sea salt, Topolobampo, and Dijon mustard similarly reflect real trends in the target demographic and the belief (based at least partially in reality) that gourmet foods and upscale dining are the exclusive provenance of the wealthy.

Obama's visit to Ben's Chili Bowl was notable not only for the significance of the diner in black history and culture, but also for the class status of its customer base. *Obama Foodorama's* celebration of his decision to make his first public restaurant visit to a restaurant “of the people,” referred not to just to black people, but to the chili-dog-eating masses as opposed to the Blue Hill elite. Of course, Obama isn't really a part of the masses, as Cosby's and Hannity's jokes pointed out, so his trips to Ben's and Ray's seemed to many like as a form of “slumming,” the quintessentially upper-middle class practice of patronizing establishments whose target market is people of a lower socioeconomic status. Slumming, just like buying organic or gourmet food, ultimately reinforces class hierarchies by affirming that the elite patron is out of place in the “slum” and can leave it behind.⁸⁷ The contradictions within and between the four pillars

⁸⁴ I discuss the idea of snobbery in greater length in Chapter Four.

⁸⁵ Campos, 2004: 68-9.

⁸⁶ Richard Lawson, “Barack Obama Shames Americans With His Elitist Body,” *Gawker*, 15 August 2008, Web (accessed 27 February 2011).

⁸⁷ Slumming is only one part of cosmopolitan eating, which is, by definition, consuming foods that are not part of familiar habits and traditions, and especially marked by the search for “authenticity.” Cosmopolitanism most often refers to geographic breadth and diversity (as in a “cosmopolitan traveler”), and culinary “authenticity” is often ratified by a food's ties to a particular nation or region. However, people also seek and find “authentic” otherness by crossing social boundaries like race, class, ethnicity, and religion or temporal boundaries—finding foods that are rooted in historical traditions or “authentic” to the past. Often, one or more forms of “authenticity” converge: Southern American cooking is portrayed as “authentic” by virtue of its regional specificity, its associations with blackness, practices seen as traditional or true to the past, and the sense that it is the food “of the people” rather than elite or institutional. “Slumming” itself has historical roots in Victorian-era London and nineteenth-

challenge both the idea that there's an unproblematic consensus about what it means to eat well and the prevailing scholarly and popular explanation for the proliferation of popular interest in and anxiety about food. The anxieties about how each of the pillars map onto social class hierarchies suggest that what actually unites the four pillars is their construction of an ideology of “enlightened” eating associated with the liberal elite, which has made eating well a valuable form of cultural capital.

Enlightened Eaters in a Fast Food Nation: Culinary Enlightenment and Decline

Two conditions are necessary to the cultivation of the science of gastronomy, national peace and individual taste. Wherever these have existed, the science has progressed, with more or less credit, limited by temperance and rational festivity where men were refined, and degraded into fantastic gluttony where they were licentious.

—Thomas Carlyle, “Gastronomy and Civilization” (1851)⁸⁸

Both popular and scholarly accounts of the various trends that make up the food revolution typically offer a standard progressive narrative. According to this narrative, most Americans didn't care as much about dieting or gourmet food thirty years ago, or even ten years ago, because they either didn't know any better (a deficit of information), didn't care enough (a moral deficiency, because the importance of food is normative), or didn't have sufficient resources (a lack of money, energy, time, or access). The Culinary Enlightenment Thesis proposes that these deficits have been reduced in recent decades by advances in the production and circulation of knowledge and products, the development of new technologies, and the accumulation or freeing up of resources—

century American metropolises, where wealthy people traveled to the slums both in the spirit of benevolent reform and seeking entertainment and adventure. Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) and Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

⁸⁸ Thomas Carlyle, “Gastronomy and Civilization,” *Fraser's magazine* Volume 44, ed. James Anthony Froude and John Tulloch London: J. Fraser, 1851, Digitized by Google 30 August 2005, Web (accessed 18 June 2009).

time, money, and skills. In short, the forward march of progress in multiple realms led naturally to a revolution in the way many Americans eat and think about food.

For example, in the introduction to *The Gospel of Food*, a book that is otherwise quite critical of many of the prescriptions and proscriptions about food that began to proliferate in the 1980s, sociologist Barry Glassner writes: “The good news about our food-obsessed age is the quality and variety of foods that have become available and the delight many Americans take in exploring new tastes.” According to Glassner, the factor that prevents Americans from enjoying that quality and variety (compared to the French, who play the role of the good and happy hedonists in his account) is that “rather than let our palates be our guides, we let others tell us what to eat and how to think about what we eat.”⁸⁹ On the one hand, he acknowledges that the new food aesthetics are historically-contingent and do not necessarily lead to Americans in general deriving greater pleasure from food; on the other hand, he reaffirms the notion that the “quality and variety” of food in America has objectively increased. Furthermore, he reinforces the myth of French culinary superiority.⁹⁰

In a later chapter, Glassner critiques the advice available on the growing number of online food discussion websites like Chowhound, noting that “few of the other ethnic places I have tried on the recommendation of chowhounds have merited a second visit,” and suggesting that the criteria chowhounds privilege, like “deliciousness” and

⁸⁹ Barry Glassner, *The Gospel of Food: Everything You Think You Know About Food Is Wrong* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007: x-xi).

⁹⁰ According to T. Sarah Peterson, this dates to the seventeenth century, when François Pierre La Varenne's cookbooks codified the emerging cuisine that inaugurated the modern dichotomy between salty-acidic main courses and sweet desserts and downplayed the emphasis on golden hues and aromatic spices formerly associated with luxury and the divine. Early Modern and Renaissance cuisine emphasized the spiritual and magical powers of food and flavor and elevated the culinary trinity of sugar, saffron, and spice. The new cuisine invented by Varenne and other chefs in the employ of Second Estate nobles was based on secular ideas about the natural essence of individual ingredients, the physiology of appetite stimulation, and the goal of bringing flavors into harmonious balance. Varenne's worked as a chef in the kitchens of Marie de Médici (of the Florentine Medici dynasty), the second wife of King Henry IV of France, and Nicolas Chalon du Ble, Marquis of Uxelles. The cuisine of the French nobility eventually spread throughout Europe, along with other Enlightenment beliefs, but the French remain the primary arbiters of superior cuisine. T. Sarah Peterson, *Acquired Taste: The French Origins of Modern Cuisine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994: 161-84).

“authenticity,” are inherently elusive. However, he heartily endorses the “informed restaurant recommendations” of “connoisseurs” who “pound a lot of pavement, eat a lot of lousy food, make a serious study of the diverse cuisines they write about, and unlike their colleagues who review high-end establishments, almost never get recognized or catered to by restauranteurs.”⁹¹ His defense of connoisseurship reinforces the notion that superior food is more available and sought-after in America today than ever before, even if only a small minority of hard-working critics are qualified to discern it. Ultimately, Glassner argues that the major improvements in American cuisine are due to immigration:

Until recently, Americans were unlikely to explore the great cuisines of the world unless they lived in ethnic enclaves. And even then, people tended to have access only to the food of their own ethnic group, or to bastardized dishes like chop suey. Today, most every major city in the U.S. boasts dozens of serious ethnic eateries; New York and Los Angeles are home to hundreds. Many serve primarily their own ethnic communities, but a substantial number live off a group of restaurant goers on a flavor quest of their own.... Anyone who is open to trying a range of ethnic cuisines can eat out well in America, and for little money.⁹²

However, as historians like Donna Gabaccia and Kristin Hoganson have documented, that's simply untrue. Immigrants have been shaping mainstream American cuisine for centuries, and for most of U.S. history, many Americans have been quite eager to explore the cuisines of the world and of the ethnic enclaves in their own backyards.⁹³

Even historians sometimes invest in and reproduce the culinary enlightenment thesis. In *Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America*, historian Harvey Levenstein suggests that mid-century American food was objectively bad and the subsequent rise of natural, ethnic, and gourmet foods was not just a change, but a real improvement. According to Levenstein, despite the midcentury revolution in food processing, “one of the most striking aspects of the new food technology was how little it

⁹¹ Ibid, 121-2.

⁹² Ibid, 116-7.

⁹³ I discuss their arguments in more detail in Chapter Two.

altered basic American food tastes.”⁹⁴ Aside from a few exceptions like Italo-American spaghetti with meat sauce and Chinese-inspired “chop suey,” the average post-war American was trapped in what he calls a “culinary straightjacket.”⁹⁵ Even those few immigrant-inspired dishes were usually domesticated with industrial products like ketchup and Worcestershire sauce. He endorses restaurant reviewer Gael Green's description of Americans as wrapped in a “Velveeta cocoon.”⁹⁶

Indeed, according to Levenstein, the central paradox of American food in the post-war era is the culinary *nationalism* exemplified by the notion that Americans were “the best-fed people the world has ever seen” and their culinary *provincialism*; the “paradox” of *plenty* in the sense of volume but *paucity* in the sense of quality. This juxtaposition implies that being well-fed *should* encompass not just food security or access to plentiful food, but also a quality of food that he suggests can be measured by the sophistication and cosmopolitanism of cookbooks, Gallup polling data about Americans' ideal meal, and restaurant menus. Levenstein describes the consistency in the cookbooks and the ideal menus reported to Gallup between the 1930s and 1960s as “unfortunate” and laments that “American restaurants hardly picked up the culinary slack.”⁹⁷ He calls the the forces that promoted consistency and conservatism in American eating “mediocritizing influences,” although those forces turn out to be largely tautological—he claims that “national provincialism” was driven by restaurants' “conservative clientele” and the “gastronomically insensitive public.”⁹⁸ In other words, the cause of America's widespread culinary conservatism was America's widespread culinary conservatism.

Although Levenstein's description of the foodies who developed a reverence for “French nouvelle, 'Northern Italian,' ethnic, American regional, and of course, healthy

⁹⁴ Levenstein, 1993: 119.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 123.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 130.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 125.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 127-8.

foods” in the 1960s is often gently mocking, he implies that the trends they pioneered made the national cuisine not just different, but *better*. The chapter title “Darling, Where Did You Put the Cardamom?” and his description of the “imitators” of Alice Waters “fanning out on both coasts and into mid-America, mesquite supplies in hand, visions of Waters's nasturtium butter in their heads” seem deliberately arch, invoking now-familiar stereotypes about the food snob.⁹⁹ But he lauds their effect on the national cuisine: “the greater variety ethnicity and regionalism added to the American menu obviously helped counter the social, economic, and technological forces that had been tending to standardize and homogenize the national diet.”¹⁰⁰

The culinary enlightenment thesis essentially reprises the archetypal version of the progressive narrative developed by seventeenth and eighteenth-century intellectuals in Western Europe. Philosophers like Rene Descartes and John Locke argued that beliefs, institutions, and practices based on empirically-verifiable, objective “reason” and the “natural” rights of man would necessarily replace the authoritarian, monarchical, theocratic ones that preceded them in an inexorable forward march of progress.¹⁰¹ They believed (as many people still do) that the intellectual, cultural, political, and social changes they advocated, collectively referred to as “The Enlightenment,” represented not just a transformation but a principled improvement, that their ideologies were not just *different* from religious dogmatism or fatalistic acquiescence to authority, but *better*. The term “enlightenment” itself refers to idea that reason would cast an illuminating light, banishing the darkness of ignorance and dogma and revealing the immanent truth. Similarly, the four pillars of superior eating are widely believed to be based on objective truths that have been revealed by superior evidence and reason and are unquestionably better than the ignorant, backwards practices of the past—ergo, a *Culinary*

⁹⁹ Ibid, 223.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 222.

¹⁰¹ The debates about the chronological and geographic span of “The Enlightenment” are not relevant here as those debates concern the origins and scope of the changes referred as “The Enlightenment,” not the narrative itself.

Enlightenment.

There are multiple possible dates for the dawn of the Culinary Enlightenment, depending on which of the four pillars is privileged, but most of them locate the first glimmers in the post-World War II era. The 1940s and 1950s are widely seen as the culinary dark ages, when American cuisine (so maligned people sometimes express doubts about whether it even merits the name “cuisine”) was dominated by the fattening, bland, processed, oil energy-dependent, chemically-tainted, nutrient-deprived, homogeneous, inauthentic food produced by large-scale agriculture and the industrial food production system. That was the monolith confronted by early vanguards like James Beard (the “father of American cookery”) and Julia Child in the 1950s. Their cookbooks and cooking shows introduced Americans to the possibility and pleasure of preparing fresh, sophisticated, delicious, and nutritious foods at home. Still, most people remained unconverted, which helped pave the way for the 1960s counterculture to take their rebellion into their backyards and kitchens when they discovered—thanks largely to writers and restaurateur-chefs like Francis Lappe and Alice Waters—that gardening, cooking, and eating differently was another way to pursue many of their social and political agendas.

According to other food historians, participants in the new trends of countercuisine and weight-loss diets remained on the margins until the 1980s, when some iconoclastic entrepreneurs, many of whom participated in or were influenced by the 1960s counterculture, began to realize the commercial potential of foods marketed as “gourmet” or “natural.”¹⁰² They founded companies like Whole Foods Market and Williams-Sonoma, whose commercial success was boosted by the proliferation of nutritional advice from public health authorities, lifestyle programming on television and in magazines, pesticide scares and concern about environmental toxicity and decay,

¹⁰² Belasco, 1989: 208-9. See also Schwartz, 1986: 238.

and immigrants who introduced native-born Americans to novel and “exotic” cuisines.¹⁰³ Even the monolithic food industry eventually got on board once they sensed an opportunity to profit.¹⁰⁴ The revolution achieved a critical mass in the late nineties and by the early twenty-first century, trends like drinking wine, buying USDA Organic-certified products, and eating imported cheeses had moved from the fringes of American culture into the mainstream. Some advocates of the culinary enlightenment thesis note that this triumphant trajectory was not without pitfalls, like the potential “watering down” of some of the ideologies and practices in their movement from the cultural periphery to the center, but the essence of the thesis is that the overall narrative arc represents progress: the new trends are inherently better, and both the demand for and availability of those better foods suggests that many Americans have finally “seen the light.”

The archetypal progressive narrative has largely fallen out of favor in the humanities and some of the social sciences,¹⁰⁵ but even academics in those fields invoke the principles of the culinary enlightenment thesis when attempting to explain the increasing visibility of university course offerings, academic concentrations, and publications about food. In a *Washington Post* article titled “Field Studies: In Exploring Culture, Politics and the Environment, Food Programs Hit the Academic Mainstream,”

¹⁰³ Fromartz, 2004.

¹⁰⁴ There is a tension between the “entrepreneurial” account of the rise of natural foods, promoted by journalists like Samuel Fromartz, and the “capitalist co-optation” account promoted by Belasco, 1989. I find the latter far more convincing, as the former takes a “build it and they will come” approach, as if the market for natural foods existed always just waiting for some enterprising former hippies to discover and exploit it.

¹⁰⁵ This is due largely to influential critiques by theorists like Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They argue that “reason” and “natural” law were never objective, and instead of producing greater freedom, equality, and well-being, they worked to legitimate unprecedented state violence and oppression, including vast material and social inequalities and the imperial conquest of “backwards” peoples. According to Foucault, the modern state and institutions like schools, prisons, and the medical profession actually extend far greater control over subjects than pre-modern political systems did, largely through increased surveillance. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 1975 (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). Adorno and Horkheimer argue that modern capitalism produces only an illusion of freedom and choice while actually exploiting and oppressing workers and producing homogeneous products, particularly in the entertainment industries. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1944 (New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1976). The belief that these changes represent “progress” is a myth, and one that serves powerful interests.

the director of the Yale Sustainable Food Project was quoted saying, “There’s a generation of students that understand that the modern world has been shaped by agriculture, and they are turning to their curriculum to understand those connections,” suggesting that previous generations *didn’t* understand the importance of agriculture (again, a deficit of information or mis-evaluation of the available information). In the same article, writing instructor Stephanie Hartman from George Washington University added: “Once you have gone from ignorance to a greater understanding of how your choices impact the food system, you can’t go back.”¹⁰⁶ Barbara Haber, the curator at Radcliffe College’s Schlesinger Library who spearheaded their culinary collection, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that when she first started collecting cookbooks, people thought she was “trying to send women back to the kitchen,” but “women’s studies is now a mature enough field to accept food studies as legitimate.”¹⁰⁷ The underlying assumption is that food studies has become legitimate because it is *inherently* legitimate, so its acceptance is a sign of “maturity,” and its previous marginalization was the folly of a less mature, less enlightened time.

Some proponents of culinary enlightenment aren’t convinced that the culinary dark ages have been entirely relegated to the past. Evidence that *unenlightened* eating not only continues, but by some indicators has steadily increased fuels the counterpoint to the culinary enlightenment thesis: a narrative of culinary decline. Despite being antithetical, the two stories have a lot in common. Both portray the American food industry developed after the world wars as the source of unsophisticated, unhealthy, unnatural, inauthentic food, and both are invested in the four pillars of enlightened eating. However, the decline thesis reaches a different conclusion about the contemporary state of American food: instead of getting better, American eating habits

¹⁰⁶ Jane Black, “Field Studies: In Exploring Culture, Politics, and the Environment, Food Programs Hit the Academic Mainstream,” *The Washington Post*, 20 August 2008 Web (29 June 2009).

¹⁰⁷ Jennifer K. Ruark, “A Place at the Table: More Scholars Focus on Historical, Social, and Cultural Meanings of Food, but Some Critics Say It’s Scholarship-Lite,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 09 July 1999, Web (accessed 29 June 2009).

have generally gotten *worse*. Rather than seeing new technologies and globalization as the source of healthier, safer, fresher, better-tasting, more varied, and more environmentally-friendly foods, the story of culinary decline argues that industrialization and capitalism have distanced people from their food sources, corrupted the food supply and environment with toxic chemicals, destroyed traditional foodways and the social values and institutions they supported (especially “the family” and “family values”)¹⁰⁸, and made people fat and unhealthy.

¹⁰⁸ For example, there is a widespread belief that the “family meal” has declined, but little evidence to back up that claim, and precious little clarity on how to define it—some who lament its loss imply that a “family meal” must be home-cooked and eaten at a table without distractions like television or texting and last at least twenty minutes; others set a lower bar of nuclear families simply eating at the same time, whether at home, in a restaurant, or even in a car. Levenstein argues that the idea of the “family meal” first became a preoccupation in the U.S. and England during the Victorian Era among bourgeois families, for whom eating “correctly” and training their children to do so became a crucial way of distinguishing themselves from the working classes. Before that, children in the upper classes would customarily dine in the nursery with a nanny, governess, or other servants until they were considered adult enough to join their parents. In the lower classes, meal time did not become a formal affair until sometime in the twentieth century. According to *Time magazine* contributor Nancy Gibbs, most families in the U.S. did not have a separate “dining” area until the twentieth century, and most families did not settle into the Victorian workday rhythms until the 1940s or 1950s. However, concerns about the “decline” of the family meal are almost as old as the practice itself. According to nutrition policy analyst Paul Fieldhouse, the “nuclear concept of the family meal is a fairly modern phenomenon... and there is evidence that every generation has lamented its demise. Already in the 1920s there were worries being expressed about how leisure activities and the rise of the car were undermining family mealtimes.” There is some evidence that nuclear families ate dinner together more often in the 1970s than in the 1990s. In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam notes, “The fraction of married Americans who say ‘definitely’ that ‘our whole family usually eats dinner together’ has declined by a third over the last twenty years, from about 50 percent to 34 percent. . . . The ratio of families who customarily dine together to those who customarily dine apart has dropped from more than three to one in 1977-78 to half that in 1998-99.” The phenomenon of nuclear families eating together probably peaked sometime between the 1940s and 1970s, but it was still habitual for less than half of the American population and probably mostly limited to relatively affluent, dual-parent, single-income households. And despite how much more free time Americans supposedly had to cook, and how much harder-working they were back then, we know that most of those households relied on domestic servants, restaurant meals, take-out, and/or industrially-processed convenience foods at least some of the time. By the 1990s, the percent of families “usually” eating together had declined by 16%, which is significant. However, recent trends point towards a *revival* since the 1990s, not further decline. According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University, the number of adolescents who reported eating with their families “most nights” increased 23% between 1998 and 2005. In CASA’s 2010 of over 2000 teens and 456 parents, 60% said they eat dinner with their families at least five times a week. Sources: Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Nancy Gibbs, “The Magic of the Family Meal,” *Time magazine*, 04 June 2006, Web (accessed 02 March 2011). Paul Fieldhouse, “Eating Together: The Culture of the Family Meal,” *Transition* 37.4 (Winter 2007-8), The Vanier Institute of the Family, Web (accessed 02 March 2011). Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2001: 100). The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA), *The Importance of Family Dinners IV*, September 2010 <<http://www.casacolumbia.org/download.aspx?path=/UploadedFiles/lintfzad.pdf>> (accessed 02 March 2011).

Instead of putting faith in progress to ameliorate these problems, culinary decline narratives often promote a return to the imagined foodways of the past. For example, one of Michael Pollan's heuristics for making better food choices is, "Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food."¹⁰⁹ The Culinary Decline Thesis that celebrates the foodways of the past—real or imagined—echoes many aspects of the antimodernist movement that developed at turn of the nineteenth century. In *No Place of Grace*, T.J. Jackson Lears argues that the educated American bourgeoisie embraced the Arts and Craft movement associated with William Morris, the Strenuous Life (especially associated with Theodore Roosevelt), and medieval and Oriental religious practices, all in search of more intense, authentic experiences. According to Lears, the cultural elite were reacting against a spiritual sterility caused by the increasing technological and bureaucratic rationalization of their lives. They rejected the dominant embrace of progress. Instead of setting their chins to the future, they "recoil[ed] from an 'overcivilized' modern existence" and turned towards the past "supposedly embodied in medieval and Oriental cultures."¹¹⁰ Like *fin-de-siecle* antimodernism, the narrative of culinary decline leads in a variety of sometimes-contradictory directions.

Industrial food production often seems complex and opaque, from deceptive labeling to the notorious secrecy of the slaughterhouse. In contrast, the ideal of the family farm,¹¹¹ home cooking, and "whole" foods offer simplicity and transparency. At the

¹⁰⁹ Michael Pollan, *Food Rules: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York, NY: Penguin, 2009: 2).

¹¹⁰ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1981: xv).

¹¹¹ The myth of the "family farm," imagined as a small, self-sustaining operation with free-ranging livestock and a cornucopia of different crops is the idealized "other" to big, bad industrial agriculture. In the book *Family Farming*, Marty Strange says, "this idealistic description of family farming... has never existed anywhere, certainly not in North America," at least not as the norm or primary source of agricultural production. Mary Weaks-Baxter notes in *Reclaiming the American Farmer* that even Thomas Jefferson, perhaps the yeoman farmer's most renowned cheerleader and one of the primary historical authorities people turn to when they advocate for small, independent farms, cultivated thousands of acres and relied on slave labor to make a profit on cash crops. There's also no evidence that preindustrial agriculture was any safer, more efficient, or more ecologically-minded. Nonetheless, many proponents of organic farming and farmer's markets appeal to a widespread nostalgia for the myth of preindustrial farming represented by the "family farm." Some agricultural scientists argue that organic methods and a properly managed balance of different crops and animals can produce higher yields than synthetic-dependent monoculture; however that's not necessarily how

same time, the labor involved in making food from scratch, gardening, and seeking out rare ingredients and little hole-in-the-wall restaurants might be refreshingly difficult in comparison with the ease and blandness of prepared foods and chain restaurants. What unifies the sometimes-contradictory threads of the culinary decline thesis is the belief that the forces of capitalism have a destructive influence, and people would be better off returning to the foodways of the past. What the culinary enlightenment and culinary decline theses share is an implicit investment in the same class hierarchy constructed and reinforced by the four pillars of the food revolution. They are both fundamentally elitist.

The dueling narratives of culinary enlightenment and culinary decline are exemplified by two book titles published in the last decade, both of which made the *New York Times* bestseller list: David Kamp's *The United States of Arugula: How We Became a Gourmet Nation* and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Kamp argues that the increasing variety and quality of foods available across the country and growing interest in sophisticated foods inspired by visionaries like Julia Child and Alice Waters represent a “gourmet revolution.” He suggests that they have become so wholly mainstream that the U.S. can be considered, as his title suggests, a “gourmet nation.”¹¹² Schlosser, on the other hand, argues that changes in the American landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture since the 1970s are better represented by, and in many cases were driven by, the proliferation of

people *used* to farm. There is a broad consensus that synthetic inputs enabled farmers to produce exponentially greater yields with fewer workers over the course of the twentieth century. What concerns me here is not the *future* sustainability of commercial versus organic methods, but the romantic idealization of imagined historical practices. Sources: Marty Strange. *Family Farming: A New Economic Vision* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1988: 35). Mary Weaks-Baxter, *Reclaiming the American Farmer: The Reinvention of a Regional Mythology in Twentieth-Century Southern Writing* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2006). Catherine Badgley *et al*, “Organic agriculture and the global food supply,” *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 22 (2007): 86-108. Gilbert Gaul, *et al*, “Federal Subsidies Turn Farms Into Big Business,” *The Washington Post*, 21 December 2006, Web (accessed 23 July 2009).

¹¹² Kamp, 2006.

fast food restaurants.¹¹³ These accounts aren't mutually exclusive, and both are invested in the same four pillars of “enlightened” eating. They simply reach different verdicts.

Sometimes writers argue that the narratives are connected. Michael Ruhlman, the author of multiple cookbooks and food memoirs, wrote the following in a blog entry titled “Cook! Celebrate! Happy Thanksgiving!”:

We live in a time of unprecedented interest in, and care for, food and all the issues that surround its growing, harvesting, purveyance, and its cooking. This interest happened because we were on the brink of losing good food altogether, with farmers disappearing and the masses abandoning the kitchen, handing over our farming to Monsanto and giving our most fundamental and exclusively human act, cooking, over to the ConAgras and McDonalds.¹¹⁴

Ruhlman suggests that culinary enlightenment was *caused* by culinary decline, as if no one realized that industrial farming and fast food were bad until they had pushed “good food” to the brink of extinction.

Some scholars have also sought to accommodate both narratives, claiming that American eating has diversified with fast food flourishing alongside Whole Foods. Although his account is invested in enlightenment logic, Levenstein argues that both gourmet cooking and fast food represent a departure from a Cold War-era culinary consensus culture.¹¹⁵ He refers to the early signs of malaise and disillusionment with middle-class suburban conformity that appeared in the mid-1960s as “cracks in the façade.” Those cracks eventually widened with the rise of specialty foods that became *de rigueur* for the upper and urban middle-classes and the fast food franchises that became ubiquitous and came to define American food to the world, both of which represented a departure from the standard roster of 1950s dinners pulled from the *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook*.¹¹⁶ Warren Belasco offers another explanation for how these

¹¹³ Schlosser, 2001.

¹¹⁴ Michael Ruhlman, “Cook! Celebrate! Happy Thanksgiving!” *Michael Ruhlman: Translating the Chef's Craft for Every Kitchen*, 25 November 2010, Web (accessed 03 March 2011).

¹¹⁵ This argument is reminiscent of other accounts Cold War consensus culture, like Elaine Tyler May's *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 1988 (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008).

¹¹⁶ Levenstein, 1993.

seemingly divergent trends might be related: mass marketers seeking to cater to the seemingly contradictory desires of the “Woodstock Generation” succeeded in many cases by co-opting aspects of what he calls the “countercuisine,” the culinary arm of the 1960s counterculture and vanguard of the food revolution. Their oppositional foodways were absorbed and politically neturalized by the food industry to appeal to the post-60s consumer.¹¹⁷

Whether someone judges the changes in American eating over the last few decades to be good or bad ultimately depends on whose eating habits they take to be representative of the nation. The culinary enlightenment thesis takes the rise of “superior” practices in the norm-setting middle classes as a sign of collective national progress. Narratives of culinary decline use increasing national rates of obesity and fast food consumption as evidence that unenlightened practices have not only continued in spite of the growing consensus that people ought to eat “better,” they've actually increased. Some of that is undoubtedly due to what food industry market research has called “schizophrenic” eating, like the simultaneous rise in the popularity of skim milk and triple-cream brie. To some extent this schizophrenia has to be expected given the contradictions between the ideological pillars of superior eating. However, most of the pernicious persistence of “unenlightened” eating is due to significant gaps between the foodways of the masses and those of the elite.

Food and the Liberal Elite

Of all the presidential candidates in the 2008 election, only Obama was singled out by participants in the food revolution. They projected hopes and anxieties about what it means to be an “enlightened” eater onto him, even when the choices he made were contradictory. Nothing in the popular discourse about his political opponents even came close, despite the fact that virtually all the presidential candidates and especially

¹¹⁷ Belasco, 1989.

Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Senator John McCain would be considered elite by virtually any definition of the word.¹¹⁸ However, Obama was seen as a different kind of elite—part of a younger generation, less a beneficiary of wealth than someone who had risen through the ranks. Since its mainstream emergence in the 1980s, “enlightened” eating has been specifically associated not just with the elite but with the *liberal* elite, defined as much by their *lifestyle* and *upward mobility* as their relationship to capital and political ideologies. Food has always been central to the social construction of that demographic.

Since the 1980s, the liberal elite has been essentially synonymous with the yuppie. Both groups were the target of withering critique from the first moment they were identified as distinct entities. The cover of a jokey “manual” or field guide published in 1984, titled *The Yuppie Handbook*, shows two quintessential specimens on the cover, carrying fresh pasta in a “gourmet shopping bag” and wearing designer-brand business suits with Tennis shoes and L.L. Bean Duck Hunting Boots to represent their active lifestyles. Despite the widespread disdain and occasional vitriol directed at yuppies,¹¹⁹ market analysts took them seriously because they saw them as taste leaders. As Belasco

¹¹⁸ McCain's father and paternal grandfather were four-star generals in the U.S. Navy, and he was educated at an elite boarding high school in Alexandria and the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis. In 1980, he married a woman who inherited a multi-million dollar fortune. Due to a pre-nuptial contract, they file taxes separately so the family's wealth is private; together, they own eight residential properties for their private family use. Clinton attended public high schools in the suburbs of Chicago, Wellesley College, and Yale Law School. She was the first female partner at Rose Law Firm in Arkansas where her husband was elected Governor in 1979. In 2008, the family's wealth was reported to be \$109 million, accumulated primarily through books, speaking fees, and investments. The Clintons' cumulative annual income has been at least \$7.9 million every year since 2001. Paul Alexander, *Man of the People: The Life of John McCain* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2002): 28, 22, 93. Peter Nicholas, et al. “Clintons Disclose Wealth,” *Los Angeles Times*, 05 April 2008, Web (accessed 28 February 2011).

¹¹⁹ Most critics of the yuppie settled for sardonic eye-rolling at their conspicuous consumption and superficiality. However, the phrase “Die Yuppie Scum” was widely deployed, and even became the rallying cry in protests against gentrification, like the 1988 riot in New York's East Village, where bricks were hurled at a new luxury condo that had replaced a community center for poor immigrants. One of the most famous critiques is Bret Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho*, which is widely read as an indictment of yuppie culture for being shallow, materialistic, and dehumanizing. Jeremiah Moss, “Happy 20th Die Yuppie Scum,” *Vanishing New York*, 16 June 2008, Web (accessed 01 March 2011). Julian Murphet, *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: A Reader* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002: 15).

explains in *Appetite for Change*, “According to Market Facts, a Chicago-based research company, the 'true yuppies' were just the tip of an iceberg composed of people who watched 'Cheers,' 'St. Elsewhere,' and 'Hill Street Blues' and aspired to grind fresh coffee beans, drink imported beer or wine, own a personal computer, and use automatic teller machines.”¹²⁰ [Figure 1.5]

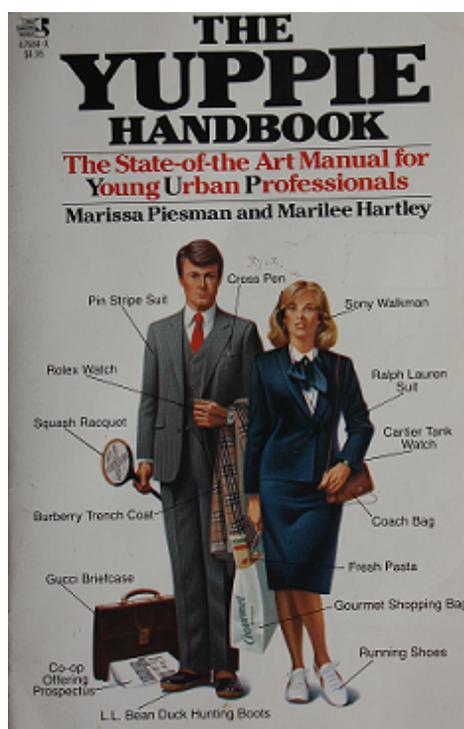


Figure 1.5/*The Yuppie Handbook*¹²¹

Although those television shows are all off the air or in syndication now, similar representations of the upwardly-mobile, urban, professional class and their lifestyle have become ubiquitous. Reviewing *The Yuppie Handbook* in 2006 for an article in *Details magazine*, Jeff Gordinier argues that the lifestyle portrayed as bizarre in 1984 has since become *de rigueur* (at least for the demographic reading *Details magazine*):

The yuppie could be found working off stress with a shiatsu massage and a facial, learning as much as possible about fine wine, traveling around the world on vacation. . . racking up gobs of debt on his credit card, and—the

¹²⁰ Belasco, 1989: 208-9.

¹²¹ Photograph by the author 26 March 2011. Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley, *The Yuppie Handbook: The State-of-the Art Manual for Young Urban Professionals* (New York, NY: Long Shadow Books, 1984), book design by Jacques Chazaud.

clinch—eating tuna sashimi for lunch! . . . All of which means that the archetypal yuppie of the eighties sounds precisely like, um, *everyone you know*. . . . By now, the entire manuscript comes across as nothing more than a rote annotation of urbane American life. . . . If anything, your average upwardly mobile young professional has so outstripped and outclassed the mid-eighties yuppie that if Gordon Gekko himself were to show up in polite society in 2006, he would look kind of provincial. (These days, no host worth his fleur de sel would serve brie at a cocktail party—not when there are hundreds of obscure cheeses on display at Trader Joe’s.)¹²²

Again, food features prominently in the description of the lifestyle—wine, sushi, fleur de sel, brie, and Trader Joes are key elements of the once-strange and now “rote” practices of the yuppie. As Gordinier notes, some of the details have changed, but the guiding ethos of upscale, cosmopolitan consumption has remained essentially the same.

In *Bobos in Paradise* David Brooks coins his own term for the group of people distinguished by exotic, upscale consumption habits and liberal attitudes towards sex and morality, the “Bobos,” a portmanteau of *bourgeois* and *bohemian*.¹²³ Brooks’ description of the habits and social manners of the urban elite helps to explain both the association between the food revolution and left-leaning politics and the use of liberal elite foodways as a form of political character assassination. According to Brooks, the central tension in Bobo culture is how to reconcile their egalitarian ideals with their class pretensions. The primary strategies they use are 1) investing deeply in the myth of meritocracy, which enables them to believe that their status is the result of skill and effort rather than systematic economic inequality, and 2) using their consumption choices as opportunities to express their political beliefs, fetishizing products that are “Made in America,” Fair Trade certified, organic, or otherwise marked as socially

¹²² Jeff Gordinier, “The Return of the Yuppie,” *Details* magazine, November 2006, Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

¹²³ According to Brooks, there was a significant shift from 1980s Yuppie culture to 1990s Bobos. However, that supposed shift relies on a characterization of the yuppie as considerably more politically conservative and socially straight-laced than the demographic is portrayed in texts like *The Yuppie Handbook* and *American Psycho*. If yuppies were not just corporate strivers, but instead were also invested in being “hip,” tolerant of drug use, and socially liberal—as seems to be the case—his argument for the distinctiveness of “Bobos” becomes much weaker. David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000: 11-12).

responsible to express their distinction from the established mainstream.

The result is that the taste hierarchy constructed by the liberal elite carries the stink of hypocrisy. They claim to believe in equality, yet spurn the tastes of the masses. They pursue markers of status distinction predicated on helping the poor as a means to distinguish themselves further from them. The politically conservative elite might also engage in conspicuous consumption, but as they are less invested in egalitarianism, it has been less likely to raise populist hackles. Concern about the liberal elite intensified after the 2000 presidential election, when the stark contrasts in the electoral map gave rise to intense speculation about the cultural differences between “red states” and “blue states.” As with the yuppie and the Bobo, the definition of the liberal elite relied heavily on food. For example, in a 2000 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly*, “One Nation, Slightly Divisible,” Brooks wrote: “Different sorts of institutions dominate life in these two places. In Red America churches are everywhere. In Blue America Thai restaurants are everywhere.” The same dichotomy is represented in the epigraph, riddled with references to food stereotypes used to caricature conservatives (“roadkill-eating”) and liberals (“latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan. . .”).¹²⁴ If the Bobos were the 1990s version of the Yuppies, the liberal elite would be their twenty-first century incarnation.¹²⁵

Mark Ames, the author of *Going Postal*, wrote in an essay published in 2004 by *New York Press*, “Republican elites don't set off the spite gland in the same way.”¹²⁶ The tension inherent in the “liberal elite” and its earlier manifestations like yuppies and bobos is like the inverse of the problem of the culturally conservative working class that Thomas Frank describes in *What's the Matter With Kansas?* According to Frank, over the second half of the twentieth century, the Republican Party attracted white working-

¹²⁴ Barry, 2004.

¹²⁵ I'm actually not sure either the Bobos or liberal elite are meaningfully distinct categories, and suspect they all refer to the same demographic, which I believe emerged in the 1980s as a result of middle-class stagnation. See Chapter Five.

¹²⁶ Mark Ames, “Spite the Vote,” *New York Press*, 15 June 2004, Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

class voters by appealing to cultural wedge issues like abortion and guns, thus inducing them to vote “against their interests.”¹²⁷ The contradictions in the liberal elite might be summed up, “What's the matter with California?” Why do people who seem insulated from the negative consequences of inequality support political agendas that appear to be “against their economic interests”? Even more peculiar, or infuriating, why do they do it while simultaneously flaunting their privilege?

The idea of the hypocritical liberal elite distinguished by its personal taste is not new or unique to the U.S. In Australia, the term “chardonnay liberal” emerged in the late 1980s to describe the the “guilt-ridden rich and bleeding hearts” who support the left-leaning Labor Party.¹²⁸ In Britain “champagne socialist” has the same connotation, and in 2002, Ireland's Labour Party leader Ruairi Quinn sought to dispel the label of “smoked salmon socialist.”¹²⁹ However, the political trope of the “blue state” liberal with upscale tastes has intensified in the last three decades, culminating in the portrayal of Obama as an “enlightened eater.” What Brooks' account of Bobos doesn't explain is why the tastes of a group so popularly reviled also became normative, why the practices associated with “yuppie scum” became “rote” in “urbane American life.” Why have so many people embraced the four pillars, despite their contradictions and the stain of hypocrisy that haunts them? Why did the idea of the latte-sipping, weight-conscious, Whole Foods-shopping, sushi-eating city dweller become a political trope in the 1980s?

One possible answer is suggested by Paul Fussell's somewhat-irreverent 1983 book,

¹²⁷ Critics like Larry M. Bartels have demonstrated that based on presidential voting behavior, white working-class voters (defined either as white voters without a college education or white voters in the bottom third of income earners) have not migrated to the Republican party en masse outside of the South, where the shift is due entirely to the demise of the South as a bastion of Democratic support in the wake of major shifts on civil rights issues within the Democratic Party in the 1960s. White working-class voters claim to place more importance on economic issues than cultural ones and see themselves as closer to the Democratic Party on the so-called “cultural wedge issues.” Larry M. Bartels, “What's the Matter with *What's the Matter with Kansas?*” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 2006, 1: 201-226.

¹²⁸ Mark Rolfe, “Days of Wine and Poseurs: Stereotypes of Class, Consumption, and Competition in Democratic Discourse,” Paper delivered to the Australasian Political Studies Association Annual Conference 24-26 September 2007, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

¹²⁹ John Downing, “Quinn Bids to Banish 'Smoked Salmon Socialist' Image,” *Irish Examiner*, 23 Saturday 2002, Web (accessed 01 March 2011).

Class: A Guide Through the American Status System. He describes a nine-tier class hierarchy, poking fun at every rung, and argues that *everyone*, even the truly rich positioned above the upper-middle class, really want to be upper-middle class, even though they might not admit it.¹³⁰ Although he doesn't explain why, I suspect that the key is that the upper-middle class and the various demographics that have become synonymous with it, including the yuppie, the Bobo, and the liberal elite were distinguished primarily by their upward mobility. The desire to be like them, and in particular to *consume* like them, was less a function of simply wanting to be powerful or wealthy (in which case why not aspire to be “rich”?) but to be doing well, to be advancing, and to have the potential to rise farther. The upper-middle class, far more than a group defined by their income, has become the cultural repository of the fantasy of mobility and its lifestyle trappings. Furthermore, the meritocratic ideologies that anyone can and everyone should strive to be more sophisticated, thin, socially and environmentally responsible, and cosmopolitan obscures the structural differences in access to the four pillars. In order to examine where those ideas about “enlightened” eating came from, I turn in the next chapter to the longer history of the four pillars.

¹³⁰ Paul Fussell, *Class: A Guide Through the American Status System* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1983: 20).

CHAPTER TWO

THE RISE, FALL, AND RETURN OF ENLIGHTENED EATING

The Food *Re*-volution

The culinary enlightenment thesis, or the argument that the changes in U.S. foodways since the 1980s are an improvement on older ones reinforces many Americans' personal experiences. Many people still remember when national grocery store chains began to sell gourmet cheese, often in a separate display in the produce section along with *pâté* and hummus (also new additions to the inventory). The bricks of Colby and individually-wrapped single slices of American cheese remained in the Dairy aisle. Some people will recall a time when none of the major soft drink brands had diet versions and the only artificially-sweetened soda were niche brands like Tab and Diet Rite. Foods labeled “natural” have become far common, both at specialty chains like Whole Foods and Trader Joe's and regular supermarkets. Additionally, even outside of major metropolitan areas, restaurant-goers and adventurous cooks have been able to sample a widening array of ethnic foods and purchase imported ingredients without leaving their hometowns.

While some of the trends and products that represent the food revolution are actually new, like Diet Coke, and USDA Organic certification, the four pillars of the food revolution—1) sophistication, 2) thinness, 3) purity, and 4) cosmopolitanism—are not. They were not new in the 1960s, when Julia Child first appeared on television, or in the 1980s, when the first Whole Foods Market opened. Looking at the longer history of American foodways reveals a surprising coincidence most accounts of the food revolution have missed: all four of the pillars were mainstream concerns in the U.S. at

the turn of the twentieth century. Between approximately 1880 and 1930 French cooking, slimming diets, natural diets, the campaign for Pure Foods, and ethnic entertainments all became popular in the urban middle class.¹ Their tastes and practices were also then becoming normative in the emerging national mass culture. Although some of the manifestations of the four pillars have changed over time, the longer history of the ideals of “enlightened” eating challenges the popular notion that Americans only recently realized the virtues and pleasures of gourmet food, thinness, “natural” foods, and ethnic cuisines.

After the 1920s, rather than continuing to increase in popularity the way enlightenment theories would predict, all four pillars receded from prominence. None of them completely disappeared; weight-loss dieting in particular remained more popular throughout the twentieth century than gourmet, natural, or ethnic foods. However, histories of slimming diets and beauty ideals also note a shift from the idealization of thinness at the turn of the century to a mid-century belief in intransigent body types and a glorification of larger bodies, especially for women. French restaurants that were shuttered during Prohibition and the Great Depression didn't re-open even during the post-World War II boom. Meanwhile supermarkets and chain restaurants that offered standardized menus and products spread across the country. Advertisements began to emphasize value, familiarity, and Americanness rather than sophistication or foreignness. By the 1980s, when Americans who considered themselves middle-class and mainstream began to drink wine, buy low-fat milk and triple-creme cheeses, eat Pad Thai and shop for local produce, it all seemed brand new.

¹ Which referred, at that time, to the roughly ten to fifteen percent of Americans who lived in single-income households in urban areas and could afford to employ a least one servant. Richard Ohmann uses the term “professional-managerial class” to refer to the target market for the advertising-driven magazines that first appeared at the turn of the twentieth century. He argues that those magazines, which were much less expensive and aimed at a slightly less-educated and affluent audience than older subscription-driven magazines, were the first instance of national mass culture in the U.S. and that they succeeded because they responded to the changing needs of industrial capitalism, particularly the need to cultivate *consumption*. Ohmann, 1996. For an extended discussion on competing definitions of “class,” see Chapter Five.

As the longer history of the four pillars shows, the American food revolution isn't revolutionary in the sense of something radically new that opposes the prevailing order—as in a *break* with the past or *turn away* from it—but might be revolutionary in the sense of a cyclical rotation. The changes that have been widely called a revolution represent a rebellion against the culinary status quo that developed during and after the World Wars, but rather than staking out *new* ground, it represents a return to the kinds of culinary discourses popular in the past.² This is a different kind of return than the one sometimes invoked by major interlocutors of the food revolution like Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser when they equate organic farming and eating fresh, local, seasonal food prepared at home to imagined pre-industrial foodways.³ The recent food revolution looks very much like a re-emergence of foodways that were popular with American taste leaders at the turn of the twentieth century. Like recent foodies, they elevated foods, constructed as sophisticated, slimming, natural, and Other (ethnic or exotic) above their diametrical opposites—foods constructed as humble, fattening, industrial, and familiar.

Many accounts miss the earlier flowering of “enlightened” eating because they don't look back far enough, usually taking World War II as their starting point. For example, the section on “historical perspective in Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann's recent book *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape* begins with the launch of *Gourmet* magazine in 1941. An exception to this trend, which illustrates how a taking a longer historical view challenges the triumphant progressive narrative of culinary enlightenment is Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont's 1976 *Eating in America: A History*.⁴ **[Figure 2.1]**

² The movements were not identical by any means. It is a return with a difference, and I'm sure there would be much to learn from a more detailed comparison of the differences between the earlier middle-class interest in eating “better” and the recent food revolution. Here, I focus on the similarities because they pose a significant challenge to the culinary enlightenment thesis and because their simultaneous emergence in both periods is striking and has seemingly gone unnoticed by scholars and popular food writers.

³ Like the romanticized myths of the “family farm” and “family meal.” See Chapter One notes 108 and 111.

⁴ Waverly Root and Richard de Rochemont, *Eating in America: A History* (New York, NY: William

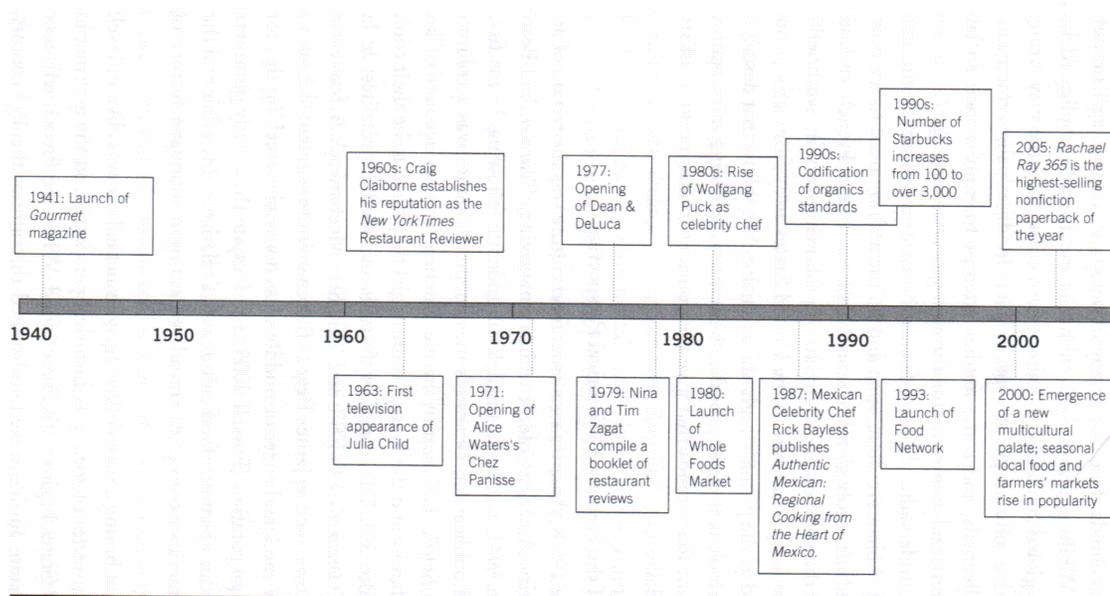


Figure O.1 Major events in recent American culinary history

Figure 2.1/The Foodies Timeline⁵

Root and de Rochemont attempt to chronicle the whole history of American food from indigenous traditions and the first European encounters to their present moment. They were not historians by training—Root was a journalist and de Rochemont primarily a documentary filmmaker—and their breezy, sweeping history often reveals more about their own racism, elitism, and Franco-American/expatriate chauvinism than the actual history of eating in America.⁶ Nevertheless, their assessment of the state of American eating in the mid-70s and their predictions for the future reflect a longer historical arc than accounts that begin in the 1940s. Their book challenges the popular notion that

Morrow and Company, 1976).

⁵ Reproduced from Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 6.

⁶ Both men were world travelers and committed Francophiles. Waverley Root moved to Paris in 1927 and took a job as a foreign correspondent for *The Chicago Tribune*. He remained there for the rest of his life, even after he retired from journalism in 1957 and turned his full attention to writing books, mostly about the food of France and Italy. Richard de Rochemont was one of the original members of France Forever, a pro-de Gaulle organization formed during World War II. He was also an Academy Award-winning documentary filmmaker who worked on Time, Inc.'s *March of Time* newsreel series in the 1940s, which took him around the world to film on-location shots and dramatic reenactments. This probably shaped their own tastes, and may also have made the speed and extent of the industrialization and homogenization of the American diet seem even more dramatic and pervasive and obscured the evidence or prevalence of marginal and counter-cultural tastes and practices they would have recognized as simpatico. Sources: "Obituary: Waverly L. Root, 79, Journalist," *The New York Times*, 01 November 1982, Web (accessed 07 April 2011). "Richard de Rochemont," *IMDb*, Web (accessed 07 April 2011). Richard de Rochemont, "France Forever," *France-Libre*, January 1975, Web (accessed 07 April 2011).

American foodways have been on an upward arc since the 1940s, offering an alternative view of the last century.

In the penultimate chapter of *Eating in America*, titled “Where We Are Now,” the authors describe widespread ignorance and indifference to food and especially the kinds of food they favor—fresh, made from scratch, and especially French:⁷ “We may conclude that the American gourmet, if we may assume his existence as a group or even an attitude, is not today enjoying any real renaissance. . . food has been gradually becoming more banal for several decades.”⁸ They gesture to the “seeds of a new recovery and the birth of an American cuisine suited to our own times,” but claim those seeds are “not yet sufficient in strength to stand up against the flood of glop and slop which flows like slime through the supermarkets.”⁹ Root and de Rochemont's insistence that there was no “*real* renaissance” of gourmet suggests that there must have been at least enough interest in gourmet food to create some perception a renaissance was possible. Furthermore, their book itself and the criteria they use to evaluate American eating, which presage the values and aesthetics of the food revolution, are themselves evidence of the nascent

⁷ They spell out their criteria, which notably privilege not just “gourmet” or French food, but hit on all four pillars of the “food revolution”: “The authors, in attempting to evaluate the present state of American eating, have recourse to some simple criteria (it has been the fashion to call these things “guidelines”) which they have not concealed: They believe that fresh food is preferable to preserved, and that food grown not too far from the place of consumption is best, even if it is only available in season. They believe that variety in ingredients and in ways of preparation of dishes makes eating more enjoyable and probably more healthful. Choice of foods should be, within reason, up to the consumer instead of reflecting the wishes of agribusiness and the food industry giants (i.e. the “hard-ripe” tomato). Most industry-created foods, such as the sugared breakfast foods, “potato chips” synthesized from powdered desiccated potatoes, synthetic fruit drinks notably shy on fruit, dry soup mixes, and meat and fish “extenders,” are in the opinion of the authors properly called junk and should be so regarded. They believe that mankind is meant to drink milk (for a starter), water, wine, beer, tea, coffee, and some spirits if desired, but never should we sluice down pop, crushes, colas, “un-colas,” or milk-shakes which must be called simply “shakes” since they contain no verifiable quantity of milk. They fancy the idea of eating with a certain decorum, preferably while seated in a quiet place with or without company, and talking their time. The idea of talking about food at table does not shock them. While they admire quality and diversity of food, they deplore its conspicuous waste as evidenced in over-large servings. The steak house which grossly overcharges its clients for more than they can eat does not atone by offering a “doggie bag” for the uneaten portion. Restraint is appropriate in home cooking, too, unless the cook is a genius at using leftovers.” Root and de Rochemont, 1976: 446-7.

⁸ Ibid, 454.

⁹ Ibid, 455.

movement to improve American food.¹⁰ However, as their use of the words “renaissance” and “recovery” suggest, even if they thought American foodways *were* improving, that wouldn't be a *new* development, but a *return* to the kinds of food and tastes that prevailed before the post-war decline.

Although they express doubts about the existence of, or prospects for, culinary enlightenment, they were proponents of many of the central tenets of the culinary enlightenment thesis. They portray their ideals as objectively superior according to empirical evidence and reason. The contrasting food choices and preferences of the American masses are the product of ignorance, apathy, and the brainwashing of advertisers, which they think consumers are largely powerless to resist.¹¹

What distinguishes them from contemporary proponents of the culinary enlightenment thesis, who assume the food revolution first introduced Americans to better food is that Root and de Rochemont knew that Americans had *chosen* mass-produced “glop” over the fresh, local, and gourmet.¹² They were both chroniclers of and personal witnesses to the elevation of a kind of “home cooking” both in actual homes and in restaurants that increasingly relied on prepared items like canned soups and instant, gelatin over traditional cooking from-scratch cooking and gourmet foods, increasingly rejected as un-American fancy business. Rather than assuming Americans

¹⁰ This seems more likely than the alternative, which is that their criteria were purely idiosyncratic and the similarity to the tastes and practices of the ensuing “food revolution” merely coincidental.

¹¹ For example, they say: “A critic of the British system of government once nastily said that it was ‘designed to give the Englishman the *sensation* of self-government.’ It will be many a year before the American consumer is rid of the highly advertised and skillfully merchandised foods and drinks which at best provide principally the *sensation* of nourishment.” Comments like that are reminiscent of the Frankfurt School critics who, despite their critique of Enlightenment and the faith in “reason” and “natural law,” were perhaps too quick to dismiss all mass culture as empty propaganda and all mass culture consumers as dupes who are incapable of resistance, implicitly relying on and privileging their *own* reason and aesthetic preferences as if they were the only ones capable of critique. Root and de Rochemont's argument that even the “gourmet societies” that had recently grown in popularity in cities across the country only created the illusion of choice and sophistication that enabled the food industry to continue pumping out the same “slop and glop” to the masses also echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's argument that even the avant-garde was a calculated mutation designed to produce the illusion of choice and agency. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944: 129.

¹² This also probably has something to do with their lived historical memory. They were both born in 1903, and witnessed much of the rise of industrial agriculture and food processing, especially between 1940 and 1970, the decades that now often get portrayed as America's culinary Dark Ages.

would inevitably be enlightened about how much better fresh, local, natural, homemade food (especially French) was, they knew that Americans had already been acquainted with all of those things, and actively chose the glop instead.

Decline narratives are seductive for many of the same reasons progressive narratives are. The ability to attribute historical changes to the loss of “family values,” a decline in religious faith, or increasing corporate greed often seems like common sense or serves a particular ideological project. Foodways are especially vulnerable to ideological distortion because they are so diverse. Root and de Rochemont claim, “the field of food production and use is so vast that everything one can say about it is provably true and provably false at the same time.”¹³ What I might say instead is that the diversity of American foodways enables people to select evidence to fit a wide range of narratives.

The story that Root and de Rochemont choose to construct is a quintessentially Romantic cautionary tale about the dangers of too much industrialism, too much science, and too much capitalism—of Progress in general going “too far.” They posit an inverse relationship between Progress in general and progress in the realm of food, exemplified by their fondness for an Andy Warhol quotation: “Progress is very important and exciting in everything but food. When you say you want an orange, you don't want someone asking you, 'An orange what?’”¹⁴ With no reason to expect capitalism or industrialism to decline, and no reason to believe Americans who had willfully rejected what they saw as inherently superior food to suddenly embrace it, Root and de Rochemont were effectively blinded to what did, in fact, turn out to be a *real* renaissance of gourmet, along with fresh, natural, cosmopolitan, and especially French food.

Root and de Rochemont's pessimism serves as a useful corrective to the idea that the “food revolution” was the inevitable result of the forward march of Progress. Although the kinds of food that they valued have become more available and popular

¹³ Ibid, 458.

¹⁴ Ibid, 460.

since their book was published, the longer history of the ideals that became dominant in the 1980s can no more be characterized by an ascending arc of progress than it can by a descending arc of decline. The history of “enlightened” eating in mainstream American culture is more complicated than they (or many of the other people who've written about U.S. food history since) have accounted for. This chapter addresses those gaps and challenges both the progressive and decline narratives by offering a synthetic survey of the secondary literature on food in the U.S. divided into four sections—one for each of the four pillars I described in Chapter One. In addition to showing that the ideals that constitute the four pillars are not new or even newly popular, the longer history of the four pillars reveals a shared pattern of rise, fall, and return. I supplement the secondary literature on the recent “food revolution” with market research and corporate histories that offer a clearer picture of the timing and extent of the mainstream permeation of the four pillars in U.S. popular culture.

It is not my intention to minimize the differences between the four pillars or between their initial flowering at the turn of the twentieth century and their recent re-emergence as mainstream trends. Nor am I seeking to offer a comprehensive account of any of these trends. The growing literature on U.S. food history offers many nuanced accounts of how Americans in particular times and places have grown, purchased, prepared, eaten, shared, and talked about their food. I rely largely on other scholars' evaluations of how popular or marginal the four pillars of “enlightened” eating were at different historical moments. Similarities between the longer histories of the four pillars has been obscured by the tendency to study only one of them at a pillar's time. There are real conflicts between the ideals that define the four pillars—e.g. sophisticated foods like *foie gras* and bluefin tuna are incompatible with the ideal of thinness the ideal of purity. However, the similarities between their twentieth century chronologies suggest a commonality.

Scholars have attributed various aspects of the food revolution to changes in race and gender ideologies, advances in science and technology, immigration patterns, domestic and international politics and policies, advances in medicine, food industry lobbying, advertising, mass media, global trade, changes in the natural world, and “human nature.”¹⁵ All of those factors undoubtedly shape popular food trends. However, none of them explain the rise, fall, and return of all four pillars, with all their contradictions. It is my theory that the broader pattern is due to changes in middle class anxiety resulting from shifts in income inequality and class mobility. **[Figure 2.2]**

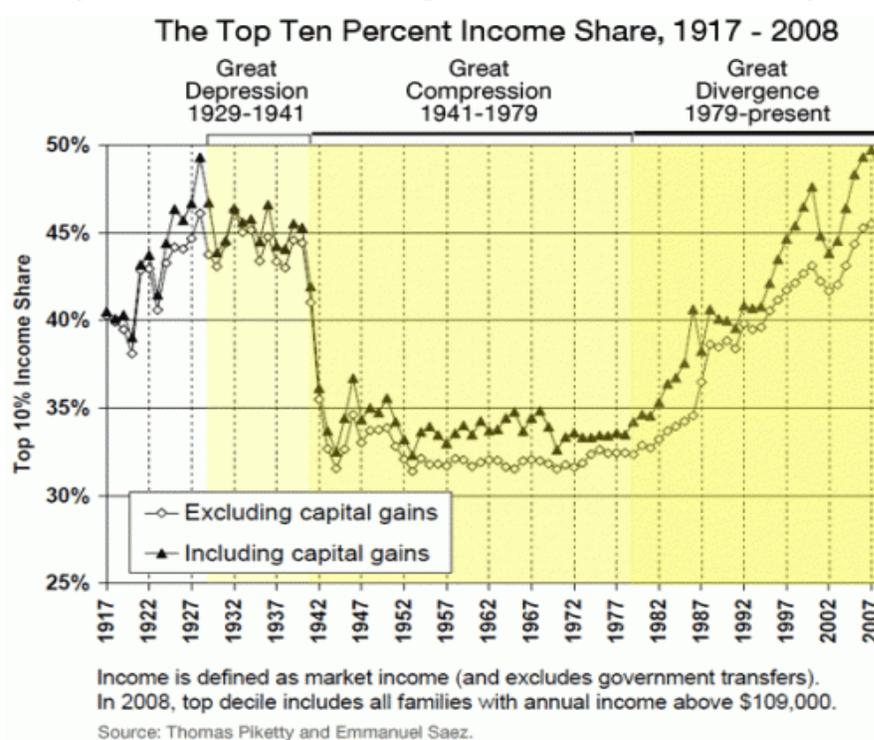


Figure 2.2/Income Share for top decile of American households¹⁶

Between 1880-1930 and again from the 1980 to the present, federal policies that favored the wealthy created vast gulfs between the super-elite at the top of the income ladder and the middling professional and managerial classes. From 1929 to 1980, policies like the GI Bill and minimum wage law and the high demand for unskilled labor contributed to what

¹⁵ See references in Chapter One and throughout this chapter.

¹⁶ Reproduced from Gwen Sharp, “The Great Income Divergence,” *Sociological Images*, 07 September 2010, Web (accessed 08 April 2011), adapted from Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “The Evolution of Top Incomes: A Historical and International Perspective,” *Measuring and Interpreting Trends in Income Inequality* 96.2 (2006): 200-205

economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo dubbed the “Great Compression” in American wage structures.¹⁷ During periods of greater income inequality and relatively low mobility, interest in and anxiety about eating “better” becomes more important to the middle classes. Although they are a minority, their tastes are normative and reflected in mass media and market trends. “Enlightened” eating not only serves to *distinguish* the middle class from the working and lower classes in the Bourdieuan or Veblenian sense of cultural capital and conspicuous consumption, it also operates as a form of compensatory mobility. The four pillars elevate certain foods and practices over others without reliable evidence, but they nevertheless offer real pleasures and rewards that make them especially compelling for the middle classes when they are not advancing materially.¹⁸

The secondary sources surveyed in this chapter hint at the relationship between changing foodways and social class. At the turn of the twentieth century, trends like French food and slimming diets were portrayed as not just better, but also “genteel” or “respectable,” code words for the elite and aspiring middle classes. From the 1930s through the 1970s, similar trends were generally portrayed as elitist.¹⁹ The dominant culinary aesthetic shifted, elevating foodways specifically characterized as *unpretentious* and *unlike* the practices associated with the wealthy. And as I discussed in Chapter One,

¹⁷ Claudia Golden and Robert Margo, “The Great Compression: The Wage Structure in the United States at Mid-Century,” *National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper* No. 3817 (August 1991).

¹⁸ See Chapter Five.

¹⁹ Or just strange, like Julia Child, who was described even by fans of her first show, *The French Chef*, as “eccentric.” According to a brief biography by Marilyn Mellowes, the 1983 series *Dinner at Julia's* faltered because it cast her in the role of glamorous hostess, which was disconcerting and disappointing to long-time fans. Her popularity in the 1960s has likely been exaggerated by the rise of gourmet, which makes her seem like a forerunner rather than a historical oddity, and the recent interest in her prompted by the film based on the best-selling book *Julie and Julia* (dir. Nora Ephron, 2009). In the 1960s, her cookbooks never competed with stalwart sellers like *The Joy of Cooking* or the *The I Hate to Cook Cookbook* (the best-selling cookbook of the 1960s). According to the publisher of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, it sold 22,000 copies in a single week after Nora Ephron's 2009 film *Julie and Julia* debuted. Before then, it hadn't sold that many copies in any full year since its original publication in 1963. Marilyn Mellowes, “About Julia Child,” PBS American Masters, 15 June 2005, Web (accessed 08 April 2011). Stephanie Clifford, “After 48 Years, Julia Child Has a Big Best Seller, Butter and All,” *The New York Times*, 23 August 2009, Web (accessed 08 April 2011). See also: Jessamyn Neuhaus, *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

when the ideals of “enlightened” eating became popular again in the 1980s, they were immediately associated with the yuppie, a group specifically defined by their upward mobility.²⁰ The longer history of the four pillars suggests that food has been an important way for Americans to negotiate, perform, and embody class status throughout the twentieth century.

I: Gourmet Food and the Ideal of Sophistication

A Theoretical Interest in Food

Although the pursuit of culinary refinement in the West dates back at least to ancient Greece,²¹ the history of the word “gourmet” represents the emergence of a new concern about the relationship between sophisticated food and social class in the early nineteenth century. English speakers adopted the word “gourmet” after a poem published in 1820 suggested that it could fill a semantic gap. The first citation for “gourmet” in the OED is Ange Denis Macquin's “*Tabella Cibaria*, The Bill of Fare: A Latin Poem, Implicitly Translated and Fully Explained in Copious and Interesting Notes.”²² In the preface, Macquin explains that the poem and accompanying notes are intended as both a “*jeu d'esprit*” and an “elucidation of many of the mysteries in which the curious art of cookery in this [France] and other countries generally consists.”²³ His

²⁰ Later chapters explore this tension between the embrace of the “middle class” as inclusive and its values and tastes as universal and normative versus the rejection of the “middle class” as exclusive and its values and tastes as elitist.

²¹ Probably earlier, and not just in the West. I mention ancient Greece because accounts about the seventh century B.C. onward about lavish banquets, daily and celebratory culinary practices, and the pleasures of food and drink suggest that the Greeks were concerned with eating “well” in multiple senses of the word. I know by invoking “the West,” I’m reproducing a questionable dualism, but there are two reasons for my choice: 1) I don’t think complicating that dualism would significantly affect the story I’m telling or the argument I’m making and there is a literature concerning the influences of ancient Greece on the culture and thought of Europe and its colonies that is relevant to my account and 2) while I suspect there are also signs of culinary sophistication in ancient non-Western texts, I am ignorant about them.

²² “Gourmet” *OED Online*, March 2011, Oxford University Press. Web. (accessed 09 April 2011)

²³ Ange Denis Macquin “*Tabella Cibaria*, The Bill of Fare: A Latin Poem, Implicitly Translated and Fully Explained in Copious and Interesting Notes.” London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, Paternoster Row; J. Robins and Co. Ivy Lane, Paternoster Row 1820 Original from Harvard University Digitized by

definition of gourmet is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but is also a genuine attempt to distinguish between the *gourmet* who has a “merely theoretical” interest in food, the *glutton* who simply loves to eat, and the *gourmand* who “unites theory with practice.” Macquin claims that the French term *gourmand* is equivalent to “*epicure* in the full sense of the word, as we use it in English,” but that no existing term in English corresponds to *gourmet*. So from the beginning “gourmet” carried a connotation of affectation: someone who pretends to appreciate food because of what it represents but has no appreciation for the bodily (and historically debased) pleasures of eating.

Macquin notes the French also lacked a word with that meaning until *gourmet* “acquired a greater latitude of signification,” implied to be a recent development. The term had previously referred to a wine-merchant's assistant, and according to Macquin the new meaning was based on the old: “a man who, by sipping a few drops out of the silver cup of the vintner, can instantly tell from what country the wine comes, and its age.”²⁴ The existing association between French food and sophistication in the English-speaking world²⁵ may have been more responsible than Macquin's poem for the rapid adoption of the term, and might also explain why *gourmand* was also adopted in the same period despite its redundancy.²⁶ Nevertheless, Macquin's distinction between gourmets and people who actually like to eat prevailed in its early use.

In 1835, Washington Irving described people in the American West eating “with an appetite unknown to the gourmets of the cities” without defining the term or even italicizing it.²⁷ An 1851 article titled “Gastronomy and Civilization” in *Fraser's Magazine*

Google Jul 9, 2007 (accessed May 04, 2010): iv.

²⁴ Ibid, 16.

²⁵ See Chapter One note 90 or Peterson, 1994: 161-84.

²⁶ Or rather, re-adopted. The word had been used in English since the 15th C. as a pejorative term for someone who eats too much or figuratively for anything large or greedy, e.g. Byron's “How shall I get this gourmand stanza through?” However, in the 19th C., people began to use it synonymously with “epicure,” to refer to “one who is fond of delicate fare” or “a judge of good eating,” the way Macquin claims the French used the word at the time. Notably, this meaning was accompanied by a shift in pronunciation to the more French-like gurmă rather than the Anglicized 'gəʊmənd (OED).

²⁷ The reference is from *A Tour on the Prairies*, the travelogue about his tour of the territories of the West published in 1835.

associates the term with the elite: “Paul de Kock represents an age when the pretension to gastronomical enjoyment is as universal as liberty, equality, and fraternity; from the discriminating gourmetise of the young nobleman, to the expansive gourmandise of the voracious grisette, all more or less gastrological.”²⁸ Although united by their “pretension to gastronomical enjoyment,” gourmand and gourmet are separate ends of the gastrological continuum, respectively represented by the hungry working-class girl and fastidious nobleman.²⁹

The dual purposes of Macquin's poem demonstrate the conflicted status of culinary sophistication in America. “*Tabella Cibaria*” mocks the “hardly intelligible *Bills of Fare*” displayed at French eating-houses and hotels; its publication suggests that there was an English-speaking audience for satire that poked fun at culinary pretentiousness. However, as Macquin's preface promises, it also seems designed to *educate* readers to appreciate that pretentious food. A favorable review published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* suggests that Macquin was successful on both fronts:

We have seldom met a greater display of elegance and ingenuity than the versification of the poem itself exhibits; nor with a more easy vein of amusement than in the notes.... The quantity of information conveyed in this last part of the work is really quite astonishing; and we are sure Gourmand, Gourmet, and Glutton, must be equally grateful to the author.³⁰

The bourgeois audience for *Blackwood's* might well have been torn about whether to laugh at the pretensions of the “gourmetise” or to aspire to more “discriminating” tastes. For the broader public, French food and the new word “gourmet” initially had little appeal.

²⁸ Thomas Carlyle, “Gastronomy and Civilization” *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* Vol. XLIV (December 1851): pp. 605, published by J. Fraser West Strand, London, Original from the University of Michigan digitized August 20, 2005, Web (accessed 05 May 2010).

²⁹ In keeping with the original sense of the word, “gourmet” was exclusively used as a noun until the early twentieth century. The first citation for “gourmet” used as an adjective is from the Westminster Gazette in 1904: “The public in the matter of jokes is gourmand rather than gourmet.”

³⁰ Christopher North, “Remarks on *Tabella Cibaria* ; Or, The Bill of Fare,” *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. VII (April-Sept. 1820): 667-674, published by William Blackwood, Edinburgh and T. Cadell and W. Davies, Strand, London, Web (accessed 04 May 2010).

The Rise: America's First Gourmets

Cookbook author Hilde Lee hails Thomas Jefferson as “America's first gourmet,” saying he was responsible for “bringing the European refinements of food to America.” Jefferson changed American cooking from “mundane meat and potatoes and stews and open-hearth cooking of Colonial times to the beginnings of a more sophisticated cuisine.”³¹ The reverence for French food Jefferson developed during his diplomatic service in France is well-documented and the lavish dinners he served at the White House are legendary, but to say he changed “our cooking” overstates his influence. According to Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table*, Jefferson's taste for French dishes was shared by some wealthy Americans but “never entered the mainstream.”³² For much of the nineteenth century, French food was an object of populist derision because of its association with the elite. During Martin Van Buren's bid for re-election in 1840, the opposition Whig party used the fact that he had hired a French chef for the White House against him “in a smear campaign labeling him an aristocrat intent on the restoration of monarchy.”³³ Additionally, in their 1869 *American Women's Home*, the Beecher sisters refer to the American distaste for “French whim-whams.”³⁴

The prejudice against French cooking was so widespread that mid-century cookbook authors who included ingredients or dishes with French associations were defensive about them. In her 1864 *House and Home Papers*, Harriet Beecher Stowe claims she ought to be able to take some leaves from foreign cookbooks “without accusations of foreign foppery”.³⁵ “Foppery,” refers specifically to an over-concern with

³¹ Ellen Koteff, “Thomas Jefferson,” *Nation's Restaurant News* (February 1996) *BNET*, CBS Interactive Business Network, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

³² Levenstein, 1988: 11.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Catherine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science* (New York, NY: J. B. Ford & Co, 1869: 179) Original from the University of Michigan, digitized by Google, 29 November 2006, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

³⁵ Hoganson, 2007: 106.

appearances. Juliet Corson's 1877 *Cooking Manual*, extolls the thriftiness of French home cooks to counter the idea that French cooking was inherently fancy or profligate.³⁶

Despite Corson's efforts, French food was never seen as “thrifty,” but popular attitudes towards foppery and whim-whams changed significantly towards the end of the nineteenth century. The first signs of a more widespread acceptance of French cooking, according to Levenstein, are “menus that survive from the upper and upper-middle-class hotels of the post-war era.”³⁷ Levenstein argues that the cuisine developed by the French upper-class of the Second Empire was especially well-suited to be a distinguishing form of conspicuous consumption for the postbellum upper classes. While most of the ingredients were familiar and readily available, the “elaborate methods of preparation, foreign code-words, and complex dining rituals” served as a “refuge from those trying to scale the ramparts of their newly acquired status.”³⁸ In the 1880s, the trend began to spread to the roughly fifteen percent of Americans—a quarter of all urban and suburban households—who Levenstein defines as “middle class” in that period. These were people who weren't manual laborers and employed at least one servant. The French food fad was largely responsible for the growing obsession with what popular publications at the time called “the servant problem.”³⁹

The “servant problem” was exacerbated by *service à la Russe*—serving meals in sequential courses—which became popular first in France and then the U.S. in the late nineteenth century. According to etiquette writer Mary Sherwood, a dinner party with

³⁶ Levenstein, 1988: 8.

³⁷ Ibid, 15.

³⁸ Ibid, 14.

³⁹ Letters in magazines like *Good Housekeeping* frequently groused about the “servant problem” and the magazine frequently ran articles about it, including one commissioned from the socialist writer Edward Bellamy on how cooperative housekeeping of the kind described in his *Looking Backward* might help alleviate the stresses of finding, training, and retaining good servants. The wealthy, Levenstein says, were “hardly affected by the problem,” because they were able to afford servants trained in Europe. He quotes Mary Hinman Abel, who wrote in 1903 that “The house service question is concerned with the small household only.” Some middle-class women tried to set up training courses and one of the goals of the home economics movement as to “elevate domestic service to a more skilled level” but most of their efforts were short-lived. Ibid, 63-65.

service à la Russe required at least one servant for every three guests. However, even “young couples with small means” could achieve a modified version by serving the same basic order of dishes, putting the meat carving in the hands of the host, and serving champagne and claret throughout the meal rather than pairing a different beverage with each course. After recounting one of the elaborate bills of fare suggested by Maria Parola's popular 1881 cookbook aimed at the middle class, Levenstein notes:

We will never know if anyone ever served exactly that meal [the menu described by Maria Parola], although given the popularity of Parola's books, it is likely that some did. However, what is interesting is that a mere fifteen years earlier it would have been inconceivable for anyone to even suggest that a dinner of this sophistication could or indeed should be cooked and serve in a middle-class home.⁴⁰

Kristin Hoganson makes a similar argument in *Consumer's Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920*. By the end of the nineteenth century, American cookbook writers had stopped being defensive about French influences and instead “assumed that foreignness had cachet.”⁴¹ Foods and fashions from France became popular among the upper middle-class women who were national taste leaders during the postbellum period⁴² because cultivating sophisticated tastes was both a way for women to distinguish their homes from lower classes and a socially-acceptable way for women to enjoy the bounty of the growing U.S. empire. Whereas Levenstein focuses on the anxieties generated by the social expectations of postbellum entertaining, Hoganson emphasizes the pleasures women derived from demonstrating their sophistication. Those anxieties and pleasures were mutually constitutive. As advice columns about “the servant problem” testify, pulling off a successful dinner party with modified *service à la Russe* was stressful, but it wouldn't have been a powerful form of distinction if anyone could do it.

Hoganson talks about sophisticated and cosmopolitan consumption

⁴⁰ Ibid, 20.

⁴¹ Hoganson, 2007: 106.

⁴² Apparently describing the same population as Levenstein and Ohmann.

interchangeably, suggesting that there was then—as now—a lot of overlap between interest in food constructed as gourmet and foreign. However, it's worth making a conceptual distinction between *foreignness* and the aesthetic superiority implied by the word “gourmet.” The latter was associated almost exclusively with French cooking until the later part of the twentieth century. Hoganson notes several times that although culinary internationalism ranged from Hungary to Jamaica to the Philippines, French traditions were uniquely privileged:

The great exception to the tendency to publish a narrow range of dishes from any given place was France. 'It cannot be denied that the French excel all nations in the excellence of their cuisine,' wrote Fannie Merritt Farmer in *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*, and many of her contemporaries agreed.... Besides inserting the word 'French' into recipe names, food writers conveyed French origins through nomenclature—as in *hors d'oeuvres*, *bouquet de corsage*, *consommé*, and *filet de boeuf*.⁴³

Hoganson conflates the exceptional reputation of French food with the *overall* trend towards cosmopolitanism seen in internationally-themed dinners and Japanese teas:

Society and cooking pages alike reported on the preferences of the rich—sometimes printing the recipes favored by their French chefs.... As a result, continental and especially French food became thoroughly associated with luxury. If home cooking smelled of middle-class provincialism, European cuisine evoked the cosmopolitanism of high society.⁴⁴

However, French food was associated with luxury long before the turn of the twentieth century. What changed was not the *reputation* of French food, but its popularity. In the antebellum period, “luxury” was widely regarded with suspicion. The Japanese teas and *filet de boeuf aux champignons* that became popular in the post-bellum period may both have evoked cosmopolitanism, but when eating the latter, people didn't don ethnic costumes to play at a kind of foreignness they could subsequently disavow. The middle-class struggle to perform *service à la Russe* was driven by the desire to meet new social expectations for genteel entertaining, not to experience something exotic or learn about

⁴³ Hoganson, 2007: 107.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

the people of France.

The Fall: Many Different Homes, All “Home-Style”

From our contemporary vantage-point, it can be difficult to understand how food essentially constructed as *better* could ever go out of style. Who doesn't want better food? But “gourmet” doesn't designate *objectively* superior food; it's an aesthetic that, from the beginning, was marked primarily by a particular kind of attention to food associated with *pretension*. “Gourmet” isn't inherent superiority itself, it's signaled by a *claim* to superiority (and especially a claim associated with wealth). Gourmet connotes luxury, sophistication and refinement; it is not the “better” of home cooking or authenticity or healthfulness or social responsibility. After the initial flowering of interest in the gourmet aesthetic at the turn of the twentieth century, it faded from popularity. Like an outdated clothing, it didn't disappear entirely, but towards the end of the 1920s, “gourmet” ceased to be a mainstream preoccupation.

According to Levenstein's *Paradox of Plenty*:

By 1930 the ranks of the French restaurants had been decimated, and many of the others had either passed away or sunk into mediocrity. Moreover, a general prejudice against French cooking seemed to have reemerged, alongside widespread ignorance of what it was. In a 1929 experiment, the Fred Harvey System, which ran the dining cars for a number of railroads, discovered that even the well-heeled patrons of the Santa Fe Railroad's crack California Limited would order much more steak when it was called “Small Tenderloin, Mushrooms” than when it was labeled “Filet Mignon, Champignons.”⁴⁵

As the Fred Harvey System experiment example shows, the change was not simply the result of people having less money to spend on food. Prohibition contributed to the demise of some restaurants by eliminating one of their primary sources of profit, but Levenstein notes that even after Prohibition was lifted, fine dining didn't recover. Even among the elite, the dominant aesthetic shifted to “home-style” foods—those seen as simple, economical, wholesome, and wholly American.

⁴⁵ Levenstein, 1993: 45.

In 1947 the Gallup polling organization asked a random sampling of American adults, “If cost were no factor and you could have absolutely anything that you wanted to eat, what would you choose for a perfect meal?” They didn't publish the complete results of the poll, but compiled the answers into one “perfect meal”:

Approximately one person in every four polled would start with a drink of some kind. The chief preferences are for some variety of gin cocktail or a plain Manhattan. Here's the complete menu for the perfect meal:

Fruit or shrimp cocktail
Vegetable soup or chicken broth
Steak
Mashed or french fried potatoes
Peas
Vegetable salad
Rolls and butter
Apple pie a la mode
Coffee

Second choice in meat is roast beef, third choice roast chicken.⁴⁶

Levenstein cites these survey results as evidence of the unchanging nature of American tastes. Food historian Amy Bentley, on the other hand, uses them as evidence of the rise of the “ordered meal” consisting of a large portion of a high-status food like meat and smaller portions of complementary foods, usually vegetables.⁴⁷ Bentley argues that this structure became more important during the Second World War as a response to general cultural instability, particularly the fear of food shortages. According to Bentley, the perceived superiority of ordered meals to one-pot soups was especially important to the middle classes, “who were more anxious about their status and the structure of their meals than those below (or above) them on the socioeconomic scale.”⁴⁸ When the Army polled its enlisted ranks about their food preferences in 1963, the favorites were largely the same: steak, french fries, corn on the cob, sliced tomatoes, hot rolls or biscuits, and

⁴⁶ Gallup, 1972: 636 qtd. in Levenstein, 1993: 119.

⁴⁷ She also refers to this as the A+2B meal structure, following anthropologist Mary Douglas. The “A” is a high-status food, usually protein, prepared and served separately from two lower-status accompaniments. This is contrasted with casseroles or stews. Bentley notes that “until recently middle America has been prejudiced against “mixed” or spicy foods. One-pot soups and stews, and anything containing garlic or chili pepper, were reminiscent of peasant status.” Amy Bentley, “Islands of Serenity: Gender, Race, and Ordered Meals During World War II,” *Food in the U.S.A.: A Reader*, ed. Carole M. Counihan (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002: 179).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

strawberry shortcake (which barely beat apple pie). Although the industry developed during the wars dramatically changed how food was produced, Levenstein says, “one of the striking aspects of the new food technology was how little it altered basic American food tastes.”⁴⁹

The homogeneity and mediocrity now associated with the 1950s and the rise of processed foods shouldn't be overstated. Laura Shapiro argues in *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* that home cooks continued to devote a lot of time, derive a lot of pleasure, and take a lot of pride in feeding their families. Food manufacturers had to entice women to buy their products by offering ways for them to put their own personal touches on ready-mix or prepared food. Boxed cake mixes that included every ingredient necessary and only required that the baker add water sold poorly because they seemed like a way of “cheating” at the emotionally-charged task of cooking for one's family. So consumer researcher Ernest Dichter came up with “the egg theory.” Mixes that required bakers to add an egg enabled them to take advantage of the convenience and reliability of the mix without removing themselves from the process entirely. Sales soared.⁵⁰ However, adding an egg to a boxed mix or even baking a cake from scratch was different from attempting to make something gourmet. The simple, wholesome, and American aesthetic dominated between the 1930s and the mid-1970s, especially among the growing number of Americans who considered themselves middle class.

What simple, wholesome, and American meant varied. Regional differences persisted despite the rise of industrial agriculture, national brands, restaurants chains, and mass media. Regional variation in American foodways is the primary subject of the *America Eats* project started in 1939 by the Federal Writer's Project, one of the New Deal arts programs started as part of the WPA. *America Eats* was initially conceived of

⁴⁹ Levenstein, 1993: 119.

⁵⁰ Shapiro, 2004:75.

as a follow-up to the FWP's unexpectedly successful series of guidebooks, which were somewhere between essay collections and travel guides with a historical and anthropological bent. The editors planned to produce one for each of the existing 48 states, Puerto Rico, Alaska, Washington, D.C. and about thirty other cities, regions, and small towns.⁵¹ Every guidebook included a section on black history and culture, which Mark Kurlansky claims was part of the inspiration for *America Eats*: “It [*America Eats*] came out of the ethnic books, which in turn came out of the 'Negro' sections of the guidebooks.”⁵² What's just as striking as the variation in local ingredients, recipes, and traditions is the similarity in what people across the country prided themselves in and wanted to share with the writers.

Donna Gabaccia says in *We Are What We Eat* that the project's administrators and editors encouraged writers to focus on “traditional American celebrations of community through food,” instead of “mongrel” or “commercial” foods and events, but the writers were not always compliant.⁵³ They sent in submissions about hot dogs, machine-cut Suzi-Q potatoes invented in Oklahoma City, Coca-Cola parties in Atlanta, and drive-in restaurants in Colorado, all of which were “marked for exclusion from the final publication.”⁵⁴ The project ended abruptly when the U.S. entered World War II and most of the submissions remained unpublished until 2009. Kurlansky selected about five dozen of the original articles, including many of the ones marked for exclusion, for a collection titled *The Food of a Younger Land*. Given the biases of the project's administrators and the fact that the editors encouraged writers to “liven up” their pieces with fiction, the book is hardly the “untouched paper trail into the past” that Kurlansky makes it out to be.⁵⁵ As Laura Shapiro suggests in her review: “Is this how America ate? Who knows? But it's how America chose to imagine itself at history's table, comfortably

⁵¹ Mark Kurlansky, *The Food of a Younger Land* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009: 2).

⁵² Ibid, 14.

⁵³ Gabaccia, 1998: 144.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Kurlansky, 2009: 22.

surrounded by like-minded neighbors and the endless bounty of the land.”⁵⁶ The diversity of foodways in America and conflicts between *America Eats* writers and editors belie the appeals to national unity and “like-mindedness.”⁵⁷

An article on the “Italian feeds” of Barre, Vermont opens with the claim that “government official, professional, clerk, or truck driver” (Yankees from all walks of life) could appreciate the home-cooking served by Italian immigrant widows trying to make a living after their husbands succumbed to “occupational sickness” at the local granite quarry.⁵⁸ That kind of ethnic “home cooking” was how most of the writers and people who contributed their stories and recipes to *America Eats* “chose to imagine [themselves] at history's table.”⁵⁹ They primarily featured the kind of holiday fare that they couldn't afford to eat daily in either Depression-era America or the “Old World.” When the University of Iowa decided to publish the *America Eats* manuscript in 1992, they contacted Louis I. Szathmáry II, the Chicago restaurateur who had donated it. He volunteered to try making all the recipes in the collection and edit them as necessary to make them “enjoyable eating.” His preface notes:

There isn't one vegetable dish among the group or not even one that is predominantly vegetable.... All immigrants from all parts of the world arriving in the United States start to replace their everyday national dishes with their homeland's special holiday and festival dishes and Sunday meals. Germans in America don't eat daily German food, rather German Sunday fare.... I think it is natural that sixty years ago, when the United States was an active 'melting pot,' a young American writer exploring the traditional national dishes of his fellow Americans of Dutch, Russian, Italian, Mexican, and other origins overwhelmingly received recipes for national holiday feast dishes.⁶⁰

Their Sunday fare idealized tradition and home, not French-inspired gourmet.

Even the few descriptions of high society in *America Eats* are worlds apart from

⁵⁶ Laura Shapiro, “Down-Home-Cooking Nation: Did you know the Federal Writers Project funded foodies?” *Slate*, 02 June 2009, Web (accessed 07 May 2010).

⁵⁷ Shapiro says the project reveals “how America chose to imagine itself at history's table, comfortably surrounded by like-minded neighbors and the endless bounty of the land.” Kurlansky appears to take this at face value.

⁵⁸ Kurlansky, 2009: 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Louis Szathmáry, “Preface,” *America Eats*, by Nelson Algren (Iowa City, IA: 1992: xvi).

the anxiously aspirational “modified *service à la Russe*” and costumed ethnic dinners Americans engaged in at the turn of the century. In a short piece by children's book author Jerry Felsheim about the “New York Literary Tea,” he explains that the literary tea had only lately transformed from an event for women's “study clubs” to a cocktail party and “informal gathering place for intellectual sophisticates on their way to dinner.”⁶¹ Felsheim says, “The conventional beverages are dry martini and Manhattan cocktails, with scotch for those who insist....Food receives little attention. Usually it consists of a few uninteresting canapés passed haphazardly about, with few takers.”⁶² While not all wealthy, the people in attendance were part of the intelligentsia and cultural elite. Although the word “canapé” suggests the lingering influence French food on aspirational catering, the party-goers' indifference to the food and cocktails instead of wine reflect the changed attitude towards the gourmet aesthetic.

The Return: From Sonoma to Safeway

Foodways associated with pretension and sophistication never went away entirely, which is one reason there are so many theories about when gourmet started its comeback. In *The United States of Arugula*, David Kamp dates the first sign of gourmet's revival to 1939. In that year James Beard, “Dean of American gastronomy,” co-founded the catering company that launched his career and Henri Soulé traveled from France to America to serve as the maitre d' of the restaurant in the French Pavilion at the New York World's Fair. The restaurant served over a hundred thousand meals over the course of the Fair's two summers. Kamp admits that the mere arrival of both men in the American food industry didn't have immediate effects. He corroborates claims that until the 1980s, most middle class Americans favored the “meat and potatoes” cuisine still identified as quintessentially American. Kamp says, “the very unprestigiousness of

⁶¹ Kurlansky, 2009: 40.

⁶² Ibid, 41.

America's food culture was what left the door open for people like Beard, [Julia] Child, and [Craig] Claiborne [the *New York Times*' first food critic] to come in and make it their own.”⁶³

Kamp dates the real transformation of American eating to 1971, when Chez Panisse opened in Berkeley, California. However, most Americans who appreciate the “California cuisine” Alice Waters is often credited with popularizing have never been to the landmark restaurant or even heard of her. Alice Waters and Chez Panisse *catered* to a growing demand; they didn't *create* it. Nora Ephron claims the first sign of the the coming “gourmet explosion” was in the 1950s. In an essay originally published in *New York Magazine* titled “The Food Establishment,” she describes the sudden popularity of what she calls the “first fashionable international food”⁶⁴:

In the 1950s, suddenly, no one knew quite why or how, everyone began to serve curry. Dinner parties in fashionable homes featured curried lobster. Dinner parties in middle-income homes featured curried chicken. Diner parties in frozen-food compartments featured curried rice. And with the arrival of curry, the first fashionable international food, food acquired a chic, a gloss of snobbery it had hitherto possessed only in certain upper-income groups. Hostesses were expected to know that iceberg lettuce was *declassé* and tuna fish casseroles *de trop*. Lancers sparkling rose and Manschewitz were replaced on the table by Bourdeaux. Overnight rumaki had a fling and became a cliché.⁶⁵

The new concern with “chic” foods Ephron describes did emerge earlier in her native New York than in the rest of the country, but probably not as early as the 1950s. The curry craze she describes was prompted by a recipe for “Country Captain” popularized by Associated Press food columnist Cecily Brownstone in the 1963. At that time Country Captain was “widely regarded as a specialty of the southern United States,” not an

⁶³ Kamp, 2006: 10.

⁶⁴ As noted in the introduction, although “sophisticated” and “cosmopolitan” eating sometimes reflect conceptually distinct values and desires, they are also very frequently intertwined especially in the popular discourse on food trends. Although some effort will be made to distinguish between the competing and even sometimes conflicting discourses of gourmet and ethnic or international foods, at other times it will be difficult or impossible to separate them.

⁶⁵ Nora Ephron, “The Food Establishment,” *Wallflower at the Orgy* 1968 (New York, NY: Random House, 2007: 6).

international dish.⁶⁶ Rumaki, an appetizer usually consisting of chicken livers and water chestnuts wrapped in bacon and then broiled, first appeared in a cookbook in 1965. Anyone attempting to cook gourmet food in the 1950s or 1960s would have been an outlier, not part of a mainstream trend.⁶⁷

Even in New York City, a journalist who surveyed 200 Manhattan shoppers in 1961 concluded that “most Manhattanites eat well...if unimaginatively.”⁶⁸ Aside from a few exceptions,⁶⁹ the journalist says, “when asked for a typical dinner menu, a majority of those asked listed steaks or chops, a green or yellow vegetable, salad and gelatin or canned or fresh fruit for dessert. In moderate to upper income homes, pot roast, beef stew, roast lamb, pork or beef, and roasted chicken are some other popular meat dishes.” Only the couple interviewed in Greenwich Village expressed “cosmopolitan tastes,” including the French, Italian, and German foods they came to know and like when they traveled in Europe, “Arabic dishes” prepared by the wife who was originally from Egypt, and the “chopped liver, borscht, and gefuellte[sic] fish” the husband grew up eating. The article's tone foreshadowed the changes to come, applying the pejorative adjectives “monotonous and uninspired” to the meals most New Yorkers eat and praising the couple from the village who “take advantage of one of New York's best attractions—foreign restaurants and food shops that offer delicacies from every corner of the globe.” However, the mainstream palate was reflected better by the woman from Stuyvesant town, which the article describes as populated by “predominantly young, middle-income

⁶⁶ Molly O'Neill, “Long Ago Smitten, She Remains True to the Country Captain,” *The New York Times*, 17 April 1991, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

⁶⁷ Brownstone began to investigate the dish in 1960, and discovered that it had first appeared in an 1867 cookbook by the Philadelphia writer Eliza Leslie, who in turn had speculated that it was introduced to the English by an Indian or “Sepoy” officer—who were sometimes referred to as “country captains.” The rumaki she mentions, which is an appetizer usually consisting of chicken livers and water chestnuts wrapped in bacon and then broiled appears on the menu from Victor “Trader Vic” Bergeron's restaurant Don the Beachcomber as early as 1941 and may have appeared in some fashionable homes in the 1950s, but likely wasn't something many middle-class people were serving or enjoying until the 1960s.

⁶⁸ June Owen, “How New Yorkers Eat: Rich and Poor Have Monotonous Diets,” *The New York Times*, 16 March 1961, p. 40, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (retrieved 08 April 2011).

⁶⁹ In the African-American neighborhood of Harlem, cooks made use of cheaper cuts of meat and adopted a more casual attitude towards the time of the evening meal and recent Puerto Rican immigrants reported a preference for rice and bean dishes. *Ibid.*

families,” who says “My husband likes plain food.... Give him steak and he's happy. If I try a new dish, he looks as if he thought I was trying to poison him.”⁷⁰

Americans' limited exposure to gourmet food in the mid-century was what made Julia Child seem like such a revelation when she first appeared on Boston public television in 1962, demonstrating how to prepare unfamiliar and sophisticated-seeming French dishes with her peculiar charm.⁷¹ *The French Chef* quickly became the most popular show on WGBH Boston and was picked up by public television stations across the country. From the vantage point of 2010, the nationwide broadcast of her show may seem to mark the “arrival” of gourmet in the national consciousness, but as influential as Julia Child may have been, the extent of her popularity is often exaggerated.⁷² A better indication of the mainstream popularity of foodways constructed as sophisticated is the rise of wine and the kitchen equipment associated with gourmet cooking.

The history of Williams-Sonoma, whose website describes it as “the premier specialty retailer of home furnishings and gourmet cookware in the United States”⁷³ provides a useful index. Charles Williams was another member of what Kamp calls the “first wave” of the “gourmet revolution.” He got the idea for a “gourmet” kitchenwares store after visiting France in 1953, where he observed the differences between French and American home cooking. As he told *Fortune* magazine in 2003: “There were so many things we didn't have in this country, such as heavy sauté pans, huge stockpots, fish poachers, and an endless array of bakeware. There [in France] was no difference between what home cooks and restaurants used. But in this country, what home cooks could buy were relatively inexpensive pots and pans, made out of thin aluminum or

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *The French Chef* aired on PBS from 1963 to 1966 (in black and white) and 1970 to 1972 (in color) and then in re-runs for many years afterward. Child's first television appearance was on *I've Been Reading*, a book chat program hosted by Albert Duhamel, a professor of English at Boston College. According to Kamp, she brought the equipment she needed to make an omelet to “merry up the proceedings. . . correctly deducing that programs of this sort tended to be dull static affairs.” Kamp, 2006: 93.

⁷² See note 19.

⁷³ “About Us,” *Williams-Sonoma Website*, 2009, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

tin.”⁷⁴ He began selling imported pots out of a defunct hardware store in Sonoma in 1956. His business was particularly successful with wealthy San Franciscans who had summer homes there; they eventually convinced him to move into the city, but he retained the name that evoked his pastoral beginnings. His business flourished, particularly after the San Francisco public television station picked up *The French Chef*. He says they never knew what Julia Child was going to make on the show that week, but the next day customers would come in looking for soufflé dishes or charlotte molds like the ones they had seen her use. With the help of other luminaries like Beard and food writer Elizabeth David, Williams-Sonoma quickly positioned itself as the discerning Bay area cook's source for gourmet kitchen goods.

Williams began expanding his customer base in 1971 with the first Williams-Sonoma catalog. Despite its humble beginnings—the first one was printed in black and white and fit into standard business envelopes—the catalog was immediately successful, probably because the product descriptions gave Williams the opportunity to educate his clients about the tools and ingredients he discovered during his annual trips to Europe. The business continued to grow throughout the 1970s. In 1973, Williams incorporated with the help of a few business partners and opened a second store in Beverly Hills. The year after that, they opened another store in an upscale retail area of Palo Alto and then a fourth in Costa Mesa.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the number of Americans experimenting with different kinds of foods was growing, exemplified by the increasing interest in the beverage most associated with French food and sophistication: wine.

A 1970s radio campaign for Blue Nun, a brand of sweet white wine from Germany, starring Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara reflects both the growing interest in wine and anxiety about how to drink it. The tag line for the campaign was “the wine that

⁷⁴ Arlyn Tobias Gajilan, “From Pots to Poachers, I Searched for Tools That Would Transform American Kitchens. Along The Way, I Discovered That Good Taste Can Build a Business,” *Fortune*, 01 September 2003, *CNN Money*, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

⁷⁵ “Company Overview,” *Williams Sonoma Website*, 2007, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

goes as well with meat as it does with fish.”⁷⁶ Along with some “Who's on first?” style banter involving the brand name, the spots generally sought to take the stress out of selecting wine. In one of the spots, Stiller and Meara play strangers assigned to the same table on an ocean cruise:

Jerry Stiller speaks: “Would you like to share a bottle of wine? I noticed a little Blue Nun at the captain's table.”

“Poor thing, replies Anne Meara. “Maybe she's seasick.”

“No,” puts in Stiller. “Blue Nun is a wine. A delicious white wine.

“Oh, we can't have a white wine if you're having meat and I'm having fish,” Meara says firmly.

But Stiller persists: “Sure we can. Blue Nun is a white wine that's correct with any dish. Your filet of soul. My filet of mignon.

“Oh, it's so nice to meet a man who knows the finer things,” Meara says. “You must be a gourmet.”

“No, as a matter of fact I'm an accountant.”⁷⁷

Stiller described the concept of the campaign as “two idiots, two nudnicks” discussing wines, but apparently even an “idiot” in the 1970s would have known it was “incorrect” to drink white wine with red meat or red wine with fish.⁷⁸ The reassurance that Blue Nun was “correct with any dish” and the vaudeville-style repartee sought to make Blue Nun seem approachable compared to imported wines whose foreign names were printed in forbidding Gothic script. However, as an imported table wine, Blue Nun was still a sophisticated choice compared to jug wines and Night Train. Sales of Blue Nun increased every year the Stiller and Meara commercials were on the air and by 1976, Blue Nun was the best-selling white wine in America.⁷⁹

Although the niche markets for gourmet foods, kitchenwares, and wine expanded in the 1970s, they remained confined mostly to the coasts and super-elite. Most Americans stuck to familiar, “home-style” foods, albeit in new forms developed by the post-war food industries. Kamp recounts an anecdote from Judy Rodgers, chef of the

⁷⁶ Larry Oakner, *And Now a Few Laughs from Our Sponsor: The Best Fifty Years of Radio Commercials* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2002: 65).

⁷⁷ “Humor Helps Change U.S. Tastes in Wine,” *Nation's Business* (pre-1986), 01 April 1976, p. 41 ProQuest (retrieved 26 August 2009).

⁷⁸ Nadine Brozan, “Chronicle,” *The New York Times*, 04 March 1995, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

⁷⁹ Oakner, 2002: 67.

famed Zuni Cafe in San Francisco. Rogers returned to St. Louis in 1974 after spending a year in France in an exchange with the daughter of Jean Troisgros, owner of the Hotel Troisgros in Roanne:

The first thing I ever tried to cook, the summer after I got home from France, was Jean's little salad of green beans. . . Just little velvety green beans coated with a little crème fraiche and he would put little ribbons of champignons de Paris [button mushrooms] in it. . . . I thought 'Heck, I can make this.' But I found out that I wasn't gonna find these ingredients in St. Louis in 1974. The green beans in the supermarket in St. Louis were like Lincoln Logs. And I made the salad, and it was just dreadful.⁸⁰

In most cities, there were no specialty markets selling imported cheese or *haricots verts* or the Bordeaux Ephron claimed had supplanted Manischewitz in the 1950s. It wasn't until the 1980s that gourmet food and wine truly became popular nationwide.

Williams-Sonoma opened its first store outside of California in 1983, and by 1991 there were 91 locations across the country. Both total and per capita wine sales in the U.S. increased steadily until 1987 (see Figure I.1 on page 5). There were a few years of decline in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which wine market analysts usually attribute to continued contractions in the fortified wine market and the dramatic drop-off in the number of people reaching the legal drinking age (due to the “baby bust” that followed the “baby boom”).⁸¹ However, even in those leaner years, the circulation of *Wine Spectator* continued to increase, suggesting that there was still a growing interest in learning about wine.

Wine Spectator started off as a tabloid-style semi-weekly paper on the wine industry in Northern California in 1976. With a circulation of less than 1,000, it was on the verge of folding when an investment banker named Marvin Shanken purchased it in 1979. The next year, *Wine Spectator* began publishing scores on a 100-point scale, a practice the influential wine critic Robert Parker had pioneered a few years earlier in his

⁸⁰ Kamp, 2000: 239.

⁸¹ Sumner *et al*, *An Economic Survey of the Wine and Winegrape Industry in the United States and Canada*, University of California at Davis Agricultural Issues Center White Papers, 02 December 2001: 7, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

newsletter *Wine Advocate*.⁸² Parker's system was designed to get away from confusing subjective descriptions and inflated reviews from writers with an investment in the wines they were rating. By adopting the seemingly objective scoring system, *Wine Spectator* sought readers seeking a clear guide to making “correct” wine choices. By 1987, the magazine was publishing scores for over 1,000 wines per year, circulation was up to 65,000, and Shanken had the publication redesigned as a glossy magazine.⁸³ Despite the early 1990s slump in wine sales, by 1993, the audited circulation of *Wine Spectator* had risen to 120,000 and its revenues approached \$11 million.⁸⁴

By the 1980s, culinary sophistication had again become a dominant culinary aesthetic instead of the exclusive provenance of an urban elite. The French restaurant also returned, first in cities on the coasts and eventually nationwide. In 1982, the French-trained chef Wolfgang Puck opened the restaurant Spago on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles; Spago is now the flagship of a culinary empire that includes twenty fine dining establishments, more than eighty quick-casual “Wolfgang Puck Express” locations, a premium catering service, kitchen wares, cookbooks, a line of prepared foods, and occasional cameo appearances in television shows and movies.⁸⁵ The national successes of Wolfgang Puck, Williams-Sonoma and *Wine Spectator* reflect the sea change in mainstream taste between 1961 when even Manhattanites preferred “monotonous and uninspired” meals and 1981, when *Business Week* reported that Safeway—the nation's largest supermarket chain—had equipped 75 percent of their stores with a “gourmet” section.⁸⁶

⁸² Kevin Zraly, *Windows on the World: Complete Wine Course* (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2007: 207).

⁸³ Linda Moss, “Wine Magazine Tries to Drink from Deeper Advertising Cup,” *Crain's New York Business*, 3.44L p. 28, 02 November 1987, ABI/INFORM Dateline, Document ID: 5476815 (retrieved 08 April 2011).

⁸⁴ Joshua Levine, “The Good Life,” *Forbes*, 18 January 1993:103.

⁸⁵ The word “empire” comes directly from the biography on his official website. “Meet Wolfgang,” *Wolfgang Puck*, 2011, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

⁸⁶ “A New Twist: Supermarkets with All the Frills,” *Business Week*, 2701: p. 122, 17 August 1981, ABI/INFORM Global Document ID: 1363541 (retrieved 08 April 2011).

II: Weight-loss Dieting and the Ideal of Thinness

Weight is a cultural condition. A scale does not make it more or less real. Fatness too is a cultural condition. Calipers are a pretext and pretense. There can be no timelessly perfect diet because the act of losing weight or shedding fat, like the desire itself, is culturally bounded.

—Hillel Schwartz⁸⁷

Unholy Appetites: Food and the Body

Like the broader concern with culinary sophistication invoked by the word gourmet, the concern about the moral and medical significance of excessive consumption and its relationship to the body has a long history.⁸⁸ In the fifth century BC, Hippocrates observed that extreme fatness was correlated with infertility and premature death and outlined elaborate weight-loss regimens:

Obese people and those desiring to lose weight should perform hard work before food. Meals should be taken after exertion and while still panting from fatigue and with no other refreshment before meals except only wine, diluted and slightly cold. Their meals should be prepared with a sesame or seasoning and other similar substances and be of a fatty nature as people get thus satiated with little food. They should, moreover, eat only once a day and take no baths and sleep on a hard bed and walk naked as long as possible.⁸⁹

Representations of extreme fatness in pre-modern literature and art tend to be somewhat pejorative; characters who are merely plump may be jolly, but the exceptionally large tend to be tragic.⁹⁰ In Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, King Harry attempts

⁸⁷ Schwartz, 1986: 8.

⁸⁸ The language here is deliberately vague because it wouldn't be accurate to say that the Ancient Greeks were concerned about "fatness," or to assume that "fatness" had the same meaning—either physically or symbolically.

⁸⁹ J. Mann Chadwick, *The Medical Works of Hippocrates* (Oxford: Blackwell Scientific, 1950: 205).

⁹⁰ Attempting to infer information about how people thought about fatness, what size people actually were, or what people thought of as ideal or beautiful based on paintings and literature is complicated for many reasons—paintings of religious and mythical figures may use body size to represent power, abundance, spiritual purity, or health in ways that may or may not be related to prevailing beauty ideals. Even portraits of living humans were often designed flatter or offer a symbolic representation of their subjects rather than capture them in a photo-realistic way. Similar issues trouble the recent attempts to

to dismiss the corpulent Falstaff with a pun that suggests fatness was also associated with premature mortality in seventeenth century England: “Make less thy body hence, and more thy grace/ Leave gormandizing. Know the grave doth gape/ For thee thrice wider than for other men.”⁹¹ Early Christian texts define gluttony as a sin, and some scholars argue that religious fasting and the sometimes-skeletal thinness it could lead to was an even more important marker of piety than chastity, especially for women in medieval Europe.⁹² Many contemporary accounts of the “obesity epidemic” gesture to these precursors as evidence that humans have *always* considered fatness medically and morally dangerous and understood the “common sense” relationship between overeating, fatness, and health.⁹³

However, historical accounts of slimming practices reveal significant differences in attitudes towards body size in different times and places. Just in the last century the U.S. has seen dramatic shifts in beliefs about how fat or thin people should be, how they ought to go about achieving an “ideal” weight, and what their failure to do so might say about them. Although there are conflicting accounts about the development of mainstream dieting, historians generally agree that dieting specifically to achieve “thinness” first became widespread in America during the 1880s and 1920s. Before that, bodily regimens were concerned more with spiritual purity and discomforts like indigestion and constipation than achieving a particular body size.

Francine Prose argues in her book on gluttony for the Oxford series on the “seven

make inferences about eating practices and portion sizes based on paintings of the “Last Supper” through the ages. Wansink, B and C. S. Wansink, “The Largest Last Supper: Depictions of Portion Size and Plate Size Increased Over the Millennium,” *The International Journal of Obesity* 34 (March 2010) Web (accessed 13 May 2011).

⁹¹ William Shakespeare, *Henry IV Part II Act V: Scene 5: 50-3*, *The Norton Shakespeare* ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1997: 1374.

⁹² Caroline Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987: 24).

⁹³ See W. M. Ayers, “Changing Attitudes Towards Overweight and Reducing,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 34 (January 1958): 23-9; George A. Bray *et al*, *Handbook of Obesity: Etiology and Pathophysiology* (New York, NY: Marcel Dekker, Inc., 1998: 17); AJ Stunkard *et al*, “Stigmatization of Obesity in Medieval Times: Asia and Europe,” *International Journal of Obesity* 22 (1998): 1141-1144.

deadly sins” that theologians like Evagrius of Pontus and St. Augustine were concerned primarily with the spiritual significance of the *act* of over-eating and the worse sins it might lead to, not the resulting corpulence. Sermons against gluttony declared it a cardinal vice because it represented an impious worship of the senses and weakened the defenses against drunkenness and lustful acts. Overeating was a gateway sin that might lead to more serious transgressions. Manuals of penance offered stricter penalties for the “arrogance of excessive fasting” than for overindulgence in food.⁹⁴ Although representations of atypical fatness in Western literature and visual art tend to be unflattering,⁹⁵ the historical scarcity and unequal distribution of food also generated associations between moderate fatness and wealth, generosity, health, and prestige. Those associations prevailed in the United States until the late nineteenth century.

Contrary to the popular notion that the American obsession with thinness has increased steadily since then, more nuanced accounts show that its rise over the course of the twentieth century was slow and uneven. Like the gourmet aesthetic, there was no consistent or inevitable progression from the emergence of dieting at the turn of the twentieth century to the 1980s diet revolution and the rise of an extreme ideal of thinness exemplified by 1990s “heroin chic.”⁹⁶ The belief that thinness is beautiful, admirable, and directly related to self-control and virtuous effort was considerably more widespread at the turn of the twentieth century than during the period from the 1930s through the 1970s. The growing national obsession with weight-loss in the 1980s widely heralded as a *new* phenomenon actually signaled a *re-emergence*.

⁹⁴ Francine Prose, *Gluttony* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006: 13-4).

⁹⁵ Even that tendency isn't universal. Art historians debate the significance of artwork from the Ice Age to Early Modern periods that portray bodies that appear large by contemporary standards. In *Revolting Bodies*, Kathleen LeBesco analyzes the debate over fat Aphrodites and what they say about Hellenistic beauty norms. She also notes that there are modern examples of fat being idealized, primarily in non-Western cultures “namely the Mediterranean/North African region and some Polynesian locales.” Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004: 20-2).

⁹⁶ See Thomas C. Shevory, *Body/Politics: Studies in Reproduction, Production, and (Re)Construction* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000:188).

In *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat*, a foundational text in the field of Fat Studies, Hillel Schwartz claims “the first American weight watchers” were disciples of the Presbyterian minister Rev. Sylvester Graham. Graham designed a dietary program to restore “wholesome” appetite to a nation he described as gluttonous in the early nineteenth century.⁹⁷ However, his followers did not watch their weight in hopes that it would *decrease*. Although Graham's diet is similar to some contemporary weight-loss prescriptions—consisting mostly of whole fruits, vegetables, and grains—Graham and his followers desired to be “robust,” not thin: “Their comparatively slender diet was meant to yield handsome, robust bodies. Thinness was never the goal; wholesome appetite was....They yearned not for leanness but for a 'natural' weight, a tempered and temperate life.”⁹⁸ Grahamites weighed themselves and the food they ate regularly in order to prove they were *not* losing weight despite following an abstemious diet.

Although Graham and his ideas were popular enough that a high-fiber flour marketed for health came to bear his name (as did the crackers made from it), neither Grahamism nor any other fringe nineteenth century diets designed to promote physical, moral, and spiritual well-being became widespread. Shortly after Graham's retirement in the 1840s, his followers joined up with others moral crusaders and concerns about corsets and tobacco eclipsed the nutritional agenda. In the 1930s, historian Richard Shryock called Graham a failure because his name “is recalled today—if recalled at all—only in connection with such prosaic foods as bread and crackers.”⁹⁹ Both Shryock and Schwartz note that even in his heyday, Graham was widely mocked and his diet considered extreme. According to Schwartz, Graham's asceticism and the thin body “bespoke lack of charity and a denial of a rightful American abundance.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Schwartz, 1986: 21.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁹⁹ Richard Shryock, “Sylvester Graham and the Popular Health Movement, 1830-1870,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* Vol. 18 No. 2 (Sept. 1931):172.

¹⁰⁰ Schwartz, 21.

Nineteenth century beauty ideals celebrated abundance, especially in the form of the voluptuous female body. According to fashion historian Valerie Steele, for most of the Victorian Era, “except for the waist (and the hands and feet) the entire body was supposed to be well-padded with flesh.”¹⁰¹ Corsets could be used to cinch the waist, but nothing could substitute for the desired fullness of the bust and hips. A late nineteenth century instructional book titled *Beauty and How to Keep It* claims, “extreme thinness is a much more cruel enemy to beauty than extreme stoutness.”¹⁰² Lillian Russell, the highest-paid entertainer at the height of her popularity was celebrated as much for her voluptuous figure as for her voice. Newspapers reported admiringly on her voracious appetite and dining exploits with millionaire “Diamond Jim” Brady. According to one biographer:

Together, they achieved great gourmand triumphs in Chicago restaurants, high-lighted by contests to determine who, at one sitting, could eat the most corn-on-the-cob, Brady's favorite food. Reporters covering these contests would bet among themselves about how many ears of corn might be consumed by the contestants. Brady would always win (legend had it that he possessed an enlarged stomach), but Lillian proved fiercely competitive.¹⁰³

But as the new ideal of thinness emerged, critics began to question Russell's reputation for being “America's Beauty.”

By 1894 the worm had turned. A review of a comic opera starring Russell describes her beauty as “the doughy sort that ravishes the fancy of the half-baked worshippers of pink-and-white pudginess.”¹⁰⁴ According to feminist historian Lois Banner, Russel began to diet after reviews began comparing her to a white elephant and “for the next decade or so her diet regimen was as much publicized by the press as any other detail of her life.”¹⁰⁵ Russell wrote an occasional advice column for *The Chicago*

¹⁰¹ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985: 108).

¹⁰² A Professional Beauty, *Beauty and How to Keep It* (London: Brentano's, 1889: 47) qtd. Steele, 1985: 108).

¹⁰³ Armond Fields, *A Biography of America's Beauty* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc.: 1999: 85.

¹⁰⁴ Fields, 1999: 98.

¹⁰⁵ Lois Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983: 151).

Tribune, which began to focus on the slimming virtues of bicycling and the dangers of “intemperance in eating” which was “almost as fatal to beauty as intemperance in drinking.”¹⁰⁶ Banner also notes that actresses once described as ugly because they were too thin, like Sarah Bernhardt and Lillie Langtry, became beautiful seemingly “overnight” around 1900.¹⁰⁷

The Rise: The Slender Ideal and the Body as a Machine

Like the simultaneous rise of gourmet, thinness was initially a preoccupation of the bourgeois, but it quickly spread to the urban and suburban middle classes thanks to the emerging national magazine market. The transition was marked by a period of ambivalence. Schwartz notes that during Grover Cleveland's 1882 gubernatorial run, his supporters proudly advertised their candidate's large frame and inclination to corpulence while his opponents portrayed his 250 pounds as a sign of weakness. However, admiration of corpulence was on the way out. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Gibson Girls drawn by illustrator Charles Dana Gibson set the first national standard for feminine beauty specifically described as slender and active.¹⁰⁸ The Gibson Girl gave way to the even thinner “flapper” exemplified by Mary Pickford and Clara Bow, who were frequently described as “small and boyish.”¹⁰⁹

Many diets and medicines that had previously been touted as cures for dyspepsia or neurasthenia were recuperated as “slimming” regimens. Additionally, four new techniques specifically designed to promote weight loss emerged: fasting, slow-chewing, calorie-counting, and thyroid medication.¹¹⁰ Unlike the ascetic diets and water cures of

¹⁰⁶ Lillian Russell, “Lillian Russell's Beauty Secrets: Do You Eat Properly?” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 07 August 1911 p. 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers Chicago Tribune (1849 – 1987), Document ID: 386906921 (retrieved 15 June 2010).

¹⁰⁷ Banner, 1983: 151.

¹⁰⁸ Angelika Köhler, “Charged With Ambiguity: The Image of the New Woman in American Cartoons,” *New Woman Hybridities*, ed. Ann Heilmann and Margaret Bettham: 158-78.

¹⁰⁹ Angela J. Latham, *Posing a Threat: Flappers, Chorus Girls, and Other Brazen Performers of the American 1920s* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000:10).

¹¹⁰ Schwartz, 1986: 113. Slow-chewing was often called “Fletcherism,” after one of its primary advocates.

the past that sought to purify the body, the first weight-loss diets were based on the idea that the body could be regulated and balanced based on the new science of metabolism. Before the late nineteenth century, food was measured by weight. The nutritional calorie (or Kcal), which offered a measure both of food energy and human metabolism, was introduced to the American public by W. O. Atwater in a series of articles in *Century* magazine in 1887. It quickly became the dominant measure used in dietetic science.¹¹¹ Schwartz claims that the appeal of the calorie was that it “promised precision and essence in the same breath. It should have been as easy to put the body in order as it was to put the books in order for a factory.”¹¹² Calorie deficits were created using fasting, calorie-counting, slow-chewing (to prevent overeating), and thyroid medication to speed up the metabolism. All were embraced as new, “scientific” methods that could make *any* body thinner by shifting the balance between calories in and calories out.

In “The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States,” Laura Fraser also identifies 1880-1920 as the period in American history when the popular perception of fat shifted from a sign of health and beauty to a sign of disease and moral weakness. Fraser highlights the shift in the columns Woods Hutchinson, a medical professor, wrote for popular magazines. In 1894, he responded to the nascent demonization of fat in *Cosmopolitan* by attempting to reassure readers that fat is both medically benign and attractive. He describes fat as “a most harmless, healthful, innocent tissue” and claims

There were earlier “mastication” diets aimed at alleviating indigestion, but Fletcher’s “industrious chewing” was focused on the *time* involved in chewing, not the mechanical process of breaking down food. According to Schwartz, it caught on because it “made the eating of less food into the formidable pretense of eating more” (1986: 126). Although that may seem strange now, some contemporary dieters echo Fletcher’s method. For example, in a 2008 article in her magazine, Oprah says, “in order not to abuse food, I have to stay fully conscious and aware, of every bite, of taking time and chewing slowly.” Oprah Winfrey, “How Did I Let This Happen Again?” *Oprah.com*, 10 December 2008, Web (accessed 26 March 2011).

¹¹¹ James Hargrove, “History of the Calorie in Nutrition,” *The Journal of Nutrition* 136 (December 2006): 2957-2961 Web (accessed 17 June 2010). Contrary to popular wisdom, which suggests that the calorie was already used as a measure of heat in the metric system and adapted to help measure human energy needs and food energy values, James Hargrove also argues that, “The thermal calorie was not fully defined until the 20th century, by which time the nutritional Calorie was embedded in U.S. popular culture and nutritional policy” (2958).

¹¹² Schwartz, 1986: 135.

that “if a poll of beautiful women were taken in any city, there would be at least three times as many plump ones as slender ones.”¹¹³ He also warns against starving or exercise as means of weight control, practices which Fraser claims were “just becoming popular.”¹¹⁴

Hutchinson was fighting a losing battle. Thirty-two years later, a *Saturday Evening Post* article sounds resigned to a pursuit of thinness that was by then hegemonic:

In this present onslaught upon one of the most peaceable, useful and law-abiding of all our tissues, fashion has apparently the backing of grave physicians, of food reformers and physical trainers, and even of great insurance companies, all chanting in unison the new commandment of fashion: 'Thou shalt be thin!'¹¹⁵

Hutchinson says the fashion *preceded* the medical rationale, which was only later supplied by “grave physicians” and “great insurance companies” with whom he clearly did not agree. Similarly, a physician quoted by Schwartz wrote in 1927: “Concerning obesity, the amount of scientific information which we have regarding it is in marked contrast to the large amount of public opinion on this subject.”¹¹⁶ Fatness did not come to be seen as unattractive because it was discovered to be unhealthy; instead, the idea that fatness was unhealthy gained popular credence only after fatness had been constructed as unattractive.

The shift to a thinner ideal represented a dramatic change in what was considered beautiful, with implications for clothing fashion too. In addition to dieting for weight loss, women began to wear “flat” brassieres or bind their breasts. The “new woman” promoted in mass media was exemplified by the heroine of Aldous Huxley's novel *Antic Hay*, who he described as “flexible and tubular, like a section of a boa

¹¹³ Laura Fraser “The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Esther Rothblum, Sondra Solovay, and Marilyn Wann (New York University Press 2009: 11).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Schwartz, 1986: 204.

constrictor. . . dressed in clothes that emphasized her serpentine slimness.”¹¹⁷ Steele argues that womens' bodies probably changed very little, but how they attempted to shape them changed dramatically.¹¹⁸

Many historians attribute the ideal of thinness to the fact that as food got cheaper and more abundant, fatness ceased to be a sign of prestige. Quoting anthropologist Margaret Mackenzie, Fraser says, “the status symbols flipped: it became chic to be thin and all too ordinary to be over-weight.”¹¹⁹ However, the shift was too rapid to attribute to agricultural productivity or a decline in the price of food. America may have been portrayed as a “land of plenty” by European settlers since the sixteenth century, but just like those settlers eking out an existence, the working classes whose labor fueled the industrial revolution struggled to afford sufficient or reliable sustenance. Additionally, records from military conscription, college physical exams, and weights measured on public scales at state fairs show that there was little change in the average height-to-weight ratio from the early nineteenth century to the twentieth century. According to Schwartz:

The intolerance of overweight was growing faster than bodies themselves. American college students, for example, had grown 1 inch and 3 lbs in fifty years, according to R. Tait McKenzie in the *American Physical Education Review* in 1913.... Young women during the same general period grew from 5 feet 2 inches and 115 lbs (1875) to 5 feet 3 inches and 114 lbs (1893) to 5 feet 4 inches and 121 lbs (1933).¹²⁰

By World War II, white soldiers in their twenties were on average one inch taller and half a pound heavier than the average white soldier in his twenties in the Civil War. Based on records of scales at public fairs from 1859 to 1933, the average height increased by about two inches and average weight increased by about ten pounds over those seventy years.¹²¹

The attitude towards fatness did not reflect any real change in Americans' bodies.

¹¹⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Antic Hay* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997[1923]: 82), qtd. in Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (Yale University Press, 2003: 154)

¹¹⁸ Steele. 1985: 240.

¹¹⁹ Mackenzie 1996, qtd. in Fraser, 2009: 12.

¹²⁰ Schwartz, 1986: 168.

¹²¹ Ibid, 170.

Instead of bodies getting bigger, Schwartz suggests the new prioritization of thinness resulted from “a shift in economic models from scarcity to abundance.”¹²² He connects the new fretting about “overnutrition” to Veblen's critique of conspicuous consumption in the leisure class and the idea that fatness represented an outmoded hoarding. Instead, to be modern was to be unburdened and exuberant. Purging flesh was a way to purge the anxiety about excess.¹²³ T. J. Jackson Lears echoes this argument in *Fables of Abundance*, where he argues slimness was part of a broader “perfectionist project.” He connects a wave of advertisements for intestinal cleansing, soap, and deodorants in the early twentieth century to a mechanistic view of the body and growing disgust for anything that would make it less efficient. He says, “The most immediate and obvious impact of this mechanistic style of thought was a slimming down of body types. Fat became unfashionable. . . . Fat was not a bank account but a burden. What was to be stored was not embodied in flesh but was a more evanescent quality: sheer energy, the capacity for intense, sustained activity.”¹²⁴

The “fear of abundance” theory relies on the premise that thinness was a constant through the twentieth century. However, thinness became less prevalent in the mid-twentieth century. In *Fat Politics*, J. Eric Oliver claims the “idealization of thinness was largely suspended during the privations of the Great Depression and World War II.”¹²⁵ The idealization of a more voluptuous female body continued through the recovery spurred by World War II and remained prevalent during some of the most productive and abundant decades in American economic history, even as declining income inequality and increasing income mobility enabled more people to partake in that abundance. Slimming practices never wholly disappeared, but they did become marginal

¹²² Ibid, 86.

¹²³ Also echoed by Joseph Roach's argument about performances of waste deflecting the “anxieties produce by having too much of everything—including material goods and human beings” in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996: 123).

¹²⁴ Lears, 1994: 167-8.

¹²⁵ Oliver, 2005: 70.

enough that their *re*-emergence as dominant trends in the 1980s was widely seen as notable and new.

The Fall: Buxom Beauties and Biology as Destiny

Francis G. Benedict, the director of Carnegie Institute's Nutrition Laboratory, wrote in 1931 that the popular interest in weight reduction had finally “receded a bit,” although the Institute's lectures on the topic still attracted “an eager, agitated, expectant band of zealots.”¹²⁶ Some Americans, mostly women, continued trying to losing weight throughout the twentieth century. However, beginning in the 1930s, Americans also began to embrace a new theory that there were fundamentally different body shapes (or “somatotypes”) that determined how much a given individual was likely to weigh.¹²⁷ This new attitude corresponded with a shift in beauty norms. Thin was still “in,” albeit a more curvaceous thinness than the tube-like flapper, but the voluptuous woman returned in “bosom mania.” The hourglass figure epitomized by actresses like Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren, and Elizabeth Taylor was the dominant symbol of sex appeal.

Somatotype theory was developed by William Sheldon, a psychologist and leading expert in the science of anthropometry, the science of measuring human bodies.¹²⁸ The categories he identified—the thin “ectomorph,” the fat “endomorph,” and

¹²⁶ Schwartz, 1986: 183.

¹²⁷ Schwartz acknowledges the rise of somatotype theory, claiming it reflects a complex set of anxieties about abundance: “The aggressive, gluttoned consumer took on the exogenous form of obesity, while the fearful, inundated consumer took on the endogenous form. The two types represented the double-edged threat of economic abundance: the exogenous fat man was the figure of overproduction, gluttony lured on by and economy run wild; the endogenous fat woman was the figure of underconsumption, domestic inefficiency in the midst of a flood tide of goods. In each case, abundance led to fatness but not to satisfaction.” *Ibid*, 136.

¹²⁸ This included craniometry, phrenology, physiognomy, and comparative anatomy, which Barbara Stafford argues reflected the shift from a text-based to a visually-dependent culture and growing embrace of empiricism in the Enlightenment. Anthropometry sought to identify and quantify objective external measurements that would enable them to “read” the inner nature of the person from the outside. Sheldon's somatotype theory emerged out of his doctoral research and was first published in a 1936 book titled *Psychology and the Promethean Will*. It was further popularized by both non-fiction and fiction by Sheldon and others, including his friend Aldous Huxley, that appeared in publications like *Harper's Weekly*, *Time*, *Life*, *Esquire*, and *Popular Science* in the 1930s and 1940s. Patricia Vertinsky, “Physique as Destiny: William H. Sheldon, Barbara Honeyman Heath and the Struggle for Hegemony in the Science of Somatotyping,” *Canadian Bulletin of Medical History Volume 24:2* (2007): 296.

the muscular “mesomorph”—were supposed to predict personality types and behaviors, like criminality, and were part of a broader project of identifying correlations between physical traits and more ephemeral ones.¹²⁹ However, the aspect that people embraced was the idea that people are essentially stuck with the bodies they're born with.

According to Patricia Vertinsky, a professor of Human Kinetics, “In his [Sheldon's] view, the type of body one was born with (and its corresponding levels of beauty and symmetry) could not be much changed as the physical educators believed with good training and exercise. To him physique was indeed, destiny.”¹³⁰ Although similarities between Sheldon's somatotypes and eugenics attracted some criticism after World War II, the idea of the body as destiny remained widely popular. In 1951, *Life* claimed that Sheldon's influence rivaled Freud's or Hippocrates':

On the basis of his work up to now, many workers in the psychiatric field and in the allied sciences of sociology and anthropology are convinced that Dr. Sheldon has done what Hippocrates tried to do 2500 years ago: he has shown that character and physique are closely related, and that the first, like the second is to a considerable extent a product of heredity.¹³¹

Somatotype theory held that that some people were naturally slender and others naturally plump and there were limits to how much diet and exercise could change that. This was in diametric opposition to the earlier paradigm of the body as a machine that would reliably process calories like factory inputs. Notably, in recent years, somatotype

¹²⁹ Taxonomies of body types thought to correspond to personality, disposition to disease, criminality, moral character, complexion, and all manner of other variable traits were nothing new. Ancient Greeks and Romans developed a set of types based on the theory of the four humors, often attributed originally to Theophrastus: plump, ruddy, cheerful, hot, moist people were thought to have too much blood (*sanguine*); thin, angry, hot, dry people were thought to have too much yellow bile (*choleric*); fat, pale, stupid, cold, moist people were thought to have too much phlegm (*phlegmatic*); and thin, sad, cold, dry people were thought to have too much black bile (*melancholic*). By the nineteenth century, the idea that the differences were due to imbalances in bodily fluids had largely been discarded, but the four body types persisted, recast slightly as sanguine, bilious, lymphatic, and nervous. Unlike those systems that confined bodies one of the four types, Sheldon proposed a three-dimensional system—within each component (fatness and sphericity, muscularity, and linearity), there was a ranking system from 1 (little) to 7 (a lot) that would sum between 9 and 12, for example a very fat person with little muscle or height would be a 7-1-1, the most extreme endomorph. The precise midpoint of the scale would be a 3-3-3 or 4-4-4. Vertinsky, 2002: 110.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 300.

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 308.

theory has been used to customize weight loss and body-building plans, so the mid-century interpretation that it explained intractable bodily difference was not a natural or inevitable result of Sheldon's theory.

Although a wider range of body types were represented as beautiful in the 1930s, the dominant ideal featured enhanced breasts and hips. The increasing importance of breasts and growing preference for large breasts was noted by scholars of sex in every decade from the 1930s through the 1970s.¹³² The return of the “voluptuous” ideal was also reflected in the measurements of Miss America contestants, whose average bust measurement grew continually from 1940 until 1965 when it achieved parity with average hip measurement (35”) and in fashion trends like the rise of the girdle and “falsies.”¹³³ The shift is clearly visible in the paintings and illustrations of Alberto Vargas, one of the most famous pin-up artists of the twentieth century. In 1919, Vargas was hired by Florenz Ziegfeld to paint portraits of the chorus girls whose reputation for beauty was the primary attraction of his Broadway revues. Vargas' Ziegfeld era work showcase quintessential flapper beauty: slender and youthful-looking girls. In the 1930s, Vargas began painting movie posters and star portraits for major motion picture studios. The poster for *The Sin of Nora Moran* offers a telling contrast to “Smoke Dreams” (Figure 2.3 center). Like the Ziegfeld girl, the woman in the movie poster is hunched over and her breasts are only half-covered with a diaphanous material. However, her breasts and thighs are much larger and her body forms a smooth arc, unlike the awkward, girlish angles of the earlier image. Notably, the movie poster was not based on the actress who played the role of Nora Moran, the dark-haired Zita Johann. In 1940, Vargas was hired by *Esquire* magazine and began producing the artwork he is best remembered for—curvy pin-up girls with prominently displayed breasts, whether nude or clothed, like the

¹³² A. Mazur, “US Trends in Feminine Beauty and Overadaptation,” *Journal of Sex Research* 22 (1986): 281-303 and references therein (Laver 1937, Kinsey Pomeroy & Martin 1948, Winch 1952, Morrison 1965, and Jesser 1971).

¹³³ *Ibid*, 291.

“Apple Girl” (Figure 2.4 right). [Figures 2.3 and 2.4]



Figure 2.3/Vargas Pin-ups from the 1920s¹³⁴

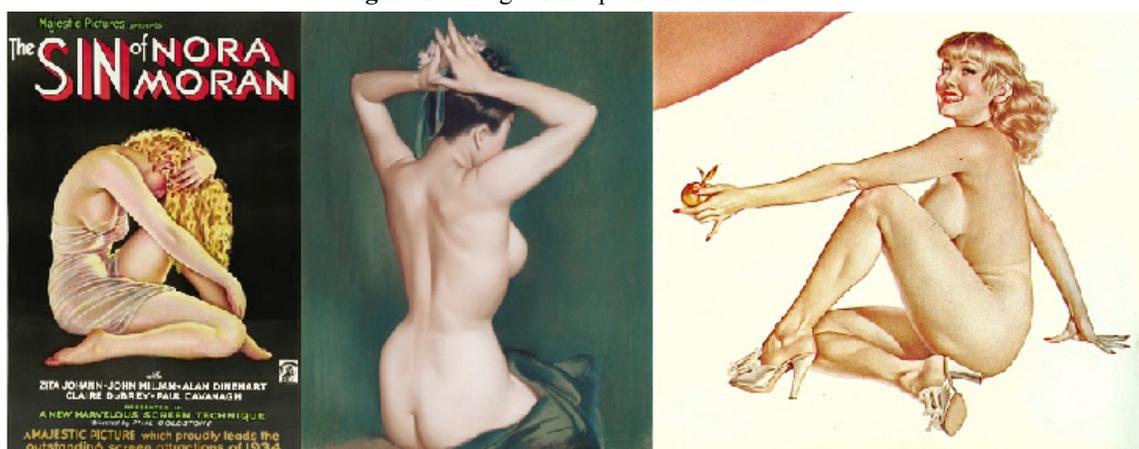


Figure 2.4/Vargas Pin-ups from the 1930s-1950s¹³⁵

A version of the “slender” ideal lived on through the mid-century, represented by actresses like Grace Kelly and Audrey Hepburn who “symbolized a subdued and classy sensuality, often associated with the aristocrat and high fashion.”¹³⁶ The association between slender model and high fashion was cemented in the 1960s by the emergence of Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy, whose fame was inextricable from their extreme thinness.

Lois Banner attributes the association between thinness and fashion modeling to “the

¹³⁴ “Queen of Hearts” (1922), “Smoke Dreams” (1927), and “Behind the Scenes” (1922) originally published in *Shadowlands*, reproduced from, “Pin Up Art: Vargas Early Works,” *Multiply*, Submitted by “obb1esso,” Web (accessed 21 June 2010).

¹³⁵ “The Sin of Nora Moran” (1934), “The Green Room” (1938), and “The Apple Girl” (1955), reproduced from “Pin Up Art: Vargas Early Works,” *Multiply*, Submitted by “obb1esso,” Web (accessed 21 June 2010).

¹³⁶ Mazur, 1986: 299.

professionalization of fashion photography in the early century,” when it became “canonical that clothes are best displayed on lean bodies, which do not compete for viewer attention with the model's attire.”¹³⁷ Banner also claims that as the modeling industry became more competitive, thinness became a way to winnow the legions of aspiring models and claims, “Americans have always responded to challenges that require hard work and self-control; dieting for women is comparable to sports expertise or professional success for men.”¹³⁸

According to a national survey conducted in 1950, only 7 percent of men and 14 percent of women were on a diet.¹³⁹ Joan Jacobs Brumberg argues that “breasts, not weight, were the primary point of comparison among high school girls in the 1950s.” A common refrain in adolescent girls' diaries was, “I must, I must, I must increase my bust!”¹⁴⁰ Despite that, Brumberg characterizes the twentieth century as the *century of svelte*.¹⁴¹ Brumberg's primary argument is that as doctors and marketers took over the educational functions previously handled by mothers, “scientific medicine, movies, and advertising created a new, more exacting ideal of physical perfection.”¹⁴² However, as somatotype theory and Vargas' pin-ups suggest, neither science nor mass media have provided consistent messages about what “perfection” looks like or how to achieve it. Nor were mothers and other familial figures incapable of creating exacting ideals, as her own work in *Fasting Girls* demonstrates. Perhaps the best evidence that the twentieth century was not just one long *century of svelte* is the broad consensus that the diet

¹³⁷ This explanation seems insufficient, as it would have made just as much sense for a canonical view to develop that clothes are best displayed on bodies the typical shopper would identify with or be most appealing on bodies with the idealized hourglass figure. I suspect it has something to do with a latent or nascent belief in the relationship between self-denial and thinness, which made thinness “aspirational” even when it was not as hegemonic a beauty ideal.

¹³⁸ She offers no evidence for this claim, for reasons that may be obvious. Banner, 1983: 121-2.

¹³⁹ Schwartz, 1986: 246.

¹⁴⁰ Brumberg, 1997:116.

¹⁴¹ Similarly, in *Fasting Girls*, her history of anorexia nervosa, she notes that the disease was first identified in the late nineteenth century and became an issue of popular concern again in the 1980s, but makes no attempt to explain the long gap in between. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*, 1988 (New York: Vintage Books, 2000:134).

¹⁴² Brumberg, 1997: xxv.

culture that emerged in the 1980s was a significant departure from the past.

The Return: The Fitness Craze and “Obesity Epidemic”

Scholars agree that weight-loss dieting became a national phenomenon in the 1980s. Schwartz claims the 1980s saw thinness become “a national way of life.”¹⁴³ News media began to report breathlessly on the latest diet fads and the “man-made epidemic” of fatness. Food manufacturers responded to the changes with a stunning array of new products marketed as diet and low-cal (starting in the 1980s), low-fat (starting in the 1990s), and low-carb (starting around 2003). People who wanted to lose weight were also increasingly participating in the “fitness craze.” A 1981 *Time* magazine cover story reported that “on any given day in the Republic this year, a record 70 million Americans—almost half the adult population—will practice some form of corporeal self-betterment” while “in 1960 only 24% worked out.”¹⁴⁴

The unanticipated success of Diet Coke, which debuted July 4, 1982 was a watershed event. Diet Coke was the first new brand since 1886 to be baptized with Coca-Cola's trademark wave, which worried some invested parties. A Pennsylvania bottler quoted in *The Wall Street Journal* said, “If they adulterate the name of Coke, they have lost their minds.”¹⁴⁵ At the time, Philip Morris's Pepsi products, especially the new 7-Up, were seen as potential threats to Coca-Cola's dominance in the soft drink market. Op-ed columns in the trade press debated whether it was a good time to do anything that might dilute the brand, which was seen as their one indisputable advantage. Diet sodas had already been on the market for a decade. Diet Rite and Tab—advertised with the tagline “Tab cola, for beautiful people”—had attracted a loyal following in what was seen as a relatively small niche market of dieters. Diet Coke proved naysayers wrong. Within six

¹⁴³ Schwartz, 1986: 238.

¹⁴⁴ J.D. Reed, “America Shapes Up,” *Time magazine*, 02 November 1981, Web (accessed 08 April 2011).

¹⁴⁵ Janet Guyon and Jody Long, “Coke to Put Much-Cherished Trademark on Diet Cola, in a \$100 Million Campaign,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 09 July 1982: 5.

months of its release, it had surpassed Tab to become the third best-selling soft drink in New York. Coca-Cola C.E.O. Roberto C. Goizueta said it had not only surpassed every sales target they had set, but “may well be the most successful new product in the history of the soft drink industry.”¹⁴⁶ The Diet Coke debut provides a useful reminder that food marketers are not always right about what products will succeed and how well. Coca-Cola managed to tap into the growing desire for diet products, but even they did not realize how well the strategy would work.

Diet products owed their success to the growing population of people who thought that they were overweight and felt an obligation to do something about it. In 1950, only 21 percent of men and 44 percent of women believed themselves to be overweight; by 1980, 70 percent of college-age women thought that they were overweight, despite the fact that only 39 percent fit the criteria set by life insurance companies. The diet craze was not prompted by a dramatic increase in average weight.¹⁴⁷ Even people defined as “normal” by the medical and insurance industries were increasingly likely to see themselves as “fat” and believe that dieting was the appropriate solution.

The new weight-loss culture was at least in part social; the 1981 *Time* cover story noted that corporate health plans could be routes to faster promotion and the boom in tennis shoes was as much a product of fashion as a necessity for doing aerobics.¹⁴⁸ However, more Americans were also taking steps in private to lose weight with the assistance of new technologies like the VCR. In 1981, a small firm named Karl Video released a workout tape starring Jane Fonda. VCRs were not yet ubiquitous and videotape distribution had until then been dominated by the rental industry, but Fonda's

¹⁴⁶ Eric Morgenthaler, “Diet Coke is a Big Success in Early Going, Spurring a Gush of Optimism at Coca-Cola,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 22 December 1982, p. 17.

¹⁴⁷ The small average increases in Americans' weight during this time period were not actually recognized by the medical and nutritional establishments until 1994, at which point they came as a surprise, and most of the increases associated with the “obesity epidemic” occurred after 1980, not before. See Gard and Wright 2005:81.

¹⁴⁸ Reed, 1981.

workout sold an unprecedented 250,000 copies in its first year. It even prompted many people to purchase their first VCRs.¹⁴⁹ Jane Fonda's *Workout* was still the best-selling videotape on the market two years later, beating out box office hits like *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* and *An Officer and a Gentleman*.¹⁵⁰

New diet trends were often attributed to a growing awareness of the supposed medical dangers of fatness.¹⁵¹ However, the idea that fatness was medically dangerous was far from new. The original MetLife Tables that posited an inverse relationship between weight and health were developed by Louis Dublin in the 1940s. According to Glenn Gaesser, Dublin concluded that weight was correlated with mortality because he attributed the low mortality rates of people in their twenties to their lower average weight.¹⁵² The tables never corresponded with actual rates of disease or mortality. MetLife released its last version of the recommended weight tables in 1983 with a new disclaimer that the weights recommended by the tables “are not weights that minimize illness or the incidence of disease. These weights are not used for underwriting or in the computation of premiums.”¹⁵³

The “obesity epidemic” *followed*, rather than *preceded*, the increase in weight-loss dieting. In the early 1990s, a group of researchers at the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) led by Robert J. Kuczmarski, set out to determine whether or not the fitness craze of the 1980s had translated into anything measurable. They used the data gathered in the four National Health and Nutrition Examination surveys (NHANES) between 1960 and

¹⁴⁹ Betsy Sharkey, “Video Visionary Stuart Karl Sees 1st-Run Programming,” *AdWeek*, 08 July 1985.

¹⁵⁰ Judy Klemesrud, “Self-Help Videotapes, From Cooking to Car Repair,” *The New York Times*, 03 August 1983 (Late Edition) p. C.1 National Newspaper Abstracts (3) (Document ID: 949766531 (retrieved 08 April 2011).

¹⁵¹ Reed, 1981.

¹⁵² Gaesser, 2002: 106.

¹⁵³ Campos, 2004: 9. The 1983 MetLife tables cite the 1979 “Build Study” as the basis for the revised table; however, the recommended weight ranges in the tables do not correspond with the mortality rates observed. For example, the MetLife tables indicate that the recommended weight for a 55 year old woman who is 5’4” tall and has a “small frame” is between 114-138 lbs; according to the Build Study, the weight range at which women of that age, height and build have the lowest mortality is between 185-194 lbs, which would make her medically “obese.” Similar discrepancies occur across genders, age groups, and build types in the MetLife tables. Gaesser, 2002: 107.

1991, each of which involved a nationally representative cross-sectional survey of 6,000 to 13,000 adults, along with an in-person interview and medical exam. The CDC researchers hoped and expected to find that Americans were getting thinner. Instead they found that the percent of overweight people had increased in every racial, gender, and age group. Furthermore, the increases had occurred over all three decades; the weight gain wasn't just a residual effect of the “bad old days” before weight-loss dieting became popular. In the period between NHANES II (1976 and 1980), and NHANES III, (1988 and 1991), the prevalence of overweight increased from 25 percent of adults to 33 percent.¹⁵⁴ Albert Stunkard professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and founder of the Center for Weight and Eating Disorders spoke for the medical community and for the public at large when he told *Time magazine*: “All of us were stunned.... It runs counter to what we as a nation seem to be doing.”¹⁵⁵ The renewed popularity of dieting preceded the declaration of a “war on fat” by over a decade.

The continued popularity of weight-loss dieting is not a result of public health authorities urging Americans to lose weight to live longer, healthier lives. While doing research for *The Obesity Myth*, Paul Campos conducted a survey of 273 people who self-identified as currently trying to lose weight (94 percent female, 88 percent white, with an average age of 34). One of the questions was, “If you could take a pill that would guarantee you would achieve, and/or continue to maintain, whatever weight you consider most desirable, would you take such a pill if it lowered your life expectancy? If the answer is 'yes,' how much life expectancy would you be willing to forgo?” 78 percent of the respondents said yes, and the mean number of years they were willing to forgo was 5.7 (with a range of 1-15 years).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ RJ Kuczmarski, *et al*, “Increasing Prevalence of Overweight Among US Adults: The National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys, 1960 to 1991,” *JAMA* 272: 3 (1994): 205-211.

¹⁵⁵ Phillip Elmer-DeWitt, “Fat Times,” *Time magazine*, 16 January 1995: 59.

¹⁵⁶ Campos, 2004: 142. Sampling and survey method unknown. A recent study in Britain involving a random sample of college-aged women found that approximately one-third would trade at least a year of life “to have a perfect body,” with ten percent willing to trade between two to five years, two percent willing to give up ten years, and one percent willing to give up 21+ years. Stephanie Pappas, “Many

There are many competing theories about why dieting and thinness became so popular in the 1980s. Schwartz claims the diet industry of the 1980s was built on fears dating to the Depression and Cold War about a world that seemed to offer so much, but guarantee so little. That doesn't explain the dramatic shift between the 1950s to the 1980s. Campos claims fatness and fat people have been stigmatized to make up for the disappearance of other socially acceptable pariah groups in the wake of the social justice movements of the 1960s. According to Campos, correlations between higher body weights and lower class status have caused people to transfer residual disgust about poor and non-white people onto fat bodies and/or substituted fat people as the primary out-group that the dominant culture uses to ratify its superiority.¹⁵⁷ However, fatness has not replaced other “pariah” groups (as documented by scholars who analyze the continuing racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other forms of bias in American culture). Rather than *replacing* other stigmas, the widespread fat phobia that has developed since the 1980s interacts in complicated ways with other forms of bias.¹⁵⁸

Neither of those theories accounts for the earlier flowering of slimming diets. I suspect that in both periods, the ideal of thinness and popularity of weight-loss dieting answered cultural needs produced by middle class income stagnation. The middle class embraced ideologies that equated desirable characteristics like health and beauty with self-denial and hard work, actively creating meritocracy of thinness. That meritocracy offered the stagnating middle class a compensatory arena of aspiration. The meritocracy of thinness *drives*, rather than *results from* the popular belief that America is in the midst of a national “obesity epidemic.” This meritocracy became dominant at the same time as the ideals of gourmet, natural, and cosmopolitan dining because they all functioned as compensatory forms of mobility for the stagnating middle classes.

Women Would Trade a Year of Life to Be Thin,” *MSNBC*, 05 April 2011, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

¹⁵⁷ Campos, 2004: 67-8.

¹⁵⁸ See Rothblum *et al*, 2009.

III: Natural Food and the Ideal of Purity

Origins, Essence, and Purity

The popular interest in “natural food” encompasses a wider range of concerns than gourmet food or weight-loss dieting. The interest in gourmet food is primarily a concern with *good taste*, or the idea that some foods are more delicious. Weight-loss dieting and the ideal of thinness are justified by concerns about beauty and nutrition, or *good looks* and *good health*. The field of “natural food,” on the other hand, appeals to all three of those—taste, beauty, and health—as well as concerns about how food relates to the environment, animal welfare, labor conditions, and a more holistic view of health. The beliefs and desires gathered under the banner of “natural food” are not always compatible: many vegans do not find grass-fed beef to be an acceptably ethical alternative to the industrial corn-fattened variety and even Fair Trade-certified coffee from Peru is problematic for people attempting to eat local.

The ambiguity of the word “natural” itself reflects some of the challenges involved in characterizing a discourse that includes so many different concerns. “Natural” is often used to mean “as found in nature.” Since the development of *agriculture* and settled populations, very little of the food most people have eaten has been truly “natural” in that way; however, the same notion is at work in the distinction between conventional and organic food. The latter designates foods grown without man-made fertilizers, pesticides, and chemicals. Everything used in the production of the food can be found in nature rather than produced in a laboratory. “Natural” is also used to mean “in keeping with *its* nature,” in the sense of an essence or origin. When applied to food, that identifies something that hasn't been adulterated or refined—i.e. nothing added, nothing taken away. So even hand-ground and sifted flour would be “unnatural” by that criteria because it would be missing the chaff that is essential to the wholeness of the grain.

If the latter seems marginal in an era when organic is the more important term, the popular response to a recent marketing campaign suggests the second definition is still salient. When the Corn Refiners Association launched their “Sweet Surprise” campaign in August 2008 to reclaim high fructose corn syrup (HFCS) as “natural,” the reaction was overwhelmingly negative. The campaign directly followed the FDA's decision that (HFCS) could be called “natural” because the synthetic enzymes used in its production don't end up in the final product. The FDA ruled that HFCS is natural in the first sense: everything in HFCS is found in nature. In one of the “Sweet Surprise” print ads, two women are shown mid-conversation. The first says, “My hairdresser says sugar is natural and high fructose corn syrup isn't.” The second responds, “Wow! You get your hair done by a registered dietician?” Underneath, the ad copy reads, “Wonder what the facts are about high fructose corn syrup? Well, you're in for a sweet surprise. That's because it is natural, with no artificial ingredients—it's simply a kind of corn sugar.”¹⁵⁹

Some consumers disagreed with the FDA's ruling and the claims made by the “Sweet Surprise” campaign on the grounds that even if everything *in* HFCS is natural, it's what's *missing* that matters. Shortly after the campaign began, Gena Haskett wrote an article criticizing the ads on the women's blogging community *BlogHer*. Haskett quotes the CRA website's explanation of how HFCS is produced:

High fructose corn sweeteners begin with enzymes which isomerize dextrose to produce a 42 percent fructose syrup. By passing 42-HFCS through a column which retains fructose, refiners draw off 90 percent HFCS and blend it with 42-HFCS to make a third syrup, 55-HFCS. Further processing produces crystalline fructose.¹⁶⁰

Then she adds sarcastically, “Yeah, that sounds like it was plucked off the tree.” The idea that something “natural” must be not only found in nature, but found *in the same form*—unrefined and unadulterated—was echoed across the food and nutrition blogosphere.

The author of the blog *Fresno Famous* says, “HFCS is nothing like sugar. It's a synthetic

¹⁵⁹ Corn Refiners Association, “Hairdresser,” *Sweet Surprise*, 2009, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

¹⁶⁰ Gena Haskett, “High Fructose Corn Syrup and Evaluating Information,” *BlogHer* 10 September 2008, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

chemical so it isn't 'natural' in the sense that grows in the ground.”¹⁶¹ In response to a post about the “Sweet Surprise” campaign on *FitSugar*¹⁶² from “Francoisehard” says, “the process which it takes is why it's not natural and it's a processed ingredient for processed food.”¹⁶³

While many of the concerns surrounding natural food are relatively recent developments, there is also long history of anxiety about adulteration, refining, and the consequences of industrially-produced food in the U.S. Particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an interest in natural diets and concerns about “pure” food, drink, and drugs attracted nationwide attention. Histories of “natural” food movements characterize the concern with nature and purity as a relatively recent phenomenon only when they fail to recognize the earlier movements as their historical antecedents.

There are striking parallels between the crusades for pure food and the natural diets that flourished between 1880 and 1929 and the natural food revolution launched by the 1960s counterculture that became mainstream in the 1980s. Both movements positioned themselves in opposition to industrialization and gained popular support due to widespread anxieties about shifts in American eating habits. For both, the fear was that the food supply was compromised by the growth of massive companies with largely unregulated control of national food production. Demographically, both were led primarily by white, urban, middle-class women with progressive political leanings; but both attempted to build coalitions across traditional racial and class divides. In terms of practice, both of them manifest in 1) dietary prescriptions 2) investigative journalism aimed at uncovering unfair and disgusting conditions in the food industry, and 3) grassroots activism aimed at improving the food supply. Ideologically, both movements

¹⁶¹ “High-fructose corn syrup: Sweet surprise, you're fatter now!” *Fresno Famous*, 20 April 2010, Web (accessed 30 August 2010).

¹⁶² The health blog run by Sugar, Inc., a network of sites targeting “Generation Y” women.

¹⁶³ FitSugar, “Speak Up: Are You Surprised by the Sweet Surprise Ads?” *FitSugar*, 08 September 2008, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

rely on discourses about nutrition and the past that have more to do with their own fears and desires than scientific or historical evidence.

The movements are also unified by their common interest in purity. “Purity” in food overlaps with the use of the term “natural” to mean something unadulterated, or free of impurities. “Purity” also evokes moral or ethical superiority, innocence, and being unmarred by sin or harm. Both turn-of-the century “Pure Food” crusaders, and late twentieth-century vegetarians and locavores frame their food choices in terms of righteousness. Many also pursue it with a quasi-religious zeal. Although “natural” has largely come to replace “pure” in mainstream discourse, the movement is still marked by a concern about the wholeness, healthfulness, and goodness of food. While there are differences between the ways the ideal of purity manifested in the two historical periods, treating them as entirely separate obscures the similarities between them. It also enables the Enlightenment myth that “natural” food has become more popular in recent years because it is inherently superior and the more people learn about nutrition and food production, the more likely they are to make join the cause.

The movement for less-adulterated, better-regulated food became popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century fell from popularity around the beginning of the Great Depression, and remained a niche practice generally regarded as strange at best and possibly dangerously un-American at worst until the 1980s. This trajectory challenges the idea that Americans became concerned about “natural” foods primarily because of actual changes in the food system. The industrialization of food production logn preceded the Pure Foods movement and continued, even intensifying, during the decades between 1930 and 1980 when pure and “natural” foods largely dropped off the mainstream radar. Again, the correspondence between the middle-class concern with this form of eating “better” and the changing patterns in income distribution is more than coincidental. As with gourmet and weight-loss dieting, the ideal of culinary purity

in American history has always been inextricable from the performance of a middle-class identity.

The Rise and Fall of Pure Foods: Righteous Crusaders, Agitated Women, and the Disenfranchised Middle

Some historians date the older campaigns for “pure” and “natural” foods to the early 1900s and suggest that popular interest in food quality and regulation was prompted by the publication of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* in 1905.¹⁶⁴ Lorine Swainston Goodwin disputes that chronology (and the implied causality): “dating the beginning of the fight for pure food and drugs after the turn of the twentieth century is clearly too late.”¹⁶⁵ Using records left by organizations active in the Pure Food movement, she documents the simultaneous emergence of grassroots campaigns in the late 1870s and early 1880s calling for more education about natural health practices, protesting the sale of adulterated food, and demanding safeguards against unsanitary practices in the food industries. She suggests other historians have erred in believing the politicians, bureaucrats, and journalists who later wrote about food and drug adulteration “as if it was their exclusive discovery.”¹⁶⁶ The real vanguards were white, urban, middle-class women.

She identifies three campaigns as representative of the national emergence of Pure Foods activism: 1) Mary Hackett Hunt's campaign against substance abuse, especially alcohol, which began with a town hall meeting in Massachusetts on Easter

¹⁶⁴ See Paul Starr *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic, 1982); Peter Temin *Taking Your Medicine: Drug Regulation in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Robert Crunden *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (New York: Basic, 1982); and Arthur and Lila Weinberg *The Muckrakers* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964).

¹⁶⁵ Lorine Swainston Goodwin, *The Pure Food, Drink, and Drug Crusaders, 1879-1914* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1999: 15).

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

Sunday in 1879, 2) Ella Kellogg's "Health and Heredity Normal Institute" founded in Battle Creek, Michigan in 1884 that sought to teach women how to avoid "diseased" foods like refined sugar, white flour, and spicy or pungent condiments, and 3) the Ladies' Health Protective Association (LHPA), started by women who lived in the exclusive Manhattan neighborhood of Beekman Place to pressure the city to make a nearby slaughterhouse and fertilizer dealer clean up its act. According to Goodwin, the muckraking journalists often credited with calling Americans' attention to food adulteration were only as effective as they were because these "organized women had laid the infrastructure...during the preceding three decades."¹⁶⁷

There were significant differences between the goals of those "representative" initiatives. While Hunt was advocating the legal prohibition of alcohol, Goodwin groups her with the same groups complaining that "first class barrooms" sold an "adulterated article" instead of real beer or whiskey and urged Congress to pass laws to give the country "pure licker"¹⁶⁸ Like her husband, Kellogg advocated a vegetarian diet, arguing that "man is not naturally a flesh-eater," whereas the LHPA was concerned with ensuring that the meat they fed their families was clean and safe. Hunt and Kellogg targeted individual consumers; the LHPA went directly to regulatory agencies and the political bodies that administered them. Goodwin doesn't specify what she thought united their efforts, or why she chose to focus on Pure Food activism instead of the anti-corset movement, settlement house movement, or cultural societies spearheaded primarily by the same organizations (and sometimes the same women). What seems to unite the conflicting movements Goodwin focuses on is a concern with *purity*—purity of the body achieved by avoiding poisonous, enslaving, unnatural, or diseased foods; purity of food signified by a lack of adulterants, additives, and stimulants; and purity of the growing industries producing food and drugs. There are three primary schools of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 71.

thought about why so many Americans, especially women, began campaigning for consumers to purify their diets, for the food industry to purify their factories, and for the government to purify the food industry at the turn of the century: 1) the bad food theory, 2) the covert feminism theory, and 3) the status anxiety theory.

The bad food theory takes the motivations cited by turn-of-the-century crusaders at face value: they were motivated by increasing rates of food adulteration, alcoholism and poor diets, and the decline of traditional safeguards like consumers being able to see for themselves how clean the butcher's shop was. This theory is most prevalent in popular accounts of American history. Most purvey a triumphant narrative of how muckrakers exposed the dangers, noble crusaders fought the corporations, and Teddy Roosevelt signed the historic legislation that corrected the worst abuses. The second theory, largely advanced by feminist historians, claims that impure or unsafe food was merely one of many kinds of social reform women seized on to advance a broader agenda of political equality. The third theory, which prevails among American historians, claims crusades for pure food, drink, and drugs were the fragmented result of middle-class status anxiety. The "Pure food" crusades have been portrayed by many historians as a prototypical example of the perversion of participatory democracy to serve far less noble projects of class distinction and the consolidation of power by bureaucrats and big business.

Despite the profound differences in how people in those three camps interpret and explain the rise of Pure Food crusades, there is widespread agreement that they were inextricable from other Progressive Era reform movements. Like those movements, Pure Food activism emerged in the 1880s and 1890s and then largely disappeared after the 1920s.

The Bad Food Theory

The “bad food” theory claims the movements appeared all went away at the same time because things were bad, but then the reformers won. It is based on the premise that the safety of available food deteriorated at exactly the same time that alcoholism and tobacco use became public problems and reformers were just stepping up to the plate to fix society's ills. The coincidence between so many different social ills appearing at once is generally attributed to other structural changes, like the growth of big cities, railroads, factories, an industrial working class composed largely of immigrants and former slaves or their descendants, and corporations as the dominant form of enterprise. However, there's little evidence that those things actually caused changes in the problems the reformers cared about. The “bad food” theory relies entirely on the reformers' own evaluations of both how bad things were at the turn of the century and how much better they were before the 1880s. Goodwin's account notes, “reliable morbidity and mortality statistics were not available. The few existing estimates lacked documentation and were probably exaggerated or biased.”¹⁶⁹ Nonetheless, she concludes that the reformers were responding to real changes, and claims:

Before 1870, consumers had felt little need for outside protection. In a predominately agricultural society, people raised much of their own food, bought most of the rest from local merchants, and depended on simple and tried remedies to treat their maladies. Consumers could observe conditions under which their food and medical supplies were produced, handled, and marketed, and a tradesman's social and business future depended on his reputation for cleanliness and honesty.¹⁷⁰

However, the shift to commercial farming long predated the Pure Foods movement. According to Richard Hofstadter, one of the primary architects of the “status theory,” the transition from independent yeomans to cash crop farmers dependent on the country store for their supplies was “complete in Ohio by about 1830 and twenty years later in Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan...in so far as this process was unfinished in 1860, the demands of the Civil War brought it to completion.”¹⁷¹ In the industrializing

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 43.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 47-8.

¹⁷¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965:

cities of the North, consumers had been reliant on food transported, handled, packaged, and marketed by anonymous businesses for the better part of a century before muckraking journalists and crusading women took up the cause of Pure Food.

Nor were conditions on the farm necessarily superior. As Isaac Williams Brewer noted in a 1909 handbook on rural hygiene, deaths from many infectious diseases popularly associated with cities, like influenza and dysentery, were actually higher in rural districts than urban centers.¹⁷² Rural areas were plagued by disease and sanitation problems caused by the contamination of drinking water and clean soil with animal manure and the vulnerability of large stores of food to vermin. Rather than uncritically accepting the reformers' reports that food adulteration were new or newly-pressing concerns in the 1880s, most historians suggest that poor food, alcohol use, and drugs had *always* been problems. What changed in the late nineteenth century was the *popular sentiment* about those problems and the rise of organized efforts to change them.

The Covert Feminism Theory

Some feminist scholars have attributed the changing sentiment among upper middle-class women to universal manhood suffrage and the construction of the “Cult of True Womanhood.”¹⁷³ Paula Baker argues in “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920” that one of the results of the nineteenth century bifurcation of the public and private spheres was that women's reform societies were

39).

¹⁷² Isaac Williams Brewer, *Rural Hygiene* (Philadelphia, PA: 1909: 13).

¹⁷³ A phrase that comes from Barbara Welter's 1966 article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18 No. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-74. Welter argues that the idea of “separate spheres” of influence for men and women, and the idea that women's proper place was the home emerged at the same time as male egalitarianism and universal manhood suffrage. Welter suggests that the elimination of property qualifications for suffrage made gender into the most salient political division and turned womanhood into a sort of negative referent that united all white men. At the same time, the construction of “public” politics and the control of businesses and state money in the hands of white men relied on the increased emphasis on women as the arbiters of the moral and spiritual health of their families and the nation.

constructed as crucial to the production of virtuous citizens and applauded even as women's agitation for privileges constructed as exclusively male like suffrage, met with great resistance. Women's reform societies were constructed as outside of and often above politics, even when they were pushing for legislative reforms.¹⁷⁴ Women's historians broadly agree that white, middle-class American women learned to work within and simultaneously expand the “separate sphere” constructed in the nineteenth century by pursuing public action through their accepted roles as mothers, caretakers, and managers of the home (including, crucially, the kitchen). Many of the women involved in reform societies rejected woman suffrage because it threatened to undermine their moral authority. Scholars like Karen Blair argue that the proliferation of women's clubs ranging from literary societies to temperance unions exemplified what she calls “domestic feminism.” According to Blair, the overt acceptance of traditional roles gave women “ideological cover” for their more radical sentiments and agendas—including greater equality in the public sphere.¹⁷⁵

The covert feminists theory grew out of an attempt to address the exclusion of women from U.S. history. For decades most scholarship on the Progressive Era was based primarily on the published writings of middlebrow journalists like Upton Sinclair, the campaign speeches of politicians like Teddy Roosevelt, leaders of new regulatory agencies like Harvey W. Wiley, and the records kept by corporations, political parties, and professional organizations like the American Medical Association. All of which exclude women. However, the theory that the Pure Foods movement was the product of gender ideologies and only incidentally about food fails to explain the simultaneous rise of Progressive reform sentiment among white urban professional men. How do we explain both Mary Hackett Hunt and Upton Sinclair? Additionally, as Goodwin

¹⁷⁴ Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *The American Historical Review* 89 No. 3 (June 1984): 620-647.

¹⁷⁵ Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980:1).

documents, participants in the Pure Foods movement were divided about suffrage; rather than serving as ideological cover, the Pure Food activism was eventually “eroded by the suffrage movement.” Gender politics undoubtedly shaped the strategies and that both women's organizations and male politicians and journalists used to agitate for food and drug reform, but the participants in the Pure Foods movement were ultimately unified less by gender than by race and class.

The Status Anxiety Theory

The status anxiety theory argues that both middle-class men and women who took up social causes at the turn of the twentieth century were driven not by objective changes in the severity of the nation's social ills, nor by shifts in gender politics, but instead by an upheaval in the distribution of deference and power. In *Age of Reform*, Hofstadter argues that Progressivism was led primarily by “Mugwumps”—the college-educated class of doctors, lawyers, and business owners who were active members in societies for civic betterment and local political leaders. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, they found themselves eclipsed by the rise of a new super-elite:

In their personal careers, as in their community activities, they found themselves checked, hampered, and overridden by the agents of new corporations, the corrupters of legislatures, the buyers of franchises, the allies of political bosses.... In a strictly economic sense these men were not growing poorer as a class, but their wealth and power were being dwarfed by comparison with the new eminences of wealth and power. They were less important and they knew it.¹⁷⁶

Men who were used to being big fish in small ponds suddenly found themselves in an ocean full of sharks. According to Hofstadter, they responded to the expropriation of their moral authority by becoming active in reform movements that challenged the new corporations and the new social order that had disenfranchised them.

Hofstadter underestimates the role that women played in those reform movements, but that doesn't necessarily undermine his theory. Status upheaval can also

¹⁷⁶ Hofstadter, 1965: 137.

explain why middle-class women took up the mantle of reform. Goodwin insists that “activism for pure food, drink, and drugs extended across lines of class, sex, religion, and ethnic origin that had divided people in the past,” but she offers little evidence that the movement was more widespread than other historians suggest.¹⁷⁷ The General Federation of Women's Clubs (G.F.W.C.), a national organization formed in 1890 to coordinate the efforts of clubs nationwide, encouraged member clubs to welcome every woman regardless of her “station in life.” However, the admonition offers clearer evidence that the early clubs *excluded* members based on class than proof that working women, immigrants, or African-Americans ever joined in significant numbers.

Nearly all the women activists she profiles were either professionals themselves—like all the women involved in Sorosis—or, more commonly, the wives of professional men. Sarah Sophia Chase Harris Platt Decker of Denver Colorado, the first president of the G.F.W.C. was married first to a business tycoon active in politics and then to Judge W.S. Decker. Eva Perry Moore, the first vice-president, was a Vassar graduate who had traveled in Europe between graduation and marriage. Helen Miller, the first chair of the G.F.W.C.'s Pure Food Subcommittee was a home economist at the Agricultural College in Columbia Missouri and married to another academic.

Goodwin claims that the size and influence of the movement and official open membership policies suggest that Pure Foods activism was “truly a mass movement that began in the grassroots of America.”¹⁷⁸ For example, she claims:

The obvious advantage of open membership increased the potential of the crusade by bringing greater numbers and a wider heterogeneity of women in to the club movement. By 1900 Federation membership rose to more than 150,000 women, organized into 595 clubs and 30 state federations. By 1905 the numbers more than doubled. In Illinois, alone, 242 federated clubs represented 24,000 women.... Open membership also served to bridge the religious, sectional, ethnic, and social barriers which had prevented women from uniting in the past.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Goodwin, 1999: 133.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 291.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 133-4.

However, she provides no evidence that those 150,000 women were actually heterogeneous beyond their formal declaration of inclusivity. Not only does she lack demographic data, she doesn't provide a single anecdote about any non-white, non-middle-class women taking part. Instead, her anecdotes reinforce the clubs' functional (if not intentional) exclusivity. For example, Decker visited a club in Denver that met in a “wealthy and handsome clubhouse” in a room with a decorative inlaid border on the floor. The president told her that there were 200 members and as many more on a waiting list. Decker asked why the membership was restricted, and was told that only 200 chairs would fit within the border. Setting chairs on the border itself was not to be considered.¹⁸⁰

What makes the status anxiety theory especially compelling is that it explains not only the sudden rise of food reform sentiment in the upper-middle classes, but also why it disappeared just as suddenly after the 1920s. As even proponents of the “bad food” theory admit, the Pure Food movement didn't stop with the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act—on the contrary, it was energized by the victory.¹⁸¹ Nor were there any notable changes in food production or distribution in the 1920s to guarantee a safer food supply at that point. Many recent critics of the food industry argue that the continued growth and consolidation of the national food supply during and after the World Wars *exacerbated* the unresolved problems that ostensibly motivated the first food movement. The Nineteenth Amendment did alter women's political power, but proponents of the covert feminism theory note that women continued to participate in activism outside of formal politics even after the ratification of the Amendment in even greater numbers. What *did* change during the Great Depression and World War II was the relative status and power of the American middle classes.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 133.

¹⁸¹ According to Goodwin, “an extraordinary explosion of activism accompanied attempts to implement the law,” and the same organizations that had pushed for its passage now organized around the conviction that “the Augean stables are still unclean” (266).

The Return of “Natural” Foods: From Woodstock to Whole Foods Market

By the time the freaks and hippies of the 1960s counterculture discovered natural foods, the quest for purity in whole grains and meat-free diets had been firmly relegated to the cultural margins. Warren Belasco describes how “young bohemians often shared the conventional view of 'heath food nuts' as hypochondriacs who dipped desiccated wheat germ crackers into yeast carrot juice cocktails”¹⁸² when they first began to venture into natural food stores in the late 1960s. By now the association between hippies and natural food is so pervasive, some people assume that it was inevitable that politically left-leaning freaks would come to question and ultimately reject the fast food, TV-dinner, Wonderbread cuisine developed by the industrial food system. However, the few people in the counterculture who attempted to call attention to food before 1969 had had little success. The Diggers distributed free meals in the Haight-Ashbury district made from ingredients grown or scavenged in San Francisco; they were seen by others in the counterculture as “an 'anonymous group of stubborn moralists, probably stiff-necked primitive Christians in sackcloth'.”¹⁸³ When Alice Waters returned to Berkeley in 1966 after spending her junior year in France, she began serving elaborate French meals to the Free Speech Movement activists who would gather in the apartment she shared with fellow activist Jeremy Goines. However, she faced resistance from other activists like Jerry Rubin, a leader of the Youth International Party, who insisted on eating bologna and white bread sandwiches because that's what the “masses” ate.¹⁸⁴

According to Belasco, “ecology” emerged as a powerful buzzword practically overnight in 1968 and 1969. As a “subversive science” that spoke to concerns about the environment and offered personal methods of taking action against the military-

¹⁸² Belasco, 1989: 16.

¹⁸³ Charles Perry, *The Haight-Ashbury: A History* (New York, NY: Rolling Stone Press, 1985), qtd. in Belasco, 1989: 19.

¹⁸⁴ Kamp, 2007: 131.

industrial complex, ecology was the driving philosophy behind what Belasco calls the “countercuisine” – “a coherent set of dietary beliefs and practices” based in part on avoiding processed “plastic” food. He notes that as late as 1968, leftist literature featured seemingly proletarian recipes involving ingredients like instant coffee, nondairy creamer, bologna, and canned soups. After 1969 “no counter-cultural food writer mentioned processed food—unless in contempt.”¹⁸⁵ A number of factors set the stage for the creation of the countercuisine: the Kennedy and King assassinations, intensifying violence in Vietnam, and riots from Detroit to Paris caused a widespread sense that social order was disintegrating. A spate of environmental crises including an oil spill off Santa Barbara and the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland catching fire were followed by a rash of news stories about DDT, world hunger, and overpopulation. Additionally, there was a growing sense of futility or disenfranchisement on the left—antiwar rallies seemed increasingly futile, and many on the left felt that the movement had been “taken over by Great Society bureaucrats and exclusionary Black Power advocates.”¹⁸⁶ Ecology combined a transcendent vision of a radically restructured society with immediate ways to participate: plant a garden, stop eating meat.

It was not inevitable that the “natural” foods movement would go mainstream, either. Many other aspects of the counterculture didn't. Some popular accounts of the rise of the organic market portray it as a pre-existing consumer desire simply waiting for entrepreneurs to tap into it. For example, in *Organic, Inc.* Samuel Fromartz argues that the “organic revolution” was driven by a handful of “iconoclasts” influenced by the radical thinking of the 1960s but willing to drop their “countercultural baggage” and make nice with capitalism in order to natural foods to the waiting consumer.¹⁸⁷ Fromartz mentions the Alar panic in the early 1990s as a driving factor, but the market for organic

¹⁸⁵ Belasco, 1989: 27.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Samuel Fromartz, *Organic, Inc.: Natural Foods and How They Grew* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 2006: 110).

foods had been expanding rapidly for at least a decade before that. By 1989, when the 60 minutes episode about Alar aired, Whole Foods Market had already begun to expand nationwide, with successful stores in Austin, Palo Alto, and New Orleans.¹⁸⁸

Belasco identifies the key moment when natural foods emerged in the mainstream as the early 1980s. According to Belasco, the Kellogg company “generally followed food industry conventions that 'nutrition doesn't sell'—until 1981, when it introduced Nutri-Grain vitamin-fortified, sugar-and-preservative-free flakes. ” The flakes were incorporated into a variety of cold cereals, frozen waffles, and fruit-filled bars marketed at “well-trimmed yuppies.” Belasco further argues that even in the 1980s, the new, health food trends were largely limited to the wealthiest 25-40 percent of the population. Their tastes were increasingly portrayed as normative. A decade earlier, hippie foods were popularly derided as “nuts and twigs,” unpalatable at best and unpatriotic at worst. However, in the 1980s, the food industry found it could appeal to even respectable Reaganites with a diversified array of foods given a healthy imprimatur with words like “granola.”

Granola was originally the name of a single brand of cereal trademarked in 1886 by W. K. Kellogg.¹⁸⁹ A similar cereal called “Granula” was first developed by Dr. James Caleb Jackson in 1863 at his health spa in Danville, New York. Granula was made from a paste of graham flour combined with water baked in thin sheets until crisp and crumbled into pieces. The serving suggestions recommended reconstituting the bean-sized nuggets in liquid for at least twenty minutes before consuming. Kellogg began selling his own version of Granula using whole wheat, oatmeal, and corn meal in the 1870s, but renamed it “Granola” after Dr. Jackson sued him in 1881. By 1889, Kellogg's Sanitas Food Company was selling approximately two tons of Granola every week. Kellogg's Granola was eventually surpassed in popularity by Grape Nuts, a similar cereal developed by one

¹⁸⁸ “Company History,” *Whole Foods Market*, 2011, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

¹⁸⁹ “granola, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, March 2011, Oxford University Press (accessed 09 April 2011).

of Kellogg's former patients, Charles Williams Post. The bran-nugget genre was later surpassed by the flaked, sugared, and puffed cereals developed in the twentieth century (including the Kellogg Company's iconic Toasted Corn Flakes). Still, the Granola brand name lived on as the generic term for toasted whole-grain cereals.¹⁹⁰

Generic granola remained a staple of small health foods stores. It took on additional significance as a slang term for the culture, politics, and food of the counterculture, probably due to the role it played at Woodstock. Nathan's hot dogs was originally lined up to provide concessions for the festival, but they pulled out over disagreements about wages and the festival's location. Instead, the organizers hired a trio called Food for Love. Despite what the name connotes today, Food for Love exemplified a pre-1969 culinary aesthetic: they sold conventional concession fare like hot dogs and hamburgers. However, they—like everyone else involved in the festival—were completely unprepared to deal with the size of the crowd that showed up. Facing dwindling supplies and long lines on Saturday night, they raised their prices. Angry crowds burned two of their concession stands down. The next morning, members of the Hog Farm Collective, who had been hired to help with security, set up free food lines serving brown rice and vegetables and arranged to distribute thousands of cups of granola to the people close to the stage, some of whom hadn't eaten in nearly two days because they didn't want to give up their spots.¹⁹¹

In the 1980s, granola was still associated with the counterculture (and often deployed derisively; Reagan supporters described Jerry Brown of California as “the granola governor, appealing to flakes and nuts”¹⁹²). But it also became a mainstream

¹⁹⁰ Joy Santlofer, “Cereal, Cold,” *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Food and Drink in America*, ed. Andrew F. Smith (e-reference edition) University of Michigan - Ann Arbor, Web (accessed 9 April 2011).

¹⁹¹ Michael Lang, *The Road to Woodstock* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2009: 155), referenced in Lisa Braman, “Woodstock—How to Feed 400,000 Hungry Hippies,” *Smithsonian Magazine: Food & Think*, 14 August 2009, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

¹⁹² “Jokes, and Echoes, in New Hampshire,” *The New York Times*, 20 February 1980, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 – 2007) Document ID: 113932327 (retrieved 09 Apr. 2011).

cereal and snack bar ingredient, especially for the middle class.¹⁹³ In Saul Bellow's 1984 short story, "What Kind of Day Did You Have?" suburban divorced mom Katrina Goliger feeds her daughters granola as part of a typical morning routine: "Katrina woke the girls and told them to dress and come downstairs for their granola. Mother had to go to a meeting. . . . When Katrina, ready to go, came into the kitchen in her fleece-lined coat, the girls were still sitting over their granola. The milk had turned brown while they dawdled. 'I'm leaving a list on the bulletin board, tell Ysole.'"¹⁹⁴ The granola is as much of a marker of their class status as the reference to the housekeeper or Katrina's affair with a "world-class intellectual, big in the art world." "Granola" is still used to identify left-wing politics and lifestyle markers associated with the 1960s counterculture, but it is also associated with the particular kind of health-savvy and wholesomeness that became a middle-class preoccupation again in the 1980s.

Part IV: Ethnic Food and the Ideal of Cosmopolitanism

Food from Another Place and Time

In the introduction to *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*, Sherrie Inness acknowledges the difficulty of defining *ethnic food*: "ethnic food is a label that many Americans apply to those foods from cultures most clearly demarcated as 'foreign.' Thus sashimi will be labeled ethnic more readily than dishes that have been assimilated into U.S. culture, such as British fish and chips or the omnipresent spaghetti and meatballs."¹⁹⁵ However, even those assimilated foods may be presented in a way that renders them foreign. At the Manhattan eatery A Salt & Battery, for example, signs proclaim that it is "New York's only truly authentic fish & chip shop." **[Figure 2.5]**

¹⁹³ Again, meaning the *idea* of the middle-class, not "the masses."

¹⁹⁴ Saul Bellow, "What Kind of Day Did You Have," *Him With His Foot in His Mouth and Other Stories* 1984 (New York, NY: Penguin Books 1998: 90).

¹⁹⁵ Sherrie A. Inness, "Introduction," *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).



Figure 2.5/A Salt and Battery home page Screen shot¹⁹⁶

The source of A Salt & Battery's “authenticity” is their fidelity to a particular construction of Britishness as foreign, not assimilated. In addition to their hot food, they also sell a variety of imported UK-brand groceries like HP Sauce, Branston Pickle, PG Tips Teabags, and cans of Batchelors Mushy Peas. They sell merchandise emblazoned with logos like “Cod Save the Queen,” and display black and white photographs of what appear to be real British people on the walls. The menu features soft drinks from the UK like Dandellion & Burdock, Vimto, and Irn Bru and declares “Chips! No French Fries Here!” Their sister restaurant, Tea & Sympathy, similarly trades the foreignness of many British culinary traditions. They serve afternoon tea with scones and clotted cream and the dinner menu includes roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, welsh rarebit, treacle pudding, and rhubarb with custard. Both restaurants assume, like the cookbooks Hoganson writes about, that “foreignness has cachet,” even when it comes to a cuisine often declared “the worst in the world.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Screen shot by the author from “A Salt and Battery,” 2011, Web (accessed 09 April 2011).

¹⁹⁷ See for example, George Orwell, “In Defence of English Cooking” (1945), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: In front of your Nose, 1945-50* (London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968). Thanks to Ken Albala for calling that essay to my attention.

Inness ultimately decides “the best approach is a broad one. Numerous factors, including social class, ethnicity, race, language, age, religion, and regional location, influence people's reactions to what they perceive as ethnic cuisine.”¹⁹⁸ Essentially, she suggests, ethnic food is whatever people think it is. The collection offers a series of examples: Paul Christensen says his Sicilian-born mother's ritual preparation of pasta and tomato sauce (“mac and gravy”) affirms a romantic, passionate “counterpoint to the killing dullness of her life” in the United States; Arlene Voski Avakian writes about how she wins over her lesbian partner's disapproving Aunt Elizabeth with Armenian *fassoulia*¹⁹⁹ and rice pilaf; Lisa Heldke interrogates the “racial/ethnic and class privilege” represented by her penchant for cooking foods from Southeast Asia and Africa.²⁰⁰ Like A Salt & Battery's construction of an authentic British foreignness, these examples point to the characteristics that people tend to perceive as *ethnic*.

As Christensen's essay suggests, ethnic food is not only a designation that people apply to cuisines they are not personally familiar with. For many immigrants and their descendants, eating “ethnic” is a way to affirm their identities, but only when those identities are associated with a different place. Heldke differentiates between the Thanksgiving meal she prepares the same way every year just like her mother did and the *ethnic* cooking she does when she invites people over for dinner and plans an elaborate menu with foods from different nationalities, “most of them consisting of several dishes I've never cooked before.”²⁰¹ The traditional Thanksgiving meal is her equivalent of Christensen's mother's “mac and gravy,” but as its imagined referent is (white) America instead of Sicily, only the latter is *ethnic*.

The distinction may have more to do with power than actual geographic origin.

¹⁹⁸ Inness, 2001: 4.

¹⁹⁹ Green beans cooked in a sauce of tomato and onions, which prompts Aunt Elizabeth to note that she also used to make them that way and hadn't for the longest time, suggesting the ways in which ethnic food can be a source of affinity as well as difference.

²⁰⁰ Christensen 37; Avakian 113-5; Heldke, 177-8, in Inness 2001.

²⁰¹ Heldke, 176.

Donna Gabaccia notes that Native Americans participated in the “new ethnicity” movements of the 1970s and their foodways are likely to be recognized as ethnic even if they are also rooted in America. Similarly, soul food is constructed as both Other and American. However, the power relationships involved in designating something Other may be complex, as the example of A Salt & Battery demonstrates. The appeal of culinary foreignness is not always expressed as a desire for foods that are *exotic* (which usually connotes non-whiteness and is often associated with sensuality, primitivism, and danger—in American culinary terms, assertive flavors, spiciness, and “mixed” foods)²⁰². I use the word cosmopolitanism both as a nod to Hoganson's *Consumers Imperium* and because it seems to capture the essential characteristic of Otherness at stake.²⁰³

The other key characteristic of culinary cosmopolitanism is the word invoked by A Salt & Battery: authenticity. The appeal of ethnic and foreign foods almost always depends on the idea that they are faithful to a particular place or tradition and have not been adapted to fit mainstream tastes. Those places do not always have to be other countries—seeking out an authentic New York bagel, a specific style of barbeque, or New Mexico green chile also appeal to the kind of desirable Otherness popular with the middle-class today.²⁰⁴ The mainstream appreciation for authentically Other foodways is not a historical constant. According to Gabaccia, for much of U.S. history, immigrants cultivated culinary practices they brought with them in relatively isolated ethnic

²⁰² See Bentley, 2002: 179.

²⁰³ Invoking the Ulrich Beck sense of the word “cosmopolitanism” as a recognition of otherness, rather than the Immanuel Kant sense of universal moral law.

²⁰⁴ These two concerns—otherness and authenticity—are also associated with tourism. Anthropologist Dean MacCannell defines the tourist as “a temporarily leisured person who voluntarily visits a place away from home for the purpose of experiencing a change” and argues that the “touristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experience.” Folklorist Lucy Long coined the term “culinary tourism” to refer to the use of food itself as a vehicle for experiencing another culture and the growing use of food as a rationale for choice of destination and trip itineraries. Culinary tourism is definitely one form of culinary cosmopolitanism, but the latter is slightly broader—encompassing not only the exploration of foods other to the self, but also foods from your own past that are other to the mainstream, like Christensen's mother's “mac & gravy.” Lucy M. Long, “Introduction,” *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004:15).

enclaves. Markets, restaurants, bars, butchers, and bakeries run by immigrants catered to immigrants from the same country or region. She also notes that “the boundaries around ethnic enclaves in the United States have never been firm or impermeable,”²⁰⁵ but whether mainstream, middle-class Americans thought it was a good thing to cross them has varied greatly over the last century

The Rise and Fall: Foreign Entertainments to Frito Lay

As noted in Part I, cosmopolitanism has often been intertwined with sophistication. The same postbellum women worrying about service à *la Russe* also threw “foreign entertainments” with international themes. According to Hoganson, guests at those entertainments were often instructed to dress in traditional ethnic costume; in addition to the internationally-inspired food, they played games that encouraged people to cultivate their knowledge about the world: “At a Japanese party, guests might encounter envelopes containing jumbled letters of some of the largest cities on the islands. The task was to determine the names by straightening out the mixtures. At a Dutch party, guests might be asked to write down as many interesting facts about the Netherlands and its people as they could recall.”²⁰⁶ Recipes provided lessons in foreignness, like how to eat spaghetti in the traditional Italian fashion by twirling it around a fork rather than cutting it or how to eat with chopsticks. The texts assume that middle-class women and their guests would want to enjoy their foreign foods as *authentically* as possible

Gabbacia describes the first decades of the twentieth century as a particularly “intensive phase of cross-cultural borrowing” for American ethnic foods. She describes the rise of Delmonico's in New York, which adopted a French menu in the mid-nineteenth century and in the 1870s became the most conspicuously extravagant

²⁰⁵ Gabaccia, 1998: 94.

²⁰⁶ Hoganson, 2007: 145.

restaurant in the city. For people with slightly less money, Italian restaurants in Greenwich Village offered something “far more expensive than a typical workingman's dinner but well below the prices of a restaurant like Delmonico's.”²⁰⁷ The owners and staff played up their foreignness for crossover consumers, performing a sort of Italian drag to create a “dining experience” that was about far more than just the food. A 1883 guidebook for tourists in San Francisco suggests that people with enough money to travel could be expected to have an interest in Chinese food, recommending “four restaurants where they could safely eat—all above street level, of course.”²⁰⁸

Gabaccia argues the attitude towards immigrant foods did not diminish with the onset of the Depression; however, the dominant tone changed. The wider acceptance of immigrant foodways outside of ethnic enclaves and middle class culinary tourism during and after the 1930s was driven largely by their practical advantages. Due to wartime shortages, the privations of the Great Depression, and the gradual assimilation of the immigrant populations they were associated with, dishes like spaghetti and chop suey were increasingly portrayed as patriotic and accessible, not novel or sophisticated.²⁰⁹ Ethnic foods were celebrated for being cheap to make. They required far less meat than the “ordered meal,” or sometimes even no meat at all. Gabaccia welcomes this as “culinary pluralism,” but it was no longer culinary *cosmopolitanism*. Ethnic dishes were celebrated for being familiar and economical, not Other and authentic.

Gabaccia also notes that many of the key entrepreneurs of the growing food industry during the post-war years were first or second-generation Americans. Carl Swanson of Swanson's TV dinners moved from Sweden to the U.S. in 1896; Chef Boyardee originated with a chef from Piacenza, Italy named Hector Boiardi; Henry J. Heinz was the son of German immigrants. All of them succeeded by “selling their products with no ethnic labels attached.” She also points to the example of Doritos,

²⁰⁷ Gabaccia, 1999: 100.

²⁰⁸ Gabaccia, 1999: 103.

²⁰⁹ Gabaccia, 1998: 147.

which were developed to “taste more like 'authentic' tostadas” and became tremendously popular. However, there's no evidence that they were seen as ethnically marked. Just two years earlier the Frito Lay company was accused of insensitivity, stereotyping, and racism by the Mexican-American Anti-Defamation Committee when they switched their mascot from the cowboy-clad Frito Kid to the Frito Bandito, so they dropped the “Mexican” imagery. Processed foods reflected the diversity of native and immigrant influences on U.S. foodways, but they were not embraced because they were seen as Other or authentic.²¹⁰ The most striking evidence that the enthusiastic pursuit of cosmopolitan eating declined in the mid-twentieth century is how widely it was heralded as a “new” development when it re-emerged in the 1980s, again most conspicuously with the yuppies.

The Return: Neither Frugal Nor Gourmet

Gabaccia actually argues “ethnic” eating first became more popular in the 1970s; however, she claims that at that point the phenomenon was primarily limited to people who identified with the “new ethnicity” movement:

It began with African-American critiques of a national history that had excluded them—some of the oldest Americans—from participation and membership. Native-Americans, Asian-Americans and Latinos also emphasized their exclusion from the celebrated benefits of American prosperity and democracy. Racial minorities initiated this ethnic revival or 'new ethnicity' by demanding recognition for their unique histories and ways of life. . . . For these new ethnics, the task at hand was to undo the cultural effects of three generations of assimilation. Not surprising, food became an integral part of that effort.²¹¹

Some white ethnics also began to try to preserve or recover parts of their ethnic heritage, especially culinary traditions, as exemplified by the proliferation of ethnic food festivals and community cookbooks. While that does represent one form of culinary

²¹⁰ This attitude is exemplified by the editors of the America Eats project who “vigorously rejected foods or events they regarded as commercial or corporate” in their attempt to capture authentic American traditions. Gabaccia, 1999:143.

²¹¹ Gabaccia, 1999: 176.

cosmopolitanism, it still limited. Like most other scholars, Gabaccia dates the mainstream explosion of ethnic restaurants, international food aisles, and the value of culinary adventurousness to the 1980s:

“No longer a nation of fussy, self-denying eaters, Americans by the 1980s devoured cookbooks describing the foods and cooking techniques of cultures around the world. . . . Educated, well-traveled, and enjoying a higher income than most hippies had as young people in the early 1970s, yuppies in the 1980s searched more often for authentic and exotic, than healthy, ethnic food.”²¹²

Where the yuppies go, the masses follow: “The yuppies' fascination with ethnicity in authentic or nouvelle forms eventually spread to more modest consumers in the mass marketplace.”²¹³

The renewed popular appeal of culinary cosmopolitanism is exemplified by the success of Jeff Smith, otherwise known as “The Frugal Gourmet.” A *Time magazine* article titled “Food: Most of the Decade,” published on January 1, 1990 declared Smith the “Most Visible Gourmet” of the 1980s.²¹⁴ Smith's name may not ring a bell for some contemporary followers of celebrity chef culture, particularly ones who came of age in the 1990s or later, but the *Time* benediction is a testament to the influence he had in the first decade of gourmet's re-consolidation as a mainstream trend. According to the blurb about him:

Jeff Smith of Seattle, the lanky, gray-bearded, cackle-voiced Methodist minister who calls himself the Frugal Gourmet, entered millions of American homes via his still running how-to series on PBS. All four of his precise, tip-laden and irrepressibly cheerful cookbooks—The Frugal Gourmet, The Frugal Gourmet Cooks with Wine, The Frugal Gourmet Cooks American and The Frugal Gourmet Cooks Three Ancient Cuisines—hit best-seller charts, with hard-cover sales of 3.4 million.²¹⁵

According to a 1987 article by Laura Shapiro in *Newsweek*, Jeff Smith's show was the “most popular television cooking series ever produced,” surpassing even Julia Child.²¹⁶ A

²¹² Gabaccia, 1999: 181, 215.

²¹³ Gabaccia, 1999: 217.

²¹⁴ “Food: Most of the Decade,” *Time magazine*, 01 January 1990, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Laura Shapiro, “Preaching the Word About Food,” *Newsweek*, 09 March 1987 Lexis-Nexis (accessed 01 September 2009).

1992 cover article in *Harper's* claimed (actually, lamented) that he had 15 million viewers, “more people than, if things keep on as they are, will vote in this year's presidential election.”²¹⁷ Several years later, an Associated Press article claimed that his in-store appearance at a Boca Raton bookstore had drawn crowds “exceeded only by those drawn by Ivana Trump and Oliver North.”²¹⁸

As the *Harper's* article exemplifies, he wasn't universally admired. Critics and culinary professionals generally found his popularity galling; in the scalding attack in *Harper's* magazine, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison asks, “Why is he beloved?” and answers, “The short answer is that people are stupid.”²¹⁹ For his fans, the appeal seems to be the opportunity to learn about unfamiliar dishes from all over the world with the quirky, unpretentious Smith acting as a tour guide. The name of the show is a little misleading. Smith rarely mentions the cost of ingredients or anything else related to money, like how to stretch expensive ingredients or possible substitutions for someone on a limited budget. His set was equipped with expensive tools like a KitchenAid mixer, then a Williams-Sonoma exclusive (although he sometimes referred to it as “a Mixmaster,” the name for Sunbeam's less expensive version). His own cookbook implicitly acknowledged that his show didn't represent the common understanding of the word “frugal” by offering his own definition: “The term 'frugal' does not necessarily mean 'cheap.' It means that you use everything and are careful with your time as well as with your food products. Fresh foods, prepared with a bit of care and concern will result in terrific meals at lower costs.”²²⁰ Nor does the show focus on what most people thought of as “gourmet” food. He doesn't use the word “gourmet” very often, and rarely claims that the recipes he's demonstrating are sophisticated or impressive or fancy.

²¹⁷ Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, “P.C. On the Grill: The Frugal Gourmet, Lambasted and Skewered,” *Harper's Magazine*, June 1992, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

²¹⁸ Associated Press, “Critics Turn Up the Heat Over Frugal Gourmet's Style, Endorsements,” *Los Angeles Times* 23 August 1992, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

²¹⁹ Harrison, 1992.

²²⁰ Jeff Smith, *The Frugal Gourmet* (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1984: 1).

Instead, episodes were usually organized around the cuisine of a particular region or foreign country. This was usually not France. The primary themes in his stream of consciousness monologue are how delicious and achievable these unfamiliar recipes are and his faith in God. The show was pitched squarely at a public broadcast audience used to slightly-stuffy educational programming. Like the foreign entertainments that Hoganson describes, this is food that comes with a geography lesson. The opening credits feature a montage of Smith sampling foods around the world while an orchestral arrangement of Handel's "Water Music" plays. Episodes frequently begin with a brief historical segment. Smith also peppers the cooking demonstrations with asides about the exotic cookware and serving dishes he's picked up in his international travels. He generally speaks about foreign ingredients and foods approvingly, but almost always follows them up with the assertion that his only *real* concern was how the food tastes.

For example, in an episode where he demonstrates several versions of chicken teriyaki, he says, "They'll spend hours carving a little bitty carrot to make it really look attractive. The Japanese claim that food should feast the eyes as well as the stomach. Today I'm concerned," and he glances over both shoulders as if to see if anyone is listening and gives a little chuckle as he finishes, "with just the stomach."²²¹ Rather than attempting to teach formal restaurant techniques or insist upon adherence to foreign standards, Smith effectively told people that *they* were the ultimate arbiters of what counted as "gourmet" and they could adventure into unknown culinary waters without fear and experience deliciousness. In a show where he demonstrates a Chinese soup including chicken feet, red dates, mushrooms, and peanuts, he says, "Now, I know this sounds strange to you, but the Chinese claim that this wonderful soup is one of the most healthy, invigorating, healing soups that you can possibly have. My friend Mary Young claims that this will solve cancer. I can't quite believe such a thing, but I'm not

²²¹ Jeff Smith, *The Frugal Gourmet Collection: The Japanese Kitchen*, produced by WTTW Chicago and MPI Home Video, 1992 (VHS).

advocating it for that reason. I'm advocating it because it's delicious."²²²

People like Harrison found his schtick unbearable. In the *Harpers* article, she calls him “a downscale Bill Moyers of the Insinkerator, an aproned P.C. Guru of Ethnic Self-Esteem.”²²³ But he wasn't a cheerleader for foods on the grounds that there was any moral or politically correct motivation to cook or eat diverse foods. Smith frequently insisted that America had the best food, best quality produce, and best variety of ingredients in the world. In the Chinese soup episode, he hails the availability of bok choy in “many supermarkets” saying, “I'm so glad that Americans are finally admitting the fact that we have better food than almost anybody.”²²⁴ However, the show clearly assumed that a mass audience would be interested in recipes and techniques from all over the world and the histories behind them. One of Smith's best-selling cookbooks is titled, *Three Ancient Cuisines: China, Greece, and Rome*; it seeks otherness and authenticity not just in foreign places, but also in the distant past. But as with all of his work, it unites the diverse traditions under a friendly, adventurous search for deliciousness. Rather than *evading* the traditional categories of “gourmet” cooking, Smith's show was representative of the redefinition of what could be called gourmet in the 1980s, which encompassed a wide range of cuisines marked *other*.

Conclusion

By painting in broad strokes, I have undoubtedly oversimplified many aspects of American eating. However, only by taking a long and broad view does the pattern emerge. A wide variety of scholars focusing on very different aspects of U.S. foodways all document a much longer history of popular interest in the ideals of sophistication, thinness, purity, and cosmopolitanism. The central pillars of the food revolution were

²²² Jeff Smith, *The Frugal Gourmet: The Chinese Kitchen*. Produced by WTTW Chicago and MPI Home Video, 1992 (VHS).

²²³ Harrison, 1992.

²²⁴ Ibid.

not new in the 1960s when they were fringe preoccupations in the counterculture or super-elite. Nor was the 1980s the first moment when suburban consumers expressed an interest in eating “better” food. Instead, the mainstream popularity of all four pillars corresponds closely to the pattern in income inequality: high in the postbellum period and first Gilded Age, low during the mid-twentieth century “Great Compression,” and high again during the return to an bifurcated income structure in the last three decades. In the following chapters, I focus primarily on that latter moment. Using exceptionally popular mass media texts about food and audience responses, I analyze 1) how the middle class has embraced meritocratic ideologies that obscure the role of class in culinary capital, 2) the persistent negotiation with snobbery that exposes the importance of food in the popular imagination of class, and 3) why the hard work and self-denial involved in eating “well” has special appeal for an anxious middle class in need of compensatory forms of aspiration.

CHAPTER THREE

MERITOCRACIES OF TASTE AND THINNESS

If the soil creates castes, the machine manufactures classes—classes to which people can be assigned by their achievement rather than ascribed by their birth. Insofar as this has happened, social inequality can be justified.

—Michael Young, *The Rise of The Meritocracy*¹

Meritocracy and the Justification of Social Inequality

The word “meritocracy” was invented by the British writer and politician Michael Young and initially popularized by his 1958 novel, *The Rise of The Meritocracy*. Originally, the book was a non-fiction polemic against the belief that modern education would guarantee that people were selected for advancement based on their competence instead of nepotism, bribery, and inheritance. The manuscript was rejected by the first eleven publishers he sent it to, but one of the editors suggested that he revise it using Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* as a model. The version that was eventually published is hybrid of sociology and satire framed as an account of a major uprising by the underclass written in the year 2034 by a man named Michael Young. According to the fictional future Young, the rebellion was the result of a century and a half of supposedly merit-based employment that had produced a highly inequitable, rigid class system. Rather than promoting equality and class mobility, the “merit” system enabled a small elite to accumulate a vastly disproportionate share of wealth by controlling how merit was defined.

The primary thrust of Young's novel is that merit cannot be objectively defined,

¹ Michael Young, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition,” *The Rise of Meritocracy* 1958 (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1994: xiii-xvii).

measured, and rewarded. Furthermore, as Young clarifies in a new introduction to the 1994 edition, he intended the future Young to seem “dour and portentous” to show how arrogant the rich would become if they were convinced that their advantages were earned. The novel ends with a manifesto calling for a “classless society,” which claims, “Were we to evaluate people, not only according to their intelligence and education, their occupation and their power, but according to their kindness and their courage, their imagination and sensitivity, their sympathy and generosity, there could be no classes.”² The quote in the epigraph, then, does not mean that a merit-based system is *justified* in the sense that it is actually just, but that it is made to seem so when it is actually unfair.

The term has been widely adopted, especially in the U.S., but the negative connotations intended by its originator have not been preserved. Instead, according to lexicographer Michael Quinion, “It is usually employed in the sense . . . [of] a social system which allows people to achieve success proportionate to their talents and abilities, as opposed to one in which social class or wealth is the controlling factor.”³ That kind of system is widely seen as desirable. To the extent that people perceive the prevailing system as meritocratic, they approve and welcome it as evidence of historical progress. The problem with meritocracies is not only that merit is almost impossible to reward objectively, but also that the belief that it *is* obscures structural inequalities.

All four of the pillars of the food revolution are supported by meritocracies that construct the markers of enlightened eating as evidence of talent, effort, and virtue. Becoming an enlightened eater is seen as an *achievement* rather than an expression of inherited tastes and privilege. A sophisticated palate, thin body, and affinity for natural and ethnic foods are constructed as things everyone can and should strive for rather than arbitrary preferences valued primarily because they are associated with the elite.⁴ This ideology is particularly powerful as it applies to body size. The belief that the thin body is

² Young, 1958:159.

³ Michael Quinion, “Meritocracy,” *World Wide Words*, 21 July 2001, Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

⁴ I also discuss the logics and processes of distinction at greater length in Chapters Four and Five.

the product of virtuous effort goes virtually unchallenged in U.S. popular culture, despite a substantial body of evidence suggesting that thinness⁵ is not, in fact, something most people can achieve.

The idealization of meritocracy long preceded Young's term. It is represented in maxims like “you can do anything if you set your mind to it,” rags to riches stories like Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick* books, and the proverbial American Dream.⁶ According to Jürgen Habermas, the idea that “the distribution of gratifications should be an isomorphic image of the achievement differentials of all individuals” has been a constant feature of “bourgeois conceptions. . . from the beginnings of modern natural law to contemporary election speeches.”⁷ However, he suggests that the market has lost credibility as an allocation mechanism, and thus, populations in advanced-capitalist countries have shifted their belief in meritocracy from the market to the educational system. He predicts that as the educational system also proves to be incapable of distributing rewards in a fair and reliable manner, people will lose faith in it as well: “In all advanced capitalist countries since World War II. . . . The expansion of the education system is becoming increasingly independent of changes in the occupational system.

⁵ Thinness is a shifting social construction. Many scholars have noted that what would have been considered “thin” in previous decades might be seen as “fat” today. Even medical definitions of normal, overweight, and obese have changed in the recent past (see note 28). Today, thinness refers less to a particular weight or body size than to the appearance of having little apparent body fat. Thus, a muscular person might appear “thin” even if they are technically overweight or obese, according to current medical definitions.

⁶ The phrase “American Dream” was coined by James Trunslow Adams in a one-volume history of the United States called *The Epic of America* published in 1931, and generally refers to a combination of meritocratic beliefs—that wealth and power are distributed according to talent and effort—with a version of American exceptionalism—that an unparalleled equality of opportunity and freedom to define and pursue success distinguish the U.S. from other nations. Although many popular texts, social movements, and scholars have contested the “reality” of the American dream, public opinion surveys regularly find that vast majorities of American adults believe in its basic tenets. In a 2005 *New York Times*/CBS News poll about social class, eighty percent of respondents said they thought it was “possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich,” (versus only nineteen percent who said it was not possible). Forty-six percent of respondents said they thought it was easier to move up from one social class to another in the United States than in Europe, another twenty-six percent said they thought it was “about the same,” and only thirteen percent said they thought it was harder in the U.S. than in Europe. Stephen J. McNamee and Robert K. Miller, *The Meritocracy Myth*, Second Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009:2) and David Leonhardt, “A Closer Look at Income Mobility,” *The New York Times*, 14 May 2005, Web (accessed 25 January 2009).

⁷ Habermas, 1975: 81.

Consequently the connection between formal schooling and occupational success may become looser in the long run.”⁸ My analysis challenges the theory that meritocracies depend on fair and reliable allocation mechanisms. Instead, people actively look for evidence to support the hegemonic belief that rewards are reliably tied to talent and effort and ignore evidence to the contrary. Meritocracy becomes the framework through which people interpret mass media texts and their own experiences.

This chapter explores how mass media texts about food create meritocracies and how audiences negotiate with them. First, I use the 2007 Pixar film *Ratatouille*, which tells the story of a rat who becomes a great chef, to explore the popular appeal of culinary meritocracies and how they justify prevailing power structures. Then, I turn my attention to perhaps the most powerful and tenacious meritocracy to emerge in the recent food revolution: the belief that an ideal body size is an achievement based on self-control, hard work, and the proper use of food. The meritocracy of thinness has become hegemonic in the U.S. since the 1980s. As discussed in Chapter Two, earlier aesthetics that portrayed a wider range of body types as healthy and beautiful have been largely replaced by an increasingly stringent ideal of thinness, a highly judgmental attitude about fatness, and the elevation of weight-loss dieting as a moral imperative for anyone who does not fit the current standards for a “healthy” weight. I offer a brief survey of the literature on weight-loss dieting, which challenges the idea that anyone can become thin by eating less. The lack of scientific support for the meritocracy of thinness suggests that other factors—cultural, political, social, or economic—must be involved in the maintenance of that ideology.

In order to analyze the popular appeal of weight-loss dieting and the belief that anyone can be thin, I analyze the NBC reality television series *The Biggest Loser*, one of the most-watched shows of the last decade. *The Biggest Loser* helps foster the myth of meritocratic thinness not only by obscuring the inconsistencies in the results of dieting

⁸ Ibid.

(although it does that too) but more importantly by folding some key inconsistencies into a misleading representation of weight-loss success. Using audience responses gathered from online discussion boards and blogs, I analyze how the show is popularly received and why audiences generally say “yes” to the idea that anyone can, and everyone should be thin, even when that conflicts with their personal experiences. My analysis challenges the dominant explanation in Fat Studies for the rise of fat-phobia and weight-loss dieting. Many scholars argue that the “obesity epidemic” was manufactured by powerful interests that stand to profit from the sales of diet products and have succeeded in duping millions of Americans. Audience responses to *The Biggest Loser* suggest that audience have not been “duped,” but instead actively seek out narratives that portray thinness as universally achievable and resist evidence to the contrary. My analysis also challenges the theory that reality television succeeds primarily by satisfying voyeuristic desires and that audiences primarily take pleasure in the spectacle of shame. In the case of “life-changing” reality shows like *The Biggest Loser*, audiences invest in the success of the contestants and portray the show as an inspiration. I argue that the immense popularity of texts like *Ratatouille* and *The Biggest Loser* is the result of a widespread desire for alternative, cultural arenas of aspiration produced by increasing income inequality and stagnating mobility since the 1980s.

Not Just Anyone Can Cook

The tension between the egalitarian ethos of the American liberal elite and the renewed interest in foodways constructed as “enlightened” is exemplified by the critically-acclaimed 2007 Pixar film *Ratatouille*. The film begins by zooming in on a television set broadcasting an image of a spinning globe with an Eiffel tower sticking out to mark the location of France. A voice with a French accent says:

Although each of the world's countries would like to dispute this fact, we French know the truth: the best food in the world is made in France. The

best food in France is made in Paris. And the best food in Paris, some say, is made by Chef Auguste Gusteau. . . . Chef Gusteau's cookbook, *Anyone Can Cook!* climbed to the top of the bestseller list. But not everyone celebrates its success...⁹

The globe gives way to a montage of images of Paris and Gusteau. Then, the fictional documentary cuts to an interview with a skinny, bald man identified by a screen caption as “Anton Ego, Food Critic, 'The Grim Eater.'” Ego re-balances the half-moon spectacles on top of his giant nose and gestures with a copy of Gusteau’s cookbook in his hands as he says, “Amusing title, *Anyone Can Cook!* What's even more amusing is that Gusteau actually seems to believe it. I, on the other hand, take cooking seriously. And, no, I don't think *anyone* can do it.” He punctuates his dismissal of Gusteau's motto by tossing the cookbook off screen. In less than a minute, this opening sequence establishes the central conflict in the film: Gusteau’s inclusive philosophy about cooking versus Ego’s exclusive, elitist one.

The film's position in the debate is clear from the beginning; Ego is obviously portrayed as a villain. In addition to his sneering demeanor and giant nose,¹⁰ his clothing is dark, his shoulders are hunched, and his facial expression is consistently dour. His name plays on the pejorative sense of “ego” referring to an inflated sense of self-importance and disregard for other people. Gusteau, on the other hand, dresses all in white, has round, pleasant features, and smiles warmly. His name plays on the Latin root “gust-” meaning taste (as in *gustatory* and *gusto*), which reinforces the idea that Gusteau cares more about the inherent quality of someone's cooking than who they are. The fictional documentary explains that Gusteau became the youngest chef to earn five stars for his restaurant, but one of the stars was rescinded after a scathing review by Ego. Gusteau was “brokenhearted” and died shortly thereafter. However, Gusteau’s philosophy lives on in the film's protagonist, a rat named Remy who talks to an

⁹ Brad Bird, dir. *Ratatouille*, Perf. Patton Oswalt, Lou Romano, Ian Holm, Janean Garofalo, Peter O'Toole, Walt Disney Pictures, 2007 (DVD).

¹⁰ For more on the association between large noses and evil, see TV Tropes contributors, “Sinister Schnoz,” *TV Tropes*, last edited 03 March 2011, Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

imaginary ghost of the chef and has cooking skills formidable enough to challenge The Grim Eater.¹¹

Remy teams up with a newly-hired garbage boy at Gusteau's restaurant named Linguini who has no cooking skills. Through some trial and error, the two of them discover that Remy can control Linguini like a puppet by tugging on his hair while remaining hidden underneath his toque. They manage to fool the other cooks into thinking Linguini is a culinary genius, and Remy's cooking begins to lure crowds back to Gusteau's restaurant. Ego is incensed that the restaurant is becoming popular again despite the fact that he gave it such a negative review and announces that he will return to "deflate the overheated puffery" about the new chef. On the night of Ego's return visit, Remy takes a risk by preparing ratatouille, traditionally a simple vegetable stew the other cooks note is a "peasant dish," not something a five-star restaurant would normally serve. Remy reinvents the dish and wows Ego, who agrees to wait until closing time for the privilege of meeting the chef. Linguini and another chef introduce Ego to Remy and explain how a rat came to be the primary architect behind the restaurant's renaissance. The review he writes resolves the conflict set up in the opening scene:

In the past I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realize only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere.¹²

Thus, the film initially seems to endorse the inclusive philosophy represented by the motto "Anyone can cook." In the end, even Ego agrees that social origins are irrelevant, it is only taste that matters and based on that criteria, even a rat can be a great cook, and even a rustic vegetable stew can become an entrée worthy of a five-star restaurant.

However, both Ego and Gusteau specifically note that *not everyone* can be a great cook. In more of the documentary footage, Gusteau qualifies his motto by insisting that while anyone can cook, becoming *great* requires creativity, courage, a willingness to

¹¹ Bird, 2007.

¹² Ibid.

make mistakes, and ambition. “Great cooking is not for the faint of heart,” he says, “You must be imaginative, strong-hearted, you must try things that may not work. And you must not let anyone define your limits because of where you come from. Your only limit is your soul. What I say is true, anyone can cook, but only the fearless can be great.”¹³ Remy shows courage and ambition by repeatedly putting himself in harm's way in order to pursue his desire to create great food. He demonstrates creativity by defying the other cooks in the kitchen who want to stick to Gusteau's recipes; he also insists repeatedly that he would rather *create* than *steal* the way his fellow rats do. However, the film suggests that those factors are tertiary to his ultimate success; they are necessary, but not sufficient. The primary reason Remy is driven to create great food and capable of appreciating the heights of culinary artistry, instead of being content to eat garbage with the rest of the rats, is his “highly developed sense of taste and smell.”¹⁴ Instead of suggesting that great cooking is truly something *anyone* can achieve, the film re-mystifies fine dining and portrays culinary skill as something you must have innate talent to achieve or appreciate. Ultimately, *Ratatouille* does not advocate a truly inclusive philosophy (e.g. everyone who tries hard can be great); instead, it suggests that culinary sophistication is exclusive, based not on social origins but on the possession of a sensitive palate.

The innate superiority of Remy's palate is established in two scenes where taste and smell are represented visually and aurally in a sort of cinematic synesthesia. The first scene of synesthesia occurs approximately four minutes into the film when Remy sneaks into the kitchen of the house where his rat colony is living at the time. Gusteau appears on a television visible from the kitchen counter, and says “Good food is like music you

¹³ His emphasis on having a *strong heart* and defying those who would deny you the chance to succeed seems especially notable in light of the fact that his death is attributed to a *broken heart* caused by Ego's criticism. Gusteau's downfall may have been his failure to fully live up to his own criteria. Ibid.

¹⁴ Remy introduces himself in a voice-over that plays as he is shown being flung through a window, shielding himself from the splintering glass with Gusteau's cookbook: “This is me. I think it's apparent I need to rethink my life a little bit. What's my problem? First of all, I'm a rat. Which means life is hard. And secondly, I have a highly developed sense of taste and smell.” Bird, 2007, Patton Oswalt, Perf.

can taste, color you can smell. There is excellence all around you. You need only be aware to stop and savor it.”¹⁵ Apparently inspired, Remy looks around and finds a bit of cheese and a strawberry. He closes his eyes, and the kitchen disappears so he is shown against a plain black background. First, he takes a bite of the cheese. Soft round shapes in mostly golden hues appear to his left while a syncopated brass melody plays. Then, he takes a bite of the strawberry. Delicate pink and purple swirls appear to his right while the brass is replaced by lilting violin. Finally, he takes a bite of both at the same time, and the entire screen fills with orange and pink, swirling shapes appear all around him, and the brass and violin themes merge harmoniously. **[Figure 3.1]**



Figure 3.1/Remy's Palate, Visualized¹⁶

The sequence is repeated about halfway through the film as Remy tries to guide his brother Emile through the same taste experience. In the alleyway behind Gusteau's restaurant, Remy stops Emile from eating an unidentifiable piece of garbage, saying, “I have got to teach you about food!” He tells Emile to close his eyes, and this time Emile is shown against a plain black background. Remy hands him a piece of cheese, and Emile swallows it greedily, with crumbs scattering from his mouth, emphasizing the difference between his natural inclinations and his brother's. Remy cries, “No, no, no! Don't just hork it down!” and then, scowling, offers him another piece with the instruction, “chew it

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Screen shot by the author from Bird, 2007.

slowly...think only of the taste. See?” A vague blob appears next to Emile's head and faint, disjointed brass notes play. Remy tries to nudge him along: “Creamy, salty sweet. An oaky nuttiness?” to which Emile replies sarcastically, “Oh, I'm detecting nuttiness.” Undaunted, Remy hands him the strawberry, saying, “Now taste this. Whole different thing right? Sweet, crisp, slight tang on the finish.” Another blob appears in the same place, a little brighter this time. “Okay,” Emile allows, tentatively. “Now try them *together*,” Remy instructs. Emile chews carefully, eyes shut tight in concentration. The blobs begin to form small shapes with a little more color, and the music beings to sound more melodic. “Okay,” Emile says, “I think I'm getting a little something there. It might be the nuttiness. Could be the tang.” **[Figure 3.2]**



Figure 3.2/Emile's Palate, Visualized¹⁷

Triumphantly, Remy begins to expound on how many different tastes there are in the world and how many combinations must be possible, breaking Emile's concentration. As Emile opens his eyes, the music stops abruptly, the colors disappear, and the alleyway returns. “I think you lost me again,” he says, and Remy looks disappointed. The very same foods that conjured up completely different shapes and colors for Remy are barely differentiated for Emile. For Remy, the separate flavors appear on opposite sides of him, while for Emile they appear in the same place. For

¹⁷ Screen shot by the author from Bird, 2007.

Remy, the flavors combine to fill the screen with color and evoke a complex musical composition while for Emile, the colors remain small and faint and the sounds disjointed. The limited progress Emile makes with Remy's coaching suggests that even with a naturally insensitive palate, he might be able to develop an appreciation for fine food. However, the contrasting scenes of synesthesia suggest that few people naturally possess the ability to make the fine distinctions and experience the incredible sensations that Remy does when he tastes food. As Emile puts it, Remy has a unique "gift."

The uniqueness of Remy's abilities are further emphasized by the contrast between him and the other cooks. Remy's cooking ability is portrayed as nearly magical. His skill far surpasses that of the other chefs in Gusteau's kitchen even though they are described as artists with shady backgrounds who defy convention for the love of cooking and pursuit of culinary greatness.¹⁸ Aside from Linguini, who is hired as a garbage boy because of his mother's relationship to Gusteau, the kitchen staff is talented and hard working. They are not employed at the restaurant because of who they were or where they came from. That is especially true of Colette, the tough-talking female chef who defends Linguini's right to cook despite the fact that he is a lowly garbage boy by invoking Gusteau's motto. However, even Colette insists that they must stick to the recipe, even when Linguini is assigned to make a sweetbread dish involving cuttlefish tentacles, snail porridge, Douglas fir purée, and veal stomach, which Gusteau himself declared a "disaster." Instead of obeying her, Remy sends Linguini scrambling around the kitchen to gather new ingredient. He improvises a sauce that he manages to sneak

¹⁸ One of the chefs named Colette describes the rest of the kitchen crew to Linguini in the following exchange:

Colette: Lalo there ran away from home at 12. Got hired by circus people as an acrobat. And then he got fired for messing around with the ringmaster's daughter. Horst has done time.

Linguini: What for?

Colette: No one know for sure. He changes the story every time you ask him. . . . Don't ever play cards with Pompidou. He's been banned from Las Vegas and Monte Carlo. Larousse ran gun for the Resistance.

Linguini: Which resistance?

Colette: He won't say. Apparently, they didn't win. So you see, we are artists, pirates... Ibid.

onto the plate just before it leaves the kitchen. The customers declare Remy's version “delicious.”

Remy's unique ability to elevate the mundane is also represented by the preparation of the ratatouille. After Remy insists that ratatouille is what he wants to serve Ego despite the fact that it's a “peasant dish,” Colette shrugs, grabs a sprig of herbs, and turns to add it to a pot. But Remy stops her. “What?” she asks, “I'm making the rataouille.” He shakes his head “no,” and she asks, “Well, how would *you* prepare it?” Remy shows her step by step, indicating that she should slice the vegetables thinly with a mandoline and bake them under parchment paper. He puts the final touches on the plate himself. **[Image 3.3]**



Figure 3.3/Rat-atouille¹⁹

At the climax of the film, the ratatouille is delivered to Ego. He takes a bite, and his eyes grow wide. The restaurant whooshes out of focus and we see a flashback from Ego's childhood: a young boy stands in the doorway of a small cottage, sniffing and fighting back tears. A wrecked bicycle is visible on the pathway to the house behind him. A young woman, presumably his mother, is standing at the stove with her back to him. She turns around, sees what has happened to him and his bike, and smiles sympathetically. Moments later, the young Ego is seated at a table in the kitchen. His mother places a steaming bowl in front of him, filled with a more traditional stew-like

¹⁹ Screen shot by the author from Bird, 2007.

ratatouille, and touches his cheek tenderly. He takes a bite, and the scene cuts back to the present. Ego remains frozen in shock for a moment, and then his face is transformed by a smile. He eagerly devours the rest of the dish. [Figure 3.4]



Figure 3.4/Anton Ego, Before and After²⁰

Ratatouille reinforces culinary hierarchies, particularly the idea that food can rise to the level of art and that creating and appreciating true culinary art requires a sensitive, refined palate. The synesthesia scenes equate flavor with sound and color, the raw materials of music and visual arts like painting. In order to create a ratatouille with the appearance of *haute cuisine*, the filmmakers consulted with Thomas Keller, the owner and head chef of The French Laundry in Yountville, California and Per Se in New York City, both of which have three Michelin stars, the highest rating awarded by the prestigious international restaurant guide books published by the French tire manufacturer.²¹ However, the film rejects the idea that taste hierarchies are based on elitist traditions. Great cooking in *Ratatouille* is not about “fancy” food that rich people like because they’re snobs. The film portrays fine dining as genuinely superior in ways that anyone with an innately sensitive or well-trained palate will appreciate. In other words, it portrays culinary hierarchies as meritocratic (based on achievement) rather

²⁰ Screen shots by the author from Bird, 2007.

²¹ Stacy Finz, “Bay Area Flavors Food Tale,” *San Francisco Gate*, 28 June 2007, Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

than aristocratic (based on wealth or hereditary ties to power).

Making *Ratatouille* More Inclusive

Remy's singularly magic touch reinforces popular taste hierarchies by portraying fine dining as objectively superior. The film suggests anyone with the proper skill will identify the same foods as delicious. Its message may be formally inclusive, ie. anyone *can* have a discerning palate or great cooking skills, but functionally exclusive: most people do not. Rather than promoting the *inclusive* construction of good taste implied by the motto "Anyone can cook," or portraying access to the kind of cultural capital represented by gourmet food as available to the masses, *Ratatouille* supports an *exclusive* construction of good taste as something that by definition only a few can achieve. It also works to legitimate that hierarchy by rejecting the notion that access to good taste is based on social origins or privilege. Ego's concession to inclusiveness doesn't represent a relaxation of his exacting standards; he merely acknowledges that the criteria for admission are based on virtues that anyone *can* have, even if very few people *do*. The hierarchical construction of culinary sophistication is legitimated by a meritocracy of taste: the belief that good taste isn't bred but is instead built from innate talent, hard work, and virtues like courage and integrity (expressed in the film as being "true to yourself").

Reviews by American critics and audiences suggest that the widespread appeal of the film's meritocratic message was key to the film's popular success and critical acclaim. *Ratatouille* won the 2007 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film and was nominated for four others. It was only the fourth animated film to be nominated for Best Original Screenplay. It was also the 11th highest-grossing film of 2007 in the U.S., and as of 2011, it is still the 101th highest grossing film of all time.²² According to Rotten

²² Based on over \$206 million in box office sales earned during its wide release, between July 01, 2007 and December 09, 2007. "2007 Domestic Grosses," *Box Office Mojo* (an IMDb company), Web (accessed 09 March 2011). "All Time USA Box Office," The Internet Movie Database (an Amazon.com

Tomatoes, a review aggregation site that codes reviews as either positive or negative, an overwhelming 96 percent of 213 professional critics' reviews were positive. In addition, nearly one million audience members have rated the film for the site, 84 percent of which were positive.²³ On Metacritic, which translates reviews into numerical grades out of 100, *Ratatouille* has an average grade of 96 based on 37 critics, which easily qualifies as “universal acclaim” and places it in a tie for the 21st highest-rated film on the site. Nearly 500 Metacritic users have given the film an average grade of 8.6 out of 10.²⁴ Both the nomination for the Best Original Screenplay Oscar and the reviews written by critics and registered users on Metacritic and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) praise the story and its message, which they generally identify as: 1) food can be a form of art and 2) anyone can succeed with enough determination and hard work, so you should “follow your dreams” and “never give up.”

Only a few reviewers interpreted the film's message as exclusive. In the first paragraph of A.O. Scott's review in *The New York Times*, he invokes Ego's quote “Not everyone can be a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere,” and succinctly affirms: “Quite so.” Later, he notes that this aphorism is “both exuberantly democratic and unabashedly elitist, defending good taste and aesthetic accomplishment not as snobbish entitlements but as universal ideals,” and calls this “sensible.”²⁵ However, most people who submitted reviews to IMDb focus on the *democratic* part alone, claiming the film is inspiring precisely because it shows that everyone, even a humble rat, can achieve greatness with enough effort. For example, IMDb user “Steверino171” says, “Remy, a rat with ironically refined tastes in matters culinary, embodies the film's adamantly pro-democratic theme of ‘anyone can cook,’” and describes the film overall as, “a powerful primer for the film's target audience on American democracy and the egalitarian can-do

company), Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

²³ “*Ratatouille* (2007),” *Rotten Tomatoes*, Flixter, Inc. Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

²⁴ “Movie Releases by Score: All Time,” *Metacritic*, CBS Interactive, Inc. Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

²⁵ A. O. Scott, “Voilà! A Rat for All Seasonings,” *The New York Times* 29 June 2007, Web (accessed 09 March 2011).

notion at its core.”²⁶ This interpretation suggests that the theme is democratic rather than hierarchical. Similarly, “Neil_fraser” says, “The basic premise of the movie is quite simple. Essentially it states that you can succeed, providing you have the talent and the tenacity to stick by your dream.”²⁷ Although qualified by the admission that talent and tenacity are required, the thrust of this interpretation is that success is possible for everyone: the generic *you* can succeed.

The selective focus on the “rat makes good, wows critic,” aspect of the film, rather than the fact Remy is the only one in the film who can really cook, points to how eager audiences are to embrace democratic, egalitarian ideologies. People not only believe that everyone *ought to have* equal access to things of value, including “good taste” and success, they often believe that is actually the case: that anyone can achieve success and its trappings if they work hard enough. *Ratatouille* was embraced as yet another affirmation of the American Dream. Audiences say “yes” to *Ratatouille* and the idea that good taste is democratic because there are rewards for endorsing ideologies that work to legitimate the prevailing political and economic system. For those with a disproportionately large share of capital and power, meritocracies reinforce the belief that they *deserve* whatever they can get. For those with a disproportionately small share, they reinforce the hope that if they work hard and act virtuously, they will eventually reap greater rewards.²⁸ For everyone whose worldview is shaped by the prevailing ideologies, meritocracies reinforce the belief (or hope) that the systems that shape their lives are basically fair and just, i.e. that skill, effort, and virtue are objectively and reliably defined, measured, and rewarded.

The Myth of Meritocratic Thinness

Brain: How are we going to get the Earth to lose weight?

²⁶ Steverino171, “This First Quality Film of the Summer.” *IMDb*. 09 March 2011.

²⁷ Neil_fraser, “Awesome,” *IMDb*. 09 March 2011.

²⁸ The less-successful often feel that they deserve what they get, too.

Pinky: I know! We can get everyone to go on a diet!
Brain: Diets don't work.
Pinky: Not even if you call them "A Whole New Way of Eating?"
Brain: No.

—Gordon Bressack, *Pinky and the Brain*²⁹

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the idealization of thinness is due in part to the fact that body weight is interpreted as measure of health, usually in a simple inverse relationship where the thinner you are, the healthier you are assumed to be.³⁰ However, it also relies on the belief that body weight is determined by elective behaviors. As Paul Campos points out, being male is *actually* correlated with an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and premature death. Being overweight isn't, but because gender is not seen as something people have control over, masculinity is not seen as a "problem" that men should "correct." Fatness has been constructed as something within most individuals' control. Thus, achieving and maintaining a thin body is widely seen as a personal responsibility. More specifically, it has become an article of faith that the key to becoming or staying thin is not eating too much.³¹ Exercise is generally seen as healthful

²⁹ Gordon Bressack, "You Said a Mouseful," *Pinky and the Brain* Season 1: Episode 48, created by Stephen Spielberg and Tom Ruegger, originally aired 14 November 1997 on Kids! WB, qtd. in Campos 2004: 140.

³⁰ NHANES analyses have repeatedly shown that the lowest mortality rates are associated with people whose BMI is defined as "overweight," or even "obese" for some demographics (especially racial minorities). Claims that fatness is inversely related to health also focus on diseases, and especially diabetes, because Type 2 diabetes is reliably correlated with higher BMI (unlike cardiovascular disease and cancer). However, according to Paul Ernsberger, Professor Nutrition at Case Western Reserve University, the so-called "epidemic" of Type 2 diabetes is just as suspect as the "obesity epidemic." He notes that there is no data to suggest that blood sugar levels on average are rising and notes that the increasing rate of Type 2 diabetes diagnoses might be explained by any or all of the following three factors: 1) the disease was probably under-diagnosed in the past; 2) in 1997, the American Diabetes Association and World Health Organization changed the diagnostic criteria for Type 2 diabetes from having a fasting blood sugar level of 140 milligrams of sugar per deciliter of blood to 126 mg per dl, a change that resulted in millions of Americans becoming "diabetic" overnight; 3) the widespread use of telephone surveys in studies that claim diabetes has increased, which may count people who have been told they are "borderline diabetic" or "pre-diabetic" but do not meet the diagnostic criteria. There is also some evidence to suggest that weight-cycling, which is by far the most common result of dieting for weight loss, may increase the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, so if the disease is more common now, that might be due to the increased prevalence of weight-loss dieting (Campos, 2004: 22).

³¹ "Too much" may refer to total caloric intake, total or percent of dietary fat, especially saturated or animal fats, and total or percent of dietary carbohydrate, especially refined carbohydrates. Among macronutrients, only protein remains innocent, perhaps because it is physiologically impossible for humans to derive more than 30-35% of their caloric intake from protein or ingest more than approximately 200grams per day without exceeding the liver's capacity to convert excess nitrogen to

and admirable but optional if you can be thin without it. And exercise is not seen as sufficient to be thin on its own, without dietary moderation or restriction. Especially since the 1980s, this has become a form of common sense: we all *know* that you must not eat too much if you want to be thin.³² What this belief amounts to is a meritocracy of thinness: a set of beliefs, aesthetics, and practices that are fundamentally based on the assumption that anyone can be thin if they eat “right” and therefore, that a person's thinness or fatness is something they *earn* and *deserve*.

Almost a century of research on dietary interventions aimed at producing long-term weight loss suggests that this ideology is entirely false. It does not just exclude a few outliers or underestimate the influence of genetic or structural factors that affect body size; it contradicts the results of all weight-loss dieting research and the vast majority of weight-loss dieters' personal experiences. People who are able to achieve thinness by eating less are the rare exception, and there is no evidence to suggest that their exceptional “success” is due to better-than-average intelligence, willpower, determination, or any other kind of meritorious skill or effort. A whole host of doctors, scientists, nutritionists, psychologists, sociologists, historians political scientists, eating disorder specialists, lawyers, feminists and self-identified fat activists have examined the research and reached the same conclusion: most fat people can not lose weight by dieting (i.e. eating less).

The most common result of weight-loss dieting is temporary weight loss followed by re-gain, also known as weight-cycling. Weight-cycling is associated with significant increases in risk for Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mortality. Indeed, the

urea. The lethal results of high protein diets gave rise to the term “rabbit starvation,” originally adapted by anthropologist Vilhjámur Stefánsson from a similar phrased used by Inuit populations he lived with. Rabbit is a very lean source of protein, and according to Stefánsson, the Inuit had observed that after about a week of eating only rabbit, people would begin to suffer from diarrhea, headache, fatigue, discomfort, and hunger. Without a source of dietary fat, they would eventually die, even if they ate enough rabbit to feel continually full or appeared to still have stores of body fat. Vilhjámur Stefánsson, *The Fat of the Land: Not By Bread Alone* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1956: 30).

³² Which most people do because fatness is portrayed as unhealthy, ugly, irresponsible, and shameful.

negative effects of weight-cycling may be responsible for some of the weak correlations between very high BMI, poor health, and premature death.³³ To date, there is not one study that shows that a randomly-selected group overweight or obese people can achieve a “healthy” weight through dietary modification, or any other method. Even people who undergo weight-loss surgery typically do not achieve a “healthy” weight.³⁴ This is also why there has yet to be a single study showing that a randomly-selected group of overweight or obese people can achieve long-term health benefits by achieving a “normal” or “healthy” weight: we don't know if that's true because no one knows how to take a group of fat people and make enough of them thin enough for long enough to evaluate.

The Medical Research

Virtually every study of weight-loss dieting that has followed participants for longer than six months has found that the vast majority of dieters regain all the weight

³³ See Montani *et al*, “Weight Cycling During Growth and Beyond as a Risk Factor for Later Cardiovascular Diseases: The ‘Repeated Overshoot’ Theory,” *International Journal of Obesity* 4 (2006): S58-66; Strohacker and McFarlin, “Influence of Obesity, Physical Inactivity, and Weight Cycling on Chronic Inflammation,” *Frontiers in Bioscience* (Elite edition) 1:2 (2010): 98-104; Anastasiou *et al*, “Fitness and Weight Cycling in Relation to Body Fat and Insulin Sensitivity in Normal-Weight Young Women,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 110 (2010): 280-4; Luo *et al*, “Body Size, Weight Cycling, and Risk of Renal Cell Carcinoma Among Postmenopausal Women: The Women’s Health Initiative (United States),” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 166 (2007): 752-9; Hamm *et al*, “Large Fluctuations in Body Weight During Young Adulthood and Twenty-five Year Risk of Coronary Death in Men,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 129 (1989): 312-8; Iribarren *et al*, “Association of Weight Loss and Weight Fluctuation with Mortality Among Japanese American Men,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 333 (1995): 686-92; Lissner *et al*, “Body Weight and Variability in Mortality in the Gothenburg Prospective Studies of Men and Women,” in *Obesity in Europe*, eds. Bjorntorp and Rossner (1989: 55-60); Brownell and Rodin, “Medical, Metabolic, and Psychological Effects of Weight Cycling,” *Archives of Internal Medicine* 154 (1994): 1325-31.

³⁴ In most studies of weight-loss surgery, the surgery is considered a “success” if the patient loses half of their “excess” weight; however, for most patients who qualify for weight-loss surgery, that amount of weight loss is not sufficient to make them a “normal” or “healthy” weight. Most of them remain “obese.” The post-surgery weight-loss nadir occurs approximately two years after the surgery and in post studies is around 26, which falls in the BMI range defined as “overweight.” After five or more years, average BMI is usually around 33, or “obese.” Many of these patients are nonetheless considered surgical “successes.” Sources: M. Kruseman *et al*, “Dietary, weight, and psychological changes among patients with obesity, 8 years after gastric bypass,” *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 110.4 (April 2010): 527-34; Nicolas V. Christou *et al*, “Weight Gain After Short- and Long-Limb Gastric Bypass Patients Followed for Longer Than 10 Years,” *Annals of Surgery* 244.5 (November 2006): 734-740 and sources cited therein.

they lose initially, if not more. As early as 1959, long-term studies began to cast doubt on the efficacy of dieting. A study conducted by a hospital nutrition clinic, in which caloric consumption was strictly regulated, concluded that dieting was ineffective for ninety-five percent of participants. One of the few weight-loss studies involving subjects who were randomly-assigned to control or intervention groups and followed for more than one year is a 1995 study by Robert W. Jeffrey and Rena Wing, epidemiologists at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. They recruited 202 participants between the ages of 25 and 45 who were between 14-32 kg above the MetLife weight standards and assigned them randomly to one of five experimental groups described as follows:

1. A control group, which received no intervention.
2. A standard behavior therapy (SBT) group that participated in group counseling sessions once per week for the first 20 weeks and once per month thereafter, with weekly weigh-ins between sessions. Behavioral counseling included instruction on diet, exercise, and behavior modification techniques. Dietary goals were assigned at 1,000 or 1,500 kcal per day depending on initial body weight. Exercise recommendations were to walk or bike 5 days per week, beginning with a weekly goal of 250 kcal per week and gradually increasing to 1,000 kcal per week. Participants were asked to keep eating and exercise diaries regularly throughout the program.
3. Participants in the third treatment group, SBT + food, were given SBT and also were provided with food each week for 18 months. Food consisted of premeasured and packaged dinners and breakfasts for 5 days per week.
4. The fourth treatment condition, SBT + incentives, consisted of SBT plus an incentive program through which each participant could earn financial rewards up to \$25 per week for achieving and maintaining weight loss.
5. The last treatment group, SBT + food + incentives, included all of the treatment elements described earlier in combination (i.e., SBT, food provision, and incentives).³⁵

In addition to examining the subjects throughout the 18 months of the treatment, the participants were contacted at 30 months (a full year after the study ended) for an additional follow-up, which was completed by 177 (88%) of the original participants.

All of the treatment groups lost weight during the intervention, achieving their

³⁵ RW Jeffrey and RR Wing, "Long-term Effects of Interventions for Weight Loss Using Food Provision and Monetary Incentives," *Journal of Consulting in Clinical Psychology* v. 63: 5 (1995): 794.

maximum results at six months. However, by twelve months, even though they were all still receiving the treatment, they were beginning to regain weight. At 30 months, there was no significant difference between any of the treatment groups and the control group. The authors conclude, “The overall results of this evaluation reemphasize the important point that maintaining weight loss in obese patients is a difficult and persistent problem.”³⁶ [Figure 3.5]

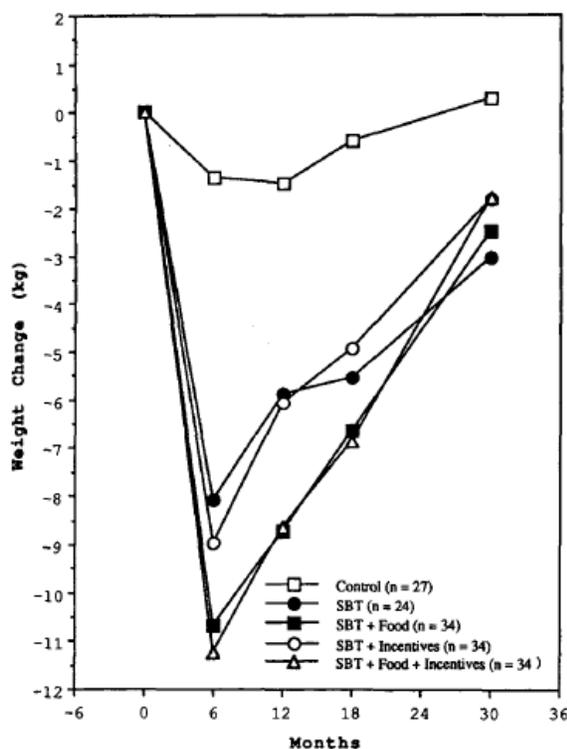


Figure 3.5/ Jeffrey and Wing (1995)³⁷

At least fifteen review articles that survey decades worth of weight-loss studies have consistently reached the same conclusion. In 2007, a team of UCLA researchers reviewed 31 weight-loss studies in order to develop recommendations for Medicare regarding obesity prevention. They were only able to find seven studies of weight-loss dieting involving participants that had been randomly assigned to diet or control groups

³⁶ RW Jeffrey and RR Wing, “Long-term Effects of Interventions for Weight Loss Using Food Provision and Monetary Incentives,” *Journal of Consulting in Clinical Psychology* v. 63: 5 (1995): 793-6.

³⁷ Jeffrey and Wing 1995: 795.

and followed for at least two years (which they define as the “gold standard” required to make causal claims about the effects of dieting). Statistically-significant differences between the diet and control groups were only found in three of the studies, and even in those three studies, the amount of weight loss maintained was too small to be medically significant. Across all seven studies, the average weight loss maintained was 1.1 kg (2.4 lb), ranging from a high of 4.7 kg (10.4 lbs) in the study with the shortest follow-up time to a gain of 1.8 kg (3.9 lb). The authors note, “It is hard to call these obesity treatments effective when participants maintain such a small weight loss. Clearly these participants remain obese.”³⁸

Mann *et al* also examined 14 studies with long-term follow-up that didn’t include control groups. The average initial weight loss in those studies was 14 kg (30.8 lb), but in the long-term follow-ups, participants typically gained back all but 3 kg (6.6 lb). Of the eight studies that tracked how many participants weighed more at the follow-up than before they went on the diet, the average was 41% with a range of 29%-64%, and in every case was higher than the percentage of participants who maintained their initial weight loss. Participants were more likely to *regain more weight than they initially lost* than they were to maintain their initial weight loss. Although Mann *et al* describe several problems with these studies, like low participation rates in the long-term follow-ups, heavy reliance on self-reporting as the primary or only measure of weight, and failure to control for the likelihood that some of participants were already dieting again at the follow-up, they note that those factors should have biased the results in the direction of showing greater weight-loss and better long-term maintenance, not less and worse.

Finally, Mann *et al* looked at ten long-term studies that did not assign participants to “diet” or “non diet” conditions randomly. In general, these were observational studies that assessed dieting behavior and weight at a baseline time and

³⁸ Mann *et al*, “Medicare’s Search for Effective Obesity Treatments: Diets Are Not the Answer,” *American Psychologist* 62 No. 3(2007): 223.

then followed up with participants to assess self-selected dieting behaviors and measure changes in weight over time. Of those studies, only one found that dieting led to weight loss over time, two showed no relationship between dieting at the baseline and long-term weight gain, and seven showed that dieting at the baseline was associated with to weight gain. Based on the results of all thirty-one studies, they conclude:

It appears that dieters who manage to sustain a weight loss are the rare exception, rather than the rule. Dieters who gain back more weight than they lost may very well be the norm, rather than an unlucky minority. If Medicare is to fund an obesity treatment, it must lead to sustained improvements in weight and health for the majority of individuals. It seems clear to us that dieting does not.³⁹

Fourteen other, earlier review articles published in peer-reviewed journals reach the same conclusion.⁴⁰ In most studies, most participants in weight-loss diet interventions lose weight for the first six months, and then begin to regain. A majority of participants regain most of the initial weight lost by the one year mark. Over 90 percent regain all of the weight within three years. Additionally, between 30 to 40 percent usually regain more weight than they initially lost, which is far greater than the five to ten percent who maintain the weight loss. Despite these dismal results, and the risks of weight-cycling, the original studies often conclude, quite mysteriously, that dieting *promotes* weight-loss and health.

Blaming the Victim

The 1987 review of 20 years of long-term weight loss research led by Robert W. Jeffrey, a professor of epidemiology and public health at the University of Minnesota described the pattern of weight loss and regain among patients who participate in behavioral treatments for obesity as “remarkably consistent.”⁴¹ This consistency is

³⁹ Ibid, 230.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey et al 2000, Miller 1999, Perri & Fuller 1995, Garner & Wooley 1991, Jeffrey 1987, Bennett 1986, Brownell & Wadden 1986, Brownell 1982, Foreyt et al 1981, Wilson & Brownell 1980, Stunkard & Penick 1979, Wooley et al 1979, Foreyt 1977, and Stunkard & Mahoney 1976.

⁴¹ Robert W. Jeffrey *et al*, “Long-term Maintenance of Weight-loss: Current Status,” *Health Psychology* 19 (2000): 7.

visually represented in a series of graphs from different studies that repeatedly show a nadir between six months and one year of treatment, and then an increase back to the baseline, or even higher in the studies with the longest follow-up. They describe a wide range of different strategies used to induce weight loss, and lament that no matter what researchers do, most dieters achieve their maximum weight loss at 6 months and gradually regain all or almost all of the initial loss within 3-5 years. [Figure 3.6]

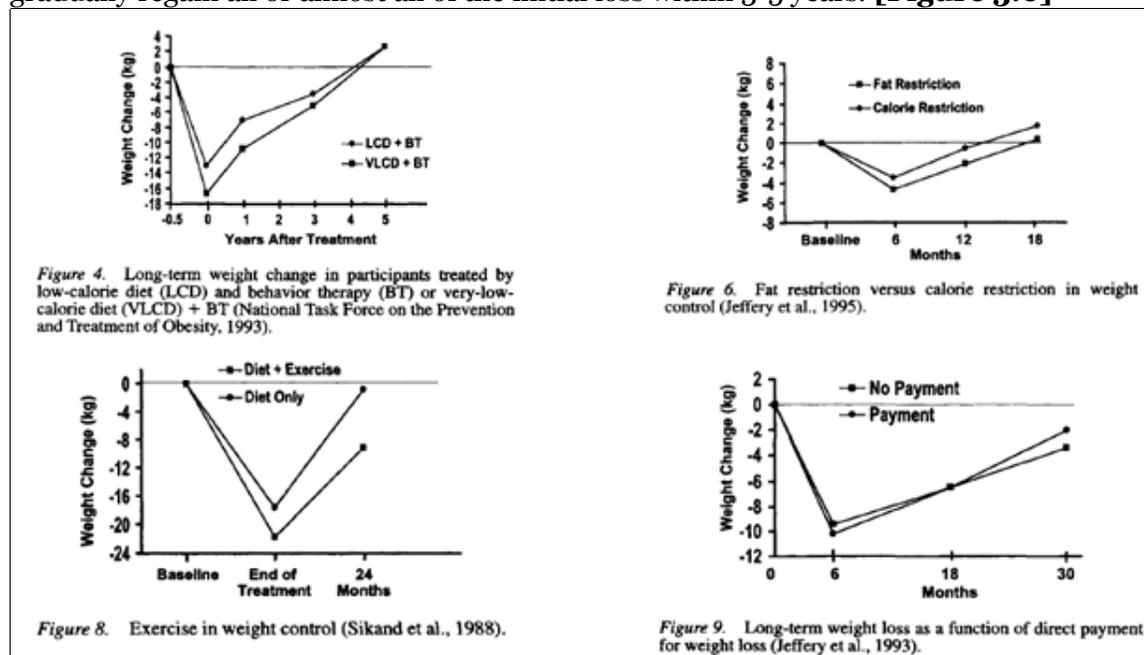


Figure 3.6/ Long-term Weight Loss Trends, Jeffrey *et al* (2000)⁴²

However, rather than concluding that weight-loss is impossible or that dieting is a poor strategy for achieving long-term weight loss, the authors implicitly blame the overweight people who “fail to maintain” the behavior:

The experience of people trying to control their weight is a continuing source of fascination and frustration for behavioral researchers. Overweight people readily initiate weight control efforts and, with professional assistance, are quite able to persist, and lose weight, for several months. They also experience positive outcomes in medical, psychological, and social domains. Nevertheless, they almost always fail to maintain the behavior changes that brought them these positive results.⁴³

The *diets* did not fail, the overweight *people* failed—worse, they “almost always fail,”

⁴² Jeffrey *et al* 2000: 8-11.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 14.

despite the supposedly obvious benefits of weight loss.

Jeffrey *et al*'s interpretation is consistent with the earlier findings of David M. Garner and Susan C. Wooley, two professors of psychiatry who set out to translate the available data about weight-loss dieting into recommendations for mental health practitioners seeking to treat overweight patients. After reviewing the literature, Garner and Wooley reversed course and advised *against* the delivery of dietary treatments for mild obesity on the grounds that none had proven effective. Instead, the focus of their article is the widespread failure to reckon with even earlier reviews questioning the effectiveness of behavioral (i.e. dietary) treatments for obesity. Garner and Wooley note that the tendency among the authors of the weight loss studies is to “advocate a critical attitude towards obese patients” and interpret the failure of behavioral treatment programs as “understandable only as a consequence of patient noncompliance.” One study they review even advocates increasing the social sanctions against obesity “so that being overweight would be a tremendously shameful thing.... Inculcated into the normal socialization process for children.”⁴⁴ Garner and Wooley accuse authors of “blaming the victim” for their ineffective treatments and call on health professionals to explore alternative approaches to addressing the “physical, psychological, and social hazards associated with obesity without requiring dieting or weight loss.”⁴⁵

For example, in one of the studies that Garner and Wooley review, researchers randomly assigned participants to three experimental groups: one received standard behavioral therapy (counseling about diet and exercise strategies aimed at creating a caloric deficit), one received a weight loss drug, and one received both the therapy and the drug. All of the treatment groups lost a significant amount of weight in the first 6 months, and all of the treatment groups showed significant re-gain by the end of the 18

⁴⁴ J. P. Foreyt *et al*, “Limitations of Behavioral Treatment of Obesity: Review and Analysis,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 4 (1981): 159-174, quoted in Garner and Wooley, “Confronting the Failure of Behavioral and Dietary Treatments for Obesity,” *Clinical Psychology Review* 11 (1991): 733.

⁴⁵ Garner and Wooley, 1991: 730-1.

month follow-up. [Figure 3.7]

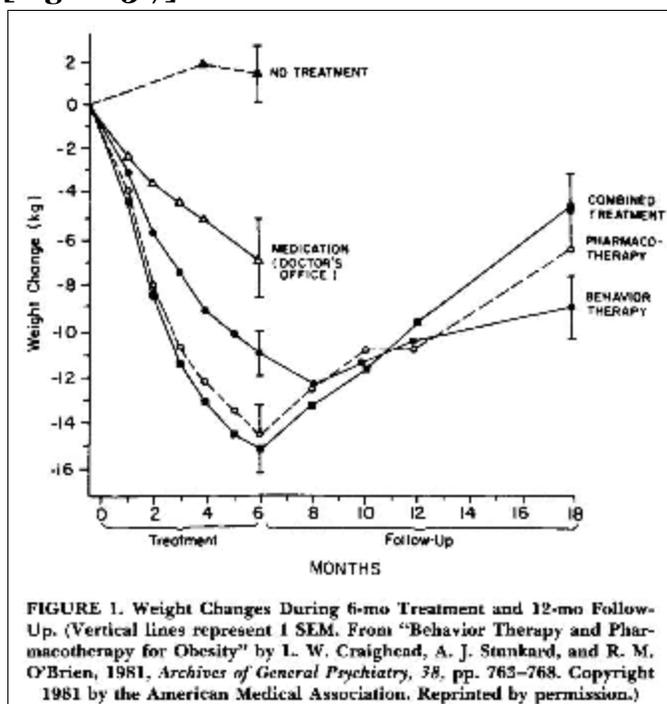


Figure 3.7/Craighead *et al* (1981)⁴⁶

Instead of concluding that all of the treatments had failed to produce lasting weight loss, the study's authors claim that their results provide hope for behavioral therapy, because that group showed the *slowest rate* of weight re-gain: "This most recent study provides grounds for optimism as to the future of behavioral treatment of obesity...over the long run, behavior therapy clearly outperformed the most potent alternative treatment with which it has yet been compared."⁴⁷

According to Garner and Wooley, Craighead *et al's* interpretation is par for the course in dieting research. After four years, nearly all participants in nearly all studies gain back nearly all the weight they initially lost, and yet, the authors of all of those studies insist that the diet interventions are "effective."⁴⁸ Sometimes they claim that if

⁴⁶ Garner and Wooley, 1991: 734.

⁴⁷ L.W. Craighead et al, "Behavior Therapy and Pharmacotherapy for Obesity," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 38 (1981): 763-768, quoted in Garner and Wooley, 1991: 734.

⁴⁸ Adams, Grady, Lund, Mukaida, & Wolk, 1983; Dubbert & Wilson, 1984; Kirschenbaum, Stalonas, Zastowny, & Tomarken, 1985; Murphy, Bruce, & Williamson, 1985; Rosenthal, Allen, & Winter, 1980; Bjorvell & Rossner, 1985; Graham, Taylor, Hovell, & Siegel, 1983; Jordan, Canavan, & Steer, 1985; Kramer, Jeffery, Forster, & Snell, 1989; Murphy *et al.* 1985; Stalonas, Perri, & Kerzner, 1984; Stunkard & Penick, 1979.

the participants had not dieted, they would weigh even more, even if the actual difference would only be a matter of five to ten pounds, reflecting just how deep the bias against fat runs. A lower body weight, no matter how medically insignificant, is heralded as a triumph while the negative health consequences of weight-cycling are ignored on the basis of the assumption that being less fat, even if you are still obese, must be a beneficial outcome. In many cases, the authors call for more “aggressive” treatments like very low calorie diets (VLCD or <800 kcal/day) or supervised fasting, both of which are no longer approved because of the risk of mortality. The ideas that people can and should be thin, and should be encouraged to eat as little as it takes to make them that way hold powerful sway even over researchers whose own work shows otherwise.

The “Exceptions”

A 2001 study by nutritionists at the University of Kentucky led by James W. Anderson claimed to challenge the “current perception. . . that participants of a structured weight-loss program regain all of their weight loss within five years.”⁴⁹ They performed a meta-analysis of twenty-nine studies, meaning that rather than summarizing and evaluating what those individual studies found, they lumped together all the data from all the studies and subjected it to new analysis. Thirteen of the studies involved “very low energy diets” (VELDs, which typically limit participants to <800 Kcal/day), fourteen involved “hypoenergetic balanced diets” (HBDs, which involve aim for a deficit between calories consumed and calories burned, but usually not as severe as in VELDS) and two involved both—in other words, they were all calorie-restriction diets, and about half of them required participants to eat less than 800 kcal/day. The authors claim that no long-term randomized, controlled studies were available (it’s unclear why they didn’t think studies like Jeffrey and Wing 1995 should count).

⁴⁹ James W. Anderson *et al*, “Long-term Weight-loss Maintenance: A Meta-Analysis of U.S. Studies,” *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 74 (2001): 579-584.

Anderson et al note that the number of participants in these 29 studies ranged from 6 to 504, the length of treatment ranged from 8 to 30 weeks, the average initial weight loss ranged from 3.5 to 37.9 kg for women and 6.2 to 44.2 kg for men, and follow-up participation rates ranged from 50% to 100% with a median of 82%. They aggregated the results of all of these studies. The average weight loss after five years for both VELDs and HBDs was 3.0 kg, or ~3.2% of the participants' starting weight and 23.4% of their initial weight loss. Anderson *et al* conclude, "These average values are higher than those reported in earlier studies and indicate that most individuals who participate in structured weight-loss programs in the United States of the type reported in the literature do not regain all of the weight lost at 5 y. of follow-up."⁵⁰ Indeed, they did not. The aggregated study participants regained 76.6% of their initial weight loss. Their claim that these results show that calorie-restriction diets are *effective* depends on a redefinition of diet "success" as the maintenance of *any* amount of weight-loss. [Figure

3.8]

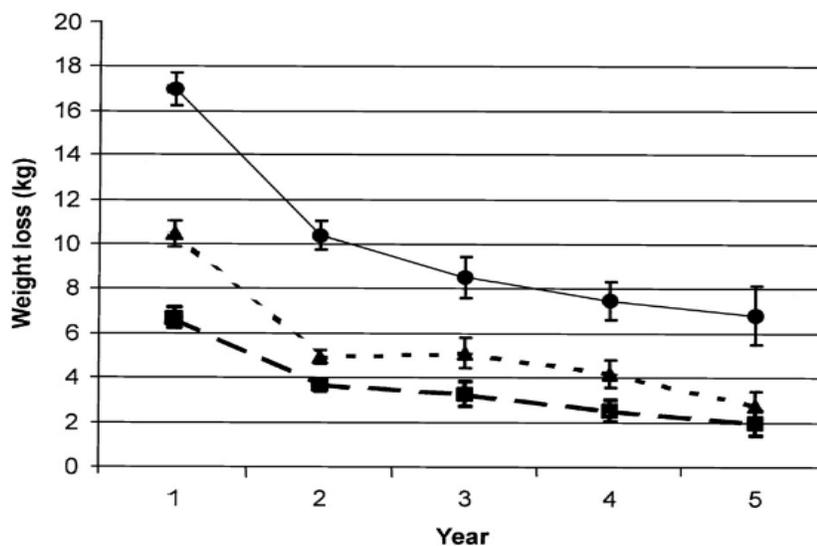


FIGURE 1. . Weight reduction maintained over time. Values are weighted means ($\pm 95\%$ CIs) for all subjects (\blacktriangle), subjects consuming very-low-energy diets (\cdot), and subjects consuming hypoenergetic balanced diets (\blacksquare). In the very-low-energy and hypoenergetic balanced diet groups, respectively, $n = 298$ and 152 at 1 y, 1307 and 650 at 2 y, 778 and 152 at 3 y, 688 and 152 at 4 y, and 337 and 36 at 5 y.

Figure 3.8/ Anderson *et al* (2001) Results⁵¹

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Reproduced from Anderson *et al*, 2001: 581.

The average initial weight loss in the studies was 14 kg; in individual terms, their assessment would be the equivalent of someone losing 31 pounds, regaining 25 pounds, and calling their diet a “success” based on the six pounds they had managed to keep off. Indeed, different standards for what makes a diet “effective” explains much of the difference between Anderson *et al* 2001 and Mann *et al* 2007; in the 14 long-term studies without control groups that Mann *et al* evaluated, they also observe an average two-year weight-loss maintenance of approximately three kilos. Since that amount of weight loss is medically irrelevant and certainly not enough to put any “obese” people in the “healthy” weight range, they do not portray it as evidence of “successful” weight loss.

Several studies also mention the National Weight Loss Control Registry (NWCR) as evidence that people *can* lose weight and keep it off. According to the NWCR website, they have over 5,000 members, all of whom have lost at least 30 pounds and maintained it for at least 1 year. Many registry participants have done far better—registry members have lost an average of 66 lbs and kept it off for an average of 5.5 years.⁵² However, as the research above suggests, that’s not remotely “representative” of people who attempt to lose weight. On the contrary, the entire *raison d’être* of the registry is to figure out what’s different about the 5-10% of dieters in almost every study who lose significant amounts of weight and keep it off. The registry’s stated goal is to identify strategies that might help other dieters, but as the researchers who run the registry admitted in a 2005 article, “Because this is not a random sample of those who attempt weight loss, the results have limited generalizability to the entire population of overweight and obese individuals.”⁵³

The kinds of things the registry members do are generally the same things the participants in most weight loss studies are counseled to do (or, in clinical settings, forced to do): most of them follow a low calorie, low fat diet, eat breakfast every day,

⁵² “NWCR Facts,” *The National Weight Control Registry*, Brown Medical School/The Miriam Hospital Weight Control & Diabetes Research Center, Web (accessed 08 March 2011).

⁵³ J. O. Hill *et al*, “The National Weight Control Registry: Is It Useful In Helping Deal With Our Obesity Epidemic,” *Journal of Nutrition Education Behavior* 37:4 (2005): 169.

weigh themselves at least once a week, watch less than 10 hours of TV per week, and engage in very high levels of activity (420 minutes per week on average). The NWCR has yet to figure out what makes those things work for them or makes them capable of sustaining those behaviors when most people don't or can't. Collecting 5,000 success stories does not prove that dieting "works" for most people, let alone that it's the norm. Somewhere between 45 million and 90 million Americans diet to lose weight every year, most of them by attempting to reduce their caloric intake.⁵⁴ According to a survey conducted in April 2010 by a private consumer research firm on behalf of Nutrisystem, thirty percent of Americans have dieted repeatedly—among dieters, the average number of attempts is twenty.⁵⁵ Unsurprisingly, weight loss attempts are more common among overweight and obese people. If calorie-restriction dieting *worked*, in the sense of producing significant, long-term weight loss, America would be a nation of very thin people.

Negotiating the Contradictions with *The Biggest Loser*

As public health authorities and news media are constantly reminding us, a large number of Americans are not "thin." Obesity has increased to the extent that it has widely been declared an "epidemic." In 2004, just months after U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Richard H. Carmona named obesity a national health crisis and "the fastest-growing cause of disease and death in America,"⁵⁶ a new reality series called *The Biggest Loser* debuted on NBC. It combines the single-elimination game show style of reality television, in which a field of competitors is narrowed down, one contestant per week

⁵⁴ The 45 million statistic was reported by CBS News in January 2005; the 90 million statistic was reported by PR Newswire in August 2010; the difference likely has to do more with the measurement than a 2-fold increase in the number of people dieting over the span of five years. Christine Lagorio, "Diet Plan Success Tough to Weigh," *CBS News* 03 January 2005, Web (accessed 08 March 2011). PR Newswire, "Cost of Weight Loss in America: Many Americans Would Forgo a Job Promotion to Lose 10 Pounds, Reports Nutrisystem Diet Index," 12 August 2010, Web (accessed 08 March 2011).

⁵⁵ PR Newswire, 2010.

⁵⁶ Richard H. Carmona, *The Obesity Crisis in America*. Released 16 July 2004, Web (accessed 14 July 2008).

until only one remains, with the makeover genre in which regular people get help from experts to solve problems ranging from outdated wardrobes to unruly toddlers.⁵⁷ For the first season of *The Biggest Loser*, NBC recruited twelve obese contestants willing to be filmed as they tried to lose as much weight as they could using only diet and exercise over the course of a television season. The grand prize for the contestant who lost the largest percentage of his or her starting weight by the end of the show was \$250,000. Even though the show wasn't part of the network's initial fall schedule, and therefore wasn't promoted with the rest of the fall line-up during NBC's coverage of the Olympics, 9.9 million viewers tuned in for the premiere. The ratings share amongst adults (ages 18-49) was a remarkable 4.1/10.⁵⁸ The third episode attracted nearly double the audience of Fox's heavily-promoted competitive reality show *The Rebel Billionaire* (10.0 million viewers compared to 5.1 million), which aired at the same time. The fourth episode beat out the simultaneous broadcast of *The Amazing Race*, a popular, award-winning reality series on CBS. At its ratings height, *The Biggest Loser* performed better in its time slot than any non-Olympic programming aired on NBC in 2004.⁵⁹

Most episodes follow the same basic structure. There is a re-cap of the previous episode, incorporating new confessional interviews with the contestants.⁶⁰ Next,

⁵⁷ Examples of the former include *Like Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *The Bachelor*, *The Amazing Race*, *America's Next Top Model*, *The Apprentice*, *Top Chef*, and many others. Like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, *SuperNanny*, MTV's *Made*, and etc.

⁵⁸ The "rating" is the estimated percent of the specified group tuned to a program in the average minute, expressed as a percent. The "share" is the percent of households or persons using television tuned into a program at a specific time.

⁵⁹ Steve Rogers, "NBC's 'The Biggest Loser' continues making ratings gains." *Reality TV World*, 23 November 2004, Web (accessed 20 October 2008).

⁶⁰ A common reality television trope where footage of individual participants speaking directly to the camera is spliced into the regular footage. Unlike some mansion-style reality shows, *The Biggest Loser* does not feature a "confession cam room," but contestants are frequently filmed in outdoor locations, apparently isolated from the rest of the cast. As there are often no indicators of when confessional interviews took place, they are prime candidates for "manipulative editing," where conflicts are manufactured or exaggerated to generate audience interest. According to Annette Hill, audiences are sometimes express suspicion of "confession cam" footage. I found less evidence of that skepticism in online reactions to *The Biggest Loser*; and suspect that even when audiences have a critical awareness that the characters and narrative may be manipulated by selective editing, they nonetheless use the information from confessional interviews in their judgments about the contestants. In *The Biggest Loser*, confessional interviews primarily focus on reactions to the Temptations and Challenges and to build anticipation for the Weigh-In, generally reinforcing the idea that central conflict in the show is the

contestants are shown going about their lives—getting dressed, eating, exercising. The first event in most episodes is the “Temptation,” in which contestants have the opportunity to high-calorie foods in exchange a prize. The Temptation is followed by an exercise scene or a healthy eating scene. The exercise scenes show them working at their physical limits, bodies straining, faces contorted in grimaces while the trainers bark at them to work harder. In the diet scenes, trainers or guest chefs show the contestants how to prepare low-calorie, low-fat foods featuring ingredients produced by the show’s sponsors (the two main ones being Jell-O and Jennie-O Turkey). Sometimes the contestants go out to restaurants to practice ordering low-calorie meals. The next event in most episodes is the “Challenge,” which tests the contestants physically, and also often has a teamwork element. Prizes for Temptations and Challenges fall into three categories: material rewards, emotional rewards like a phone call home, or in-game advantages a “pound pass” that can add to the weight loss for the purposes of the competition. After the Challenge, the contestants participate in a “last chance workout,” which precedes the weekly weigh-in

The concept of turning weight-loss into a competition not only assumes that weight-loss is desirable but also that individual weight-loss results are based on some common denominator and can be compared in a meaningful way. If individual weight-loss were acknowledged to be based on underlying biological tendencies, it would make little sense to reward someone who happens to lose weight faster than others. *The Biggest Loser* acknowledges individual differences in weight-loss results but simultaneously works to construct body size and weight loss a reliable indicator of self-restraint in eating and hard work at the gym. Furthermore, it constructs self-restraint and hard work as virtues that *anyone can* and *everyone should* cultivate, reinforcing the meritocracy of thinness in the face of contradictory evidence. Fans and critics of the

contestants versus their own weight, not between contestants. See: Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005: 173).

show acknowledge the contradictions, but overwhelmingly embrace the meritocracy of thinness represented by *The Biggest Loser's* triumphant narratives of weight-loss success.

Pathological Eaters and the Temptation Paradox

The show repeatedly frames the contestants' excess weight as the result of their pathological eating habits. They are portrayed as initially weak-willed and “emotional” eaters who turn to food for comfort and are willfully ignorant about the negative impact of their dietary excesses. The title sequence for the first season opens with a shot of a hamburger overlaid with the text “Do you have the will power?” The text remains as the hamburger fades and is replaced by a naked male torso that would typically be considered fat. The image cuts back to the burger and then to another large belly, this one with measuring tape wrapped around it, and then to a pile of donuts, each image echoing the others' curves, equating the round, squat, and presumably calorie-dense foods with round, fat bellies and bodies. [Figure 3.9]



Figure 3.9/ Do You Have the Will Power?⁶¹

Then, the scene cuts to an image of the contestants on their initial approach to the “Biggest Loser ranch,”⁶² implying that their presence, like their fatness, is the direct

⁶¹ Screen shots by the author. *The Biggest Loser* Season 1: Episode 1, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 19 October 2004 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 01 January 2008.

⁶² The “ranch” includes the house, professional gym, and extensive grounds where the show is filmed. Seasons Two and Three were filmed at the “Hummingbird Nest Ranch” in Simi Valley, California. In

result of consuming foods like hamburgers and donuts. The images reinforce the belief that people who get fat do so because they eat foods like hamburgers and donuts to excess and that people who remain thin do not.⁶³

In the first episode, host Caroline Rhea says, “Let’s take a look at your past” and a horse-drawn wagon filled with haystacks pulls away to reveal another set of haystacks covered with checkered tablecloths and food. The contestants’ names appear on placards spaced out among the piles. As the scene is revealed, several of the contestants’ mouths drop open, and some laugh knowingly or uncomfortably. “The buffet is now open,” Caroline⁶⁴ quips, “this is *some* of the food that you all ate last week.” The camera pans over piles of spaghetti and french fries. A contestant named Lizzeth exclaims, “Oh my gosh” and covers her mouth in horror.” They cut to an individual interview with Lizzeth in which she says, “I ate all that? That is gross. It kind of made me sick, like, I can’t believe I put that stuff in my body.” In between shots of popcorn, donuts, and slabs of ribs, they show an interview with another contestant named Kelly Mac, who says, “I didn’t need to be eating all that food. I’m five feet tall!” Another contestant describes the food as being “laid out like a body being laid out like a wake or at a funeral,” and says saying goodbye to it, “was like saying goodbye to a loved one.” The host calls these their “comfort foods,” and tells them to say farewell before entering the house because “after stepping through those doors you will no longer have this to comfort you.”⁶⁵

However, the same foods reappear frequently in two forms: as representations of the contestants themselves and in the Temptations. The former is exemplified by the

Season Four, the set was referred to as a “campus” instead of a “ranch,” but subsequent seasons returned to the word “ranch.” Viewers also generally favor “ranch” to “campus,” even when discussing Season Four.

⁶³ *The Biggest Loser* Season 1: Episode 1. Smith, 2004.

⁶⁴ I have chosen to refer to the hosts, trainers, and contestants by the names they call each other on the show, in most cases is their first names. In seasons where multiple contestants shared a name, they usually adopted a nickname (e.g. in Season One, there were two women named Kelly who were referred to throughout the show as “Kelly Mac” and “Kelly Min”). These are also the names that people typically use when they discuss the show and contestants in online forums and blogs.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

glass-front display refrigerators that line the walls of the “Elimination Room,” where weekly votes to determine who will be sent home take place. Each refrigerator is identified by an illuminated sign at the top displaying one of the contestants' names. The foods displayed inside are further associated with the contestants in interviews that confirm the show has selected their primary “vices.” When the refrigerators are introduced, Caroline says, “Inside each of your refrigerators is your biggest enemy: temptation,” which again suggests that the primary cause of their weight is their lack of self-control. The camera zooms in on a basket full of fried chicken inside the refrigerator labeled “Maurice,” and then cuts to an interview with Maurice in which he says, “I’m not even gonna lie to you. Fried chicken: that’s a southern boy’s favorite.”⁶⁶ The refrigerators full of “enemy” foods literally represent the contestants: they remain illuminated as long as the contestant remains on the show, and after a contestant is eliminated, the light in his or her refrigerator dims.

As each season progresses, the show begins to equate the “favorite/enemy” foods with the weight the contestants have lost. In Season 1: Episode 8, the five remaining contestants are led, blindfolded, to life-size cardboard cutouts of themselves as they looked when they arrived at the ranch. Each one stands next to a pile of their favorite foods equivalent to the amount of weight they have lost so far in the competition: 77 pounds of apple pie, 48 pounds of pizza, 50 pounds of fried chicken, 45 pounds of

⁶⁶ Maurice is black, so his reported affection for fried chicken evokes popular stereotypes about African Americans and soul food, which likely also works to reinforce the “validity” of the refrigerators as representations of the contestants. Every season of the show has included non-white contestants and contestants who espouse a strong identification with ethnicities now seen as white, especially Italian and Jewish heritage. “Favorite”/“enemy” foods often reflect racial or ethnic heritage, and are particularly pathologized as “comfort” foods that the contestants overeat for emotional reasons. On the other hand, the show also focuses on how foods seen as “all American” like hamburgers or the classic Thanksgiving meal can be comforting and fattening for contestants regardless of their racial and ethnic identities. The show has also filmed contestants cooking at home and adapting regional and ethnic heritage foods to conform to the ideas of “health” promoted by the show, usually by reducing fat content or substituting a no-calorie sweetener for sugar. The hosts and trainers never discuss race and ethnicity or address weight-loss challenges people might face based on their particular racial, regional, or ethnic background. By limiting the discussion of race and ethnicity to the contestants' own acknowledgment of the role their identities plays in their personal eating habits, the show resists stigmatizing particular identity groups and their foodways and suggests that regardless of cultural identity, all people can become thin and all foodways can be part of a “healthy” diet.

macaroni and cheese, and 44 pounds of spaghetti. The platforms are too small to hold it all, so some of it spills onto the ground, emphasizing how excessive and *gross* all this food is meant to appear. The host says, “You guys, you've all been carrying that weight around for so many years. And it feels so much better to be that much lighter.” The bad foods are equated directly with their excess weight, and the implication is that those foods were the primary cause of their “excess” weight and would cause anyone to become fat were they to succumb to temptation.⁶⁷

However, the contestants rarely express a desire to eat the forbidden foods, or eat to excess. While they are on the show, women are counseled to eat between 1,200 and 1,500 calories per day and the men between 1,500 and 1,800 calories per day. On rare occasions, a contestant will have a teary meltdown because they feel hungry or are confused about what they are supposed to eat. In Season 1: Episode 1, a contestant named Lisa is shown sitting at a table in the kitchen and crying while she says, “I'm just *hungry*. I don't know what to eat. I think I just overate chicken. I don't know how many ounces it was and then I put barbecue sauce on it.... I ate 595 calories in one day. That can't be enough.”⁶⁸ Later in the same episode, there is an array of breakfast food waiting for the contestants when they wake up including french toast, butter, syrup, and turkey bacon. Maurice is shown repeatedly reaching for the bacon, and his teammates shun him for the rest of the day.⁶⁹ But those scenes are relatively rare exceptions. For the most part, the contestants are portrayed as obedient adherents to their restricted diets. Indeed, they often express surprise at how delicious or satisfying the low-calorie, low-fat alternatives they're learning to make are.

They also express horror at how many calories are in the foods they used to consume regularly. In season three, the Red team's personal trainer Kim shows them

⁶⁷ *The Biggest Loser* Season 1: Episode 8, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 01 December 2004 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 01 January 2008.

⁶⁸ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 1: Episode 1. Smith, 2004.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

how to prepare a sugar-free dessert she calls, “Jell-O Chocolate Berry Bliss,” and several of the female contestants claim that it's something they can see themselves serving to their friends, who won't even know how many calories they're “saving.” However, even when they're eating approved foods, contestants are sometimes portrayed as pathological, out of control eaters. In the third season, Blue team trainer Bob enters the kitchen, where his team is preparing dinner after having lost that week's Challenge. He asks them what they're doing and they tell him they're preparing some white fish—the same food Maureen Dowd portrayed as the virtuous alternative to Obama's burgers. The show cuts to an interview with Bob in which he says:

“You talk to overweight people and a lot of them are emotional eaters. And when you're dealing with emotional eaters, when anything bad happens, they're gonna reach right for the food. Especially when you're dealing with people that are the size of the ones that are in the house right now.”⁷⁰

Bob tells them that instead of eating dinner, he wants them to go to the gym. Even though the contestants are preparing a virtuous dinner, their relationship to eating food *of any kind* is portrayed as pathological. Bob plays the role of the good conscience, helping fulfill the host's promise the show is going to inspire them to make the correct choices and force them to stop using food for comfort. One of the contestants asks, “Before we eat?” And Bob affirms that yes, he wants them to work out before they eat. Although they seem stunned for a moment, they dutifully follow him to the gym to complete the workout.

This pattern is consistent across season: contestants provide little evidence of their supposedly pathological appetites but the show portrays them as out-of-control eaters. Even during the Temptations, when contestants are presented with the opportunity to eat “fattening” foods, they almost never express a desire to do so. Instead, they agonize over whether the prizes are desirable enough to justify the extra calories.

⁷⁰ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 1, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 20 September 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

Emotional rewards, like the opportunity to speak to temporarily-estranged family members are often especially tempting. Contestants also weigh in-game advantages against the the estimated caloric content of the food they would have to eat, sometimes explicitly calculating how many minutes of cardiovascular exercise they will have to do to make up for taking the bait. Rather than displaying an irrational, pathological desire to eat the “fattening” foods, the contestants express emotional attachments to their loved ones (portrayed as natural and appropriate) and engage in what appear to be rational calculations about how the foods will affect their weight-loss goals. Thus, even within the competition, the food is is portrayed as a *disincentive*. The contestants may actually want to eat the foods, but getting them to actually do so requires additional incentives, beyond the inherent pleasures that they are supposedly so bad at resisting.

Despite being provided with additional incentives in the Temptations, contestants almost always decline the food. Even in first episodes of every season when the contestants are portrayed as self-control neophytes who still need to build up their willpower along with their muscles, they usually resist. In Season 2: Episode 2, the contestants have to sit at a dinner table where letters from home peek out from underneath platters full of “fattening” foods. They are told they can only read the letters if they eat what's on the plates. The camera lingers on contestants who lick their lips or stare at the food intently; however, when the contestants talk about the food, they universally say they do *not* want to eat it and express frustration that they would have to sabotage their diets in order to read the letters. One contestant, Shannon, is so distraught over not being able to read the letter that the other contestants begin encouraging her to eat the food, telling her she can work it off in the gym later. Ultimately, even Shannon resists. In other Temptations when at least a few of the contestants decide the prize is too good to pass up—as is often the case when they have the chance to win immunity from elimination—contestants generally eat the food quickly

and without much apparent pleasure. They also confer with each other as they attempt to track the calories they consume and strategize ways to make up for these dietary transgressions.

Nevertheless, the show explicitly claims the Temptations test contestants' ability to resist their desire to eat fattening foods, which is portrayed as the “enemy” they must conquer in order to become thin. The shots of contestants licking their lips are often repeated in the re-caps shown after commercial breaks and at the beginning of subsequent episodes, suggesting that it really is the *food* that's tempting, not the additional prizes, despite what the contestants say and do. The show also routinely frames the Temptations as preparation for the real world and all the desirable foods they will encounter there, obscuring the role of the prizes. Furthermore, when contestants do decide to eat, it is portrayed as evidence of their unresolved issues with food, not a rational calculation.

In Season 4: Episode 3, host Allison Sweeney introduces the Temptation as a “real world challenge” and a “simulation” of the kinds of temptations they will face after they leave the show. She tells the contestants that the show has set up a buffet full of their favorite foods, like pizza, brownies, and cupcakes. Each of them will spend four minutes in the room, and whoever eats the greatest number of calories will win a three-pound pass for their team (meaning for the purposes of the competition, three pounds will be added to their collective weight loss at that week's weigh-in). Allison also says that no one else on their team will know how much they ate. Only two of the contestants eat any food while in the room; both of them eat immoderately, but not in an apparent act of succumbing to temptation. Once in the room, Neil begins grabbing at whatever is closest to him with no apparent attempt to select favorite foods or enjoy them; at one point, he tips a small bowl of M&Ms into his mouth like a shot of liquor (replayed several times in re-caps). Patty also eats as if on a mission, shoving egg rolls, eclairs, and

handfuls of apple pie into her mouth. Both claim that their primary motivation for eating the food was to win the three pound pass for their team. However, Patty's teammates claim that she wasn't supposed to eat, and berate her until she admits that she “has issues.” Bob tells them he “doesn't want to punish” anyone but that his philosophy is “if you play, you have to pay.” He is shown working both Neil and Patty especially hard during the subsequent workout.⁷¹

The Temptations promote the idea that the contestants' weight loss is a hard-won battle with their pathological appetites and deviant habits. Rather than being sequestered in a clinic where they have no choice but to eat an approved diet, their weight loss is presented as a personal triumph over their natural inclinations. The construction of weight loss as difficult challenge whose accomplishment demonstrates laudable virtue is also what makes the competitive aspect of the show make sense. If the show instead focused on the remarkable consistency with which contestants are able to resist the tempting foods dangled in front of them and appear more concerned with the emotional rewards and in-game incentives, that would undermine both the ideology of weight-loss the show is based on and the logic of the competition.

The Correspondence Between Effort and Weight-Loss

The Biggest Loser attempts to construct contestant eliminations as fair, even when they are based on a group vote or the results of a single work-out, as in the Season 3: Episode 1. For that season the show recruited fifty contestants, one representing every state. In the first episode, all fifty of them are gathered at the ranch. In the first minutes of the episode, the host informs them that only fourteen of them will be chosen to stay. Based on their stunned reactions, this is news to the contestants, who may have thought they would spend at least a week and up to several months there. She introduces the

⁷¹ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 4: Episode 3, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Allison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 25 September 2007 on NBC.

personal trainers, who immediately begin leading the whole group in a calisthenics routine. In between shouting instructions to the crowd, the trainers run up and down the rows of people, asking individual contestants questions like “Do you want this real bad? How bad?” Immediately afterward, they return to the stage and choose seven contestants each to be on their teams. Each selection is followed by the trainer claiming to have seen something special in them, usually identified as “heart.”

Some of the contestants seem to invest in the idea that this initial elimination is based on some kind of merit. In an confessional interview with the woman from Vermont, who was not chosen, she says, “I thought I was going to die when we did the first workout in our rows. I kept thinking, like, you gotta do it, just one more time 'cause they're watching you and you know, maybe if I just get my legs up a little higher, I'll be one of the fourteen to stay.”⁷² After the chosen fourteen repair to the mansion with the trainers to settle in, the host gathers the remaining 36 contestants into a huddle to “let them in on a little secret”: they are not actually out of the running, instead they are to return to their normal lives and compete from home, armed with a *Biggest Loser* cookbook and workout DVD. The most successful among them will be invited back and have the opportunity to be crowned “The Biggest Loser.”

Audience members were split on whether this initial elimination was fair or appropriate. “Adam2010” on the online forum “Reality TV World” started a thread titled “terribly disappointed” that railed against the show:

If anyone saw the opening of *The Biggest Loser*, you probably felt as I did – angry. . . . They were told they would be given a DVD and book to help them lose weight. I'm not overweight myself, but my mother is, and I know that she is not unique in that she has tried every diet and read every book out there; another new book and DVD will hardly make the difference. . . . I encourage everyone else to turn the channel and watch something else; or better yet, get out and go for a walk!⁷³

Other audience members adopted what Hall might classify as a “negotiated” position,

⁷² *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 1. Smith, 2006.

⁷³ Reality TV World contributors, “terribly disappointed,” *Reality TV World: Biggest Loser* 20 September 2006, Web (accessed 18 November 2008).

expressing sympathy with Adam2010's belief that sending so many contestants home so quickly seemed unfair but holding out more hope for those who would be competing from home. A reply by "MizJasmine" noted that they had not been *eliminated* from the competition:

When they were picking the two teams, I was sitting there thinking this is like a bad dream. What are they basing their selections on? What made one person more worthy than the other?... BUT I also did see it coming that they weren't gonna be left out so to speak. In essence they did enroll them in their program and are using them as a type of promo.... one of the people who weren't picked for the teams could actually win this thing.⁷⁴

Another user named "jackandjill" sided with MizJasmine: "I agree that the selection process wasn't very fair and slightly mean, but to get the opportunity to learn proper nutrition, work with a trainer, and possibly win some money are good motivators."⁷⁵ Others offered what seems to be the dominant or preferred reading. A user named "skeetergirl87" said:

I kind of like what the show has done.... I think that they have more motivation to prove that they can do it without the ranch.... I think it's great for the audience, too...it's great to see that you don't need a personal chef and personal trainer to lose weight - all it takes is the right mind set and lots of determination and hard work!!"

The plurality of online commentary on *Reality TV World* and elsewhere seems to ultimately agree that the potential unfairness of the initial elimination will be righted by the rest of the competition, which they seem to believe will reward whoever works the hardest, wherever they do it.⁷⁶

Individual eliminations are also portrayed as merit-based. In Season 3: Episode 1, the Red team loses the weigh-in (meaning that as a team, their collective percentage weight loss was lower than the Blue team's) so they have to vote to eliminate one of their team members. The team is shown back at the house, reacting to the news. A contestant named Heather verbally attacks Jen. Both Jen and Heather lost four pounds that week,

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid.

but Jen's starting weight was lower, so she was the contestant on the team with the lowest percentage weight-loss. "You had the lowest percentage," Heather says, pointing at Jen, "So just know that. So don't try and lie to yourself or lie to anyone else. You had the lowest percentage because you didn't bust it." The show then cuts to an individual interview with Kim, who says that at first she was "shocked" that Heather "called Jen out," but that on further reflection, "I could kind of see it. I told Jen several times this week, 'Step it up.'" The scene cuts to a flashback of the Red team at the gym. Jen appears to be struggling while working out on an elliptical machine, and Kim comes over and asks, "What are you doing?" Jen says wearily, "I think it's called a break," and Kim barks, "Uh uh, there are no breaks here." The scene cuts back to the present, where Kim looks intently at Jen as she says, "Only you know if you're working 100 percent." The implication of the scene is clear: the scale has revealed the truth, Jen wasn't working hard enough. At the end of the show, her team members vote to send her home.⁷⁷

Participants in online discussions generally accept the premise that the largest percentage weight loss is a reliable indicator of who is working the hardest and therefore deserves to win the competition. In a discussion about who should have been the final four contestants of the fourth season, registered users on the Biggest Loser message boards hosted by NBC's official website almost all use the percentage weight loss as their only criteria. They also equate the amount of weight the contestants lose with the amount of effort they put forth. For example, a user named "Wizzykin" says, "Neil for sure. He was a workhorse - he lost 211 lbs. He absolutely deserved to be up there." Although all the contestants had been shown working hard all season, "Wizzykin" suggests that Neil's weight loss proved that he must have worked harder than the other contestants who, implicitly, did *not* "deserve to be up there." Many NBC forum participants are so invested in the idea that percentage weight loss should be the only factor in determining the winner, they found the results of Season Four frustrating because several contestants lost

⁷⁷ *The Biggest Loser* Season 3, Episode 1. Smith, 2006.

a greater percentage of their starting weight than the contestant ultimately crowned “The Biggest Loser.” A participant named “littlenicky2” writes that the season was a “fraud”: “On all the other seasons the winner of the show could say with conviction that they lost the most weight. Not this season. The winner of this season can only say he won it but did it through game playing.”⁷⁸

However, the contestants' bodies don't always comply with this strict, weight-loss based meritocracy. In some weeks, contestants don't lose any weight or actually gain weight despite spending hours in the gym and eating salads and sugar-free Jell-O. The first season of the show initially set up the competition between the teams as a mini-experiment, with the blue team following what the show called the “Eat More” diet with many small meals throughout the day that Bob promised would “stop hunger before it hits,” and the red team following the “Eat Less” diet, focusing exclusively on restricting caloric intake.⁷⁹ After the second week, when competitors from both teams lost very small amounts and several lost nothing at all or even gained weight back, trainer Jillian revised the diet plan, claiming that the contestants bodies were “hoarding” calories and they needed to “trick” their bodies in to starting to lose weight again.⁸⁰ When a contestant named Wylie lost zero pounds in Season 3: Episode 9, Kim told him it must be because he had been building muscle so fast, which weighs more than fat.⁸¹ In general, contestants fluctuate between good weeks, when they lose a lot, and bad weeks, when they only lose a little. Some contestants actively try have a “bad” week when protected by

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ The “Eat More” and “Eat Less” diets are mentioned rarely after the second episode when the trainer Jillian Michaels decides her team members should eat more to prevent their bodies from responding as if they're being starved. However, the core principle of the “Eat Less” diet—that people must consume fewer calories than they burn in order to lose weight—is the basis of both diets in the first season and all of the subsequent seasons.

⁸⁰ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 1: Episode 2, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 02 November 2004 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 01 January 2008.

⁸¹ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 9, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Kim Lyons, and Bob Harper, originally aired 15 November 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

immunity in order to have a “good” weigh-in when it will count.⁸² In at least one instance, a contestant also manipulated his weigh-in by drinking a lot of water.⁸³

Nevertheless, the overall trend towards weight loss is taken as evidence that consuming fewer calories than you burn can make anyone thin. In an online community called “Fat Fighters,” a contributor named “Renee” offered to “crunch the numbers” to figure out how dramatic losses, like a 16 pound loss in one week by a Season Three contestant named Amy, would be possible according to caloric arithmetic:

At 260lbs, she needs 2333 calories to maintain her weight if she is sedentary. Bob put his ladies on a 1200-1500 calorie diet, creating a 1100 daily deficit via eats alone. . . . I am going out on a limb and say they workout intensely 4 hours a day. . . . @ her size, she can burn 5000 calories in those 4 hours if she just walked or jogged. . . . Easily she burned 6000 calories. 6000 burned via exercise + 2100 daily deficit =’s doing the above for 7 days @ her 260lb weight is how she shed 16lbs in one week.⁸⁴

That doesn't explain why in subsequent weeks Amy's weight loss dropped to eight or nine pounds and then to four pounds for two weeks in a row, after which she was eliminated from the competition.

Differences in weight loss based on gender prompt the most active debate about the fairness of the competition both in the show and in online communities. Men typically start off heavier and lose weight faster. Trainers and hosts frequently acknowledge the gender gap. When the first two members of the blue team eliminated in Season Three were women, Bob told the one remaining woman on his team that she would have to work out “like a man” to stay in the game.⁸⁵ On the red team, a contestant named Wylie expresses a jealous admiration for a woman on his team named Kai, who

⁸² For example, Erik gains 3 pounds while protected by immunity. *The Biggest Loser* Season 3: Episode 7, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Kim Lyons, and Bob Harper, originally aired 01 November 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

⁸³ Neil gained 17 pounds in a Episode Seven by drinking a lot of water before the weigh-in, and lost 33 pounds the next week. Wikipedia contributors, “The Biggest Loser (season 4),” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 10 Mar. 2011, Web (accessed 14 Mar. 2011).

⁸⁴ Renee, “Be a Biggest Loser,” *Fat Fighters*, 2006. Web (accessed 18 November 2008).

⁸⁵ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 3, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Kim Lyons, and Bob Harper, originally aired 04 October 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

he says “loses weight like a guy.”⁸⁶ Kai was the runner-up for the grand prize, and at the finale Caroline praised her for losing the most weight “of any woman in the history of the Biggest Loser,” implicitly recognizing that the bar for record-setting achievement is lower for female competitors.⁸⁷ In all of these instances, participants in the show acknowledge that the playing field is not level but simultaneously imply that if women work hard enough, they *can* compete with men.

So the rules of the competition and eliminations remain gender-blind, despite evidence that the scale is not. In the second season, the teams were initially divided based on gender. They were rearranged after the women's team lost three weigh-ins in a row, but the “men versus women” theme was fundamental to the season's continuing narrative. Special attention was devoted to the fact that three of the final six and two of the final four contestants were women, which was supposed to “prove” that the competition does not inherently favor men. However, many viewers were still skeptical that underlying biological differences predispose men to succeed in the competition. In December 2007, after a man won the grand prize for the fourth consecutive season of the show, a user named “goofball” started a message board topic in NBC's online *Biggest Loser* community titled: “IT'S TIME FOR A FEMALE TO WIN!” In the message body, “goofball” elaborates: “Julie was the first woman who had a good opportunity to win and she still didn't. She looked fantastic and could not have lost any more! I'm frustrated and it's time for the show to do an all female cast.”⁸⁸ “BGSU_Falcon” agrees: “I'm beginning to realize that it's going to have to be an all women final 3 or final 4 for a woman to win.”⁸⁹ Many other contributors endorse the claim that women have an inherent

⁸⁶ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3:Episode 3. Smith, 2006.

⁸⁷ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3 Finale, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Kim Lyons, and Bob Harper, originally aired 29 November 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

⁸⁸ NBC.com contributors, “IT'S TIME FOR A FEMALE TO WIN!” *mynbc.com* NBC> Reality> The Biggest Loser> Previous Seasons Discussion Archive> The Biggest Loser: (Season 4) 19 December 2007, Web (accessed 14 March 2011).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

biological disadvantage that makes the competition unfair.

However, a sizable contingent of NBC message board participants disagree. They generally suggest that the fact that at least one woman made it to the final elimination in every season proves that women are capable of winning. Many of them claim that a victory based on adjusted rules would be unsatisfying. A user named “matthew_me” writes: “Last year, Poppi beat out 35 other people to win [the “at home” prize] by losing over 50% of her starting weight - if she had been in this year's final four, she would have been crowned the Biggest Loser with that stat!”⁹⁰ Another user named “gambitsgal45” agrees: “I want to see a female biggest loser to, but I want to see her win it fair and square. If they changed to rules to help the women, I wouldn't feel good about the win. It can be done... and I'm sure it will.”⁹¹ Some argue that implying that gender is an issue undermines the achievements of the winners. “Ryan_D” said: “Your frustrated that a woman has not won? I am frustrated that you are trying to cheapen the wins of every winner by claiming that the competition was not fair. They won fair and square and they had amazing accomplishments.”⁹² In Season Six, a woman named Ali was crowned the first female Biggest Loser, silencing most complaints about inherent gender inequality and reinforcing the idea that weight loss is an equal playing field.

The fact that most contestants lose significant amounts of weight by the end of the season through diet and exercise⁹³ offers powerful reinforcement for the hegemonic belief that anyone can become thin with enough self-control and hard work.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Some contestants have publicly admitted to the use of diuretics and laxatives to enhance their results and implied that those strategies are promoted by the trainers and other people involved in the show; however, the bulk of the weight loss is likely achieved through the dietary modifications and hours of strenuous exercise. Spokespeople for the show tend not to address the specific allegations regarding dehydration or laxative use; however, they insist that the contestants are monitored by health professionals and that “the consistent health transformations of over 200 contestants through nine seasons of the program speak for themselves.” Emily Friedman, “Former Biggest Loser Contestant Kai Hibbard Says Show Triggered Eating Disorder,” *ABC News*, 25 June 2010, Web (accessed 14 March 2011).

Inconsistencies prompt some viewers to question the fairness of the competition, but in general, the show and its audience work hard to make inconsistent results make sense with the dominant nutritional paradigm of calories in vs. calories out. Additionally, the overall weight-loss trends are widely interpreted as evidence that dieting can help anyone achieve a “healthy” weight.⁹⁴ Some viewers (and many doctors and nutritionists) have questioned the safety and sustainability of the rapid rate of weight loss portrayed on *The Biggest Loser*, but in general, they also conclude that the results “speak for themselves.”⁹⁵

Experts, Equipment, and Seclusion

Despite the dramatic results, both the show and its viewers struggle to reconcile the belief that *anyone* can lose weight through diet and exercise with the fact that the contestants have exceptional resources and incentives to do so. Many of them identify as the show as a *singular* opportunity or say it is their “last chance.” The show is a potentially humiliating and painful trial they are only willing to go through because their previous weight-loss attempts have failed and they are convinced they cannot succeed on their own. Most of the contestants have careers, typically in middle class professions like education or firefighting, and many of them have children. They often identify obligations related to work and family as barriers to their past weight loss attempts. The trainers also sometimes acknowledges that the kind of weight loss people achieve on the

⁹⁴ Gard and Wright note in *The Obesity Epidemic* that a review of over fifty years of research on adiposity suggests that less than half of individual variation in weight can be attributed to this sort of abstracted ideal of caloric metabolism or the strict measure of calories in versus calories out (2005). Nevertheless, as the show demonstrates, regardless of individual variations in hunger and satiety, muscle mass and development, metabolic rate, perceived exertion or effort expended, most people will lose weight if they restrict their consumption to the extent the contestants on the show do and exercise for four or more hours every day.

⁹⁵ Obesity experts like Xavier Pi-Sunyer and Albert Stunkard have called the show “humiliating” and “cruel and counterproductive,” although their primary concern is that the weight-loss achieved will not last, not that weight-loss in itself is unsustainable or undesirable. Similarly, contributors to the forum *Getting Lean* raise concerns about whether *The Biggest Loser's* methods are “safe,” but ultimately decide that the “results speak for themselves.” Travis Smith, “‘The Biggest Loser’ Full Review! Is it Safe?” *Getting Lean* 2005, Web (accessed 01 December 2008).

show may be difficult for contestants to sustain once they return to their normal lives. However, the show also works to reinforce the idea that the primary factors determining weight loss are available to everyone: self-control and willpower, both of which might vary naturally between individuals (much like a palate sensitivity) but which everyone is presumed to be able to cultivate.

In Season 1: Episode 10, the Challenge involves holding on to a bunch of helium-filled balloons. The last person to let them go will win a professional-grade treadmill, just like the ones in the *Biggest Loser* gym. In individual interviews, the contestants discuss the significance of the prize. Kelly says, “If there was one piece of equipment I would love to take home it would be the treadmill,” and Ryan emphasizes the dollar value of a professional piece of fitness equipment: “The fact that the treadmill was the prize was definitely motivation enough to win this. Jillian tells us they cost seven or eight thousand dollars.”⁹⁶ All of the contestants express concern that they will not be able to maintain their weight loss without access to the kind of equipment available to them on the show. However, the show also include a number of segments designed specifically to address that anxiety. The trainers sometimes have contestants exercise outside of the gym, during which they repeatedly remind the contestants that it's possible to work out *anywhere* and *any* time. In the second week of season three, the trainers take their teams to a beach, where they do yoga and run through the sand. Later that season, the entire cast goes on a cruise where they are tested on their ability to eat healthy foods in moderate amounts at the ship's buffet and must adapt to working out with the resources available on the ship. In at least one episode in every season, the contestants and trainers arrive at the gym to find signs indicating that the gym is closed. They do cardiovascular and strength training exercises outside to prove that “you don't have to go to the gym to

⁹⁶ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 1: Episode 10, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, Perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 21 December 2004 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 01 January 2008.

get a great workout.”⁹⁷

Some viewers, like Sarah Dussault, the Senior Video Producer at Diet.com who also writes columns under the moniker “the Diet Diva”, take umbrage with the show's failure to offer a more realistic role model for real-world dieters. In a column titled “Biggest Loser: Do They Eat?” she says, “working out 8 hours a day is not something you or I can do. Why do they show us footage of things we can't take away any tips from?”⁹⁸ A user registered as “ehaley” replied in agreement: “Just started watching it this season, and while I love it and feel that it's really inspirational for a lot of people, I don't know that it's setting the best example in some ways. Pretty much no one can lose 10 lbs a week in 'the real world' (which I suppose they do mention).”⁹⁹ On a message board on the site *Diet.com*, a user named “lifematters” expresses the same concern: “I think they lose so much b/c of the 24/7 attention to diet and exercise. We can all diet but not many have the luxury of several intense workouts in one day! Some of us have to work!”¹⁰⁰ However, most fans accept the show's gestures to “at home” success as evidence that anyone can lose weight, even if they don't have 24/7 to devote to their bodies.

Every season involves an “at home” period when the finalists leave the ranch and continue trying to lose weight at home, which is constructed as a test of their ability—or anyone's ability—to lose weight in the “real world.” In every season the show has also awarded a smaller prize to the eliminated contestant who loses the most weight by the finale, crowning him or her the “at home champion.” The third season involved the largest number of “at home” competitors with the thirty-six contestants sent home in the first week competing not just for the secondary prize, but also for a chance to return to

⁹⁷ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 6, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Kim Lyons, and Bob Harper, originally aired 25 October 2006 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 08 September 2008.

⁹⁸ Sarah Dussault, “Biggest Loser: Do They Eat? Plus Idol Weight Watch,” *Diet.com* 30 January 2008, Web (accessed 22 October 2008).

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Diet.com contributors, “Anybody watching The Biggest Loser this season?” *Diet.com*, 22 Sept 2006, Web (accessed 28 October 2008).

the Biggest Loser ranch and compete with the remaining contestants for a chance at the grand prize.

Contestants who achieve significant weight loss at home are given special attention by the show and help convince many viewers that people can achieve dramatic weight loss even without the special resources available to the show's contestants. In the same discussion thread on *Diet.com* mentioned earlier, a user named “reneesman” says: “I[t] goes to show that if he [Ken, eliminated in Season 3: Episode 6] can lose that much while at home, they aren't giving them some magic potion. When people ask me what I am doing to lose weight, I say, diet and exercise. So simple that it works. I know I can, I know I can.”¹⁰¹ Rather than focusing on the problem of finding the time to exercise for hours a day while also attending to other responsibilities of a job, family and home, the show suggests that the biggest differences between being on the show and going home are issues of self-control and motivation. Many fans echo “reneesman” in claiming that this proves that they themselves should be capable of losing weight.

The contestants' reliance on the expertise of personal trainers also challenges the idea that anyone can lose weight on their own. The show frequently creates drama out of the question of whether or not contestants *need* the help of the personal trainers. In Season Three, one of the costs of losing a Temptation was being denied access to the personal trainers for 48 hours. When Bob learns which contestants have been assigned to work out without his assistance for two days, he looks at Erik, the heaviest contestant on the show that season, and says, “You're screwed.”¹⁰² However, Erik has a good week at the weigh-in, which is later portrayed as a “turning point” for him and the moment when he realizes that he can lose weight on his own.

When the most successful men and women competing from home return and re-join the competition at the ranch, they struggle with the trainers. Both returners lost an

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² *The Biggest Loser*, Season 3: Episode 6. Smith, 2006.

greater percentage of their starting weight than the competitors at the ranch in the same time period, and their weight loss is a challenge to the trainers' expertise and authority. Jaron gets into an argument with Bob about whether or not the diet he's been following is sustainable, and Adrian worries in private interviews whether following Kim's advice will work as well for her as what she has been doing at home. Furthermore, in the final episode of each season when the winner is announced, the personal trainers are welcomed to share the stage with the finalists and applauded for their role in the contestants' weight loss; however, the winning contestants accept both the prizes and the credit for their transformations.

In the Season 3: Episode 10, when the final four contestants say farewell to their trainers before returning home, Erik admits to Bob, “the one thing that makes me sad about leaving here is you.” Bob reassures him, saying, “you are a man in control of his life again,” and introduces Erik to a cardboard cut-out of himself as he looked when he first appeared at the ranch. Erik begins to cry. He tells Harper, “You said you were going to save my life and you did.” Bob encourages Erik to talk about how he felt when he was “that big” and a morose soundtrack plays while Erik talks about how unhappy he was. Then, Bob turns the conversation towards Erik's accomplishments (mirrored by an appropriate soundtrack shift). He announces that Erik has lost 124 pounds, more than any other contestant in their time on the ranch, and says, “You did it. My friend, you did it all. And that's what I am so proud of. Look how far you have come. Because of *your* determination and *your* focus.” Erik cries, nods, and accepts the praise. Although the show invests the trainers with expertise, scenes like this one place the primary responsibility for weight loss squarely on the overweight individual's shoulders.

Tuning in for Success, not Schadenfreude

The weigh-in is the longest segment of *The Biggest Loser*, comprising the entire

second half of each regular episode and the entirety of the season finales, which are two-hour live broadcasts. Contestants don special outfits and step onto a giant scale with large flatscreen displays behind them and a smaller one mounted at their feet. The outfits put their bodies on conspicuous display: all of the contestants wear shorts, and the women wear only a sports bra. The men wear t-shirts that they remove just before stepping onto the scale. **[Figure 3.10]**



Figure 3.10/*The Biggest Loser* First Week Weigh-in¹⁰³

Jennifer Fremlin compares the moment they step on the scale to the “money shot” in porn, a normally private moment of vulnerability turned into a titillating spectacle.¹⁰⁴ Fremlin says she fast-forwards through the rest of the show to get to the weigh-ins. Based on the Nielsen ratings for season finales, she's not the only one. Ratings grow substantially in the second hour, when re-caps of the season finally give way to the final weigh in and the announcement of the winner.¹⁰⁵ According to Fremlin, the squirming

¹⁰³ Screen shot by the author, *The Biggest Loser* Season 6: Episode 1, written by David Braun, created by Dave Broome, perf. Allison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 16 September 2008 on NBC.

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Fremlin, “The Weigh-in as National Money Shot,” *FlowTV* 7 07 May 2008, Web (accessed 14 June 2008).

¹⁰⁵ The season five finale, which aired April 15, 2008 averaged 3.6 percent of viewing households during the 8pm hour and jumped to 5.1 for the 9pm hour according to Nielsen's overnight report. Wayne Friedman, “‘Biggest Loser’ Finale Scores Its Best Rating This Season,” *Media Daily News* 17 April 2008, Web (accessed 14 March 2011).

pleasure offered by the weigh-in is the public display of shame which shields viewers from the shame of their voyeurism.

They put their shame on display: at being fat, their exerted bodies wheeze and squeeze into spandex workout clothes meant for svelter shapes. Their exhibition becomes a cover for our own shame as viewers who, by participating in their humiliation, in turn abject ourselves.¹⁰⁶

Both the shame of voyeurism and the shame of the weigh-in rely on a deep-seated moral and aesthetic revulsion to the fat body. The televisual gaze that fixes on the exposed body on the scale may be punitive and most viewers probably do seek to distance themselves from the fat, exposed bodies.

However, the weigh-in also encourages identification. Like the contestant, the viewer waits in suspense as the false numbers flash. The drama of the show depends on the impressive bodily changes the contestants achieve by making weight-loss their full-time job, so audience members are invested in seeing the numbers go down, just as they are when weigh themselves in the privacy of their own bathrooms. When the scale finally settles on a number and the net loss appears, contestants pump their arms triumphantly, shout with joy, and usually, at least for a moment, look totally un-self-conscious about their bodies. Additionally, midway though each season, the weigh-in outfits change.

[Figure 3.11]



Figure 3.11/*The Biggest Loser* Mid-Season Weigh-in¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Screen shots by the author. *The Biggest Loser* Season 5: Episode 10, created by Dave Broome, starring Allison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 04 March 2008 on NBC.

Men step onto the scale wearing lose-fitting sleeveless t-shirts that hide their bellies, and the women wear form-fitting tank tops that streamline their bodies. Beginning with those episodes, the weigh-in is shown with a split screen. One side shows a video of them from the first weigh-in, fat and exposed next to their now-slimmer and more forgivingly-attired bodies. The show emphasizes the visual evidence of their success as a testament to the tangible rewards of dieting. People who fast-forward the show or turn it on just to see the weigh-in are tuning in for that, too.

Fremlin's reading of the weigh-in reflects a broader consensus among critics of reality television that the format succeeds primarily by putting people in uncomfortable situations to attract viewers based on their base, voyeuristic tendencies. The genre is often accused of having demonstrated to network executives that superior writing and acting are unnecessary expenses, and reinforcing undesirable social behaviors. Susan Douglas sums up critiques of the genre when she says, "We should appreciate that reality TV, particularly, traffics in and relies upon voyeurism, one-upmanship, humiliation and often soft-core pornography. . . . It exhorts us to be a voyeur of others' humiliation and to see their degradation as harmless, even character-building fun."¹⁰⁸ Some scholars argue that viewers derive satisfaction from seeing people fail because they get to feel superior to the "losers." A 2004 study at Ohio State University survey found that respondents who reported watching and enjoying reality television had "above average trait motivation to feel self-important and, to a lesser extent, vindicated, friendly, free of morality, secure, and romantic," which the authors suggested may lend some support to the theory that viewers watch to feel better about their own lot.¹⁰⁹

Cultural critic Lee Spiegel,¹¹⁰ offers an alternative theory, but one that nonetheless

¹⁰⁸ Susan J. Douglas, "We Are What We Watch," *In These Times* 01 July 2004, Web (accessed 20 November 2005). Annette Hill echoes this summary in *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (2005:7). She claims that the criticism fails to capture the immense variety in the genre, but implies that it may be accurate for the "worst" shows.

¹⁰⁹ Steven Reiss and James Wiltz, "Why People Watch Reality TV," *Media Psychology* 2004 v. 6: 368-378.

¹¹⁰ Currently a Visiting Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University.

depends on the assumption that reality television primarily portrays people as failures. He suggests that “only in America” could reality television become a “gigantically profitable object of diversion.”¹¹¹ Rather than arguing that reality television represents something new in American culture, he claims that Americans are drawn to the underdog figure because they identify with his/her failures:

[Reality] television consoles people for their daily failures and defeats rather than making them feel superior to other people's failures and defeats. Reality television replaces the glowing, successful celebrity ideal with gross imperfection and incontrovertible unhappiness. In a ruthlessly competitive society, where the market has become the exclusive arena of success, reality television shames the illusion of meritocracy by making universal the experience of the underdog, the bumbler, the unlucky and unattractive person.¹¹²

It's true that on *The Biggest Loser* only one person earns the grand prize in every season; however, the show doesn't portray the “losers” as abject or unlucky. At the end of every regular episode, the show provides an update about the eliminated contestant. Many of them continue to lose weight for a while after leaving the show, and they often talk about how they have changed their diet and exercise habits.

For contestants who have not lost a significant amount of weight, the epilogue often focuses on what kinds of “healthy” behaviors they engage in. Maurice, for example, lost an additional twenty pounds after leaving the ranch, but at 363 pounds did not look significantly slimmer than at 380. However, in an interview he says that he's enjoying healthier foods and continuing to exercise. The show also reports that he has been appointed to serve as a spokesperson for a Tennessee Department of Health program called “Respect Your Health.”¹¹³ During the season finale, all the eliminated contestants return for a final weigh-in and the one who loses the greatest percentage of their starting

¹¹¹ This is empirically untrue. There are versions of *The Biggest Loser* in 22 countries, and many other shows in the reality genre like *Pop Idol* and *Big Brother* actually started abroad. Perhaps the statement is a simplification of a softer claim like, “reality television has been especially successful in the U.S.”

¹¹² Lee Spiegel, “Reality in America,” *The New Republic* 16 June 2003. Web (accessed 20 November 2005).

¹¹³ *The Biggest Loser*, Season 1: Episode 11, dir. Brian Smith, created by Dave Broome, perf. Caroline Rhea, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 04 January 2005 on NBC. Re-broadcast on Bravo 01 January 2008.

weight is declared the “at home” winner and awarded \$100,000. Furthermore, the host and contestants who do not win either prize frequently riff on the series title, noting that they by losing weight, they are really *all* “winners.”

Dozens of critics, bloggers, and message board participants claim the show has inspired them and convinced them that they *can* lose weight even if their past attempts have failed. Some people even report being moved to do calisthenics while watching the show. A woman named Brenda Rizzo writes the following in a post titled, “Why the Biggest Loser?” on a blog called *Brand Liberators*:

I love Biggest Loser. I watch it faithfully every season. My husband wonders why. Is it because of the game playing, or tips on eating or the tips on exercise?. . . And what about those outfits? Why do they make the men take their shirts off to get weighed when they are at their heaviest?. . . . The real reason I love Biggest Loser is for the sheer fact that it works. I have struggled with weight my whole life and I just love to see someone have success with weight loss. For the most part – the past contestants have kept it off. Who else has statistics like that? ¹¹⁴

Rizzo specifically rejects the idea that she watches to see the fat bodies revealed by the initial “weigh-in” outfits and ties the appeal of the contestants' success to her own lifelong struggle with weight. She seems to be aware that most weight-loss diets fail, but embraces *The Biggest Loser* as proof that they can succeed. Rizzo doesn't claim to have lost a significant amount of weight—indeed, she may have more in common with the less successful contestants—but she wants to identify with the winners.

Perhaps the best evidence that *The Biggest Loser's* widespread appeal is primarily due to audiences viewing it as inspirational rather than taking voyeuristic pleasure in the display of fat bodies is the success of its licensed subscription weight-loss club and \$100 million line of weight-loss merchandise.¹¹⁵ Many of the books in the *The Biggest Loser Cookbook* series have spent weeks on *The New York Times* Bestseller lists, and the most recent diet book by trainer Jillian Michaels spent more than 30 weeks in

¹¹⁴ Brenda Rizzo, “Why the Biggest Loser?” *Brand Liberators*, GSW Advertising L.L.C. (an inVentiv Health company) 22 February 2011, Web (accessed 17 March 2011).

¹¹⁵ Edward Wyatt, “On 'The Biggest Loser,' Health Can Take a Back Seat,” *The New York Times*, 24 November 2009, Web (accessed 17 March 2011).

the top ten best-selling “Advice” books.¹¹⁶ There are also Biggest Loser-branded bathroom scales, kitchen scales, workout DVDs, stability balls and resistance bands. People are literally *buying into* the *Biggest Loser* brand.

The conviction expressed by fans like Rizzo that *The Biggest Loser* “works” for long-term weight loss is probably a significant driver the sales of the licensed merchandise; however, it is not supported by the experiences of the contestants after the finale. When the contestants return from the “at home” portion of the competition, they are at the typical weight-loss dieters' nadir. After approximately three months on the ranch, the contestants are sent home for another three and a half months before the finale. Thus, the dramatic results that conclude every season are precisely at the six month point when most weight-loss dieters reach their maximum weight loss. In every season, at least one contestant has lost over 100 pounds. In Season Three, nine of the contestants from from the ranch and another nine of the contestants competing from home lost that much, and the winner lost over 200 pounds. Although these results may not be typical, what follows for most of them is: they almost all begin to regain the weight they lost. In an interview with the *New York Times* published during the eighth season of the show, the executive producer and physical trainers estimated that only half of the contestants keep the weight off for several years. If they keep statistics on former contestants' weight, they do not make them publicly available. Contracts that the contestants sign before participating in the series prevent most contestants from talking to reporters by threatening them with fines of up to a million dollars.

Nonetheless, several contestants have publicly admitted to re-gaining some or all of the weight they lost on the show and challenged the show's assertion that its methods are healthy and sustainable. In 2009, first season champion Ryan told *The New York Times* that he had not been invited to the special reunion episode, and suggested that he

¹¹⁶ Weekly sales of both print books and e-books are reported confidentially to *The New York Times* and sales of print titles are statistically weighted to represent all outlets nationwide. “Best Sellers,” *The New York Times*, 20 March 2011, Web (17 March 2011).

had “been shunned by the show because he publicly admitted that he dropped some of the weight by fasting and dehydrating himself to the point that he was urinating blood.”¹¹⁷ Season Three runner-up Kai began writing on her MySpace page in 2007 about dehydration techniques that she had used, like working out in multiple layers of clothing, drinking no water for 24 hours before weigh-ins, binging on asparagus because it has a mild diuretic effect, and having a colonic before the finale.¹¹⁸ In 2010, she appeared on “The Early Show” on CBS, claiming that she had regained 30 of the 118 pounds she lost on the show in the weeks following the finale merely by drinking water normally again. By the time of the interview, she had regained a total of 70 pounds and claimed to be struggling with an eating disorder as a result of her experiences on the show.¹¹⁹ Her *Biggest Loser* trainer, Kim, confirmed some of what she said, telling the *St. Petersburg Times* that “she once saw a black trash bag sticking out from under one competitor's sweat shirt during a work out,” and that the producers “love big numbers on the scale” but downplay the role of dehydration in achieving them.¹²⁰

Season Three winner Erik regained almost all of the 200 pounds he lost on the show within two years of the finale. Discovery Health produced an hour-long documentary about his weight rebound titled *Confessions of a Reality Show Loser* that aired in January 2010.¹²¹ In the documentary, his *Biggest Loser* trainer, Bob, shows up at his house unannounced and challenges him to return to *The Biggest Loser* to weigh in during the Season Nine finale. Erik accepts the challenge. At the finale, Allison announces that after spending five weeks at the “Biggest Loser resort,” Erik has lost 150

¹¹⁷ Wyatt, 2009.

¹¹⁸ Kai Hibbard, “Completely Content Kai's Blog,” *Myspace*, 2007-2011, Web (accessed 05 April 2011).

¹¹⁹ CBS News, “‘Biggest Loser’ Contestant: Show ‘Hurts’ People,” *The Early Show* 18 June 2010, Web (accessed 17 March 2011).

¹²⁰ Eric Deggans, “Former ‘Biggest Loser’ Competitor Kai Hibbard Calls the Show Unhealthy, Misleading,” *St. Petersburg Times*, 04 April 2010, Web (accessed 05 April 2011).

¹²¹ *Confessions of a Reality Show Loser*, produced for Discovery Health (executive producer Alon Orstein) by Discovery Studios (executive producer Robin Sestero), starring Erik Chopin. Originally aired 06 January 2009 on Discovery Health.

pounds.¹²²

Special *Biggest Loser* “reunion” episodes reveal that almost all contestants regain at least some of the weight they lose on the show within a few years; however, the show obscures the apparent trend towards weight re-gain using the following strategies: 1) disproportionately featuring contestants from recent seasons, 2) featuring mostly contestants who have kept off at least some of the weight, 3) comparing contestants' current weight to their *starting* weight from when they entered the competition rather than their weight at the finale, and 4) featuring at most one contestant who has regained most or all of their initial weight loss. Thus, despite the producers' concession that only about half of the contestants maintain a significant amount of their weight loss on the show, the reunion shows paint a picture of near-universal long-term maintenance. Erik is the lone example of significant weight re-gain during the 2009 “Where Are They now?” episode,¹²³ and in the 2010 reunion, the only contestant portrayed as a failure is Ryan, the first winner who admits to being just ten pounds shy of his starting weight when he went on the show. His former trainer Jillian hugs him, and then berates him, calling him a “jerk” who learned nothing from her. Ryan takes personal responsibility for his re-gain, saying he struggled to incorporate the lessons from the show into his life at home but intends to do better and lose the weight again.¹²⁴

Although the reunion shows do their best to provide an unrealistically optimistic view of long-term weight-loss maintenance, for many viewers even the supposedly “successful” former contestants do not live up to the show's promise of universally-achievable thinness. A recap of the reunion show on the avowedly-snarky website *Television Without Pity* is peppered with comments like, “After a commercial break, we

¹²² *The Biggest Loser*, Season 9: Episode 19, dir. Neil DeGroot, created by Dave Broome, perf. Alison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 25 May 2010 on NBC.

¹²³ *The Biggest Loser*, “Where Are They Now? Special,” dir. Neil DeGroot, created by Dave Broome, perf. Alison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 25 November 2009 on NBC.

¹²⁴ *The Biggest Loser*, “Where Are They Now? Special,” dir. Neil DeGroot, created by Dave Broome, starring Alison Sweeney, Jillian Michaels, and Bob Harper, originally aired 24 November 2010 on NBC.

learn that five former contestants have decided to get off of their couches and get to work battling the childhood obesity epidemic. . . . Ed should maybe work on treating his own self again, because he's looking a touch hefty,” and “Sione is clearly very moved by his experience in Tonga. . . . At this point it feels tacky to mention that he's maybe put on a couple of pounds.”¹²⁵ The writer even notes: “Is nobody going to remark on the fact that the winners of seasons one through three have all plumped back up? This seems like a problematic trend.” Nonetheless, the recap ends by claiming that the episode was inspiring, and it's great to see so many of the former contestants looking “fly.”¹²⁶ At least for the recap author, the overall narrative of triumph overwhelms the seeds of doubt.

The message boards on *Television Without Pity* reveal a wide range of reactions. Some people argue that on the whole, the results are obviously good or “speak for themselves,” while others suggest that some regain is natural, but express concern about former contestants who seem to be “slipping.” After the second reunion show, a user named “chocolatine” noted only one of the contestants had kept off *all* the weight so far and that two contestants who had become personal trainers weighed 35-40 pounds more than at their finales less than a year earlier. “If they couldn't manage to keep their own weight off, how are they going to help other people reach their optimum weight?” the writer asks, implying that the contestants' “optimum” is the lowest weight they've ever gotten to. In response to people who claimed that some regain was natural and even healthy, chocolatine protests:

Most contestants are at a healthy weight at the finale, so if they regain 30+ lbs, they're coming close to the overweight territory again. I guess I was just hoping that, once the media circus is over, the contestants would continue working towards / staying at a healthy weight for their own sake. I don't mean keeping up the 8hr/day workouts, but a consistent regimen of intense workouts 3-4 times a week, coupled with a calorie-controlled diet, should get 99% of the population to a healthy weight eventually.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Potes, “Thanksgiving Leftovers,” *Biggest Loser Recaps*, 24 November 2010, Web (accessed 17 March 2011).

¹²⁶ Potes, 2010.

¹²⁷ *Television Without Pity* contributors, “‘Biggest Losers': Where Are They Now?” *Television Without Pity*, 19 December 2008, Web (accessed 15 March 2011).

Chocolatine's faith in the meritocracy of thinness is absolute; even though the contestants in question are personal trainers who exercise regularly as a part of their jobs, the body supposedly does not lie. Anyone who eats a calorie controlled diet and exercises three to four times per week should not be capable of becoming overweight. And if it was possible for the contestants to get there in the first place, it should be possible for them to stay there.

Given that *The Biggest Loser* as a franchise profits substantially from people believing that their methods produce lasting weight loss, the show's misleading narratives about weight-loss might be seen as a craven form of mass media manipulation. Critics of the public health campaign against obesity and overweight that has intensified since the 1980s often point to the fact that many of the loudest voices in the “war on fat” also stand to gain financially from more people believing they should try to lose weight. Obesity research in the U.S. is almost entirely funded by the diet and pharmaceutical industries, and scholars like Laura Fraser argue, “Diet and pharmaceutical companies influence every step along the way of the scientific process. They pay for the ads that keep obesity journals publishing. They underwrite medical conferences, flying physicians around the country expense-free and paying them large lecture fees to attend.”¹²⁸ Fraser also reports that many of the lead researchers on studies that claimed obesity was a dangerous disease had financial ties to diet products.

The conflicts of interest extend to the currently-accepted definitions of “overweight” and “obesity.” The WHO's International Obesity Task Force received funding from the pharmaceutical companies Hoffman La Roche and Abbot Laboratories, which manufacture the weight-loss drugs Xenical and Meridia, and was chaired by Philip James, a nutritionist who was paid to conduct clinical trials on both drugs. The term “morbid obesity” was coined by Howard Payne, a weight-loss surgeon attempting to

¹²⁸ Laura Fraser, *Losing It: False Hopes and Fat Profits in the Diet Industry* (New York, NY: Plume, 1997: 16-50).

justify the use of a risky form of major surgery to treat what may be primarily a cosmetic issue.¹²⁹

Jeffrey Sobal argues, “The medicalization of obesity as a process did not occur by chance, but was a process which gained momentum 'as medical people and their allies made increasingly frequent, powerful and persuasive claims that they should exercise social control over fatness in contemporary society.’”¹³⁰ Two unnamed “obesity researchers” told Campos that many researchers exaggerate the supposed health risks associated with obesity to get funding and engage in “data trimming” that would be unacceptable in any other field in order to get the results they want. Campos himself concludes:

In America today the medical and public health establishment has managed to transform what has traditionally been considered a vice—physical vanity—into that most sacred of secular virtues: the pursuit of 'health'.... The health establishment's constant barrage of scientifically baseless propaganda regarding the relationship between weight and health constitutes nothing less than egregious abuse of the public trust (2004).

His indignation is easy to understand in light of the pervasive distortions of research and conflicts of interest that have shaped the way public health authorities and the mass media portray fatness. The work he, Fraser, Oliver, Glen Gaesser, Michael Gard and Jan Wright, Paul Ernsberger, and many others have done to uncover and document those distortions is invaluable to anyone seeking to understand contemporary American ideologies about food and fatness; however, the story they tell is incomplete.

Audience responses to *The Biggest Loser* challenge the prevailing assumption that the “obesity epidemic” and increasing prevalence of weight-loss dieting in the U.S. were manufactured by a diet industry conspiracy. That line of reasoning resembles the “magic bullet” theory of communication. Widespread concern about the susceptibility of mass populations to propaganda in the wake of the world wars inspired the first

¹²⁹ Oliver, 2005: 55.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Gard and Wright, 2005: 179.

generation of mass media scholars, including Paul Lazarsfeld and Carl Hovland, to undertake empirical research on mass media effects. What they, and subsequent generations of communications scholars have found is that audiences do not, by and large, passively accept whatever mass media tell them. Furthermore, the idea that a pharmaco-medical-media conspiracy has deliberately perpetuated the myth of obesity does little to explain historical shifts in the attitude towards fatness, in particular the increase in concern about fatness in the last few decades. If existing anti-fat attitudes were so easy to exploit, why didn't earlier producers of diet wonder drugs cultivate a profitable hysteria decades earlier?

People who think calorie restriction dieting can make *anyone* thin haven't necessarily been duped by the diet industry. Many of them believe it because their personal experience seems to confirm it, often repeatedly. The meritocracy of thinness provides the narrative framework through which they interpret their experience, so rather than seeing their weight regain as evidence that dieting *fails*, they tend to blame themselves for their failure and assume that dieting works if done correctly. Even people who personally struggle to achieve a "healthy" weight often embrace the idea that they are responsible for their body size.

In January 2009, when Oprah Winfrey admitted to having gained back forty pounds since her triumphant 2005 weight loss, the cover story of *O Magazine* was titled, "How Did I Let This Happen Again?" In the story, she says, "I'm mad at myself. I'm embarrassed. I can't believe that after all these years, all the things I know how to do, I'm still talking about my weight." The photograph on the cover echoes the January 2005 cover, but this time the image of "working out" Oprah in white is faded slightly, representing the "then" juxtaposed to the "now" Oprah dressed in a purple three-piece activewear outfit. Instead of a proudly bared midriff, the purple jacket she wears over a matching shirt is zipped up to doubly conceal her stomach. Wrinkles in the material

suggest shameful bulging. One of “now” Oprah's hands gesture towards her past self, and the other hangs at her side, turned outward to form a dejected, questioning half-shrug. Her question, provided by the headline, insists on her personal responsibility for what is clearly constructed as failure: not “How did this happen again?” but “How did *I let* this happen again?” [Figure 3.12]



Figure 3.12/ *O Magazine* covers January 2005, January 2009¹³¹

The same tendency that shapes the way obesity researchers interpret the results of their studies also shapes the way dieters and fans of *The Biggest Loser* interpret their both mass media weight-loss narratives and their own experiences. People actively seek to construct meritocratic narratives because there are powerful incentives for believing that you *can* acquire culinary capital. The same desire to affirm of the “can-do” spirit that audiences saw in *Ratatouille* drives the popularity of *The Biggest Loser*. Some people may be tuning in to reassure themselves that they are not as grotesque as the contestants who begin the competition, but they stay tuned for the amazing transformations. In their eagerness to believe the hierarchies of taste and thinness that have become mainstream since the 1980s are democratic and fair, they actively work to interpret mass media texts

¹³¹ Images reproduced from *Oprah.com*. Photos by Matthew Rolston. Winfrey, 2008.

about food as being even *more* inclusive and optimistic about the universal potential to achieve the markers of class distinction than a dominant reading of the texts would seem to be. That tendency has helped turn taste hierarchies into key arenas of class aspiration.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE LEGITIMATION OF CULINARY CAPITAL

Just Mustard

The commercial that introduced the phrase “Pardon me, but would you have any Grey Poupon?” into the American lexicon was written by the improbably-named ad man Larry Elegant in 1980. Elegant's Madison Avenue advertising agency, Lowe Marschalk, had been hired by the Heublein Company to create something for television to supplement a new print and product-placement campaign for their then-unknown brand of Dijon-style mustard. The 30-second spot that Elegant came up with opens with an interior shot of a car driven by a man in a classic chauffeur's uniform while a baroque orchestral piece plays in the background. A voice-over says in an affected British accent, “The finer things in life. Happily, some of them are affordable,” as the chauffeur opens the glove compartment box to reveal a jar of Grey Poupon.¹

The camera follows the chauffeur's gloved hand as he gives the jar to the passenger in the back seat, a man wearing a suit and tie with a small table in front of him set with white cloth linens, a plate of sliced beef, a separate plate with a green salad, silver utensils, and glass stemware. Images of the passenger eating are interspersed with glamor shots of mustard being spooned onto other plates of meat and a golden-hued dressing being poured over another green salad. The voice-over continues, adding that Dijon mustard is “so fine it's even made with white wine,” and listing a number of applications ending with, “and of course, sandwiches.” Then, the video cuts to a shot of the car from the outside as it comes to a stop. A second car with the same distinctive

¹ “Grey Poupon Original,” Commercial, *YouTube*, uploaded 06 March 2007 by spidermann26, Web (accessed 19 March 2011).

Rolls Royce grille pulls up alongside it. The second car's passenger, another man wearing a suit and tie, leans towards the open car window and delivers the famous question. "But of course," the first passenger replies, extending the jar of Grey Poupon out the window. The camera zooms in on the jar and the shot freezes as it passes between their hands. Beneath the jar, the tagline "One of life's finer pleasures" appears on the screen.²

Sales jumped forty to fifty percent in cities where the commercial aired, prompting Heublein to go national with the campaign. The "Pardon me" ads have since been widely credited with catalyzing America's shift from a yellow mustard monoculture to a country where even fast food franchises located in gas stations typically have big plastic squeeze bottles of Dijon mustard among their condiment choices.³ The campaign's success has made it a legend in modern marketing even though its overt strategy is hardly remarkable. Advertising historian Roland Marchand notes that even in the earliest forms of national advertising, "the most obvious source of distortion in advertising's mirror was the presumption by advertisers that the public preferred an image of 'life as it ought to be'." According to Marchand, even during the Great Depression, "ad creators tried to reflect public aspirations rather than contemporary circumstances" and "often sought to give products a 'class image' by placing them in what advertising jargon would call 'upscale' settings."⁴

Elegant himself said in a 2004 *New Yorker* article that was essentially how the "Pardon me" ad worked: "The tagline in the commercial was that this was one of life's finer pleasures, and that, along with the Rolls-Royce, seemed to impart to people's minds that this was something truly different and superior."⁵ In 1984, the trade publication

² Ibid.

³ Malcolm Gladwell, "The Ketchup Conundrum," *The New Yorker*, 06 September 2004, Web (accessed 19 March 2011).

⁴ Roland Marchand, *Advertising The American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985: xvii). See also T.J. Jackson Lears on how advertisements portray a specific vision of the good life and particular symbols of wealth that are historically and culturally-contingent. *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994).

⁵ Gladwell, 2004.

Madison Avenue reported that Grey Poupon had captured 80 percent of the U.S. market for Dijon mustard, and they attributed its success to three factors: “1. the popularity of nouvelle cuisine,⁶ 2. impressive growth of the whole Dijon category, and 3. an upscale, national television advertising campaign that successfully linked mustard with opulence.”⁷

However, product development and marketing history is full of examples where the same strategy failed and few where it succeeded so spectacularly. In the same *New Yorker* article, author Malcom Gladwell recounts ketchup entrepreneur Jim Wigon's struggle to get people to buy his upscale version of mustard's most common counterpart. The story challenges the notion that the “Pardon me” ads deserve primary credit for Grey Poupon's remarkable success. While Gladwell admits that the sophistication imparted by the ads may have gotten some people to *try* the mustard, he argues that Grey Poupon ultimately succeeded because it simply tastes better than yellow mustard. According to Gladwell, “The rise of Grey Poupon proved that the American supermarket shopper was willing to pay more—in this case, \$3.99 instead of \$1.49 for eight ounces—as long as what they were buying carried with it an air of sophistication and complex aromatics.” For Gladwell, the “complex aromatics” are really the key:

One day the Heublein Company, which owned Grey Poupon, discovered something remarkable: if you gave people a mustard taste test, a significant number had only to try Grey Poupon once to switch from yellow mustard. In the food world that almost never happens; even among the most successful food brands, only about one in a hundred have that

⁶ While the term has been used to describe many different styles of French cooking, dating back to the 1740s, today it is most commonly used to refer to the style popularized in the 1960s in a self-conscious rebellion against the “orthodoxy” associated with Georges Auguste Escoffier. The primary characteristics of this rebellion are an emphasis on using fresh ingredients and preserving the original flavor of the ingredients as much as possible. It is less reliant on rich sauces and complicated techniques than the cuisine associated with Escoffier. Paul Bocuse, one of the chefs most associated with “nouvelle cuisine,” claims the term first used by the author Henri Gault to refer to the food Bocuse prepared for the maiden flight of the Concorde airliner in 1969. In the 1980s, when French restaurants and cooking became popular again in urban centers, it was often referred to as “nouvelle cuisine,” or sometimes “American nouvelle.” Source: Paul Bocuse, featured in *France on a Plate*, produced by BBC Four, starring Andrew Hussey, originally broadcast 29 November 2008 on BBC Four.

⁷ Gillian Teweles, “Brand Management: La Crème de la Mustard,” *Madison Avenue* 26.11 (1984): 28.

kind of conversion rate.⁸

He argues that this explains why concerted efforts on the part of people like Wigon to fill what *seems* like a gaping hole in the condiment market have failed. Heinz is already as palate-pleasing as it is possible for ketchup to be. The implication is that people won't buy whatever you're selling just because you put it in a Rolls Royce and tell them that it's made with wine.

Gladwell's explanation relies on a meritocratic logic similar to the ones employed by *Ratatouille* and *The Biggest Loser*: if certain foods succeed and others fail even when they're marketed in the same way, then the successful ones must be objectively superior. However, Gladwell's initial description of Jim Wigon's "World's Best Ketchup" suggests that it, too, might have an objective advantage over popular commercial brands. He spent a day watching people taste free samples of Wigon's Ketchup at Zabar's specialty food store in New York, reporting, "The ratio of tomato solids to liquid in World's Best is much higher than in Heinz, and the maple syrup gives it an unmistakable sweet kick. Invariably, people would close their eyes, just for a moment, and do a subtle double take."⁹ Ninety people who tasted it that day liked it well enough to purchase a jar. No one could expect Wigon's ketchup to woo *every* customer from Heinz. Despite Grey Poupon's success, French's classic is still America's best-selling mustard. However, condiment purchases are not a zero-sum game. Many people now keep both yellow mustard and Dijon in their refrigerators. It remains unclear why the "complex aromatics" of Grey

⁸ Gladwell, 2004.

⁹ Gladwell doesn't fully account for the apparent conflict between his observations at Zabar's and his theory that Grey Poupon was a success primarily because of its distinctive taste. By way of partial explanation, he speaks to several flavor experts who report that Heinz has a high "amplitude," meaning its dimensions are well-balanced, and that a panel of trained tasters at Kansas State University decided Wigon's ketchup tasted "more like a sauce." However, he also offers a counterexample: Ragu dramatically increased its market share by diversifying beyond its classic formula. His conclusion is ambivalent: "It is possible, of course, that ketchup is waiting for its own version of that Rolls-Royce commercial, or the discovery of the ketchup equivalent of extra-chunky—the magic formula that will satisfy an unmet need. It is also possible, however, that the rules of Howard Moskowitz, which apply to Grey Poupon and Prego spaghetti sauce and to olive oil and salad dressing and virtually everything else in the supermarket, don't apply to ketchup." Ibid.

Poupon would catapult it from a hundred-thousand-dollar niche brand to one of the most-recognized names in condiments, but the double-take-inspiring flavor of Wigon's ketchup (or some other gourmet ketchup) has yet to carve out a similar space in the supermarket condiment aisle.¹⁰ Nor does superior taste explain the simultaneous rise of nouvelle cuisine and upscale brands in general, particularly if as Gladwell claims, it is extremely rare for products to have the power to convert people based on taste alone.

Gladwell's explanation also fails to clarify why if it was superior flavor that catapulted Grey Poupon into a national brand, the commercials themselves became a cultural touchstone. Even before trade publications were heralding its sales success, the mustard had become comedic fodder. Eddie Murphy jokes about it while playing a homeless man transplanted into high society in the 1983 movie *Trading Places*.¹¹ The mustard has also been alluded to on *The Tonight Show*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, *Married with Children*, *The Simpsons*, and *Mad TV*, always in the context of caricatures of wealth and luxury. Mike Myers re-enacts part of the commercial in his popular 1992 movie *Wayne's World*. Wayne and Garth pull up next to a Rolls Royce stopped at a traffic light, and Wayne gestures to the passenger to roll down his window; when the man complies, Wayne affects a British accent and asks if he has any Grey Poupon and then they drive away, laughing.¹² Almost three decades after the original Rolls Royce campaign was first launched, it was referenced again in the 2007 Star Wars-themed season premiere of the animated series *Family Guy*. In the midst of a chase sequence, two sandcrawlers pause at a stoplight, open their windows, and hand off a jar of Grey

¹⁰ The theory that name brands like Pepperidge Farm shortbread cookies, Hellman's mayonnaise, Sara Lee poundcake, Coca-Cola and Pepsi all have indisputably superior flavor is challenged by brand loyalties and the growing interest in home-made, gourmet, "natural," restaurant-produced, or a generic or store-brand version of all of those products. Additionally, news channels frequently run stories reporting that in blind taste-tests people either can't tell the difference between generic store brands and name brands or actually prefer the former. See, for example, Jeff Anderson, "The Great Taste Test," *WRDW News 12 On Your Side* 05 May 2008, Web (accessed 30 April 2009).

¹¹ Wikipedia contributors, "Grey Poupon," *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* 18 April 2009, Web (accessed 30 April 2009).

¹² Penelope Spheeris, dir. *Wayne's World*, written by Mike Myers, Bonnie Turner, and Terry Turner, perf. Mike Myers and Dana Carvey, Paramount Pictures, 1992. DVD.

Poupon.¹³ According to a list of the “100 greatest television catchphrases” published by the cable network TVLand in 2006, “Pardon me sir, would you have any Grey Poupon?” ranked #69, just ahead of “Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!”¹⁴

Some allusions simply invoke the brand name although even then the significance is likely due to the Rolls Royce campaign. However, many specifically reference elements from the commercials, especially the cars. The 2006 single “We in Here” by DMX contains the lyrics, “if I pull up on, it won't be for Grey Poupon.”¹⁵ In the song “Show It to Me” on T.I.'s 2007 *T.I. Vs. T.I.P.*, featured guest Nelly says, “Yea you rollin' wit the King and the one/ Country black folk in the Chevy passin' Grey Poupon.”¹⁶ Dozens of user-produced images on the popular website *I Can Has Cheezburger?* are emblazoned with either the original query or an obvious play on it, and many also visually reference the Rolls Royce scene.¹⁷ Additionally, if the comments on the YouTube.com page where the original commercial can be watched are to be believed, dozens of people have re-created the “Pardon me” scene on their own.¹⁸ The elevation of the commercial to the status of cultural touchstone and the widespread interpretation of even the original version as humorous call into question the assumption that the campaign's success owes entirely, or perhaps even primarily, to a successful association

¹³ “Blue Harvest,” Family Guy Season 6: Episode 1, dir. Dominic Polcino, written and created by Seth MacFarlane, perf. Seth MacFarlane, Alex Borstein, and Seth Green, originally aired 23 September 2007 on FOX.

¹⁴ One of the most famous lines from *The Brady Bunch*. “100 Greatest TV Quotes and Catch-Phrases” *TVLand.com*, Web (accessed 02 June 2009).

¹⁵ DMX, “We in Here,” Produced by Swizz Beats, Columbia Records (2006).

¹⁶ T. I., *T.I. vs. T.I.P.* Produced by T.I. Atlantic Records: Grand Hustle (2007).

¹⁷ I Can Has Cheezburger contributors, “Today's LOLs: All Kittes,” *I Can Has Cheezburger?* Web (accessed 29 May 2009).

¹⁸ Dgllamas: “Years ago, my ex b/f was giving my sister & I a ride home. He came upon a stop sign with a distinguished man in the car with a full head of gray hair. My then-b/f actually asked, “Pardon me, would you have any Grey Poupon?: WE WERE BUSTING A GUT LAAAAAFFFFFING!!!!!” TregAichi writes: “I have done this once. Needless to say, I didn't get much of a laugh from the other person...Crotchety old farts...”
lilmiss698: “lmaooooo last night on the way home from the club my sisters friend gets out the car n comes n runs beside our car at a red light n knocked on the window to ask if we had any grey poupon.”
tomack78: “Classic commercial. I did it in a fancy neighborhood in LA when I saw a Rolls Royce. I motioned the lady passenger to roll down the window and asked her if she had any Grey Poupn. She started cracking up. LOL.” “Grey Poupon Original,” *YouTube*.

between the condiment and sophistication. [Figure 4.1]



Figure 4.1/Images Created By *I Can Has Cheezburger?* Users¹⁹

Later versions of the ad further testify that something other than what Marchand calls a “class image” is at work in the popular appeal of the “Pardon me” campaign. In 2007, a spokesperson for Kraft Foods, which acquired the brand in 1999, told *Advertising Age* that consumers “know, love, and associate the 'Pardon me' campaign so strongly with the Grey Poupon brand” that the company decided to return to a campaign very similar to the original to introduce three new varieties. The new 30-second spot was almost exactly the same as the original, with similar music and a passenger in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce enjoying a virtually identical meal. Shots of vinaigrette being poured over salad and a dollop of mustard being spooned onto a plate featuring slices of beef clearly reference the original ad. However, instead of handing over the jar when asked “would you have any Grey Poupon?” the passenger with the mustard simply says “But of course,” and then his driver pulls away, leaving the second

¹⁹ Clockwise from top right, photographs submitted by 1) Unknown, 2) Unknown, 3) “KmotrMichail,” and 4) Unknown, captioned by 1) “afearonwood,” 2) “wintersky12,” 3) “dragon69,” and 4) “Jdbaby22.” I Can Has Cheezburger, search query “grey poupon,” Web (accessed 30 April 2009).

passenger flustered and mustard-less.²⁰ By mocking the heightened formality of the “would you” syntax, the 2007 ad lampoons both the 1980 commercial and the idea of mustard as a class marker. Nor was that the first time the campaign had poked fun at itself. In 1995, when then-owner Nabisco introduced a new squeeze bottle, they ran a commercial showing a man in the back seat of a Rolls Royce assembling a sandwich. As he dispenses the mustard, an air bubble bursts in the bottle's opening, mimicking flatulence, and passenger exclaims, “Pardon me!” to the chauffeur.²¹

Elegant and *Madison Avenue* consider only Grey Poupon's sales success when they assume the ad worked as intended: cementing a relationship between the brand and the idea of culinary superiority in the minds of consumers. The proliferation of parodies suggest, instead, that the commercial's appeal was at least partially in its *critique* of class pretensions. “Pardon me” became a catchphrase because it was an effective caricature, and the ad resonated widely as a mockery of ostentatious wealth. Although the later ads were explicitly arch, even the first commercial was predominantly viewed ironically, whether or not that was Elegant's intention. Rather than reinforcing the idea that anything other than yellow mustard was a snooty luxury, the commercial highlighted how ludicrous it would be to believe that something as mundane as a condiment could be a marker of privilege. The idea of keeping a glass jar of mustard in a Rolls Royce glove compartment box, having a multi-course dinner with wine in the back seat of a car, or sharing a condiment jar between vehicles shot directly past the “image of 'life as it ought to be'”²² and landed directly in Saturday Night Live's territory. Notably, many of the parodies didn't significantly alter the content of the commercial—they simply re-enacted the scene because it was already taken as a joke. It's possible that by portraying the brand as being “in” on the joke, the ads actually brought Grey Poupon over to the side of

²⁰ “Son of Rolls,” Grey Poupon Commercial. *YouTube*, uploaded 09 February 2007 by beautykilledbeast, Web (accessed 21 March 2011).

²¹ Sam Bradley, “ADBANK's Brand Watch,” *Brandweek*, 15 May 1995: 44.

²² I discuss the idea of “the good life” more in Chapter Five.

the average consumer, aligning it *against* the lampooned limousine set.

The original spot also made implicit claims about Grey Poupon's ordinariness that undermined the explicit claims of its extraordinariness. The pedagogical listing of possible applications and reassurance that Grey Poupon could “of course” be used on sandwiches implied that it could substitute directly for the mustard consumers were familiar with. For all that Grey Poupon might have seemed pretentious, with its French appellation, glass jar, and wine in the ingredient list, the commercial worked to convey the idea that it was still *just mustard*. That isn't to say that people didn't perceive Grey Poupon as a “classier” product than French's. The ad succeeded because it negotiated (or enabled consumers to negotiate) two seemingly contradictory cultural norms: on the one hand, Americans generally believe that economic success, wealth, and luxuries are good both in that they are desirable and that they should ideally reward virtue and merit; on the other hand, wealth is associated with decadence and arrogance and the aspiration to higher class status is generally considered vulgar. Calling someone a “social climber” is an insult.²³ Widely seen as parody of the rich, the “Pardon me” commercial offered consumers plausible deniability that buying a gourmet mustard was a sign of elitism. For nearly thirty years, the campaign has effectively reinforced the idea that Grey Poupon is a

²³ Many people trace American anti-elitism to the foundational myths that the United States was founded on egalitarian principles in contrast or in deliberate reaction to the entrenched hierarchies of the Old World. Alexis de Tocqueville famously commented on the “general equality of condition” in the United States, even claiming equality was the “fundamental fact from which all others seem to be derived.” Of course, as many others have documented, that “equality” has never been universal, and indeed when de Toqueville was writing, applied to a small minority of Americans. Contemporary manifestations of anti-elitism seem to owe less to the inheritances of 18th and 19th C. political philosophy and more to the tensions produced by the rise and bifurcation of mass culture. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Lawrence Levine argues that the America de Tocqueville wrote about was actually, in many ways, less hierarchically organized, at least in terms of popular culture. He claims that it wasn't until the end of the nineteenth century that popular culture split into distinctively “highbrow” and “lowbrow” camps. While the consolidation of “legitimate” culture has worked to reinforce class hierarchies, populist resistance to the notion of having cultural “betters” has produced resistance to and suspicion about claims to superiority. This has been especially evident in political campaigns where candidates seen as embodying the culture of privilege are criticized by their opponents as “elitist” and “out of touch.” See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Debra Winthrop, 1835 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Carla Seaquist, “Obama and American anti-elitism,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 01 October 1 2008, Web (accessed 02 Jun 2009); Levine, 1990.

desirable luxury by ridiculing the idea that eating it is unappealingly snobbish.²⁴

Mass media representations and popular discourses about foods constructed as superior reveal a persistent anxiety about the possibility that they might be elitist. Anxieties about “food snobbery” constitute a tacit acknowledgment of the role of taste in the reproduction of class and the arbitrary nature of “enlightened” eating. I analyze how the threat of elitism is negotiated in the 2004 film *Sideways*, whose protagonist starts off as a caricature of food snobbery at its worst. The film's success and its effect on the U.S. wine market (the “Sideways Effect”) reflect the film's successful rehabilitation of Miles from a snob who uses wine to show off to a connoisseur who appreciates it for its own sake. Then, I examine the tenacity of the threat of elitism in popular debates about the term *foodie*. *Foodie* initially gained currency in the 1980s as an alternative to older words with undesirably elitist connotations; however, many people reject *foodie* on the grounds that it, too, conveys a sense of snobbery. The problem with the earlier terms was not a residual association with snobbery left over from an earlier time when “enlightened” eaters really *were* snobs; instead, the foods and practices constructed as “enlightened” are inherently exclusive. As long as they are used to distinguish social classes, they will always have to negotiate with the threat of snobbery.

Food is particularly well-suited to dealing with that negotiation. Unlike other status symbols like luxury cars and high culture forms like painting and classical music, food and drink—even currently-upscale drinks like wine—are both literally more accessible to non-elites and generally perceived as less intimidating. The universality of food and the ways in which it is ultimately mundane paradoxically make it a more powerful source of cultural capital because it offers plausible deniability about its role in class aspiration.

²⁴ It's also unclear why, if consumers were merely seeking a superior product or to distinguish themselves, they would have chosen Grey Poupon over Maille, the main competing brand of Dijon mustard through the 1970s and which many “foodies” still claim is better-tasting, although perhaps only because the former has become so ubiquitous. John Bowen, “Pardon Me. Grey Poupon is a niche brand,” *Brandweek* 39.17, 27 April 1998:14.

***Sideways* and Culinary Capital**

Sideways was adapted from a novel by Rex Pickett published in 2004 that focuses on a couple of middle-aged men taking a road trip to Santa Ynez Valley, where some of the most expensive and sought-after wines in California are produced. One of the opening scenes testifies to the value of performing certain kinds of culinary know-how. Miles and Jack are shown driving in Miles' convertible. Jack complains that Miles was late picking him up from his future in-laws' house and accuses him of being hungover. Miles concedes, “Okay, there was a tasting last night, yes, but I wanted to get us something nice for the ride up. Check out the box,” gesturing to the back seat. Jack selects a bottle with the caged cork indicative of a sparkling wine and begins to open it despite Miles' protests that it's not chilled. As it erupts from the bottle, only mostly into the stemware that Jack seems to produce out of nowhere, Miles laments, “Half of it...gone!”²⁵ [Figure 4.2]



Figure 4.2/ “Pinot Noir...then how come it's white?”²⁶

Jack hands him the first glass—a “proper” champagne flute—and then pours one of his own—a regular wine glass. “Hey, shut up, okay?” Jack says, “Here's to a great week.

²⁵ Alexander Payne, dir. *Sideways*, Fox Searchlight Pictures, producer Michael London, perf. Paul Giamatti, Thomas Hayden Church, Virginia Madsen, and Sandra Oh, 2004. DVD.

²⁶ Screen shot by the author from Payne, 2004.

Come on.” Miles sighs and then nods, clinking Jack's raised glass and saying, “Yes, absolutely. Despite your crass behavior, I'm actually glad we're getting this time together.” Jack takes a sip and then does a double-take: “Man, that's *tasty*.” Miles nods and says, “That's 100% Pinot Noir, single vineyard. They don't even make it anymore.” Jack looks at his glass again, quizzically, and says, “Pinot Noir...then how come it's white?” “Oh Jesus,” Miles scoffs, “Don't ask questions like that up in wine country. They'll think you're some kind of dumb shit, okay?”²⁷

On the one hand, this scene implies that expectations about the kinds of culinary knowledge people “ought” to have vary according to social context. Acknowledging the contingent nature of sophistication seems to undermine the power of those expectations. A non-wine country audience might identify with Jack's confusion about the fact that Pinot Noir grapes can produce a golden, effervescent wine and reject the idea that admitting that would make someone a “dumb shit.” On the other hand, the scene reinforces the idea that there are superior wines and that it is a good thing to know how to select and appreciate them. Even though Miles's derision casts him as a pompous jerk, the scene suggests that he really does have superior knowledge and taste. Even Jack recognizes that the wine he's selected is especially “tasty.” Additionally, Miles provides a clear (and accurate) explanation of the difference between red and white wines, suggesting that there is an objective basis for differences between wines that can be learned and Miles has cultivated that knowledge. Miles may be pretentious, but he's not *just* pretending when it comes to wine.²⁸

Furthermore, Jack's indifference to the proper rituals of wine consumption are aligned with his “crass behavior.” If the wine were merely white and not sparkling, Miles's insistence that it be chilled might be histrionic, but Jack's refusal to heed his advice renders at least some of the wine not just suboptimal but literally undrinkable as

²⁷ Payne, 2004.

²⁸ Ibid.

it spills all over the car. Miles's claim that the wine is no longer in production further justifies his frustration and encourages the audience to sympathize with him instead of Jack. Miles isn't just being fussy; Jack has effectively ruined a unique taste experience he's been anticipating—he says he'd been “saving” this bottle, delaying gratification—and now won't be able to recreate.²⁹

Miles's concern about how Jack's ignorance about wine might inspire the wine sophisticates in Santa Barbara to think of him as a “dumb shit” (tainting Miles by association) exemplifies the way foodways reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. Foodways not only reproduce material advantages (i.e., rich people can afford better-quality food, which might directly improve their health and life chances) but also through the hidden or “soft” forms of domination that operate at the level of aesthetic taste, habitual behaviors, and social dispositions. As Pierre Bourdieu argues in *Distinction*, “Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar.”³⁰ According to Bourdieu's survey of the *habitus* (defined as lasting, inherited schemes of perception, thought and action) of different socioeconomic classes in 1960s and 1970s France, class-specific preferences for certain kinds of food reflect different levels of investment in *being* versus *seeming*: the working classes are primarily concerned with the material reality of food, the middle classes are less concerned with being and more concerned with seeming, and the bourgeoisie are concerned almost exclusively with seeming. Thus, according to Bourdieu, “the working-class meal is characterized by plenty... Food is claimed as a material reality, a nourishing substance which sustains the body and gives strength.” At the other end of the spectrum, “the bourgeoisie is concerned to eat with all due form.... with quality more important than quantity.”³¹ Miles's concern about form and quality

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Bourdieu, 1979: 6.

³¹ Ibid, 194-9.

might appear, at least at first, like a quintessential illustration of the bourgeois preoccupation with *seeming* and the rituals of fine dining over the materiality of food. However, in terms of both his income and upbringing, Miles is more middle-class than bourgeois.

On their way to Santa Barbara, Miles insists on stopping at his mother's house, ostensibly because it's her birthday. She lives in a small condo with mismatched furnishings and tacky, dated bric-a-brac on the walls, indicative of a middle or lower-middle-class lifestyle. **[Figure 4.3]**



Figure 4.3/ Mrs. Raymond's Living Room³²

He promises Jack they won't stay long, but when she offers them food he immediately says, "Yeah, I'm hungry," and then feigns helplessness as she insists they stay the night. Jack offers a backhanded compliment on the dinner she serves them on mismatched plates: "This is delicious Mrs. Raymond, absolutely delicious...is this chicken?" which further establishes that Miles didn't get his epicurean tendencies from her. Miles' real purpose is revealed when he sneaks upstairs to her bedroom and then roots around in her dresser until he finds a can of Ajax. He expertly twists off the bottom and a roll of hundred dollar bills wrapped in rubber bands slides out. He peels off at least a thousand

³² Screen shot by the author. Payne, 2004.

dollars before re-wrapping the bills and returning them to the can. Miles' reliance on his mother to support his expensive tastes is not an isolated incident, but a habit. When he returns to the table, she asks in an indiscreet whisper, "Do you need some money?"³³

Bourdieu's taxonomy of different classes' concerns with seeming versus being doesn't account especially well for people like Miles who have acquired tastes that conflict with their economic circumstances and class socialization. According to Bourdieu, food habits and preferences, like less literal forms of taste, "are organized according to. . . the social space determined by volume and composition of capital." "There is no neutral viewpoint" between the working-class belief that "substance" takes precedence and the upper class belief that appearances and form are paramount.³⁴ Bourdieu also argues the influence of social origin (measured by father's occupation) is strongest in the "personal" realms "such as clothing, furniture and cookery," while education has leveling effects on preferences in "legitimate areas such as painting or music."³⁵ Food preferences should be very well predicted by the class one is born into, especially for people who remain in the same class. But Miles has neither the background nor the income to justify his gourmet tastes.

Miles's aesthetic disposition towards food and drink associated with a higher class status is explained better by the process that historical anthropologist Sidney Mintz calls "intensification." In *Sweetness and Power*, Mintz's account of how sugar became a staple food and drug for the British industrial working class, he argues that sugar was initially seen as a precious "spice" and used only by the very wealthy. Like the twentieth century French bourgeoisie described in *Distinction*, the seventeenth century British upper classes Mintz describes were very concerned about "seeming." According to Mintz,

³³ Payne, 2004.

³⁴ Bourdieu, 1979:199-208. He defines capital as "the set of actually usable resources and powers—economic capital, cultural capital, and also social capital" and argues that the structure of a person's assets determine the kinds of immediate pressures and rewards that shape their habitual behaviors and dispositions (114).

³⁵ Ibid, 13.

the rich “derived an intense pleasure from their access to sugar—the purchase, display, consumption and waste of sucrose in various forms.”³⁶ As sugar became more widely available, practices like having a wedding cake “complete with dragees, congratulatory script, hardened sugar figures...percolated down through society.”³⁷ Mintz further argues that the availability of sugar and its association with the wealthy would not have been sufficient to inspire people to make its use a part of their daily lives, hospitality rituals, and celebrations. The working classes took to sugar because it fulfilled needs created by broader historical shifts:

Sugar, tea, and like products represented the growing freedom of ordinary folks, their opportunity to participate in the elevation of their own standards of living. . . . Tobacco, sugar, and tea were the first objects within capitalism that conveyed with their use the complex idea that one could become different by consuming differently. This idea has less to do with nutrition or primates or sweet tooths. . . . it is closely connected to England's fundamental transformation from a hierarchical, status-based, medieval society to a social-democratic, capitalist, and industrial society.³⁸

Sugar offered the working classes a material *and* symbolic way of improving their lives through consumption, which was rapidly becoming a central part of daily practice during the rise of capitalism.

Although Bourdieu himself does not offer an account of lower classes emulating upper class practices or how tastes change over time, he did provide the theoretical grounding and vocabulary for other scholars seeking to describe those phenomena. In particular, Bourdieu's assertion that symbolic practices work to reinforce and reproduce

³⁶ Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1985: 154).

³⁷ *Ibid*, 152.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 183-5. Anthropologist Alan MacFarlane and tea-grower Iris MacFarlane argue that the increase in tea drinking, facilitated in part by the use of sugar to make the tannin-rich drink more palatable, facilitated the Industrial Revolution in Britain by limiting waterborne diseases like dysentery that flourished in urban environments. Fermented beverages like beer and ale helped prevent disease through the seventeenth century, but a tax introduced on malt in the late seventeenth century caused the poor to turn to water and gin. According to the MacFarlanes, mortality rates began to rise until the 1720s. He credits the subsequent drop to the increasing availability of tea, which has antiseptic properties and more importantly, is boiled which kills many waterborne pathogens. Alan MacFarlane and Iris MacFarlane, *The Empire of Tea: The Remarkable History of the Plant That Took Over the World* (New York: New York, 1997: 183-5).

social hierarchies and thus function like material wealth helps to explain the rewards of emulating the rich. This idea is articulated in his term “cultural capital,” which insists on the real value of aesthetic dispositions and symbolic behaviors. In an essay on the class ideology promoted by representations of Julia Child and Martha Stewart, Kathleen LeBesco and Peter Naccarato build on the idea of cultural capital by introducing the term “culinary capital.” They argue that “representations of food and food practices that circulate via television programs, books, magazines, internet sites, and other media invite viewers and consumers to imagine a class status and identity for themselves and to escape, if only temporarily, their real economic conditions.”³⁹

LeBesco and Naccarato depart from Bourdieu in their argument that culinary capital is “illusory.” Bourdieu argued that cultural capital was a *real* form of capital that was “convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital” and just as critical to the structure and functioning of hierarchies as economic and social capital.⁴⁰ LeBesco and Naccarato, on the other hand, suggest that the performance of a desired class identity through foodways merely creates an illusion of mobility. They also imply that performances of culinary capital are unrelated to the “reality of their [consumers'] economic and social position.”⁴¹ Thus, they claim that Martha Stewart's exclusive line of products for K-Mart is ironic:

While one buys her products at K-Mart, one uses them to create and sustain the identity of a person who would never shop there. Thus the consumer's class status (and the broader class hierarchy) is maintained while said consumer is able to fantasize about an imagined class mobility as she uses her Martha Stewart products to perform an identity that she has not achieved.⁴²

LeBesco and Naccarato state that although the consumer might *think* she was performing a particular class identity, she would be wrong. Her actual class identity, which must therefore be based on something other than her performance of culinary

³⁹ LeBesco and Naccarato, 2007: 224.

⁴⁰ Bourdieu, 1983: 247.

⁴¹ LeBesco and Naccarato, 2007: 224.

⁴² *Ibid*, 236.

capital (like her income) remains unchanged. Thus, her real class status is maintained by the fantasy of mobility enabled by the Martha Stewart product line. In other words, she can never become different by consuming differently.

Although their analysis of the popular appeal and ideological functions of Julia Child and Martha Stewart is compelling, it's unclear why they've chosen to identify the use of foodways to promote the "illusion of class mobility" as a form of capital. It's true that watching lifestyle programming is unlikely to boost someone into a higher income bracket, even if the knowledge they acquire enables them to produce goods they could not afford to purchase ready-made. Nonetheless, given that culinary capital, like all forms of cultural capital, is socially-constructed, it's unclear what would distinguish food and food practices with real value from the "illusions" offered by the likes of Child and Stewart.⁴³ Furthermore—as they note—the pleasure that audiences derive from lifestyle programming is "an important site for the discursive production of power and resistance" and Martha Stewart's fans in particular are attracted to the "fantasy of an upper-class lifestyle attainable through hard work and attention to detail rather than wealth."⁴⁴ Notably, the fans believe they *can* actually attain that lifestyle, even without becoming wealthy. To insist that they *cannot*, as LeBesco and Nacarrato do, reduces class to material capital.

On the contrary, culinary capital is a source of real value, pleasure, and power. What LeBesco and Naccarato seem to be identifying when they claim that foodways are "vehicles for performing an illusory identity" is not actually that the *identity* is illusory

⁴³ Food historians like Laura Shapiro and Harvey Levenstein argue that Child's recipes were seen as sophisticated-but-accessible alternatives to the growing range of processed and prepared foods available in the 1950s. Shapiro argues that Child empowered women, even comparing her to Betty Friedan, whose book, *The Feminine Mystique*, was published the same year Child's cooking show premiered on television. Shapiro says of Child: "In essence, she said to women, 'You don't need to get it from a package. You can take charge. You can stand at the center of your own world and create something very good, from scratch.'" Laura Shapiro, *Something From the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America* (Bloomington, IN: 2004, 74).

⁴⁴ Ann Mason and Marian Meyers, "Living With Martha Stewart Media: Chosen Domesticity in the Experience of Fans," *Journal of Communication* (December 2001): 810-23, quoted in LeBesco and Naccarato, 236.

but that the idea that everyone has access to that identity is a myth. The problem is not that culinary capital is *fake* capital (implying that audiences who buy into it are dupes).⁴⁵ The problem is that the meritocratic ideology that drives the popular appeal of both lifestyle programming and films like *Sideways* is false. Like *Ratatouille* and *The Biggest Loser*, *Sideways* helps create and sustain the myths that some foods are objectively better, that it is an inherently admirable thing to be able to appreciate them, and that the skill required to do so is available to anyone willing to cultivate it. The fact that the meritocracy of taste is mythical doesn't make culinary capital any more illusory than the meritocracies of occupational success and wealth make material capital illusory. To the extent that the meritocracy of taste enables people to aspire to and embody a desirable identity—to become different by consuming differently—it is a real source of power and might even work as a democratizing or leveling force. However, to the extent that it obscures the differences in access to high-status foodways, it reinforces class hierarchy.

This duality is the focus of a recent book on food and social class called *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. Sociologists Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann argue that the term “foodie” embodies the tension between the two key terms in their title: democracy and distinction, which they conceptualize as “two competing poles in the gourmet foodscape.”⁴⁶ They describe them as follows: “A democratic pole that eschews elite cultural standards and valorizes the cultural products of “everyday” non-elite people, and a pole of distinction that continues to valorize standards that are rare, economically inaccessible, and representing significant amounts

⁴⁵ LeBesco and Naccarato acknowledge that “their [lifestyle programming audiences'] pleasure marks an important site for the discursive production of power and resistance” and claim that they are not dismissing culinary capital as mere “false consciousness,” and that Martha Stewarts fans are “not just cultural dupes.” However, the “just” is telling—whatever else the fans of lifestyle programming might be, LeBesco and Naccarato imply that they *are* dupes. Their fantasy of mobility is a form of false consciousness if, as LeBesco and Naccarato argue, the pleasure audiences experience is derived from a temporary escape from their “actual” class identities and “a means of...performing a class identity to which one aspires but that many never actually attain.” LeBesco and Naccarato, 2007: 235-6.

⁴⁶ Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 61.

of cultural capital.”⁴⁷ According to Johnston and Baumann the tension between these poles explains why foodies do contradictory things and act differently from the “epicures” of the past who were concerned *only* with distinction. Like their predecessors, foodies seek out the most expensive meals and ingredients. Unlike them, they also idealize “authenticity” and “exoticism,” which Johnston and Baumann argue are “reasonable and potentially egalitarian criteria—not snobbish.”⁴⁸ Although they acknowledge that even the search for authenticity and exoticism may be used as strategies for deriving status, they suggest it may also serve genuinely democratic aims and insist that the defining characteristic of foodies is their omnivorousness, which is “a strategy that is opposed to snobbery.”⁴⁹

The relationship between democracy and distinction is less antagonistic than Johnston and Baumann suggest. Rather than conceptualizing democracy and distinction as conflicting ideals in tension with one another, the conceptually egalitarian meritocracy of taste only *appears* to be open to all kinds of foods and all kinds of people in order to legitimate a taste hierarchy that is actually exclusive and works primarily to distinguish social classes, not enable class mobility. In other words, the appearance of openness to foods that are not traditionally associated with the elite primarily works to shore up the illusion that culinary capital is meritocratic. In practice, the foods and practices that distinguish the middle class are inherently exclusive. *Sideways* exemplifies the legitimation of exclusive taste hierarchies through the contrasts between Jack, Miles, and Miles's love interest, Maya.

The Rube, the Snob, and the Connoisseur

The Rube

Despite Miles's best efforts to educate Jack, once they get to wine country, he

⁴⁷ Ibid, 61.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 37.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 95.

does turn out to be a “dumb shit.” At first, Jack seems to be a proxy for the audience, modeling both their likely bemusement at Miles's fussiness and unfamiliarity with wine tasting culture. In their first visit to a tasting room, Miles explains the full ritual: holding the glass up to the light, tipping the glass to evaluate the color and opacity, sniffing, swirling, and sniffing again. Jack follows along dutifully, and then asks the question the audience may also be wondering at that point—“When do we *drink*?”⁵⁰ [Figure 4.4.]



Figure 4.4/“When do we drink?” “Now.”⁵¹

However, the film discourages a complete identification with Jack. His ignorance is the butt of many of the jokes in the film, and in most cases the viewer gets to be in on the joke by virtue of knowing more than him. Even viewers who don't know why people swirl their glasses will probably know that it's unseemly to down a tasting pour like a shot of cheap tequila. Jack evidently doesn't. Even more egregious, at the end of the scene, Miles notices that Jack was chewing gum throughout the tasting room scene. Jack is not only guilty of failing to adhere to stuffy rituals, he also fails to follow rules the audience will likely know and agree with, like the idea that you shouldn't chew gum while you're trying to taste *anything*, let alone wine.

Sympathy with Jack is further discouraged by his general boorishness, sexual

⁵⁰ Payne, 2004.

⁵¹ Screen shot by the author, Payne, 2004.

infidelities, and callous treatment of Miles. Although Jack confidently introduces himself as an “actor,” it turns out that aside from a bit part on a daytime soap opera a long time ago, the only work he can get is reading the disclaimers at the end of commercials. At breakfast the first morning after their arrival Jack leers at their young waitress, and declares that his best man's gift to Miles is going to be to “get him laid” despite Miles's protests that he'd “rather have a knife.”⁵² The next morning, when Miles lays out an itinerary featuring another series of wine tastings, Jack explodes: “I am going to get my nut on this trip, Miles. And you are not going to fuck it up for me with all your depression and anxiety and neg-head downer shit. . . . I am going to get laid before I settle down on Saturday. Do you read me?”⁵³ Although Miles's plan is selfishly oriented towards his own interests, Jack's grounds for rejecting those plans are even less admirable.

Jack quickly achieves his goal, getting involved with a sultry wine pourer named Stephanie without telling her about his upcoming marriage. Miles is shown golfing alone, exiled from the hotel room while Jack and Stephanie have loud sex. Crucially, even after Stephanie finds out about Jack's engagement and breaks his nose in a fit of rage, he flirts his way into bed with another woman the very same night (an overweight waitress at the restaurant where they have dinner). The results are again disastrous: it turns out the waitress has suckered him into a strange cuckold fantasy/scam and when her husband shows up, he has to flee without his clothes or wallet. Rather than showing any signs of remorse, Jack deliberately drives Miles's car into a tree to buttress the lie he plans to tell his fiancée about the origins of his bandaged nose. As the film's caricature of a culinary rube, Jack is almost wholly unsympathetic. He remains a blundering jerk who thinks only about himself to the bitter end.⁵⁴

The Snob

Sideways doesn't portray Miles and his culinary knowledge as unequivocally

⁵² Payne, 2004.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Payne, 2007.

preferable to Jack's ignorance. During the opening credits, Miles goes into a coffee shop to order a triple espresso, *The New York Times* and a spinach croissant, which he pronounces with a French accent: “*kwa-san*” rather than the Americanized “*kreh-sont*.” The affected pronunciation and the fact that he asks for *The New York Times* (in Los Angeles, no less) rather than just grabbing one off the rack are not only stereotypically elitist but also highly performative; he's not just seeking out the refined pleasures he happens to enjoy, he's trying to impress the people around him with his superior taste. Later, his histrionic refusal to drink Merlot and his insistence that he smells “the faintest soupçon of like asparagus and just a flutter of a, like a, nutty Edam cheese” in a glass of wine are played for laughs, just like Jack's gum chewing.⁵⁵ **[Figure 4.5]**



Figure 4.5/ “Just a flutter of uh, like a, nutty Edam cheese.”⁵⁶

As he squints with concentration to discern those subtle flavors, the camera focuses on Jack's incredulous expression. The fact that Miles has to steal from his mother to afford the vacation not only establishes that his sophisticated tastes are a form of pompous posturing, it also makes him an archetypal loser. He's a snob in the classically pejorative sense: “one who meanly or vulgarly admires and seeks to imitate, or associate with, those of superior rank or wealth; one who wishes to be regarded as a person of social

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Screen shot by the author. *Sideways* (Payne 2004) DVD.

importance.”⁵⁷

Like Jack's ignorance about food, Miles' food snobbery corresponds with his other character flaws. The lies he tells to Jack and his mother about the reason for their detour to her house align with his constant attempts to use his wine smarts to delude everyone, including himself, about how pathetic his life is. Rather than a refined hobby, his love of wine is largely a flimsy disguise for his use of alcohol to escape from his failures, a dependence bordering on alcoholism. He insists they walk to distant vineyards so as not to have to “hold back” and plans their tasting room visits so “the more [they] drink the closer [they] get to the motel.”⁵⁸ After Jack accidentally lets it slip that Miles's ex-wife has remarried, Miles guzzles an entire bottle as Jack chases him through the vineyards. At dinner with Stephanie and Maya, Miles drinks so much he slips into a dark mood and excuses himself to drunk dial his ex-wife from the restaurant pay phone and passive-aggressively slur at her that she doesn't have to worry about running into him at Jack's wedding because he's decided not to go. Her initial concern about being awoken by his call fades quickly into a weary, “Oh Miles. You're drunk,” suggesting that this is habitual behavior that likely played a role in their divorce.⁵⁹

In one telling scene, Miles gets so desperate for a drink he drops the pretense. Mid-way through a visit to big commercial vineyard Jack insisted they stop at, after already declaring that their wine tastes like “rancid tar and turpentine bullshit,” he receives a voicemail alert. He walks into the parking lot to listen to the message, which turns out to be from his literary agent. She says that the publisher who had been interested in his novel has decided to pass and that she doesn't think she'll be able to find another one. Devastated, Miles marches back into the tasting room, steps up to the bar and demands a pour. He downs it in one gulp, just like Jack did at the first tasting room,

⁵⁷ “snob *n.*”³.c. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford University Press. November 2010. Web. 12 February 2011.

⁵⁸ Payne, 2004.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

replaces his glass on the bar and says, “Hit me again.” He downs the second pour just as quickly and exasperatedly asks the pourer for a full glass, offering to pay. When the man refuses, suggesting that he buy a bottle and go drink it in the parking lot, Miles grabs the bottle out of the man's hand and fills his glass nearly to the brim. The pourer grabs the glass and they struggle over it, spilling the wine in the process. Miles steps back, momentarily defeated but then glances at the spit bucket sitting on the bar—full of the expectorated tastings of dozens of strangers. He grabs it, and pours it into his mouth (and all over his face and shirt) as the other people in the tasting room groan in disgust.⁶⁰

Rather than being portrayed as a form of enviable sophistication, Miles's taste is portrayed as ridiculous pedantry at best and alcoholism at worst. His drunken escapades drive as many of the film's moments of outlandish farce as Jack's libido. The apparent contrast between the two characters turns out to be a red herring. Jack turns out to be less a *foil* than a *double* for Miles. They are both selfish losers who lie and hurt the women in their lives and delude themselves about who they really are. Note the similarity between the framing of the shots in the tasting room (Images 4.4 and 4.5): Jack and Miles mirror each other. Miles's posturing is portrayed as just as ludicrous and pathetic as Jack's boorishness. The difference between them is that whereas Jack remains the same to the end, Miles is allowed to evolve. In fact, the resolution of the film depends on his redemption, which like so many things in the film, is symbolized by wine.

The Connoisseur

Sideways offers an idealized example of what a wine drinker who's neither ignorant nor pretentious might be like in Maya. In a pair of monologues almost exactly mid-way through the film that draw attention to themselves both by their length and also because they ooze metaphorical significance, Miles explains why he loves Pinot Noir and Maya explains why she loves wine in general. Although the scene appears to be a moment of touching connection between the characters—they're alone on a porch at

⁶⁰ Payne 2004.

night, lit warmly from the glow of the house, and they gaze into each others eyes as they speak—their words offer a neat juxtaposition of their attitudes towards wine. The scene primarily emphasizes how different they are.

First, Maya asks Miles to explain his fondness for Pinot Noir, which as she notes is “like a thing with [him].” He says he likes it because because it's “thin-skinned, temperamental... not a survivor like Cabernet,” but if carefully nurtured by someone who “really takes the time to understand its potential... its flavors, they're just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle and... ancient on the planet.”⁶¹ The description is a thinly-veiled portrait of Miles as he sees himself: unique, fragile and misunderstood, full of unrealized potential. After he trails off, he says, “What about you”? Whereas Maya's question was specific and reflected that she had paid attention to him, his is an afterthought. “What about me?” She asks to clarify, looking a little surprised that he's even asked. “I don't know, why are you into wine?” he offers, shrugging. She initially credits her ex-husband, who she says had a “big sort of show-off cellar.” She continues, sotto voice:

Maya: Then, I discovered that I had a really sharp palate. And the more I drank, the more I liked what it made me think about.

Miles: Like what?

Maya: Like what a fraud he was. [*Miles laughs and says “Wow” or “ow” uncomfortably*] No, [*she laughs too*] I like to think about the life of wine, how its a living thing. I like to think about what was going on the year the grapes were growing, how the sun was shining that summer or if it rained [. . .] all the people who tended and picked the grapes, and if it's an old wine how many of them must be dead by now [. . .] how every time I open a bottle it's going to taste different than if I had opened it on any other day because a bottle of wine is constantly evolving and gaining complexity, that is, 'til it peaks...and it tastes so fucking good.”⁶²

Maya's love of wine is rooted in the wine itself—the grapes and people who picked them, the weather and the weight of history represented by the aging process, and especially how it tastes. Unlike Miles, she doesn't invoke any superlatives or express any concern about what anyone else thinks about the wine she likes; instead, she embraces the

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

uniqueness of every bottle on the day you open it. She acknowledges that every bottle has a peak, but embraces the diversity of flavors a single bottle can provide. She implies that every bottle is a living thing worth celebrating. Meanwhile Miles dismisses Cabernet, which can “grow anywhere and thrive even when it's neglected.”⁶³ Most importantly, unlike Miles and her ex-husband, Maya has no apparent interest in showing off. She cannot be a “fraud.” Her love of wine is based on her experience of wine, not what she hopes it will make other people think about her. Miles's uncomfortable laughter exposes his guilty conscience. Maya's genuine love of wine for wine's sake exposes him for the self-obsessed snob he is.

The film also implies that Maya has a better palate than Miles, or at least that her perceptions are less muddled by the desire to impress people (or just get drunk). Immediately before the scene with the monologues, she and Miles are talking in Stephanie's kitchen where they've just opened a bottle of wine to share. Miles takes a sip and immediately intones, “Wow, that's nice, that's really good.” He swirls the glass and continues, “Need to give it a minute, but that's really tasty. How 'bout you?” Maya looks thoughtful and shakes her head: “I think they overdid it a little. Too much alcohol, it overwhelms the fruit.” “Huh,” Miles says and takes another sip. Then, he praises her assessment, “Yeah, yeah, I'd say you were right on the money. Very good.”⁶⁴ Like Miles's explanation of difference between red and white wines, Maya's expertise is ratified by her ability to make assessments about wine based on objective qualities like alcohol content.

She also immediately recognizes that the bottle he names as the prize in his collection, a 1961 Chateau Cheval Blanc, is “peaking,” and urges him to drink it before it begins to decline in quality. However, she exhibits an appealing humility by quickly noting that she “read that somewhere,” rather than posing as the expert. When Miles says he's been waiting for a special occasion, and that it was originally intended for his

⁶³ He also calls it “prosaic,” and the description is likely meant to refer to Jack, who is represented by Cabernet in the novel. Rex Pickett, *Sideways* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2004, 73).

⁶⁴ Payne, 2004.

ten-year wedding anniversary, Maya replies that the day you open a bottle like that, the wine *itself* is the occasion. Once again, Miles is hung up on what wine symbolizes about him while Maya advocates for enjoying wine as a simply a tasty beverage.

Despite their differences, Maya seems to genuinely like Miles until he lets it slip that Jack is engaged. Complicit in his friend's lie, Miles blows his chance. Piling on top of his miseries, in the parking lot after the ceremony, he has a cordial exchange with his ex-wife in which she reveals that she is pregnant. Instead of following the other cars leaving the church parking lot to go to the reception, Miles drives off in the opposite direction. He runs up the stairs to his tiny, cluttered bachelor pad and roots around at the bottom of a closet. The film cuts to the register at a fast food restaurant. The camera slowly pans around the room full of sweatshirt-clad fat people shuffling around in the unflattering light and slowly zooms in on Miles, sitting alone in one of the vinyl booths. He's drinking from a large Styrofoam cup without a lid and there's a half-eaten burger and pile of onion rings in front of him. He looks around surreptitiously to ensure that no one is watching and refills the cup from a bottle of hidden in the corner of the booth.

The “proper” rituals he modeled for Jack, like swirling the wine carefully in a glass are utterly abandoned. He actually has to hide the bottle from view and fill it up surreptitiously rather than showing it off. **[Figure 4.6]**



Figure 4.6/ Burger and Wine

The slug lines in the script specifically recall Maya's monologue, referring to the emotions that wine inspires and the complexity of wine, especially an old one reaching

its peak.: “As the camera MOVES CLOSER, all the complex emotions inspired by the wine ripple across Miles's face.”⁶⁵ The ultimate irony—as defenders of Merlot were quick to point out—is that the wine he's savoring is composed substantially of the Merlot grapes he claims to despise.⁶⁶ While only oenophiles familiar with the name Cheval Blanc are likely to pick up on that detail, it offers further evidence that the scene represents a *departure* for Miles, a break with his old, bad, snobbish self. The new Miles doesn't care if a wine happens to be made of Merlot, or about drinking from the “correct” glass or about impressing anyone. He just enjoys how good it tastes. The more accessible clues that Miles has abandoned all pretense are the setting and the meal. The burger—perhaps the most prominent icon of populist, un-pretentious food—and fast-food restaurant cleanse Miles's love of wine of its unappealing elitism.

The burger joint scene is the turning point for Miles. After it ends, the words “five weeks later” appear and Miles is shown at the front of his middle school English classroom. One of his students reads a passage from *A Separate Peace* and Miles dismisses them for the weekend.⁶⁷ He returns to his apartment to find a message on the answering machine from Maya. She praises his unpublished novel and says he should let her know if he'll be back in Santa Barbara anytime. Her message, tentative but warm, is

⁶⁵ Alexander Payne and Jim Taylor, *Sideways* Screenplay, *The Internet Movie Script Database*, 23 May 2003, Web (accessed 24 March 2011).

⁶⁶ The filmmakers actually tried to get permission to use Chateau Petrus Pomerol instead of Chateau Cheval Blanc—the former being the most expensive and sought-after Merlot in the world. However, as Christian Moueix, who runs Chateau Petrus, told *The San Francisco Chronicle*, ““Quite a few film scripts cross my desk and I vaguely recall 'Sideways' asking for permission to use Petrus. I am afraid that at that time, I found the script unexciting and declined.” W. Blake Gray, “Knocked Sideways: Merlot is suddenly uncool – but the great ones still shine,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 February 2005, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁶⁷ The quote the student reads is: “The marrow of his bone,” I repeated aimlessly. This at least penetrated my mind. Phineas had died from the marrow of his bone flowing down his blood stream to his heart. I did not cry then or ever about Finny. I did not cry even when I stood watching him being lowered into his family's straight-laced burial ground outside of Boston. I could not escape a feeling that this was my own funeral, and you do not cry in that case.” There are many parallels between the characters Gene and Phineas in *A Separate Peace* and Miles and Jack. Gene is stumbling and awkward where Phineas seems confident, and Gene initially emulates him. However, the final quote, and the title of the novel, suggest that Gene must achieve a peace—if indeed, he can find peace—on his own. Miles's redemption and maturation similarly requires him to “grow up” in a way Jack apparently cannot. John Knowles, *A Separate Peace* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1953: 186)

the voiceover that provides the final words of the film while Miles's convertible is shown entering the same highway he and Jack set out on in the beginning of the film and then climbing the wooden steps to Maya's apartment. Her message ends; he takes a deep breath and knocks. The scene in the fast food restaurant and his transformation from a snob to a connoisseur creates the sense of resolution and the possibility that buoys the film's conclusion: perhaps this time, Miles will finally succeed.

The “Sideways Effect”

Sideways was hailed as a “surprise hit.”⁶⁸ The film's distributor, Fox Searchlight, initially had difficulty getting theaters interested.⁶⁹ In its opening weekend, the film was shown in only four theaters and grossed a paltry \$207,042. After it began attracting critical acclaim (most prominently five Academy Award nominations and the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay) it was re-released at 699 theaters nationwide. It ended its box office run in May 2005 after grossing \$71 million, which made it the 40th highest-grossing film of 2004 (out of 551 ranked by Box Office Mojo, an IMDb affiliate), ahead of many other films released that year with bigger budgets and more famous stars, like Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 2* and *The Stepford Wives*. Commercially, it also beat out other successful independent films released that year, like *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Garden State*, and *Napoleon Dynamite*.⁷⁰ That success is at least partially due to the writing and direction and the performances of the four lead actors, all of whom received accolades and award nominations. However the comments on *Metacritic* and the *Internet Movie Database* (IMDb) suggest that the focus on wine, which some critics suggested would hamper its mainstream success, was actually a large part of its

⁶⁸ “Absolute Corker,” *The Independent*, 12 March 2005, Web (accessed 28 July 2010); Wikipedia contributors, “Sideways,” *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, 16 Mar. 2011, Web (accessed 24 Mar. 2011).

⁶⁹ John Horn, “A surprise package: Juno is catching on in Middle America. \$100 million looks possible,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 January 2008, Web (accessed 31 July 2010).

⁷⁰ “2005 Domestic Grosses,” *Box Office Mojo*, Web (accessed 31 July 2010).

appeal.

IMDb user “Sa'ar Vardi” writes, “where else will you learn how to taste wine properly, have a good laugh and relate to two of the most charming losers ever seen on film – all at once?”⁷¹ For some viewers who didn't find the losers so charming, the wine theme seems to have been the only appeal. “Jaywillingham” slammed the film with a 1/10 rating, but says he “did enjoy the shots of wine country and wine tasting 101.”⁷² User-submitted reviews were far more likely than those by film critics to describe the movie as slow or boring, but not generally because of the wine. For example, a comment on *Metacritic* from “Patrick C.” calls *Sideways* “boring as hell,” but then says, “the movie's wine theme is actually pretty interesting and not only do you learn about all sorts of wine, each character takes on their own type.”⁷³

Perhaps the best evidence that *Sideways* appealed to people largely because of the focus on wine is the “Sideways Effect.” Just a month after the film's wide release in January of 2005, ACNielsen reported that the percentage of households buying Merlot was down 2 percent compared to the same 12-week period in the previous year.⁷⁴ The change in Pinot Noir sales was even more striking: between October 24, 2004 (two days after the film's limited opening weekend) and July 2, 2005, grocery store sales of Pinot Noir jumped 18%.⁷⁵ The change in the demand and price for Merlot and Pinot Noir, now established as the “Sideways Effect,” has proven to be statistically significant and lasting.⁷⁶

Although the sales data alone are suggestive, anecdotal reports offer an even

⁷¹ “IMDb user reviews for *Sideways*,” *The Internet Movie Database*, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ “User comments: *Sideways*,” *Metacritic.com* <[http://apps.metacritic.com/movie/usercomments.jsp?id_string=2924:giPKj2Gf\\$3MgWGUvPar8cw**>](http://apps.metacritic.com/movie/usercomments.jsp?id_string=2924:giPKj2Gf$3MgWGUvPar8cw**>) (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁷⁴ Gray, 2005.

⁷⁵ The difference in magnitude compared to Merlot is at least partially because it represents a far smaller share of the U.S. wine market. Jordan MacKay, *et al.*, *Passion for Pinot: A Journey Through America's Pinot Noir Country* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2009: 13).

⁷⁶ Cueller, Stephen, *et al.*, “The Sideways Effect: A Test for Changes in the Demand for Merlot and Pinot Noir Wines.” *American Association of Wine Economists Working Papers* No. 25 (2008) Web (accessed 06 July 2009).

more compelling case that the effect on wine sales was the result of the film. A Seattle sommelier interviewed in February 2005 said at least two or three customers a night would specifically mention the movie when ordering. Others were suddenly sheepish about ordering Merlot, prefacing their order with, “I’m know I’m not supposed to...!”⁷⁷ In March 2005, an Ohio wine store owner was quoted in the *Sunday Times of London* saying, “People have been coming in and asking for the Sideways grape, even if they don’t quite remember its name.”⁷⁸ The idea that liking a Merlot was something of a *faux pas* was echoed by Virginia Madsen, the actress who plays Maya. In an interview with Strawberry Saroyan of *The New York Times*, Madsen described a recent visit to the Los Angeles restaurant Pastis: “‘They fooled me,’ she said. ‘They brought out this wine and we were like, this is really good, thinking it was the pinot as usual.’ It turned out to be a merlot: horrors. ‘If you saw it on a menu, you’d throw it across a room. It was a merlot from Malibu.’”⁷⁹ Even some people who seemingly hadn’t seen the film caught wind that Merlot was now “uncool.” Without mentioning *Sideways*, Katie Couric said on “The Today Show” that she had “heard” she wasn’t supposed to drink Merlot.⁸⁰ Seeking to evaluate whether this “so-called ‘Sideways Effect’” was statistically significant, a team of economists at Sonoma State University led by Steven Cuellar examined the sales volume and price of 750 ML bottles of Merlot, Pinot Noir and several varietals that didn’t feature prominently in *Sideways*—Cabernet and Syrah—before and after the film’s release.

Based on annual scan data from U.S. retail chains from 1999 through 2008, they found that until 2004, the sales growth rate of all the varietals increased at a similar rate, with Pinot Noir at a consistently higher growth rate than Merlot or the “Control” varietals.

[Figure 4.7]

⁷⁷ Richard Kinssies, “On Wine: ‘Sideways’ has intoxicating effect on pinot noir sales, some say.” *The Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 23 February 2005, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁷⁸ “Oscar winner knocks sales of merlot wine sideways,” *The Sunday Times* 06 March 2005, Web (accessed 07 September 2008).

⁷⁹ Strawberry Saroyan, “A Night Out With: Virginia Madsen: Days of Wine and Chocolate,” *The New York Times* 16 January 2005, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁸⁰ Gray, 2005

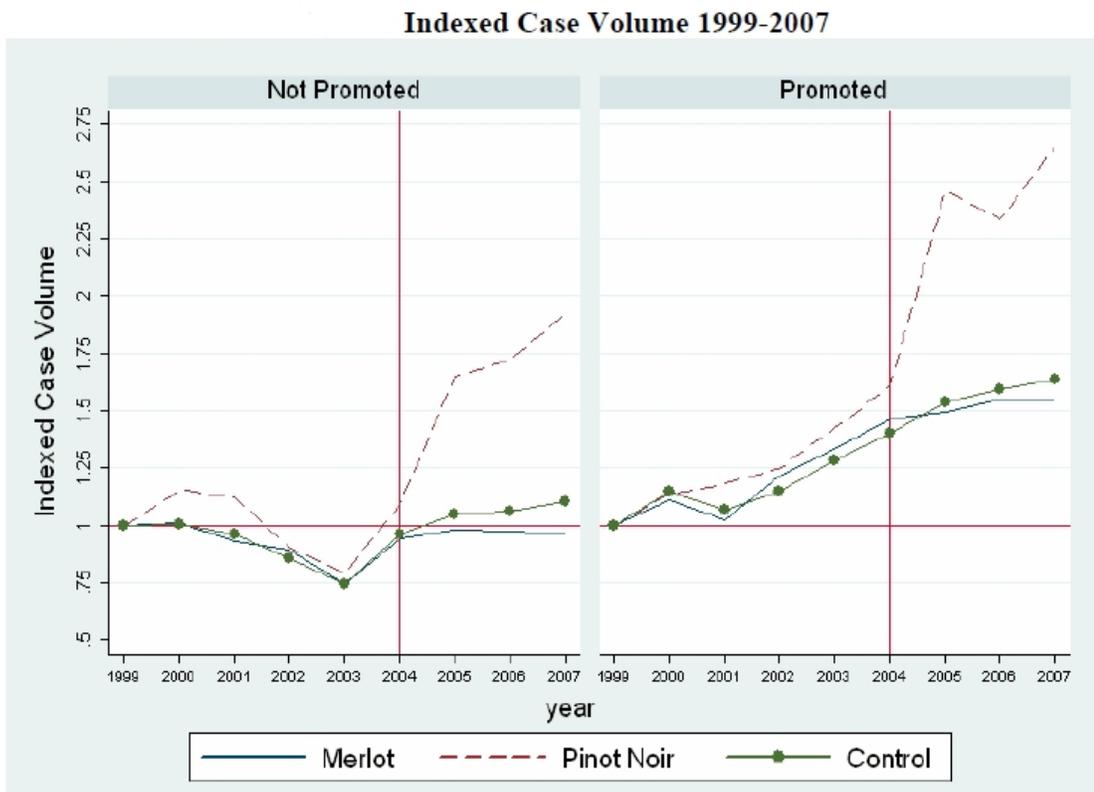


Figure 4.7/ Volume of Red Wine Sales Indexed to Their 1999 Sales⁸¹

The baseline is the 1999 sales volume of each varietal and the vertical line represents the year *Sideways* was released. “Promoted” includes any wine advertised in mailers, featured in in-store displays, or offered at temporary price reductions of 5% or more.

After 2004, Merlot sales slowed or even declined slightly while Pinot Noir sales increased precipitously. Based on a regression analysis, they found that the change in the demand for both varietals was statistically significant ($p > .05$) and that they varied significantly from the growth rate of the control group, with Merlot growing less and Pinot Noir growing more than Cabernet and Syrah. They also found a decrease in the price of Merlot and increase in the price of Pinot Noir consistent with a decrease in the demand for the former and an increase in the demand for the latter. They conclude, “all the results are consistent with the theory that *Sideways* had a negative impact on the consumption of Merlot, while increasing the consumption of Pinot Noir.”⁸²

One possible explanation for the *Sideways* Effect is that *Sideways* enlightened its

⁸¹ Reproduced from Cuellar et al 2008: 5.

⁸² Cuellar et al 2008: 21.

audience. The effect might be evidence the film taught Americans to be better wine drinkers by educating them about how bad Merlot is—or at least a lot of the Merlot they were previously buying—and how much better Pinot Noir is or introduced them to a varietal many had never have tried before. However, wine critics generally claim the opposite: that the phenomenon is an example of mass media brainwashing. They argue that Pinot Noir—or at least most of the Pinot Noir Americans have been buying since *Sideways* came out—*isn't* inherently better than Merlot and indeed is getting worse as the demand rises. Thus, the effect on the sales of both varietals indicates that *Sideways* duped a lot of people into thinking that the varietal was a reliable heuristic. They bought into the hype and spent more money on inferior wine. For example, *New York Times* wine critic Eric Asimov claimed in 2007 that the Sideways Effect had been exaggerated and the demand for and appreciation of “good” Merlot had never been substantially harmed. According to Asimov, the only thing the film had done was flood the market with a “growing sea of bad Pinot Noir.”⁸³

The second theory posits that the effect is evidence of Americans' ignorance about wine rather than *enlightenment*. Both theories rely on the idea of objective good taste. The idea that increasing Pinot Noir consumption is evidence of enlightenment relies on the belief that Pinot Noir is, at least in general, actually better than Merlot. The idea that varietals make a poor heuristic and educated consumers would not have been duped reinforces a more complicated and exclusive set of criteria for evaluating and appreciating wine, but nevertheless one in which some wines can be objectively declared “better” or “worse.” Experiments on taste perception, suggest the opposite: that taste is deeply subjective, influenced as much by context as objective properties.

⁸³ Cueller *et al* also sought to determine whether the effect was different for different price segments by re-examining the data for wines under \$10, between \$10-20, and \$20-40. They hypothesized that the film's effect would have a stronger effect on lower-priced wines. The results for Merlot were mixed, with decreases in every price range. For Pinot Noir, the results were contrary to the hypothesis. The increase in sales growth was smallest in the lowest price segment, and “drastic” for promoted wines in the \$20-40 range. This suggests that wine consumers at all “levels” were affected (2008, 14-5).

In a 2004 study at the Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, 32 participants were invited to taste what they were told was strawberry yogurt. The lights were turned out and they were actually given chocolate yogurt. Nineteen of them still rated it as having “good strawberry flavor.”⁸⁴ The yogurt-tasters weren't food critics or trained chefs, but even people experts can be dramatically influenced by contextual cues. Frédéric Brochet demonstrated this in a series of experiments he conducted as a doctoral student at the University of Bordeaux involving subjects recruited from the Faculty of Oenology—i.e., wine experts or experts-in-training. In one experiment, Brochet asked 54 expert tasters to describe wines in two sessions: in the first, they were given a red wine (a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot grapes) and a white wine (a blend of Sémillion and Sauvignon grapes) and asked to draw up a list of odor descriptors for each, using words on a list provided or their own preferred terms. The words most often to describe the white were honey, citrus fruit, floral, passion fruit, butter, and pear; the red was described as wooded, spice, blackcurrant, strawberry, cherry, prune, raspberry, vanilla, pepper, animal, and licorice.⁸⁵ In the second session, the same subjects were given two glasses of the same white wine used in the first session, one of which had been dyed red with a flavorless, odorless grape extract.⁸⁶ Each subject was given the list he or she had generated in the first session and asked to indicate which of the two wines most intensely

⁸⁴ Brian Wansink, *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think* (New York: Bantam, 2006: 120).

⁸⁵ Descriptors characteristic of red and white wines were determined using a textual analysis program called ALCESTE that counted the co-occurrence of words in particular blocks of text. Brochet ran the analysis on five collections of tasting notes: notes on 100,000 wines from the *Hatchette Guide to the Wines of France*; 3,000 from Jacques Dupont who published the weekly *Gault & Millau* letter; 9,000 from Robert Parker who writes “*The Wine Advocate*,” 2,000 from Brochet's personal corpus, and 352 from a single blind tasting session of 8 wines by 44 “tasters of international reputation.” Although there were few overlaps between the different authors' corpuses—Brochet says no more than 10 words were common to more than two authors—each body of tasting notes was strongly indexed by color. F. Brochet & G. Morrot, “Influence of the context on the perception of wine—Cognitive and methodological implications,” *Journal International des Sciences de la Vigne et du Vin* 33 (1999): 187–192.

⁸⁶ The neutrality of the dye, which was made from purified grape anthocyanins, was tested in a separate trial. 50 people were recruited to taste the white wine with and without the added color served in opaque glasses in booths illuminated by red light to obscure the visual difference. The glasses were presented in random order with three random digits indicated on the glass so neither the experimenter or subject knew which wine contained the red dye. Brochet et al, “The Color of Odors,” *Brain and Language* 77 (2001): 187-196.

indicated each descriptor. Despite the fact that the wines were identical, the tasters consistently associated the “red” wine with the descriptors they had used for the real red wine a week earlier.

In another experiment, Brochet served 57 experts the same red wine in two different sessions, first identifying it as a table wine (*vin du table*) and then as a high-prestige wine (*Grand Cru Classé*). When identified as a cheap, common wine, it was described with words like “unbalanced” (83%), “fault” (70%), “weak” (75%), “simple” (100%), “flat” (68%), “sting” (79%), and “none” (100%). However, when it was identified as an expensive and prestigious wine, the tasters used positive words like “balanced” (65%) “agreeable” (79%), “full” (87%), “complex” (73%), “round” (100%), “a lot” (100%), and “excellent” (100%).

These experiments don't necessarily mean that people can't discern differences in food or that they don't derive more or less pleasure from them based on those perceived differences. A recent study that used an fMRI to scan brain activity while subjects sampled several different wines provides further evidence that contextual cues like price affect not only what people *say* about food but also how they experience it. A team of researchers led by economist Antonio Rangel had twenty subjects who were screened for liking and at least occasionally drinking red wine (11 men and 9 women between the ages of 21-30) taste five samples of Cabernet Sauvignon and a neutral control solution. The wines were identified to the subjects only by their retail price, and two of the wines were administered twice—once at a low price and once at a higher price. Wine 1 was presented at both \$90, its actual retail price, and \$10, and Wine 2 was presented at both \$5, its actual retail price, and \$45. Wine 3 was identified only at its real retail price of \$35. Both the reported pleasantness of the wine and the amount of neural activity in an area of the brain involved in the experience of pleasantness were highly correlated with price. The price did not affect areas of the brain involved in more basic sensory perception. Rangel

et al conclude: “It seems that price changes modulate the representations of experienced utility but not the encoding of the sensory properties of taste in the primary gustatory complex.”⁸⁷

What all of these experiments suggest is that *both* good taste—or the perception of food and drink as pleasurable—and “good taste”—foodways with social and cultural value—are socially constructed. The belief that more expensive wines or particular varietals are superior isn't based on an objective evaluation of how the wines taste. That suggests that the Sideways Effect is neither the result of the audience being enlightened (taught that Pinot Noir is objectively good) nor duped (deceived into thinking varietals are a good heuristic for objective quality). Instead, the “Sideways Effect” reflects the film successfully winning consent for its particular construction of those varietals.⁸⁸ The key to its appeal was its successful negotiation of the tension between the desire to display “good taste” by partaking in the pleasures of food constructed as desirable and the threat of seeming pretentious. By constructing high-status food and wine as objectively superior and “good taste” as meritocratic, *Sideways* made it safe to cultivate culinary capital and enhanced the rewards of doing so.

Given that Pinot Noir is associated with the snobbish Miles of the first 90 percent of film, it is somewhat counter-intuitive that *Sideways* would have driven its sales up rather than other varietals. If the film endorses the inclusive, unpretentious aesthetic represented by Maya in which a fast food burger or a Merlot might be just as delicious as

⁸⁷ Hilke Plassmann et al, “Marketing Actions Can Modulate Neural Representations of Experienced Pleasantness,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 105(3) 22 January 2008: 1050-1054. A later study of 6,000 blind tastings concluded: “In a sample of more than 6,000 blind tastings, we find that the correlation between price and overall rating is small and negative, suggesting that individuals on average enjoy more expensive wines slightly *less*.” Goldstein et al, “Do More Expensive Wines Taste Better? Evidence from a Large Sample of Blind Tastings,” *Journal of Wine Economics* 3 (Spring 2008): 1-9.

⁸⁸ In thinking about the ideological effects of media texts in terms of “winning consent,” I’m relying on Stuart Hall’s use of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony. Rather than seeing media as reflective of an achieved consensus, Hall argued that media was an active agent of consensus that had to continually work to win “a universal validity and legitimacy for accounts of the world which are partial and particular” and which generally work to reinforce prevailing hierarchies and the dominant mode of production (Hall 1982).

something rarefied, then Pinot Noir shouldn't have fared any better in the wake of the film's release than Merlot or Cabernet. The argument that the film's effect was simply the result of it introducing people to a varietal they'd never heard of isn't sufficient to account for the fact that Pinot Noir became “trendy” and “cool.” It's not actually the case that all publicity is good publicity. Addressing a situation similar to the post-Sideways Merlot slump, British wine critic Oz Clark argues that the film *Bridget Jones Diary* may have hurt sales of Chardonnay in England:

Bridget Jones goes out on the pull [the singles bar scene], fails, goes back to her miserable bedsit, sits down, pours herself an enormous class of Chardonnay, sits there with mascara running down her cheeks saying 'Dear diary, I've failed again, I've poured an enormous glass of Chardonnay and I'm going to put my head in the oven.... Until Bridget Jones, Chardonnay was really sexy. After, people said 'God, not in my bar.'⁸⁹

Based on the often equally-pathetic portrayal of Miles, it would have followed the preferred reading of the film if Pinot Noir sales had slowed and Merlot had become popular as the choice of anti-snobs everywhere. Indeed, that's exactly how Mary Baker, the owner of a small winery in Santa Barbara County explains the fact that her Merlot sales weren't hurt: “No one wants to be the ‘geeky Miles.’ Miles apparently hated Merlot, and that made people curious about Merlot because no one wants to come across as such a navel-lint-gazing wine snob.”⁹⁰

However, that phenomenon clearly conflicts with the broader market trends captured by Cuellar's research and reflected in Katie Couric's reporting that she “heard she wasn't supposed to drink Merlot.” Baker's explanation only applies to a niche market of people who might purchase a bottle of 40 dollar Merlot from a self-described “microwinery” in Paso Robles, CA (and who might have understood why the Cheval

⁸⁹ Martin Hickman, “Bridget Jones 'has put Britain off chardonnay',” *The Independent*, 27 May 2008, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

⁹⁰ Simon Owen, “The Sideways offensive: Will Merlot sales ever recover?” *Bloggasm* 03 July 2007, Web (accessed 06 July 2010). Notably, according to the website of her winery, Dover Canyon, they no longer offer any wines made with Merlot grapes. “Our Wine,” *Dover Canyon Winery*, Web (accessed 06 July 2010).

Blanc was ironic). The passionate defense of Merlot by wine critics also seems symptomatic of the desire to appear less pretentious by embracing the maligned grape and simultaneously distinguishing oneself from the Pinot Noir-duped masses. Because the vast majority of American wine consumers did the opposite.

The majority of wine consumers didn't know that the Cheval Blanc was a Merlot-Cabernet blend, so Miles's invective against Merlot had more sticking power than its role in his redemption. Instead of creating an association between Pinot Noir and snobbery, *Sideways* turned the words "Pinot Noir" into a useful heuristic for the average person seeking to make better wine purchases. Ironically, the only people who made the connection between Pinot Noir and snobbery were the snobs who endorsed Merlot to (snobbishly) distinguish themselves from the masses. By offering an idealized version of the connoisseur in Maya and redeeming Miles by showing him drinking wine with a burger, the film reassured most viewers that cultivating the kind of "good taste" represented by Pinot Noir wouldn't necessarily make them snobs.

Foodies, Snobbery, and Class

Similarly, the term *foodie* has been embraced because it is perceived as less snobbish than older words like *gourmet* or *epicure*. The term was independently coined by *New York Magazine* restaurant critic Gael Greene in 1980⁹¹ and the anonymous author of a letter to the features editor of *Harpers & Queen magazine* in 1981. Even the initial appearances of the term reveal some of the conflicts that persist over its meaning. Is it an insult or a badge of pride?

Greene first used the term in an article titled "What's Nouvelle? La Cuisine

⁹¹ Greene started her career as a writer for *Cosmopolitan* and the *Ladies Home Journal*, largely focusing on "sex and the single woman." In 1968, she was hired by *New York magazine* to review restaurants, although she is best known for writing about sex in the guise of food (or vice versa). See Kamp 2006: 134-5. The Wikipedia article about her is exactly 5 sentences long, and one of them reads, "Her memoir *Insatiable: Tales from a Life of Delicious Excess* includes a description of a sexual encounter with Elvis Presley." Wikipedia contributors, "Gael Green," Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia, 28 April 2008, Web (accessed 24 March 2011).

Bourgeoisie” to describe the clients at a hip restaurant in Paris whose chef was at that time the only woman to rate three red toques from Gault-Millau (the equivalent of three Michelin stars) :

She offers crayfish with white feet or red...three ways, tends stove in high heels, slips into the small Art Deco dining room of *Restaurant d'Olympe*—a funeral parlor of shiny black walls and red velvet—to graze cheeks with her devotees, serious foodies, and, from ten on, *tout Paris*, the men as flashily beautiful as their beautiful women.⁹²

Although bourgeoisie often refers to the wealthy (when contrasted with the proletariat, for example), the title of Greene's piece refers to a movement beginning in France that was seen as less refined than “Nouvelle Cuisine.” *La cuisine bourgeoisie* was how her Paris connections were referring to the growing interest in regional, seasonal, traditional cooking, “like Grandma used to make” and the rise of chefs like Dominique Nahmias, who had no formal training. Greene describes her as “a housewife friends pestered to turn professional.”⁹³ Thus, *foodies* appears to refer to restaurant-goers eager to sample cooking that departed from the French culinary establishment. They are a peculiar elite that embraces anti-elitism.

Around the same time that Greene was sampling *la cuisine bourgeoisie* in Paris, Ann Barr, editor of the features section of *Harpers & Queen* in England, also noticed “the food world was shifting on its tectonic plates, and that perfectly sane people had suddenly become obsessed with every aspect of food.”⁹⁴ She invited readers to send their thoughts on the phenomenon, and several seized on the opportunity to criticize regular contributor Paul Levy. One of the letters referred to him as a greedy, gluttonous, lip-smacking “king foodie.” The letter made it into an article in the magazine's August 1982 issue. Levy and Barr were so excited about the word—Levy describes it as “a cocktail stick applied to a raw nerve—that they immediately began working on *The Foodie Handbook*,

⁹² Gael Greene, “What's Nouvelle? La Cuisine Bourgeoise,” *New York magazine*, 02 June 1980:33, archived at *The Insatiable Critic: Vintage Insatiable*, Web (accessed 26 March 2011).

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ As recounted by *The Foodie Handbook* co-author Paul Levy on *The Guardian's Word of Mouth Blog*. Paul Levy, “What is a foodie?” *The Word of Mouth Blog*, 14 June 2007, Web (accessed 26 March 2011).

a satirical manual similar in style and tone to *The Yuppie Handbook*. The book was published in 1984. By 1989 the word had achieved sufficient cultural currency to appear in the second edition of the O.E.D.⁹⁵

Although the anonymous letter-writer clearly meant it as a pejorative, Levy claims its valance shifted as soon as more people began to use it: “What started as a term of mockery shifted ground, as writers found that 'foodie' had a certain utility, describing people who, because of age, sex, income, and social class, simply did not fit into the category 'gourmet,' which we insisted had become 'a rude word.'”⁹⁶ In a 2007 article reflecting on the term's currency, Levy claimed, “It long ago stopped being (if it ever really was) a term of abuse. But is it a compliment about your knowledge or food or the sensitivity of your palate? Or is it simply a value-neutral description, like civil servant, football fan, or stamp-collector?”⁹⁷ Many of the commenters disagree vehemently. “Gastrotom” writes, “No, it is still a term of abuse in my book. Please stop using the F-word. I am not a f**die!”⁹⁸ Others express surprise the term had negative origins, and claim to see it as value-neutral, just a hobby like any other. A third camp claims the term with pride, often suggesting that the debate about whether or not it's a good thing to care about what you eat could only be had in the UK and US since all people in other countries like Italy and France care about “good food.”

Similar discussions have cropped up on numerous blogs and message boards, and Johnston and Baumann use them as the basis for their discussion of the term. They cite the manifesto from the online community Chowhound, which defines the community as anti-foodie: “We're not talking about foodies. Foodies eat where they're told. Chowhounds blaze trails.”⁹⁹ However, they note that many self-identified foodies make

⁹⁵ Their book is often credited with originating the term, despite the fact that in the book, Barr and Levy credit Greene. Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 53.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Asterisks in place of vowels is a common way to avoid profanity filters, implying that foodie is vulgar. Ibid.

⁹⁹ “Chowhound Manifesto,” *Chow*, Web (accessed 05 December 2008), qtd. in Johnston and Baumann,

the kind of boundary crossing that seems to be implied by the “trailblazing” Chowhounds central to their definition of what makes someone a foodie. A respondent called “Zapatista” responds to the Chowhound manifesto in a thread on the Serious Eats message board:

I'm a foodie, too. It's a shame that a perfectly good word has become a stigma. Like liberal. Or gay. I read on Chowhound that the hounds are definitely not foodies. What the heck are they then? They spend all day chiming in to every possible thread, ranting about everything from holes-in-the-wall to El Bulli. They're foodies. Take back the word. Foodies unite!¹⁰⁰

According to Johnston and Baumann, Zapatista's comment reflects an intermediate level of reflexivity: it shows some awareness of the negative connotations and issues of culinary elitism, but “little awareness of privilege and social status.” They argue that a higher level of reflexivity is “relatively uncommon” and that although class and status are “inextricably woven into the gourmet foodscape.... Class inequality is a relatively invisible phenomenon in the foodie world.”¹⁰¹

Their assertion that the popular discourse about food obscures class and “maintains classlessness” seems to disregard the class implications of the word snobbery. The texts they analyze and the data from their qualitative interviews with foodies reveal the same process of negotiation with the threat of snobbery reflected in the popularity of the Rolls Royce commercials and *Sideways*. The anxiety about elitism and insistence that the taste discrimination that demarcates the *foodie* are inclusive are explicit claims about status. Class is not “invisible” in the foodie world, it is the heart of the debate about whether or not the term foodie is snobbish.

The word “snob” originally referred to a shoemaker, but in the late eighteenth century it became a slang term for the “ordinary classes.” In 1848, William Thackeray used it to describe people who “ape their social superiors” in *The Book of Snobs*, which is

2010: 54-5.

¹⁰⁰ Zapatista, “Who's a Foodie Here,” *Serious Eats*, 29 February 2008, Web, qtd. In Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 59.

¹⁰¹ Johnston and Baumann, 2010: 59, 175.

still sometimes part of its connotation. However, in the early twentieth century it acquired another shade of meaning, now dominant in the U.S.: people who have contempt for their social inferiors.¹⁰² According to Joseph Epstein's *Snobbery: The American Version*, “The snob measures himself and others by extraneous things: ancestry, wealth, power, social connections, possession of glittering or elegant objects—everything that is connected with status in the world or with that portion of it that vibrates alluringly for him.”¹⁰³ The awareness and anxiety about snobbery is an awareness of and anxiety about class.

Those who reject the term *foodie* do so on the grounds that it implies an excessive concern about what kinds of foods have been officially sanctioned—thus the Chowhound sneer that foodies “eat where they're told.” This implies that foodies are concerned less with the way food tastes than with what their habits communicate about them—foodies are Miles. Zapatista's defense of the term also invokes status by claiming that it is precisely an openness to food from “holes-in-the-wall” (low status) to El Bulli (high status) that characterizes the *foodie*. The foodies in *Foodies* doth protest too much. Their anxiety about snobbery reflects the guilty conscience of the food revolution. Furthermore, the pervasive concern about elitism challenges Johnston and Baumann's argument that foodies and their omnivorousness represents a significant departure from the old, snobbish way of being a *gourmet* or *epicure*.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the term *gourmet* was used to poke fun at culinary pretentiousness from its earliest uses in English. Much like the term *foodie*, it was always-already a pejorative term. Embraced by people seeking to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, its very ability to do so was always in conflict with the ideals of democratic populism and egalitarianism. The attempt to recuperate the term by claiming foodies are equal-opportunity eaters is yet another attempt to portray a hierarchical

¹⁰² “snob,” *OED*.

¹⁰³ Joseph Epstein, *Snobbery: The American Version* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003: 18).

system of cultural capital as a meritocracy. As in *Sideways*, the defense of cultivating high-status tastes is that as long as you sip your fancy wine with a burger, or eat in holes-in-the-wall as well as El Bulli, being a *foodie* will not make you a “snob.” The implication is that nearly any food can be gourmet and nearly any eater can cultivate the kind of discriminating taste that distinguishes foodies.

The argument that this discourse is *classless* mistakes the meritocratic ideology that works to obscure privilege as a real erasure of class. It is rather the evidence of centrality of class to the term *foodie* and the habits associated with them. The discourse about class and status in the U.S. has always involved the use of euphemistic terms like *nice*, *proper*, and *polite society*. The ideological contortions on display in discussions about the term *foodie* reflect the tensions inherent in the reproduction of class hierarchies in a liberal, democratic society. Style and taste only work to reinforce class distinctions if the markers of the middle-class are actually confined to the middle class; however, the hierarchy must be ideologically justified by universalistic claims.¹⁰⁴ In other words, it’s a problem for class distinction if everyone can afford to eat the same food in the same way and does so, because what then *distinguishes* anyone? However, it’s a problem for normative egalitarianism if the real reason people are eating the way they do is because of inherited taste and privilege rather than the skill and effort—like a naturally good and/or well-trained palate, and a carefully-cultivated sense of what’s “hip.”

Foodies do not often discuss the role of privilege in their tastes or the role of taste in the reproduction of capital, but the anxiety about snobbery acknowledges the importance of status considerations in their food choices. It also points to the role of food in the popular construction of class. Class is not—and has never been—merely a designation based on wealth or income. The most mundane forms of consumption are central to the the performance of class identity in America. The next chapter explores the

¹⁰⁴ See also: the discussion of “universalistic morality” as a legitimating strategy for bourgeois ideologies in liberal capitalism in Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (New York, NY: Beacon Press, 1975: 86-92).

cultural significance of food as a marker of class and what the food revolution can teach us about changes in the U.S. class structure over the last three decades.

CHAPTER FIVE
FOOD, FLOURISHING, AND CLASS FORMATION

What It Means to Flourish

The water gurgled in the pipes and splattered out in a burst. I drank some down and then remembered my plant. I've had it for almost ten years. It's barely alive, but it is alive. More brown than green. There are parts that have withered. But still it lives, leaning always to the left. Even when I rotate it so that what faced the sun no longer faces the sun, it stubbornly leans to the left, choosing against physical need in favor of an act of creativity. I poured the rest of my water into its pot. What does it mean, anyway, to flourish?

—Nicole Krauss¹

Most theories of class, dating back to Marx, are fundamentally concerned with human flourishing. Flourishing is, in essence, what's at stake in class analysis: class inequality is a problem because it inhibits flourishing, and access to capital is significant because it promotes flourishing. However, flourishing is just as slippery and difficult to define as class itself. Although the popular understanding of class in America is based largely on income,² *flourishing* connotes more than material prosperity or the fulfillment of physical need. Precisely what, though, is a matter of debate. The musings of Leon Gursky, protagonist of Nicole Krauss' novel *The History of Love*, concerning his withered, left-leaning plant offers a parable for the conflicting views on what constitutes human flourishing.

According to philosopher Luc Ferry, Western conceptions of flourishing fall into four main categories: Classical (Greek), Christian, Utopian, and Nietzschean. The first

¹ Nicole Krauss, *The History of Love, A Novel* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005: 19).

² For example, the title of a 2003 article in *The Washington Times*, "What is Middle Class? Income Isn't Necessarily Sole Measure," implies that at least some people would assume that income is the sole measure.

three are governed by external principles: for the ancient Greeks, the idea of fulfilling an inherent nature (cosmological); for Christians, God's laws (theological); for Utopians, a secular ideal of the greater good (humanistic). In contrast, Nietzsche rejects the use of external criteria to judge the value of a life. Nietzschean flourishing is more like “living life to the fullest” according to one's unique, individual desires. Gursky's plant embodies the Nietzschean model. By choosing against physical need, the plant violates its supposed nature in favor of an act of defiant self-expression. However, if the plant's act of creativity is not just a form self-expression, but also a kind of *self*-creation, then it also has something in common with Marx's cosmological conception of the “good life.”

According to Marx, what makes capitalism antithetical to human flourishing is that it turns work from a freely-chosen, life-affirming activity into forced labor that alienates and enslaves people:

Labor not only produces commodities. It also produces itself and the worker as a commodity. . . . The worker does not affirm himself in his work but denies himself, feels miserable and unhappy, develops no free physical and mental energy but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore feels at ease only outside work. . . . His work therefore, is not voluntary, but coerced, forced labor. . . . it is not his own, but another person's...in work he does not belong to himself but to someone else.³

Marx's vision of the “good life” promised by communism is a system where no one is *reified* by having to sell their labor. Rather than having to become “a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and. . . remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood,” Marx claims that in a communist society, people will be able to “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner.”⁴ For Marx, the essence of human flourishing is the freedom to engage in pleasurable labor.

According to philosopher Philip Kain, Marx's view of the “good life” is aligned

³ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (selections),” 1844, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994: 59-62).

⁴ Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” 1844, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994: 119).

with Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, often translated as “happiness” but closer in meaning to “fulfillment,” or the “best good.”⁵ In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues that “each thing has a process, activity or function [*ergon*]⁶, when it has realized its essence, it achieves its end or good.”⁷ Marx suggests that the essential function or species-being [*ergon*] of man⁸ is work, beginning with the work he does to produce the means of his own subsistence:

Man can be distinguished from the animal by consciousness, religion, or anything you please. He begins to distinguish himself from the animal the moment he begins to produce his means of subsistence, a step required by his physical organization. By producing food, man indirectly produces his material life itself.⁹

The essential act of creativity that defines human flourishing for Marx is the creation of the self, free from the constraints of capitalism. Perhaps in leaning to the left, Gursky's plant is expressing a freely-chosen form of self-creation predicated on defying the productivist ethos that would be represented by growing towards the sun.

Another interpretation of how Gursky's plant might be flourishing concerns the role of *virtue* in the “good life.” Although Aristotle acknowledges the importance of external factors like health, wealth, and family, his emphasis in *Nicomachean Ethics* is virtue.¹⁰ For him, man's *ergon* is “the activity of the soul in accordance with virtue.”¹¹ According to Aristotle one of the primary virtues and the main distinguishing qualification of a free male subject is moderation (*sōphrōsyne*) in the use of food, drink,

⁵ Phillip J. Kain, *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1988: 21).

⁶ Also sometimes translated as “work.”

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Although I generally try to avoid using the outdated male “universal,” here I'm trying to echo Marx. His understanding of labor privileges the kind of work traditionally done by men (i.e. hunting, fishing, cattle breeding, criticizing) and specifically excludes the work of reproduction and consumption that falls disproportionately on women.

⁹ Marx, 1844b: 107.

¹⁰ The ancient Greeks were far from agreed on what constituted a “good life.” Because Ferry is concerned primarily with the source and validity of the standards, he conflates conflicting Greek philosophies like Aristotle's—which acknowledges the importance of material goods like wealth and immaterial goods like virtue—and the Stoics, who privileged virtue to the exclusion of material goods.

¹¹ Again, the masculine “universal” echoes the original text. According to Aristotle, ethical subjecthood is limited to free, adult men. Richard Kraut, ed. *The Blackwell Guide to Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006: 278).

and sex. Moderation is a habit that has to be cultivated through the regular exercise of self-control over physical pleasures that tend towards immoderation. A similar belief later manifested in Christian asceticism, which also associated virtue with the voluntary renunciation of physical pleasures and needs. So Gursky's plant might also be flourishing in the sense that its act of creativity involves leaning away from the sun, thus renouncing physical needs and embodying virtue.

Food is implicated in all of these modes of flourishing: food is a medium for individual self-expression (especially for the food revolution, whose defiance of the industrial “establishment” is particularly Nietzschean); producing food can be a form of pleasurable labor, especially for people who choose it freely (a la Marx);¹² and the physical need to eat and pleasures involved in eating have always been fundamentally implicated in what it means to be morally good and live well (invoking Aristotle). This chapter explores the factors that have made flourishing through the use of food more important to the American middle class in the last three decades. First, I briefly examine the role of food in bourgeois ethics from antiquity to the present, relying primarily on Michel Foucault's account of the desiring subject in *The History of Sexuality*. Second, I explore how the food revolution negotiates with a complex ethics of pleasure and self-denial that makes it especially appealing to the liberal elite. Third, I outline changes in U.S. income structure that have produced a particular form of class anxiety in the middle class since the 1980s and driven people to seek compensatory forms of aspiration. Lastly, I explore the implications of the theory of compensatory consumption for scholarly definitions of social class.

¹² This is the usual explanation for recent surveys that suggest that although men are doing more of the home cooking in America, women still do the vast majority. Men who do cook report enjoying it more than women who cook, likely because for them it is more likely to be an optional, leisure pursuit (like weekend grilling) whereas women are more likely to experience cooking as an obligation or form of forced labor.

Alimentary Ethics in *The History of Sexuality*: What if Sex Never Surpassed Food?

Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* is best known for challenging the “repressive hypothesis” about sex in the Victorian era and introducing the theory of bio-power. In *Volume I: The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault argues that sexuality is a modern phenomenon that emerged along with capitalist mode of production and modern class structure in the eighteenth century. Contrary to the popular belief that the Victorian bourgeoisie made sexuality taboo and silenced sexual discourse, Foucault argues that during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there was a “veritable discursive explosion” about sex.¹³ Institutions like school dormitories, hospitals, and the bourgeois family established new rules about sexual propriety and new technologies of surveillance and control focused on “perversions” like adultery, masturbation, and homosexuality. Prohibited acts became full-blown identities—e.g. homosexuality went from a class of forbidden same-sex desire and sex acts to a principle for classifying people. The new discourses of sexuality affirmed the differential value of the bourgeois body and replaced the sovereign monarch's power to “*take* life or *let* live” with the capitalist state's power to “*foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death.”¹⁴

The role of food in the *The History of Sexuality* has attracted far less scholarly attention,¹⁵ in part because it emerges only in the later volumes when Foucault turns his attention to earlier historical periods. The research program outlined in the first volume promises to flesh out its incomplete history of the technologies of repression that began to take shape in the sixteenth century with the Reformation and Tridentine Catholicism, and penetrated the laity “sometime around the eighteen-thirties”¹⁶ However, the second

¹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, 1978 (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990: 17).

¹⁴ Ibid, 138.

¹⁵ Which is not to say it has been entirely ignored. Two exceptions published in the last decade: Elspeth Probyn, *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (London, UK: Routledge, 2000) and John Coveney, *Food, Morals, and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006).

¹⁶ Foucault, 1978: 122.

volume reflects a dramatic change in the scope of his project, leaping back in time to the fourth century B.C. The reason for the shift was Foucault's recognition that modern sexuality was part of a longer history of individuals recognizing themselves as desiring subjects. In the introduction to *Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, he says, "One could not very well analyze the formation and development of the experience of sexuality from the eighteenth century onward, without doing a historical and critical study dealing with desire and the desiring subject."¹⁷ The narrative that emerges in *The Use of Pleasure* about the desiring subject in Greek antiquity is an inverse of his refutation of the "repressive hypothesis." The ancient Greeks are popularly depicted as pagan hedonists who exulted in sodomy and pederasty, but Foucault argues that they actually glorified self-restraint and moderation.

He supports this counter-intuitive finding not only by examining their beliefs about behaviors that we would recognize today as *sexual*, but also by looking at what he calls their "alimentary ethics," beliefs about the right use of food and drink. Foucault says:

Foods, wines, and relations with women and boys constituted analogous ethical material; they brought forces into play that were natural, but that always tended to be excessive; and they all raised the same question: how could one, how must one "make use" (*chrēsthai*) of this dynamics of pleasures, desires, and acts? A question of right use. As Aristotle expresses it, "all men enjoy in some way or another both savoury foods and sexual intercourse, but not all men do so as they ought [*ouch' hōs dei*]."¹⁸

Here, he claims alimentary and sexual pleasures were merely *analogous*, which implies that they were conceptually separate, but a few sentences later he suggests that in the fourth century B.C. food and sex had not yet been uncoupled:

It would be interesting, surely, to trace to the long history of the connections between alimentary ethics and sexual ethics, as manifested in doctrines, but also in religious rituals and dietary rules; one would need to discover how, over a long period of time, the play of alimentary

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, 1985 (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990: 5).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 51-2.

prescriptions became uncoupled from that of sexual morals, by following the evolution of their respective importance (with the rather belated moment, no doubt, when the problem of sexual conduct became more worrisome than that of alimentary behaviors) and the gradual differentiation of their specific structure (the moment when sexual desire began to be questioned in terms other than alimentary appetite).

He further claims that the uncoupling of *alimentation* and sex and the elevation of the latter as the more worrisome of the two was “belated,” and that the ancient Greeks did not distinguish (morally at least) between them. Alimentary and sexual appetites were not analogous or twin, but instead constituted an undifferentiated subject of ethical concern, a single site for the moral problematization of bodily needs and pleasures. In the fourth century B.C., sexual desire had not yet been questioned “in terms other than alimentary appetite.”

In the third volume of the *History*, Foucault says that before the differentiation of food and sexuality, food was actually the more important subject of ethical concern. In *Volume III: The Care of the Self*, he argues that the problematization of sexual pleasure intensified in the earliest centuries A.D., resulting in the creation of elaborate regimens that governed the proper timing and use of sexual pleasure. However, sexual regimens were of minor importance in comparison to dietary ones, based on the volume of practical advice published about both of them. Foucault concludes that eating and digestion was of far greater concern than procreation and sexual pleasure based on medical texts published between the first and fifth centuries A.D.¹⁹

Foucault refers again to some later date when sex became as important as food and then surpassed it:

A whole development—evident in Christian monasticism—will be necessary before the preoccupation with sex will begin to match the preoccupation with food. But alimentary abstentions and fasts will long remain fundamental. And it will be an important moment for the history of ethics in European societies when apprehension about sex and its regimen will significantly outweigh the rigor of alimentary prescriptions.²⁰

¹⁹ Foucault, 1988: 140-1.

²⁰ Ibid, 141.

Although Foucault says it would be “interesting” to figure out when sexual and alimentary ethics were differentiated, he analyzes the moral problematization of sexual pleasure in pre-Victorian times as if sex were already a distinct object of moral concern. The main reason Foucault's *History* is not more strongly associated with food is because he neglected the subject himself. This is exemplified by his decision to focus in the second volume on *aphrodisia* rather than *akolasia*.

Foucault says that his concern in *The Use of Pleasure* is the ancient Greeks' moral problematization of the pleasures whose use required moderation (*sōphrōsyne*). According to Aristotle, the opposite of “moderation” (*sōphrōsyne*) is *akolasia*, the pleasures that tend towards immoderation. Instead of focusing on *akolasia*, Foucault focuses on “the general form of the moral inquiry that they pursued concerning the *aphrodisia*.”²¹ He notes that *aphrodisia* is not an equivalent to “sexuality” because the latter term refers specifically to a modern invention, but it offered the best analog for ensemble of acts, gestures, and contacts later recognized as sexuality. The moral equivalent of sexuality was *akolasia*. For the ancient Greeks, self-restraint was recommended against the immoderate use of *all* the pleasures of the body, including the consumption of food and drink.²²

Foucault never specifies when the concern with sex became more important than the concern with food or what the signs of that important shift might have been. The three volumes of the *History* seem to chart a continuous increase in concern with sexual pleasure from the ancient Greeks to the Victorians, but it's not clear how Foucault arrives at the conclusion that sexuality not only became a distinct concept but also surpassed the

²¹ Foucault, 1985: 36.

²² This is clarified further in his discussion of the distinction between *sōphrōsyne* and its synonym *enkrateia*. Foucault notes that Aristotle was the first to distinguish systematically between the two terms. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *sōphrōsyne* is the deliberate, active choice to be moderate and do what is fitting. This is why its opposite is *akolasia*, the deliberate, active choice to be immoderate and take pleasure in following bad principles. *Enkrateia* referred instead to self-control or continence, and its opposite was *akrasia*, or succumbing to desires in spite of one's better intentions or efforts. Foucault's focus on *sōphrōsyne* reflects his argument that the Greeks' ethics concerned action and exteriority more than desire and interiority. Foucault, 1985: 63-5.

other pleasures of the body in importance. He bases his claim that alimentary ethics were more important for the ancient Greeks and early Christians on the volume of practical advice they published concerning the proper use of food and drink. However, the introductory volume, where he first claims that sexuality was a special site of moral concern, is based not on practical texts, but the discourses and institutional mechanisms that constituted a technology of sex that was deployed to create, discipline, and foster a bourgeois body.²³

If he had been looking for it, Foucault would also have found a proliferation of discourses and institutions aimed at regulating *alimenation* during the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries, and specifically a growing concern about moderation and restraint in the use of food and drink. It was in the eighteenth century that alcoholic beverages and other drugs first were distinguished from food and their use subjected to the discourses of medicine, psychiatry, and social reform.²⁴ Dr. Benjamin Rush, who is credited with founding both American temperance movement and American psychiatry criticized alcohol and tobacco in both medical and moral language. He also pioneered the language of “addiction” and the prescription of psychiatric treatment for excess drinking.²⁵ His *Inquiry Into the Effects of Ardent Spirits Upon the Human Body and Mind* ranked liquids according to how beneficial they were; water and buttermilk were at the top of the list, wine in the middle, and hard liquor at the bottom. He called the chart a “moral thermometer” and associated anything more alcoholic than “weak punch” with lists of vices, diseases and punishments.²⁶ Moderation and morality were also central to Rush's writings on tobacco. He claimed “statistical observation” had revealed that

²³ Foucault, 1985: 31.

²⁴ Craig Reinerman, “Policing Pleasure: Food, Drugs and the Politics of Ingestion,” *Gastronomica* 7 (Summer 2007): 55.

²⁵ He was also one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, notable primarily because of what it suggests about his social status. Melanie E. Du Puis, “Angels and Vegetables: A Brief History of Food Advice in America,” *Gastronomica* 7 (Summer 2007): 36.

²⁶ Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry Into the Effects of Ardent Spirits Upon the Human Body and Mind* (Boston, MA: Loring, 1823: 2-3).

tobacco activated and worsened diseases of the nerves; he also complained of its filthiness and associations with idleness and rudeness. Noting that tobacco was alleged to provide relief from “intemperance in eating,” he says, “Would it not be much better to obviate the alleged necessity of using Tobacco by always eating a moderate meal?”²⁷

[Figure 5.1]

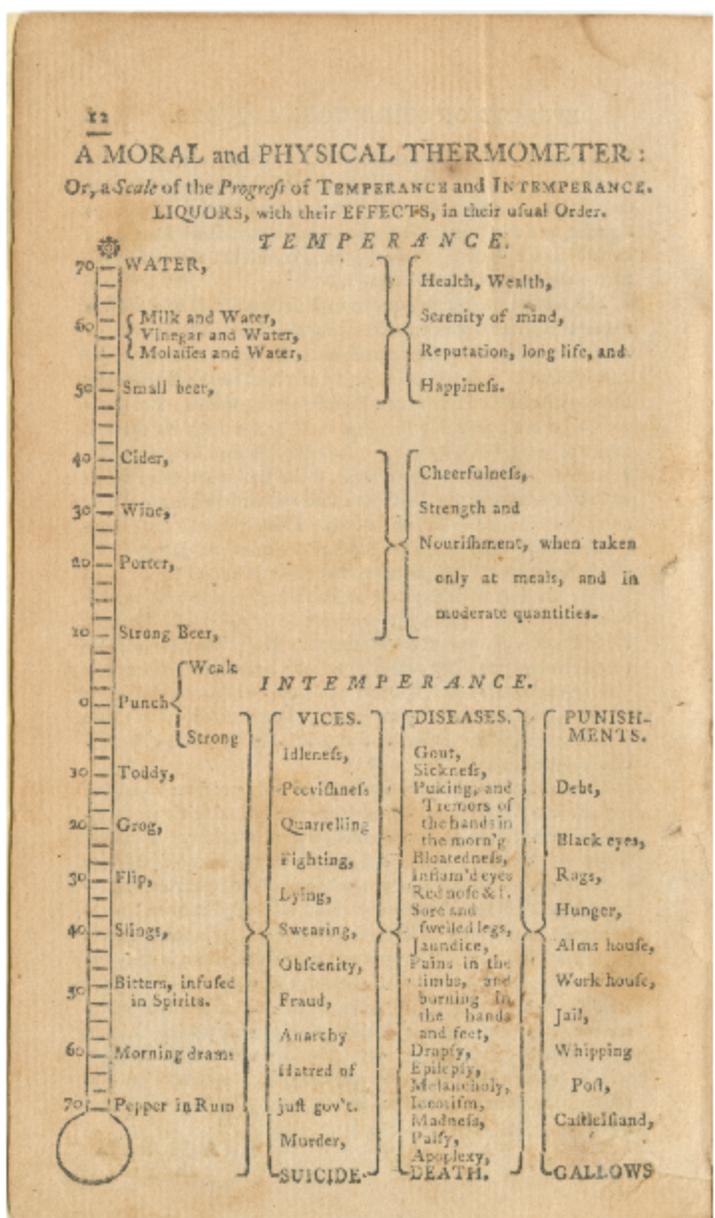


Figure 5.1/ The Moral and Physical Thermometer, Benjamin Rush²⁸

²⁷ Benjamin Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical* (Philadelphia: Thomas and William Bradford, 1789): 266.

²⁸ Reproduced from Benjamin Rush, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors on the Human Body and the Mind*, 1790.

As with the modern discourses of sexuality, the bourgeois family was one of the main sites where modern alimentary ethics were deployed. They were also focused on the production of a distinctive bourgeois body. Middle class families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came to see mealtime as a crucial opportunity for training children in manners, conversation, and taste. Children began to dine with their parents instead of with nannies and servants as it gradually became “improper” to delegate that important time to the working-class help.²⁹ Much of the advice aimed at Victorian mothers focused on proper care of the adolescent female body, including how daughters should eat and exercise to cultivate the correct social identity and moral character. The recommendations often reflect the continued parallels between food and sex; meat and spicy foods were thought to stimulate and signal sexual desire, so their consumption was seen as unsuitable for proper ladies.³⁰ According to Joan Jacobs Brumberg, the combination of smothering maternal concern about eating with elevation of restraint and physical delicacy prompted the emergence of anorexia nervosa among middle-class girls in the Victorian era.³¹

Social reform movements like Temperance and Home Economics and health crusaders like Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg were all invested in a morality of both food and sex, which were often seen as mutually constitutive. Both Graham and Kellogg claimed that vegetarianism could reduce sexual urges. Writing in 1891, Kellogg claims, “The science of physiology teaches that our very thoughts are born of what we eat. A man that lives on pork, fine-flour bread, rich pies and cakes, and condiments, drinks tea and coffee, and uses tobacco, might as well try to fly as to be chaste in

²⁹ Levenstein, 2003: 61. See also, Nibert Elias's history of table manners. He claims that the bourgeoisie began to adopt the manners of the nobility in the eighteenth century. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, ed. Eric Dunning, 1939 (Malden, MA: 2000:89-99).

³⁰ Brumberg, 1988:134.

³¹ Ibid.

thought.”³² The invocation of physiology echoes the medicalization of sexual perversions that Foucault documents. Kellogg's precautions against unchaste thoughts include eating moderate meals, eating only twice a day and, “*Discard[ing] all stimulating food*. Under this head must be included spices, pepper, ginger, mustard, cinnamon, cloves, essences, all condiments, pickles, etc., together with flesh food in any but moderate quantities [emphasis original].”³³ Home economists expressed concerns about the diets of immigrant populations—including foremost their use of spices and pickled foods—because of their suspected sexually-stimulating effects.³⁴

In the quarter-century since Foucault's death, the growing popular interest in and anxiety about food has led some people to question whether it has now surpassed sex in importance. For example, a 2009 *Policy Review* article by Hoover Institution research fellow Mary Eberstadt³⁵ asks, “Is Food the New Sex?: A curious reversal in moralizing.”³⁶ Eberstadt argues that shifts in the availability and consequences of food and sex have created an unprecedented situation in much of the West: most adults can have practically all the food and sex they want. Instead of pursuing both with equal ardor or developing more limitations on both appetites, she says a surprising paradox has emerged between “mindful eating” and “mindless sex.”³⁷

To illustrate, she asks readers to imagine the sexual and alimentary mores of a hypothetical woman named Betty who was 30 years old in 1958 and her 30-year old granddaughter, Jennifer. Betty eats mostly processed foods and has no strong feelings

³² John Harvey Kellogg, “Treatment for Self-Abuse and Its Effects,” *Plain Facts for Old and Young* (Burlington, Iowa: F. Segner & Co., 1891: 302).

³³ *Ibid.*, 303.

³⁴ Gabaccia, 2000: 124-8. This lives on in an inverted form in magazine articles that claim that spicy foods act as aphrodisiacs.

³⁵ Eberstadt is a former Republican speechwriter for the Reagan administration and primarily writes critiques of what she has referred to as “our feminized, secularized, pornified times.” See the interview with Kathryn Jean Lopez, “Don't Lose Out: Mary Eberstadt on Her New Book,” *The National Review*, 23 April 2010, Web (accessed 04 April 2011). She also edited a 2007 collection titled *Why I Turned Right: Leading Baby Boom Conservatives Chronicle Their Political Journeys* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster/Threshold, 2007).

³⁶ Mary Eberstadt, “Is Food the New Sex?: A Curious Reversal In Moralizing,” *Policy Review* 153, 27 January 2009, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

about how other people eat; Jennifer shops for organic groceries and has strong convictions about how other people “should” eat. Conversely, Jennifer is *laissez-faire* about sexual ethics, believing that things like abortion, STDs, and homosexuality are fundamentally personal matters; Betty believes all three are clearly wrong and the world would be a better place if people adhered to traditional Judeo-Christian ethics regarding sex.³⁸ Eberstadt quickly surveys some of the most popular manifestations of “mindful eating” like dieting and the success of Whole Foods, and also gestures to some “extreme” manifestations like macrobiotic diets and legal battles about *terroir* in Europe.³⁹

Ultimately, she concludes that increased vigilance about food is simply rational: “decades of recent research have taught us that diet has more potent effects than Betty and her friends understood, and can be bad for you or good for you in ways not enumerated before.”⁴⁰ The mystery, according to Eberstadt, is why people haven't come to the same conclusion about sex given that monogamous, married couples live longer, happier lives (according to some researchers). She claims that the apparent struggles of our ethical and legal institutions to cope with a sexually *laissez-faire* society suggest that “mindless sex” is as bad and unnatural as “mindless eating.” We need some kind of restrictions on our carnal appetites. Noting that people are often furtive about both their indulgence of junk food and “junk sex,” Eberstadt concludes:

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the rules being drawn around food receive some force from the fact that people are uncomfortable with how far the sexual revolution has gone — and not knowing what to do about it, they turn for increasing consolation to mining morality out of what they eat.⁴¹

Both Foucault and Eberstadt seem to be proposing a zero-sum morality in which any increase in the ethical concern about food is countered by an equal and opposite decrease in the concern about sex, and vice versa. But what if food and sex were never

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

fully uncoupled? I suspect Foucault assumes that sex surpassed food as a subject of moral concern because he conceived of his project in the *History* as an inquiry into the moral significance of *sexual* acts. This blinded him to the proliferation of discourse about the moral significance of food in the Victorian era. He claims sex was a special subject of moral solicitude.⁴² The continued—or even intensified—moralization of food, eating, and the body in the Victorian era challenge the notion that sex was a separate and more important subject of moral solicitude.

Eberstadt proposes that the new morality of food is an attempt to compensate for the conspicuous lack of morals in a sexual revolution gone too far. This theory relies on the mistaken assumption that the older generation represented by Betty is amoral about food and that the younger generation represented by Jennifer is amoral about sex. Betty's eating does not conform to the new norms of the food revolution, but that does not make her eating norm-less. This is apparent in Eberstadt's description of how Betty eats: “Betty’s food is served with what for us would appear to be high ceremony, i.e., at a set table with family members present. . . . The going slogan she learned as a child is about cleaning your plate, and not doing so is still considered bad form.”⁴³ The meat and potatoes meals that Betty prepares for her family are not mindless; they merely reflect a very different set of beliefs about food. She is concerned with reproducing the “ordered meal”: a hot dinner consisting of a prominent protein, starch, and vegetable served by a woman. Bentley shows that the ordered meal reflects historically- and culturally-specific

⁴² See, for example, the Introduction to *Volume II*, in which he asks, “Why is sexual conduct, why are the activities and pleasures that attach to it, an object of moral solicitude? Why this ethical concern—which, at certain times, in certain societies and groups, appears more important than the moral attention that is focused on other, likewise essential areas of individual or collective life, such as alimentary behaviors or the fulfillment of civic duties?” Later in the “Introduction,” he says “it occurred to me that this problematization [of sex] was linked to a group of practices that have been of questionable importance in our societies: I am referring to what might be called the ‘arts of existence.’” Nonetheless, the volume focuses on sex almost to the exclusion of food. The blurb on the back cover summarizes the questions that Foucault tries to answer: “How in the West did sexual experience become a moral issue? And why were other appetites of the body, such as hunger, and collective concerns, such as civic duty, not subjected to the numberless rules and regulations and judgments that have defined, if not confined, sexual behavior?” However, Foucault does not answer that question at all. Instead, he acknowledges that food *was* subjected to numberless rules and regulations. Foucault, 1985: 10 and back cover.

⁴³ Eberstadt, 2009.

beliefs about what people should eat for optimum health, who should do the cooking, and what kinds of meals were “proper” and “respectable.”⁴⁴ Betty's adherence to outdated foodways might be intransigent, but it is not morally indifferent. Similarly, casual sex is not *devoid* of ethics. It reflects a shift in the *nature* of sexual mores, not an abandonment of them.⁴⁵

Eberstadt underestimates the importance of food as a site of moral concern for the older generation, the continued moral importance of sex for the younger generation, and the persisting connection between the two. Both food and sex are still central to the constitution of ethical self-hood, but that doesn't mean nothing has changed. The contrast Eberstadt describes between the “Betty” generation and the “Jennifer” generation reflects a sea change in the dominant norms about food. Her discussion of “Jennifer's” habits is telling:

Wavering in and out of vegetarianism, Jennifer is adamantly opposed to eating red meat or endangered fish. She is also opposed to industrialized breeding, genetically enhanced fruits and vegetables, and to pesticides and other artificial agents. She tries to minimize her dairy intake, and cooks tofu as much as possible. She also buys “organic” in the belief that it is better both for her and for the animals raised in that way, even though the products are markedly more expensive than those from the local grocery store.⁴⁶

Jennifer's choices are based on avoidance—she never eats red meat or endangered fish and sometimes eats no meat at all. She avoids pesticides, the industrial animal agriculture, and genetically-modified organisms. The embrace of tofu and organic food is a less a positive agenda than an attempt to fill in the gaps: in the U.S., tofu is almost exclusively seen as a meat substitute and organic produce is the alternative to produce with pesticide and GMOs. Additionally, she pays a financial price: the foods she buys are

⁴⁴ See Chapter Two. Bentley, 2002: 171-192.

⁴⁵ For example, the popular sex columnist Dan Savage is constantly being asked by readers to help them navigate the ethics and etiquette of “kinky” or non-normative sex—how to establish appropriate boundaries and respect the needs of all participants in open relationships, what the role of pornography in committed sexual relationships should be, what constitutes abuse or disrespect of a sex worker, when disclosure about sexual preferences is appropriate or mandatory, etc. Dan Savage, “Savage Love,” syndicated by *The Stranger* (1999-2011), Web (1999-2011)

⁴⁶ Eberstadt, 2009.

more expensive and less convenient than what Betty gets at the local grocery store. This characterization of the new ethics of food highlights the importance of a particular kind of elective asceticism. The food revolution offers people the opportunity to *flourish* in the Aristotlean sense of living a virtuous life by exercising moderation in their use of readily-available food and working hard to achieve an ethically superior diet.

Price, Sacrifice, and Virtue in the Food Revolution

“We’re talking about health, we’re talking about the planet, we’re talking about the people who are supporting the land,” said Alice Waters. . . . “Make a sacrifice on the cellphone or the third pair of Nike shoes,” she said.”

—Alice Waters⁴⁷

The high price of “better” food is almost always portrayed as deterrent. Michael Pollan and Alice Waters, the *de facto* spokespeople for the food revolution, claim the main reason anyone is still eating Doritos and McDonalds despite the increasing availability of locally-grown produce and grass-fed steaks, is that the former are so much cheaper. Their critics claim it is unrealistic and elitist, to ask people to spend more money on groceries. In an interview with the blog *DCist* to promote his newest book, Anthony Bourdain said, “I’ll tell you. Alice Waters annoys the living shit out of me. We’re all in the middle of a recession, like we’re all going to start buying expensive organic food and running to the green market.”⁴⁸ Pollan’s and Waters’s responses to the charge of elitism suggest that rather than being a deterrent, the higher price of supposedly-superior food and other sacrifices required to eat “well” are a central part of the *appeal* for many participants in the food revolution.

Pollan and Waters do not deny the food they want people to eat is more

⁴⁷ Kim Severson, “Some Good News on Food Prices,” *The New York Times*, 02 April 2008, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁴⁸ George Pelecanos, “Chewing the Fat: *No Reservations!* Anthony Bourdain,” *DCist.com*, 19 January 2009, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

expensive. They instead depend on it to explain why their preferred foodways have not yet become universal. They portray fresh, local, organic food as inherently better and suggest that any rational actor armed with full information and the ability to choose would necessarily abandon processed food. According to Pollan, if people don't even though their attention has been brought to bear on the subject, it's because the scales are tipped in favor of junk.

In a 2007 *New York Times* article, Pollan describes a study by obesity researcher Adam Drewnowski in which he found that if he had a single dollar to spend at the typical American supermarket, he could buy 1,200 calories of cookies or potato chips and 875 calories of soda but only 250 calories of carrots or 170 calories of orange juice. “This perverse state of affairs is not, as you might think, the inevitable result of the free market,” Pollan explains, but instead the result of an archaic Farm Bill that subsidizes cheap, unhealthy sources of calories like commodity corn, and the meat from corn-fed animals.⁴⁹ Since the Farm Bill does almost nothing to subsidize the production of fresh fruit and vegetables, the “rules of the food game in America are organized in such a way that if you are eating on a budget, the most rational economic strategy is to eat badly — and get fat.”⁵⁰ Pollan accordingly welcomes increasing prices for fuel and food on the grounds that they “level the playing field for sustainable food that doesn't rely on fossil fuels.”⁵¹

However, Pollan has undermined the idea that eating cheap food and getting fat is really the “most rational economic strategy” elsewhere. In a 2010 interview with *The Wall Street Journal*, he argues that spending four dollars on a single peach or eight dollars on a dozen eggs isn't really expensive when you take the actual costs of producing “good” food into account.⁵² The problem is not that good food costs too much for most

⁴⁹ Michael Pollan, “You Are What You Grow,” *The New York Times*, 22 April 2007, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Severson, 2008.

⁵² Ben Worthen, “A Dozen Eggs for \$8? Michael Pollan Explains the Math of Buying Local,” *The Wall*

people; the problem is that government subsidies have made junk food too cheap and confused people about the actual cost of food. Pollan's proposed solution is for more people to follow his “little rule: 'Pay more, eat less.’”⁵³ Rather than eating too much cheap food, the *truly* rational consumer will pay a little more, eat a little less, and stay thin.

Pollan reinforces this claim by attributing enthusiasm for more expensive food in the Bay Area to a “consumer who is willing to pay more for better food. That's a matter of consciousness and a palate that has been educated by the chefs locally.”⁵⁴ Here, again, he suggests that the smart, conscious, educated consumer will choose more expensive food when possible. And he suggests that it *is* possible for most people: “Eight dollars for a dozen eggs sounds outrageous, but when you think that you can make a delicious meal from two eggs, that's \$1.50. It's really not that much when we think of how we waste money in our lives.”⁵⁵ The inclusive “we” suggests that most people—a least readers of *The Wall Street Journal*—have discretionary income they're spending unwisely which would be better spent on fresh, local food. Alice Waters' suggestion that people should be willing to forgo “the cellphone or the third pair of Nikes” also implies that nearly everyone can sacrifice somewhere. Cell phones are ubiquitous. The “third pair of Nikes” evokes a long-standing stereotype about the profligacy of the black, urban poor.⁵⁶ Eating better is therefore a choice that anyone can make.

That line of reasoning undermines the first argument: people don't buy the approved food because of the price. In an article in *The Atlantic*, historian James McWilliams offers further evidence that price is *not* the key factor in food purchases. Decreases in the price of “healthy” foods over the last few decades challenge the theory that more people would buy fresh, local, organic foods if they were cheaper or more

Street Journal, 05 August 2010, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ See Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

readily available. McWilliams notes that even when the kinds of foods championed by the food revolution are readily available at lower prices than fast food, not everyone seems eager to buy them. According to the USDA's Economic Research Service [ERS], from 1980 to 2006—precisely the period when fast food supposedly overtook the U.S. diet and made Americans into the fattest people on the planet—food declined in price across the board. The price of apples, dry beans, carrots, and celery went down right along with cookies, ice cream, and potato chips.⁵⁷ According to the ERS, “the price of a healthy diet has not changed relative to an unhealthy diet.”⁵⁸ McWilliams concludes:

Evidently, consumers have chosen to take advantage of the declining prices for the cookies rather than the apples, thereby undermining the claim that we choose cheap unhealthy food because it's cheap. As it turns out, we also choose it because we appear to like it better than cheap healthy food.⁵⁹

As McWilliams suggests, food choices are often less influenced by price than they are by taste. Nonetheless, there are limits to his “we,” too. Clearly it does not include Michael Pollan or the Jennifers out there who *don't* like cheap, unhealthy food and *are* influenced by price—albeit in the opposite direction.

For the food revolution faithful, the sacrifices involved in eating better aren't a deterrent. They are central to their perception that their foodways are morally superior. In the *Wall Street Journal* interview Pollan adopts an uncharacteristically agnostic position about the local food:

To eat well takes a little bit more time and effort and money. But so does reading well; so does watching television well. Doing anything with attention to quality takes effort. It's either rewarding to you or it's not. It happens to be very rewarding to me. But I understand people who can't be bothered, and they're going to eat with less care.⁶⁰

However, his entire *oeuvre* is devoted to making the case for eating “well,” even when it

⁵⁷ James McWilliams, “Should We Really Pay \$4 for a Peach?” *The Atlantic*, 07 September 2010, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁵⁸ Fred Kuchler and Hayden Stewart, “Price Trends Are Similar for Fruits, Vegetables, and Snack Foods,” *ERS Report Summary*, March 2008, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁵⁹ McWilliams, 2010.

⁶⁰ Worthen, 2010.

takes more time and effort and money. In the first chapter of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, he writes:

“Eating is an agricultural act,” as Wendell Berry famously said. It is also an ecological act, and a political act, too. Though much has been done to obscure this simple fact, how and what we eat determines to a great extent the use we make of the world—and what is to become of it. To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say eating in ignorance, are fleeting.⁶¹

Far from portraying junk food as an innocent predilection, like watching reality television instead of *The Wire*, Pollan insists that eating determines the use we make of the world (reminiscent of Marx's discussion of *ergon*). Rather than just one of many satisfying things one could devote time and effort to if one were so inclined, he portrays eating well, even at a cost, as the only rational choice. Eating industrial food is not a rational choice of someone who “can't be bothered;” it is *ignorant*.

Pollan suggests that the reason eating well matters is because of its effect on the world, but when the environmental or political superiority of local or organic foods is challenged, many proponents of local food admit to being more interested in the symbolic act of voting against the industrial food system than the real effects of their consumption choices. McWilliams' 2009 book *Just Food: Where Locavores Get It Wrong and How We Can Truly Eat Responsibly* challenges the claim that local food is always more sustainable with data on carbon dioxide emissions and environmental inputs. Food produced in optimal conditions and shipped to markets in large quantities often has a smaller per-unit carbon footprint than locally-grown produce. The latter often requires greater inputs and takes a less efficient path to market. A review by Stephanie Ogburn posted on the environmental site *Grist* claims that McWilliams misses the point. The real effects of local farming aren't locavores' main concern:

Consumers, when faced with a system they don't support, are voting with

⁶¹ Pollan, 2006: 11.

their dollars for the only alternatives they can find—local food at the farmers market and organic products at the store. . . . The locavores I know don't view shopping consciously as a solution; they view it as a protest.⁶²

Ogburn suggests that what matters to locavores is not the actual carbon footprint of their purchases so much as the symbolic protest represented by buying any alternative to industrially-produced food. Like Eberstadt's fictional Jennifer, Ogborn's locavores are primarily concerned with going against the norm.

Other reviewers claim that there are unquantifiable benefits to eating locally or that what matters is that locavores are *trying*. A review of McWilliams' book by Kelly Trueman published on *AlterNet* claims McWilliams fails to take into account the meaningful relationships and communities forged at farmers' markets, “as opposed to the soulless commerce of the supermarket.”⁶³ Trueman says McWilliams “dwells obsessively on food miles, presumably because he couldn't acknowledge these benefits without undermining his own arguments.” But McWilliams' argument it's about the ecological soundness of local foods, a central claim in the popular justification for locavorism. A review in the *Christian Science Monitor* praises McWilliams for “digging beneath slogans and oversimplifications,” but concludes, “it seems counterproductive to simultaneously belittle those already trying to make the best choices they can.”⁶⁴ All three reviews reject the possibility that the “best choices” for anyone attempting to eat sustainably might be choosing industrial agriculture over local and organic. They are universally *offended* by the suggestion.

On the other hand, all three reviewers praise the one part of McWilliams' book that corresponds with the idea of virtuous self-denial: his claim that the best way to eat more sustainably is to eat less meat. The response to *Just Food* suggests that eating

⁶² Stephanie Ogburn, “James McWilliams' Over-hyped and Undercooked Anti-Locavore Polemic,” *Grist* 08 September 2009, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁶³ Kelly Trueman, “Inflammatory New Book Attacking Local Food Movement Has One Grain of Truth Buried Under Heaps of Manure,” *AlterNet*, 26 August 2009, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

⁶⁴ Rebekah Denn, “Just Food: A Challenge to Current Ideas About Responsible Eating,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, 02 September 2009, Web (accessed 04 April 2011).

“better” isn’t driven by evidence about what’s really healthier, more sustainable, more humane, or even better-tasting (often conflicting ideals anyhow). Instead, eating “better” is a construct based on the idea that it is difficult and requires sacrifices, much like Aristotlean virtue. It is good to work hard and resist immediate pleasures. Participants in the food revolution might claim that what makes the hard work and sacrifice worthwhile is some long-term goal or objective good, but their resistant to attempts to evaluate the real impact of their choices suggests otherwise.

Evidence is ultimately unnecessary to produce the sensation of virtue. Making a special trip to the farmer’s market during the few hours per week it’s open seems like a virtuous act in part because it’s so much less convenient than shopping at a grocery store that’s open all the time. Turning a box of locally-grown produce you probably never ate as a child into edible meals must be better—morally, if not nutritionally—than microwaving a Lean Cuisine. Spending more money on something labeled “organic” or “hormone free” must be better, because otherwise why would it cost more? People don’t even need to know *what it's better for* to reap the psychic rewards of self-denial. Things that are difficult, inconvenient, or require sacrifices offer the satisfactions Pollan promises—for some people.

Virtuous self-denial does not appeal to everyone. Many Americans—perhaps especially those whose jobs require tending to others' needs—feel like they make enough sacrifices in other areas of their life, thank you very much. Others may see the effort and expense of superior eating as decadent or wasteful, not a form of virtuous self-denial. As stereotypes like Dave Barry's “left-wing communist latte-sucking tofu-chomping holistic-wacko neurotic vegan” suggest, the morality represented by rejecting the norm seems to be a particular preoccupation of the demographic identified as yuppies, bobos, or the liberal elite. However, those tastes have become increasingly hegemonic over the last three decades. The processes seems to echo the spread of bourgeois sexuality described

by Foucault.

Foucault says the deployment of sexuality did not happen evenly across social classes. It proceeded in roughly three stages: First, it was embraced by the bourgeoisie, whose initial concern was the creation of a distinctive body:

The primary concern was not the repression of the sex of the classes to be exploited, but rather the body, vigor, longevity, progeniture, and descent of the classes that “ruled.” This was the purpose for which the deployment of sexuality was first established, as a new distribution of pleasures, disclosures, truths, and powers; it has to be seen as the self-affirmation of one class rather than the enslavement of another: a defense, a protection, a strengthening, and an exaltation that were eventually extended to others.⁶⁵

Second, sexuality and the institutions of the body, especially the family, were extended to others “as a means of social control and political subjugation,” which he locates historically in the 1830s. During that process the bourgeois family became hegemonic and central to the “great campaign for the 'moralization of the poorer classes.’”⁶⁶ Third, at the end of the nineteenth century, sexuality was institutionalized, especially in medicine and law. Foucault identifies this as “the moment when the deployment of 'sexuality,' elaborated in its more complex and intense forms, by and for the privileged classes, spread throughout the entire social body.”⁶⁷

The rise of a new ethics and aesthetics of food and the body in the middle class beginning in the 1980s parallels the first moment, when the bourgeoisie embraces a new attitude towards bodily sensations and cultivates a body with differential value. There are also signs of the second stage: the moralization of the poor. Proposed taxes on soft drinks, the ban on new fast food restaurants in South-Central Los Angeles,⁶⁸ the New York City Green Carts initiative,⁶⁹ and the “war on fat” are all aimed at low-income

⁶⁵ Foucault, 1978: 123.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 122.

⁶⁸ In July 2008, the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously to place a moratorium on the opening of fast food restaurants in low-income areas, citing above-average rates of obesity in neighborhoods like South Central. Kim Severson, “Los Angeles Stages a Fast Food Intervention,” *The New York Times*, 12 August 2008, Web (accessed 06 April 2011).

⁶⁹ In 2008, New York City Mayor Bloomberg signed Local Law 9, which established 1000 permits for

Americans. There are also parallels in the earlier period of enlightened eating I described in more detail in Chapter Two. The rise of *service à la Russe*, slimming diets, and cosmopolitan entertainments is akin to the first inwardly-focused stage. Urban reform movements focused on immigrants and the poor represent stage two.

What is missing is stage three. Instead of penetrating the “entire social body,” after the Great Depression the pillars of “enlightened” eating became less popular. They were replaced by the idealization of plain foods and abundance—preferences Bourdieu associates with the working class. Rather than constituting an inevitable, top-down process of social control and political subjugation, the relative popularity of elective asceticism varies over time. My theory is that its appeal depends on historically-specific forms of class anxiety.

Stagnation, Inequality, and Anxiety

The rise of the food revolution in mainstream popular culture corresponds with a dramatic shift in U.S. income distribution. That shift consists primarily in declining mobility between income brackets (most studies use quintiles) and increasing income inequality. Those trends first began to attract widespread attention in 2004 and 2005, when both *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times* published special features on class in America. At that point, they were portrayed as surprising and counter-intuitive.

Declining Mobility

According to the introduction to the one in *The Wall Street Journal* :

carts that can only sell whole fruits or vegetables, restricted to low-income neighborhoods. Of the 350 permits made available in Brooklyn, only 84 were in use two years later. Some vendors have been successful, but many complain that they can't compete with local stores that have a better selection of produce and are allowed to sell other foods. Erin Durkin, “Vendors See Mixed Results After City's Green Cart Push to Sell Fruit, Veggies, in 'Deserts,’” *New York Daily News*, 27 April 2010, Web (accessed 06 April 2011).

Many Americans still think of their land as a place of exceptional opportunity—in contrast to class-bound Europe—the evidence suggests otherwise.... As recently as the later 1980s, economists argued that not much advantage passed from parent to child, perhaps as little as 20 percent.... But over the last 10 years, better data and more number-crunching have led economists and sociologists to a new consensus: The escalators of mobility move much more slowly. A substantial body of research finds that at least 45 percent of parents advantage in income is passed along to their children and perhaps as much as 60 percent.⁷⁰

The article implies that the idea of mobility so foundational to Americans' national self-image wasn't always a myth. Economic historian Joseph Ferrie's research on U.S. and British census records from the 1850s through the 1920s (which include occupational data for thousands of native-born father-and-son pairs) shows that more than 80 percent of the sons of unskilled men born in the U.S. during that period moved to higher-paying, higher-status positions. Fewer than 60% of the sons born in Britain did so.⁷¹ As the article notes, even Marx argued that “the position of a wages labourer is for a very large part of the American people but a probational state, which they are sure to leave within a longer or shorter term.”⁷² It's worth noting that the restrictions on Ferrie's data set suggest, the economic prospects for non-white, female and immigrant Americans during the same time period were considerably bleaker. The possibility of income mobility was never as universal or merit-based as some versions of the “American Dream” promise. Nonetheless, for the demographic taken to be representative of the nation, advancement was possible, even commonplace.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, intergenerational income mobility increased regardless of race, gender, or nation of birth. An intergenerational study of census data from 1940 through 2000 that compared individuals' incomes to their parents' showed that the chance of moving to a different income bracket increased steadily between 1940 and 1980. Income mobility began to fall sharply in the early 1980s

⁷⁰ David Wessel, “Rich-Poor Gap Widens in the U.S., Class Mobility Stalls,” *The Wall Street Journal* 13 May 2005: A1.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Karl Marx, “Value, Price, and Profit,” 1865 qtd. in Wessel, 2005.

and declined steadily until 2000.⁷³ Panel studies that measure the progress of single generations over time also suggest that mobility has declined in recent decades. According to Katherine Bradbury and Jane Katz, between the 1970s and 1990s, the chances of a family moving up or down the income ladder decreased.⁷⁴ **[Figure 5.2]**

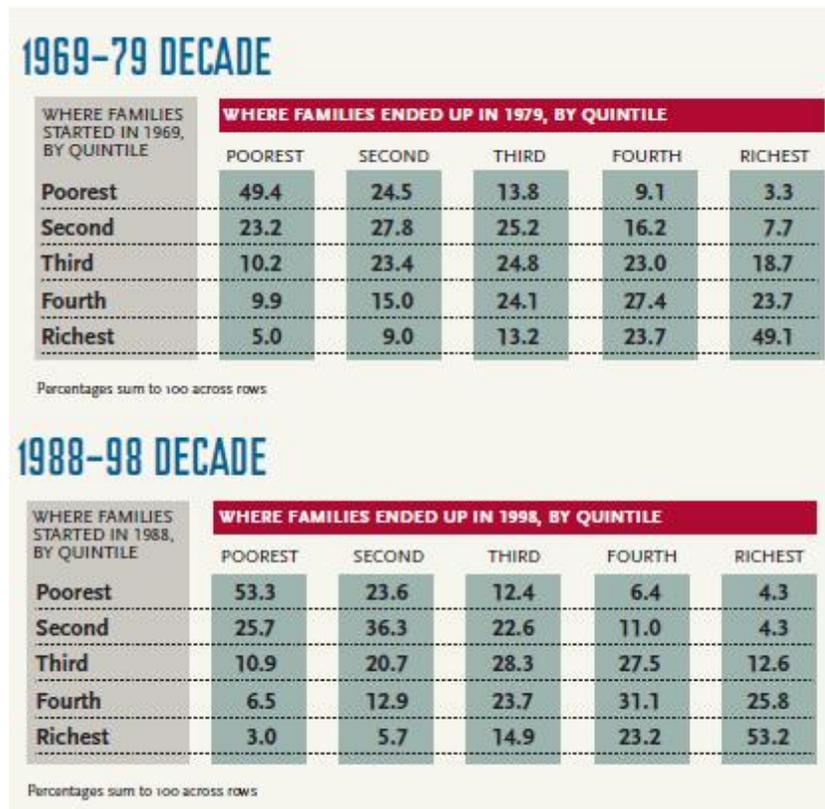


Fig. 5.2/ Up and Down the Income Ladder (Bradbury and Katz 2002)⁷⁵
The closer the numbers are to 20, the greater the rate of mobility between income quintiles.

In 2005, *The New York Times* reported that the percentage of families who remained in the same quartile of income earners increased from 35 percent in the 1970s to 37 percent in the 1980s and 40 percent in the 1990s.⁷⁶ As a result, class structure in the United States in 2009 is *less fluid* than it is in countries like France, Germany, Britain, Denmark, and Canada.⁷⁷

⁷³ Aaronson and Mazumder, 2008: 139.

⁷⁴ Katherine Bradbury and Jane Katz, "Are lifetime incomes growing more unequal? Looking at new evidence on family income mobility," *Regional Review* 12:4 (2002), Web (accessed 23 January 2009).

⁷⁵ Reproduced from Bradbury and Katz, 2002.

⁷⁶ Leonhardt, 2005.

⁷⁷ Miles Corak, "Do Poor Children Become Poor Adults?: Lessons from a Cross Country Comparison of Generational Earnings Mobility," Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA) Discussion Paper No. 1993 (March 2006), Web (accessed 05 April 2011). Scott Winship, the research manager of the Pew

Income Inequality

As Bradbury and Katz note, the decline in mobility has exacerbated the even more dramatic shift in income inequality since 1980. By virtually every measure, income inequality decreased from the 1940s through the early 1970s and has increased since the 1970s. According to *Class Matters*, between 1950 and 1970, for each dollar earned by people in the bottom 90 percent of income earners, those in the top .01 percent made an additional \$162. Between 1990 and 2002, that ratio was 1 to \$18,000.⁷⁸ Another way to measure inequality is to compare growth in the economy as a whole to median family income. Between 1947 and 1973, productivity and real median income rose at the same rate—both more than doubled, but from 1973 to 2003, median family income grew at one-third the rate of productivity. Data from the tail end of the set suggest that the trend is accelerating, not slowing: productivity increased by twelve percent between 2000 and 2003 while real median family income actually declined by three percent.⁷⁹ Since the mid-1970s, the vast majority of Americans have faced decreasing chances of moving into a higher income bracket. They have also seen their income stagnate or decline both in actual and relative terms.⁸⁰ **[Figure 5.3]**

Economic Mobility Project, argues that broader trends in inequality in the U.S. are consistent with the rest of the industrialized world. In the fifteen richest countries in the world, inequality decreased from 1920 to 1980 and then began to rise. However, even Winship admits that there is a difference between trends in the U.S., UK, and Canada (Anglophone countries) and the rest of the world. In almost all nations, income inequality since 1980 has increased dramatically, with the exception of Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. A fuller discussion of international differences is beyond the scope of this project. A tentative hypothesis: in countries where income inequality has increased, there has been a corresponding increase in aspirational cultural forms; in countries where income inequality has remained constant since the 1980s, there has been less popular interest in cultural forms of aspiration.

⁷⁸ The book version of the 2004 special series on class. The New York Times and Bill Keller, *Class Matters* (New York, NY: Times Books, 2005): 186.

⁷⁹ Jared Bernstein, “Updated CBO Data Reveal Unprecedented Increase in Inequality,” Economic Policy Institute, 13 December 2007, Web (accessed 05 April 2011).

⁸⁰ The recent increases in income inequality have prompted many scholars to re-define American class structure as a bifurcated system, like the one described by Marx, in which the top 20% is the “privileged class” and the bottom 80% constitute a “new working class” (Perrucci and Wysong 1999, Perelman 2007). This offers another way out of the “embarrassment” of the middle classes for Marxist scholars, as Erik Olin Wright pointed out in his 1984 essay, “A General Framework for the Analysis of Class Structure,”

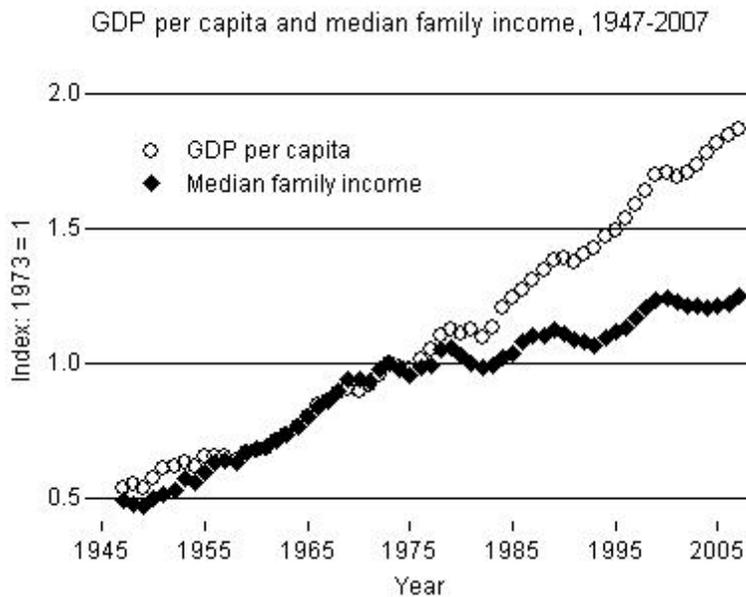


Figure 5.3/ Median Family Income Compared to Productivity⁸¹

Class Anxiety, Not Status Anxiety

Economist Robert Frank argues the relative wealth gap is what drives *status anxiety*, which he attributes to the dramatic increases in income at the very top. In *Luxury Fever*, he argues that by the 1990s runaway spending by the super-rich had infected the masses like a virus, causing people in all income brackets to devote more resources to frivolous purchases. Invoking Thorstein Veblen's term *conspicuous consumption*,⁸² Frank says the increase in the consumption of goods like wine, cigars, and professional-grade home appliances was driven by a “spectacular rise in top incomes” and “unusually rapid growth in the incomes of top earners in every

⁸¹ Inflation adjustment via the CPI-U-RS. Median family income is post-transfer, pretax (post-tax not available). Data sources: Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis. Reproduced from Lane Kenworthy, “Reducing Inequality: What's the Problem?” *Consider the Evidence*, 13 April 2009, Web (accessed 05 April 2011).

⁸² His explanation differs from Veblen's. Veblen claimed that the grandiose expenditures of the Gilded Age and excesses like utensils made from real silver were a vestige of pre-industrial economic systems where leisure and excess consumption came to represent success at violent exploit and labor came to represent “the indignity of lack.” Silver spoon were essentially a new way for the rich to show how “manly” they were. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* 1899 (New York: Random House Modern Library. 1934: 25).

demographic category” throughout the 1980s and 1990s.⁸³ According to Frank, those top earners “spent lavishly merely to demonstrate to others that they could afford to do so.”⁸⁴ This created what he describes in his later book *Falling Behind* as an “arms race” in the middle class for “positional goods” like bigger houses and nicer cars (and perhaps also more expensive mustard).⁸⁵

Frank's argument recall's Bourdieu's observation that the rich are concerned with “seeming” and seek to distinguish themselves by buying expensive things. However, Frank claims that instead of merely acting on a different set of tastes structured by their differing economic conditions, the middle and lower classes are driven by the aesthetic competition to buy luxuries despite the fact that they often *cannot* afford to do so.⁸⁶ In his later book Frank clarifies that he doesn't think middle class consumers sacrifice non-positional goods like leisure time or go into debt to buy more expensive things purely out of envy, but because the social standards that affect them also shift. Frank notes that as top earners spend more money on clothes, middle-class job seekers have to buy more expensive clothing to make the appropriate impression in interviews.⁸⁷

Although plausible in theory, Frank's argument turns out to be based on flawed assumptions about how the middle-class actually spends their money. In *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers are Going Broke*, Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi challenge what they call the “over-consumption myth.”⁸⁸ They argue that rising consumer debt and decreased savings are the result of

⁸³ Robert H. Frank, *Luxury Fever: Money and Happiness in an Era of Excess* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999:34).

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 14.

⁸⁵ Robert H. Frank, *Falling Behind: How Rising Inequality Harms the Middle Class* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007: 4).

⁸⁶ Similar arguments are made by Juliet B. Schor in *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1998) and John de Graaf, David Waan and Thomas H. Naylor's *Affluenza: The All-Consuming Epidemic* 2001 (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

⁸⁷ Frank, 2007: 3-4.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Warren and Amelia Warren Tyagi, *The Two-Income Trap: Why Middle-Class Mothers and Fathers Are Going Broke* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003: 15-55).

both stagnating incomes and dramatic increases in the price of housing, particularly in areas seen as “safe” and accessible to “good schools.” Frank points to absolute material gains in the 1990s as evidence that most middle-class people would not have to go into debt if they were content to maintain the same standard of living that satisfied their parents. Warren and Tyagi cry foul:

The average two-income family earns far more today than did the single-breadwinner family of a generation ago. And yet, once they have paid the mortgage, the car payments, the taxes, the health insurance, and the day-care bills, today's dual-income families have less discretionary income—and less money to put away for a rainy day than the single-income family.⁸⁹

According to the Consumer Expenditure Survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000 the “average family of four” spent 21 percent less on clothing, 22 percent less on food, and 44 percent less on major appliances than in 1972-1973 (adjusted for inflation).⁹⁰ The apparent epidemic of “overconsumption” is a myth created by the declining price of many basic consumer goods.

The areas where spending has skyrocketed, sending increasing numbers of families into bankruptcy and foreclosure are housing, education, and health care. While the median home value for childless individuals went up by 23 percent between 1983 and 1998, housing prices for married couples with children shot up 79 percent. Seeking to explain why parents would spend so much on a home, Warren and Tyagi discover:

The answer came down to two words so powerful that families would pursue them to the brink of bankruptcy: safety and education. Families put Mom to work, used up the family's economic reserves, and took on crushing debt loads in sacrifice to these twin gods, all in the hope of offering their children the best possible start in life.⁹¹

The spiraling costs of housing in the suburbs⁹² and college education further magnify the effects of wage stagnation and growing inequality. The anxiety induced by the structural

⁸⁹ Ibid, 8.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 23.

⁹¹ Ibid, 23.

⁹² They do not discuss the racial implications of the expressed desire for “safety.” See Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

changes in the U.S. economy over the last three decades is not the product of vain one-upmanship, but instead a real threat to the material foundations of middle-class identity: home-ownership and a college degree. Although that could also be referred to as “status anxiety” (the term Hofstadter used to describe a similar and *real* disenfranchisement) I use “class anxiety” to differentiate it from the phenomenon Frank describes.

The Professional Class and the Fear of Falling

In *Fear of Falling* Barbara Ehrenreich argues that the professional middle-class (PMC) that emerged in the nineteenth century is *always* insecure because the basis of its status is expertise, a social construct she portrays as evanescent compared to older sources of class status like wealth or property. She claims that as expertise cannot be inherited, every generation has to fight for admission to the club and fight to protect its exclusivity by erecting barriers to keep out intruders from other classes. Thus, the PMC is marked by a constant “fear of falling.” She attributes a wide range of sometimes-contradictory trends to that fear. In the 1950s, it manifested in concerns about “growing soft” and being corrupted by wealth. However, with the “discovery of poverty” in the 1960s, the middle class began to characterize the *poor* as soft, lazy, hedonistic, and self-indulgent—the same qualities the middle-class was previously afraid they would contract from affluence. In the 1980s, the PMC turned to what Ehrenreich calls “the yuppie strategy,” a superficial emulation of the rich. She identifies the fitness craze associated with them as an extension of the older fear of softness.⁹³

As a description of class anxiety from the 1950s through the 1980s, Ehrenreich's account is highly compelling. Where my analysis parts ways with hers is what we see as the likely cause of that anxiety and the changes in how its manifestations change over time. I disagree with her claim that expertise is evanescent. Although actual credentials (degrees, memberships) cannot be passed from one generation to the next, the forms of

⁹³ Ehrenreich, 1989.

social and cultural capital that pave the way to professionalism *are* often inherited. Some kinds of social and cultural capital, like habits of speech and table manners, may actually be more reliable legacies than wealth because they can withstand financial catastrophe. Lawyers cannot *guarantee* that their children will get professional jobs, but they can give them a far better shot than most children who grow up in poverty. Furthermore, middle-class anxiety pre-dates the nineteenth century rise of professionalization. Eighteenth-century technologies of class distinction like bourgeois sexuality and prescriptive grammar were adopted first by the new “middling” classes, like the bourgeoisie, that emerged along with the rise of capitalism.⁹⁴ The middle class has always been anxious to protect its privilege.

As Ehrenreich's book argues persuasively, that anxiety takes different forms in different periods, some of which may seem contradictory. The middle-class fear of affluence in the 1950s and 1960s stands in marked contrast to the “yuppie strategy” of buying “Rolex watches, Porsches, quick trips to Aruba, and, most notoriously, high-status foods.”⁹⁵ The change reflects a shift in taste leadership that resulted from the shift in income structure. When the majority of Americans who identify as middle-class were doing better materially (i.e., when their incomes were increasing in both absolute and relative terms and their chances of moving into a higher income quartile were better) their anxieties focused on punishing class-climbers and preventing cultural change; instead, they sought security and stability. When they began doing *worse*, they sought compensatory forms of aspiration and cultivated new ways of living better.

Ehrenreich's analysis of the “yuppie strategy” mistakes the popular critique of yuppies for the broader emulation of the lifestyle associated with them. The idea that buying fresh pasta, doing aerobics, and drinking imported wine was solely crass

⁹⁴ On sexuality, see the earlier discussion about Foucault. On Standard English, see Dennis Freeborn, *From Old English to Standard English: A Course Book in Language Variation Across Time* (University of Ottawa Press, 1998: 376-402).

⁹⁵ Ehrenreich, 1989: x.

materialism mistakes the caricature of yuppies for the broader appeal of those trends. For many of the people engaging in the new practices of enlightened eating (often at the same time as they continued to eat familiar, domestic, processed foods), the appeal was not to appear rich, but to embody a particular middle class status marked by the effort and sacrifices required by the new and different lifestyle. It was less important that rich people were doing it than that the foods were novel, harder to come by, and a departure from the status quo. The stereotype of the yuppie as a class-climber is akin to the specter of snobbery that haunts popular portrayals of “enlightened” eating: a guilty acknowledgment of the role that class hierarchies play in the construction of cultural capital.

The Compensations of Culture: Hipsters on Food Stamps

Despite the fact that most Americans who identify as middle class have lost ground over the last thirty years, survey research shows that the vast majority of Americans still believe the basic tenets of the American Dream are valid. In a 2005 *New York Times*/CBS News poll, 46 percent of respondents said they thought it was easier to move up from one social class to another in the United States than in Europe, another 26 percent said they thought it was “about the same,” and only 13 percent said they thought it was harder in the U.S. than in Europe.⁹⁶ Additionally, 80 percent of respondents said they thought it was “possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich,” versus only 19 percent who said it was not possible.⁹⁷ Compared to responses to the same question in previous surveys, the popular belief in the possibility of social mobility has *increased* despite the fact that economic indicators show a decline in income mobility. In 1983, only 57 percent of respondents claimed to believe it was “possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich” and 38 percent said it was

⁹⁶ Leonhardt, 2005.

⁹⁷ The poll was conducted in English and Spanish with 1,764 respondents selected by random digit dialing between March 9 and 14, 2005. Leonhardt, 2005.

“not possible.” [Figure 5.4]

16. Do you think it's still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become rich?

	Possible	Not possible	DK/NA
1/16-19/83	57	38	5
2/22-24/96	70	27	3
3/20-21/96 CBS	78	18	4
4/15-20/98 NYT	70	29	2
2/6-10/00 CBS	84	13	3
7/13-27/03	70	27	3
3/14/05	80	19	2

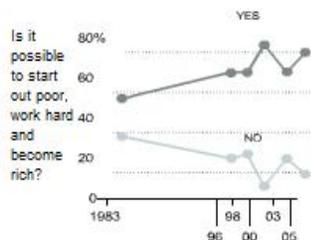


Figure 5.4/ Is it possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and get rich?⁹⁸

While still a majority, that represents a much weaker consensus. People are not only increasingly likely to believe mobility is possible, they also tend to say that mobility is *increasing* rather than decreasing. When asked whether the “likelihood of moving up from one social class to another” now compared with 30 years ago was greater, worse, or about the same, the plurality (40 percent) chose answered “greater.”⁹⁹

At first, this appears to be a quintessential example of “false consciousness.” People are clearly mistaken about the reality of income mobility in the U.S. Many scholars argue this persistent or even increasing belief in the American Dream is the product of institutional brainwashing by the mass media or educational system. For example, in *The New Class Society*, Robert Perrucci and Earl Wysong claim that “It is precisely because of. . . *Forrest Gump*-genre films, and other 'rags-to-riches' cultural products that most Americans appear to accept the myth of the American Dream.”¹⁰⁰ Perrucci and Wysong argue that films like *Forrest Gump*, public school civics classes, and the broader corporate culture in the U.S. distort the reality of class in America or

⁹⁸ Screen shot from the interactive feature “A Closer Look at Income Mobility,” Leonhardt, 2005.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Perrucci and Wysong, 1999: 186.

distract people from the reality of class inequality.

For this system to work, the majority of disadvantaged Americans must be persuaded to believe that the way things work out for people is fair. This is done by distracting attention from class inequality. . . . The complexity, the contradictions, the madness of modern life lead the average American to alternate between anger, involvement, and frustration and often finally to withdraw into some safe haven or escapist activity.

The masses, in short, have been duped.

But what if the phenomenon people are identifying when they claim it's possible to move from one social class to another is based on a definition of class that encompasses more than just income? An article in the online magazine *Salon* titled “Hipsters on Food Stamps” exemplifies the complexities in how people define class and police its boundaries. Jennifer Bleyer describes what she claims is a growing trend generated by the recent recession:

Faced with lingering unemployment, 20-and 30-somethings with college degrees and foodie standards are shaking off old taboos about who should get government assistance and discovering that government benefits can indeed be used for just about anything edible, including wild-caught fish, organic asparagus, and triple-crème cheese.¹⁰¹

Her evidence is mostly anecdotal. Bleyer goes grocery shopping with an unemployed art school graduate and a part-time blogger with a degree from the University of Chicago who live in an “artsy” neighborhood in northwest Baltimore and had recently qualified for \$150-200 in food stamp assistance. They use the stamps to buy ingredients to make a Thai curry, including lemongrass, coconut milk, a Chinese gourd, and clementine juice. She also interviews an AmeriCorps volunteer from Brooklyn who supplements his stipend with food stamps (an approved part of the standard AmeriCorps compensation) and who says some of his artist friends who live in Williamsburg also received nutritional assistance in recent months. The final piece of evidence is a quote from a cashier at Rainbow Grocery in San Francisco who says that more young people seem to be buying

¹⁰¹ Jennifer Bleyer, “Hipsters on Food Stamps,” *Salon.com: Pinched: Tales from an Economic Downturn*, 15 March 2010, Web (accessed 29 March 2011).

organic food with Electronic Benefit Transfer [EBT] cards.¹⁰²

Bleyer admits the scope of the phenomenon is difficult to measure (perhaps because “hipster” is not an official demographic recognized by human resource administrators). The food policy experts she interviews insist most food stamps go to “traditional recipients: the working poor, the elderly and single parents on welfare.” She also acknowledges the dramatic increase in unemployment for people between the ages of 20-to-34—between 2006 and 2009, the rate increased 100% for the entire age group and 176% for those with a bachelor’s degree or higher—leading her to somewhat grudgingly admit that “young urbanites with a taste for ciabatta *may* legitimately be among the new poor [emphasis added].” But then she quotes Parke Wilde, a food economist from Tufts, who implies their questionable poverty is temporary and that they likely have other sources of support: “There are many 20-somethings from educated families who go through a period of unemployment and live very frugally, maybe even technically in poverty, who now qualify.” The word “educated” is applied to family, almost certainly a class marker that elides the possibility that these college graduates might come from poor backgrounds. Wilde further states that their poverty is “technical,” only a phase in which they are temporarily reduced to “frugal” living .

The article generated over 450 comments in three days, at which point *Salon* closed the thread. Most of them were from angry readers demanding government assistance be limited to more deserving people and restricted from expensive luxuries. Many readers sought to distinguish the hipsters described in the article from the *genuinely* poor, using their high-class tastes as the primary evidence that they don't belong on government assistance. “KathyI” writes, “Instead of asking the government to assist your educated palate, maybe you should be asking Mom & Dad. Obviously they gave you the taste of the good life to begin with, which you feel you are entitled to.”¹⁰³

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Again, the word “educated” is code for “elite,” deployed almost like a slur. This response challenges the idea that class is based solely on income. The hipsters' other forms of capital—college degrees and high-class tastes—mark them as illegitimate recipients of government support.

Commenters were more likely to question the authenticity of their poverty than the average price of their subsidized meals. A reader named “pjamma” says, “If a single person qualifies and can shop in this fashion every day then 1) he or she is receiving too much money or 2) they run out of money mid-month and are getting money from somewhere else (mommy and daddy) and should not qualify to begin with.”¹⁰⁴ The insistence that desiring premium foods must reflect wealthy social origins and involve excess expenditures points both to the role of cultural practice in the popular imagination of class and the socially-constructed exclusivity of the practices associated with “foodies.” Many other commenters suggested the people described in the article must be unemployed “by choice” either because they could get jobs in the service industry if they were willing to do them or should have known better than to major in art. A reader identified as “CBFE” writes:

I have a hard time believing these people truly exhausted their options. Did they look into fast-food, janitorial services, retail? . . . No - these type of jobs don't fit into their self-image as an artist or whatever. So, even though this is a situation of their own making - they're expecting the government to subsidize their lifestyle. And its all being paid for by people who actually bite the bullet and work at jobs they don't necessarily love Yeah, its pretty appalling.¹⁰⁵

The reproachful comments follow in a long tradition of stigmatizing poor people lazy, self-indulgent, and the authors of their own immiseration. It also follows in a secondary tradition of anxiety about welfare cheats. However, unlike the fiction Reagan popularized about a black woman living in subsidized housing who drives a Cadillac and uses 50 different social security numbers to collect thousands of dollars a month in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Salon contributors, “Letters to the Editor, Re: Hipsters on Food Stamps,” *Salon*, 15-18 March 2010, Web (accessed 29 March 2011).

public handouts, the main things used to cast aspersion on the hipsters are their college degrees and ability to make a Thai curry from scratch. They're not being accused of greed or “gaming the system” (at least not much—the suggestion that they might have undeclared income sources from family support networks is a considerably more modest accusation than the ones leveled at Reagan's welfare queen). The primary focus of readers' anger is that they appear to be, as KathyI says, living the “good life” and therefore cannot be truly poor.

The primary debate in the comments is about whether their habits are virtuous or as self-indulgent as the article suggests. In the opening paragraph, Bleyer claims the hipsters from Baltimore “*sauntered* through a small ethnic market stocked with Japanese eggplant, mint chutney, and fresh turmeric [emphasis added],” implying an insouciance belied by their defensiveness about receiving public assistance. Most of the examples of “upscale” food mentioned in the article are conjured from Bleyer's imagination, not foods she actually observed the hipsters buying or eating (aside from the curry). She uses these icons of high-status food culture to undermine her theoretical defense their practices:

Food stamp-using foodies might be applauded for demonstrating that one can, indeed, eat healthy and make delicious home-cooked meals on a tight budget. And while they might be questioned for viewing premium ingredients as a necessity, it could also be argued that they're eating the best and most conscious way they know how. . . . Is it wrong to believe there should be a local, free-range chicken in every Le Creuset pot?¹⁰⁶

They *might* be applauded, she claims, but then she conflates the act of making healthy and delicious meals on a tight budget with “viewing premium ingredients as a necessity.” She caricatures this further in her updated version of the proverbial “chicken in every pot.”¹⁰⁷ The subtitle of the article also explicitly invites people to criticize the (likely

¹⁰⁶ Bleyer, 2010.

¹⁰⁷ Widely attributed to President Herbert Hoover, apparently because it was invoked by 1928 Republican National Committee ad that claimed Hoover had put the “proverbial 'chicken in every pot.' And a car in the backyard, to boot” so a vote for Hoover was a vote for continued prosperity. Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, “Frequently Asked Questions,” Web (accessed 07 April 2011).

apocryphal) trend: “They’re young, they’re broke, and they pay for organic salmon with government subsidies. Got a problem with that?”¹⁰⁸

Many people who responded to article issued a resounding “Yes, we have a problem with that.” However, a smaller, but still substantial, group of comments came from people defending the hipsters for eating “real” food instead of junk despite their limited means. This second group frequently suggested that their superior food choices would prevent them from getting fat and taxing the health care system. For example, “terriblethink” writes:

“With rising obesity epidemics and other diet-related health issues so prevalent in our culture, why would we want these folks to spend their meager allotment on highly processed foods laden with fats and high fructose corn syrup instead of organic carrots, salmon, and other healthy items?”

Others re-framed “real” food as frugal rather than extravagant, like “tweeders1” who applauds the hipsters for their principled refusal to support agribusiness:

I have absolutely no problem with this. Its about time that food stamps were used for real food. Its about time that people really learn how to cook how to cook food as opposed to buying canned food and chips. Its the best way to stretch a buck. It also take's away from the profits of the like's of Nabisco, Nestle and all of those other corporations who don't care and produce corn and other products.¹⁰⁹

Here, buying healthy food is specifically contrasted with junk. Others mention other bad, cheap alternatives. “Aburkett,” writes, “They are buying in the store rather than McDonalds and they are getting something healthy and cooking it well. . . . Should people suffer and eat junk food that makes them diebetic (which those working for would have to pay for)?” One commenter suggested a better solution than preventing poor hipsters from buying good food would be to make them teach “traditional” food stamp recipients to shop and cook.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Bleyer, 2010.

¹⁰⁹ Salon contributors, 2010.

¹¹⁰ “SalliganeG” writes, “Perhaps a solution that could make more people happy would be requiring them to take more traditional recipients shopping, and to teach them to use ingredients with which they may not be familiar to cook simple, flavorful, nutritious meals. They might even see teh benefit of public service.” Ibid.

The hipsters' defenders romanticize them as resourceful and frugal, admirably unfettered by the the gluttonous excesses of capitalism. Like Reagan's myth of the welfare queen, hipsters on food stamps became a repository for widespread fantasies and fears, which is likely why the article generated such an enthusiastic response. A typical article in *Salon* attracts about a dozen comments. More than three dozen is unusual. Four hundred is truly rare. What the two primary responses have in common is that whether the respondents saw the hipsters as admirable or loathsome was based primarily on whether they interpreted their food choices as a renunciation of unhealthy junk food (i.e. as a denial or deferral of pleasure) or as an indulgence. Many of the people who argued food stamps should be restricted specifically complained about the possibility that people could use government assistance for pleasure. For example, "Soliel" writes:

ONLY BASIC foods should be OK for food stamps. No chips, no cakes, no artisanal breads, nothing fancy[. . .] There are millions of non food stamp people buying beans and rice to save money while food stamp folks can buy fun food? No, that isn't right. If I could wave a magic wand...I would say ONLY basic vegetables, fruits, beans and grains are OK for foods stamps. Not much else.¹¹¹

Neither junk foods nor artisanal bread are permitted according to Soliel's criteria, which has less to do with how expensive the foods are than whether or not they are *fun*.¹¹²

Part of the reason so many readers were so quick to dictate thrift and asceticism to the hipsters is because it enabled them to negotiate their own shameful indulgences. Just like the image of obese poor people buying frozen pizzas and soda is a useful target of "fat shame," the hipsters with their heaping bowls of government-subsidized squash curry drew attention and derision because it's the ideal repository for *foodie* shame. That

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² A difficult restriction to operationalize, but not a novel suggestion. As Donna Gabaccia notes, at the same time that home economists were trying to Americanize new immigrants by teaching them to eat corn, often prepared in simple dishes portrayed as frugal and nutritious like Indian corn pudding, the federal Indian Bureau specifically did *not* include corn in their rations, seemingly because that's what the Indians wanted and/or because the government thought they could assimilate them with rations of wheat. Gabaccia, 2000: 130.

may even be one of the reasons many readers credulously accepted such a thin story, assumed it was a real phenomenon, and even made their own unfounded assumptions about what kinds of things foodies on food stamps might buy.

The responses also reveal ways of policing class boundaries that the idea of foodies on food stamps transgress. The debate about the proper role of government assistance highlights the difficulty of defining class using only traditional measures like income. Even though Bleyer exaggerated the extent to which people on food stamps can afford upscale foods, many “gourmet” items have become more available and affordable even on a limited budget. Although many people who identify as middle class have found themselves unable to get ahead financially in the last three decades, food is one arena where many have been able to reach for the “good life.”

Flourishing and Class Formation

Marx developed the idea of “class” in an attempt to provide an empirical account of capitalism, the dominant mode of economic production and social organization in the Western world when he began writing. Specifically, the term “class” expressed how the dominant mode of producing the means of subsistence creates differences between how various groups within a society relate to production; those differences determine the conditions of their lives. For example, he discusses the emergence of a distinct class of urban burghers who controlled movable property and craft labor in the Middle Ages:

Out of the many local corporations of burghers there gradually but very slowly arose the burgher class. The conditions of life of the individual burghers became conditions which were common to them all and independent of each individual because of their contradiction to the existing relationships and because of the mode of labor determined by these.¹¹³

As this example clarifies, it's not merely having shared conditions of life, but being in “contradiction to the existing relationships” that produces classes. Even in tribal

¹¹³ Marx, 1846: 143.

societies, the labor required for subsistence is unequally divided between family members, and individuals end up competing for scarce resources: “the division of labor implies the conflict between the interest of the individual or the individual family and the communal interest of all individuals having contact with one another.”¹¹⁴ For Marx, *classes* emerge only in conflicts between groups with antagonistic interests. The burgher class emerged only through conflict with the landed nobility and the peasants.

In other words, classes form when individuals whose conditions of life are determined by their relationship to the mode of production are united against another group with a different one: “various individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a joint battle against another class.”¹¹⁵ The critique of capitalist societies Marx is remembered for is that “the necessary result of competition [which capitalism depends on and fosters] is the accumulation of capital in a few hands...the whole society must divide into two classes of proprietors and propertyless workers.”¹¹⁶ This introduces the idea of *exploitation*: dominant classes secure their material welfare through the systematic material deprivation of subordinated ones.

According to Erik Olin Wright, a contemporary proponent of Marxist class analysis, a concern with exploitation is what distinguishes Marxist approaches to class from other definitions and models of class developed later. Wright argues that the normative critique inherent in the idea of “exploitation” forms the basis of the moral outrage that characterizes Marxist criticism.¹¹⁷ For people who believe that people deserve equal access to the goods required for their subsistence, exploitation is not just *unfortunate* for the people who are systematically deprived, but fundamentally *unfair* and *wrong*. Therefore, Marxist analysis is “rooted in” the foundational assumption that

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 119.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 144.

¹¹⁶ Marx, 1844: 58.

¹¹⁷ Wright also notes that this moral dimension is a source of discomfort for many Marxists, including Marx himself because they generally believe that morality reflects material conditions and interests: “Marx preferred to simply argue that socialism was in the interests of the working class and that it was, in any case, the historical destiny of capitalism.” Wright, 2005: 6.

“human flourishing would be broadly enhanced by a radically egalitarian distribution of the material conditions of life... that human beings will generally flourish better under such egalitarian conditions than under conditions of inequality and hierarchy.”¹¹⁸

Most scholars agree that class in contemporary capitalist societies doesn't seem to fit Marx's polarized model.¹¹⁹ Subsequent attempts to define class in ways that better reflect the developments in capitalism since Marx's death fall into two main groups: those who continue to identify class as primarily an expression of a person's relationship to material resources and those who define class as a socially-constructed identity like race or gender. Wright's typology is an example of the former. He proposes a matrix of three kinds of unequally-distributed assets: relation to the means of production, relation to authority, and the possession of scarce skills. The matrix also takes into account the size of the operation. This yields twelve possible classes. [Figure 5.5]

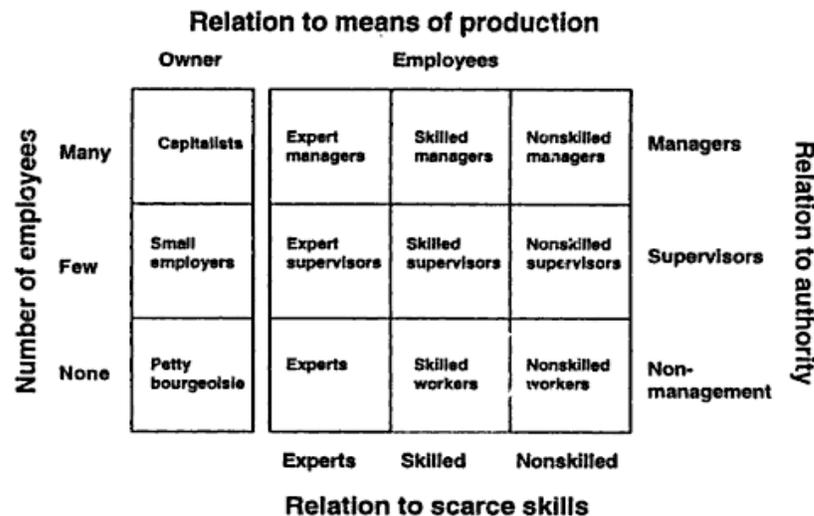


Figure 5.5/Wright's Class Typology¹²⁰

Wright's model is very useful for analyzing power relationships and exploitation in the workforce, but as even he admits, the majority of people in capitalist societies do not

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 6.

¹¹⁹ With some notable exceptions. See: Perucci and Wysong, 1999. Michael Zweig's argument that the majority of Americans are working class acknowledges the “middle class” as real, but small and claims that most people who think they are middle class are “really” working-class. *The Working Class Majority: America's Best Kept Secret* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹²⁰ Erik Olin Wright, *Class Counts: Comparative Studies in Class Analysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997: 25.

have jobs in the labor force.¹²¹

He suggests many of them can still be located within the matrix based on family relations, like children of wealthy capitalists whose class interests match their parents; however, he admits that “housewives” pose a problem because they work but are not part of the paid labor force.¹²² The hipsters and their questionable class status poses another problem for Wright's typology. There is no place for the unemployed, participants in informal labor markets, or the idle rich. In Wright's matrix, a teenager working at a fast food restaurant is a “nonskilled worker” even if her parents are expert managers. Nor does Wright offer a way to account for the vast differences in wealth, power, and status that different kinds of small business owners, skilled workers, and petty bourgeoisie might have. The structural factors that affect how much power people have when negotiating the sale of their labor do not necessarily correspond well to the lived experience of class.

Closely related to neo-Marxist models like Wright's are conceptualizations of class that rely heavily on the writings of Max Weber and define class differences in terms of unequal “life chances.” The focus on life chances places greater emphasis on the market than labor exploitation, but is nevertheless fundamentally based on an equation between material interests and flourishing. In *Economy and Society*, Weber writes: “a class situation is one in which there is a shared typical probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction,”¹²³ as if it's common sense that “procuring goods” and “finding inner satisfaction” would have the same “shared typical probability” for the individuals in each given class. Both neo-Marxist and Weberian

¹²¹ Taking into account children, students without jobs, retirees, etc. Ibid, 26.

¹²² He specifically rejects attempts to analyze housework in terms of class, like the argument that household production is a special form of feudal exploitation or a subsidiary part of capitalist exploitation as misguided attempts “to treat the gender and kinship relations within a family as if they were a form of class relations” and says “since the analysis in this book is restricted to people in the paid labor force, we will bracket these issues. Ibid, 26.

¹²³ Weber, qtd. In Breen 2005: 32.

approaches essentially reduce flourishing to material conditions.¹²⁴ Even cultural approaches which might not define class in terms of life chances or relative material wealth typically argue that inequalities produced by differences in cultural capital are unfair because they reproduce material wealth and advantages.¹²⁵

In recent decades, many scholars have begun referring to “class” as merely another kind of socially-constructed difference like race, gender, ethnicity, or nation. Feminist scholars in particular have been critical of how the dominant approaches to class that center on wage labor, occupational status, and class consciousness exclude unpaid work, traditionally feminized jobs, and practices of everyday living that also generate class difference. In *Growing Up Girl* Walkerdine *et al* argue that definitions of class based on wage labor are blind to how class is “lived as an identity designation, and not simply as an economic relation to the means of production.”¹²⁶ They define social class as “the social and psychic practices through which ordinary people live, survive, and cope...at a particular time and in a particular place.”¹²⁷ Ethnographer Lois Weis finds that formulation especially useful in her attempts to explain the survival of working-class identity in cities where the industrial jobs have disappeared. Her understanding of class is much more like prevailing approaches to race and gender—she argues that class is a “phantasmatic category” and class identities are not necessarily stable or “real,” meaning essential, but that class “nevertheless organizes the social, cultural, and material world in exceptionally profound ways.”¹²⁸

Scholars like Walkerdine and Weis have critically illuminated how class is

¹²⁴ Thorstein Veblen made this point in his accusation of Marx being too “utilitarian.” He also says supporters of socialism, or communal property and production and equitable wealth distribution, rely on a vulgar and “hedonistic calculus.” “Socialist Economics of Karl Marx and His Followers,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* v. 20 (1906).

¹²⁵ See, for example, Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* (1991).

¹²⁶ Valerie Walkerdine, et al. *Growing Up Girl: Psycho-Social Explorations of Class and Gender* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001: 13).

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

¹²⁸ Lois Weis, *Class Reunion: The Remaking of the American White Working Class* (New York, NY: 2004, 13).

gendered and gender is classed. Like most scholarship on forms of social difference, theirs is characterized by a commitment to equality. However, ideals of race or gender equality don't require the elimination of difference. Class equality does. Race and gender differences could theoretically persist in an equal system, e.g. the multicultural ideal of a diverse society without hierarchies in which people recognize and celebrate their differences.¹²⁹ In contrast, the Marxist ideal of a radically egalitarian distribution of material conditions of life would eliminate the basis for class hierarchy. Ehrenreich echoes this when she claims “the point of discussing class is ultimately to abolish it.”¹³⁰ The primary alternative to approaches that reduce class difference to economic assets are conceptions of class that functionally abandon the critique of class exploitation and hierarchy.

If class were merely another category of social identity, then like race and gender it could theoretically persist even if class hierarchy were dissolved. But it's unclear what the basis of the construction of difference would be. Even when class is used to characterize a way of living, that way of living is associated with a relative position in a hierarchy based on unequally-distributed assets. Scholars typically argue that cultural differences shouldn't be seen as hierarchical—for example, studies of working class culture in particular often argue that the ways of speaking, eating, decorating, child-

¹²⁹ Multiculturalism is a contested term, subject to caricature and attack from both ends of the political spectrum. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that critiques from the left, perhaps most prominently Slavoj Žižek's argument that multiculturalism is “the ideal ideological form of global capitalism” is based on “top-down” forms of “tolerance” or “diversity” multiculturalism and not the more radical forms of critique that originated in the social justice movements of the 1960s (2008: 128). Notably, Abul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd argue that it's a lack of attention to *class* that causes the slide from multicultural agendas to the kind of liberal pluralism Žižek takes issue with: “Such pluralism tolerates the existence of salsa, it enjoys Mexican restaurants, but it bans Spanish as a medium of instruction in American schools. Above all it refuses to acknowledge the class basis of discrimination and the systematic economic exploitation of minorities that underlie postmodern culture” (qtd. in Ella Shohat and Aamir Mufti's 1997 introduction to *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives* 1997). My point here is that while it is certainly possible to imagine equality between racial or ethnic groups without a complete eradication of differences between them; class difference is always hierarchical, meaning equality would require either the elimination of difference or an elimination of the hierarchy (which would, therefore, eliminate the basis for *class* difference)—either way, class difference and equality cannot co-exist.

¹³⁰ Ehrenreich, 1989: x.

rearing, relaxing, and so on that characterize the lived experience of, say, the working class of the 1970s American rust belt are no better or worse than the ways of living associated with the black working class or white upper class, or middle-class Asian-Americans, etc.¹³¹ Nevertheless, the unequal distribution of material assets and social hierarchy that gives rise to class-based differences persists.

While increasing numbers of Americans have come to believe treating people unequally on the basis of race, gender, or ethnicity is immoral, they tend not to see class bias as unjust, or even something that deserve to be labeled “bias.”¹³² Equal opportunity and affirmative action policies rarely claim to protect against “class” discrimination, and even when they do, class is “generally forgotten in their implementation.”¹³³ Scholars like Michael Savage claim that while race and gender identities are no less embodied or correlated with employment qualifications, capitalism literally *cannot withstand* the removal of class. Thus, while real advances have been made in establishing and addressing formal and informal discrimination on the basis of race and gender, class inequality is still often seen as natural, inevitable, and sometimes even desirable.

Many scholars point to the lack of a unified theory of class as a cause of popular confusion about what “class” means and its declining popularity as a theoretical lens compared to other major categories of social difference like race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and etc.¹³⁴ However, class is no more ambiguous than race. I

¹³¹ An implicit theme of *Distinction* and especially characteristic of studies of the working class, like the pioneering work of E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), and scholarship associated with the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies.

¹³² Hate crime laws, for example, often permit federal prosecution for crimes motivated by bias against people on the basis of “race, religion, ethnicity nationality, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, and disability” but not class identity (“Hate crime laws” 2009). Measures of explicit bias on the basis of race and ethnicity have declined so much that since the late 1990s, much of the research on racism has shifted to measures of implicit bias like the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Although the research on implicit bias shows that racism, sexism, and homophobia still shape American society in important ways, there is also a broad consensus that bias has declined significantly in the past half-century.

¹³³ Andrew Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005: 14).

¹³⁴ In recent decades, categories of social difference like gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality have come to the fore in both the politics of recognition and liberal arts scholarship. While that was necessary to address their egregious neglect and advance many important social justice agendas, it often came at the expense of class analysis. The declining popularity of class analysis and class politics have led some

suspect that some of the resistance to using “class” as an analytic is due to a widespread discomfort with, on the one hand, the idea that flourishing ultimately comes down to material capital and on the other hand, the idea that class is not inherently hierarchical. Instead of assuming that class must reflect different relationships to capital, I propose that the social construction and lived experience of class is based on perceived differences in flourishing itself.

Where people stand in the class hierarchy depends on the extent to which they embody the dominant construction of the “good life,” which connotes not just pleasure but also fulfillment and virtue. Wealth and status are often indicators of flourishing, but class, like *eudaimonia*, ultimately reflects far more than the sum of one's assets. Flourishing is inherently contextual, constructed, and contingent—what looks like “flourishing” in the an impoverished society might seem like squalor in a wealthier one,¹³⁵ and things that have at other times and places served as markers of wealth and power, like extreme fatness, are stigmatized and associated with poverty in many contemporary Western nations. Even within small and homogeneous communities, the “good life” is a a moving target, constantly being contested, re-evaluated and re-shaped. Lifestyles that fit the dominant construction of the “good life” are seen as *superior*, not merely different. Classes are thus inherently hierarchical, even if they are just as contingent as race and gender. Class is best understood as a project, like the definition Michael Omi and Howard Winant offer for race: “race has no fixed meaning, but is constructed and transformed sociohistorically through competing political projects, through the necessary and ineluctable link between the structural and cultural

sociologists to claim that class is “disappearing” in the United States, and Americans seem less likely than ever to form stable identities based on distinctions between economical assets. Nevertheless, attempts to describe and account for the reproduction of material advantage testify to the continued influence of structural relationships to productive resources and cultural divisions that cannot be wholly attributed to other forms of difference (Wright 2005).

¹³⁵ Robert Frank notes that when he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal, he lived in a house without plumbing or electricity “that most families would be ashamed of in the United States,” but that he never felt embarrassed or even deprived because “it was actually a terrific house in that context” (2007:38).

dimensions of race in the U.S.”¹³⁶

Many indicators of flourishing are the factors traditionally used to define social classes: occupation, income, and wealth. However, the idea of the “good life,” like *eudaimonia*, is based on more than just capital; the good connotes both pleasure, or *good feelings*, and virtue, or *good morals*. Class hierarchies based on the perception of flourishing don't always correspond to the ranking implied by terms like upper and lower. The upper class may be composed of people with the greatest wealth and prestige, but be seen as decadent, snobbish, and overprivileged—distinctly *lacking* in virtue.¹³⁷

Sociologist Andrew Sayer has writes about the importance of virtue to constructions of class in *The Moral Significance of Class*. He argues, “people's normative concerns in relation to class go beyond the unequal distribution of material goods and recognition and respect, to questions of just what is good in terms of ways of life, practices, objects, behaviors, and types of character that people see as desirable.”¹³⁸ The ideologies that govern aspirational eating are quintessential examples of the lay normativities that Sayer argues are central to the experience of class, like the conviction that some foods are morally good because they promote weight-loss or ecologically-sound practices while foods seen as fattening or products of distant and wasteful industrial processing are morally bad.

Sayer says sociologists typically reduce lay normativities to habitual action, status acquisition, and rationalizations of the status quo. This is exemplified by Bourdieu's

¹³⁶ Omi and Winant, 1986:71.

¹³⁷ In a 1989 book titled *The Good Life*, Loren Baritz refers to the “everywhere, invisible, and taken for granted” middle classes as “the great imperial middle,” noting that while “by no means have all Americans been middle-class, that is what most have wanted to be, and they have conducted themselves in ways acceptable to the norm before they have had or even after they have lost the price of admission” (xi-xii). In other words, the middle class is the hegemonic class; they are cultural leaders, and the class to aspire to. Paul Fussell gets even more specific in *Class: A guide through the American Status system*, which proposes a nine-class system based on economic power (as opposed to the traditional three-class system), but claims that everyone, even the truly rich, really want to be upper middle-class, whether they would admit it or not. Fussell's “everyone” is indisputably too broad, but reflects the dominant construction of “the good life.”

¹³⁸ Sayer, 2005: 2-3.

theory that tastes reflect either rational calculations based on need or savvy maneuvering for social advantage. That would mean poorer people buy yellow mustard because it's what they're used to and all they can afford; people with enough money to be concerned about how they “seem” buy Dijon for its social cache. According to the prevailing theory, anyone who claims to genuinely believe yellow mustard or Dijon is better—whether because they believe it is more sophisticated or simply think it tastes better—is merely rationalizing.

Popular constructions of the “good life” are inevitably shaped by prevailing power relationships, but that doesn't mean they are merely rationalizations for the choices that promote powerful interests. Often, lay normativities and popular representations actually challenge the status quo. More often, they are contradictory or indeterminate and open to a wide variety of different interpretations and uses. Part of the power of aspirational eating is in its ability to absorb contradictions and justify a wide range of tastes and behaviors.

CONCLUSION

STOP FEELING GOOD ABOUT WHERE YOU SHOP



Figure C.1/Billboard in Shorewood, Wisconsin, 2006¹

Our daily choices are largely inconsequential next to our larger system choices. Sure, eating less meat, buying less stuff, and flying less often are all helpful. But living in compact neighborhoods, getting rid of our cars if we can, working for companies and voting for candidates who will fight to bring us clean energy, transit, better farming, smarter buildings and more sustainable infrastructure—those are the transformative actions.²

—Alex Steffen

Food Matters

Food is so often taken for granted that it is still something of a revolutionary act

¹ Photograph by Flickr user michael.newman, originally published 12 August 2006, Web (accessed 19 March 2011).

² Daniel Fromson, “A Conversation With Alex Steffen, Sustainability Thinker,” *The Atlantic*, 17 March 2011, Web (accessed 19 March 2011).

to claim that “food matters.” This is especially true in academia, where food has only recently been embraced as a legitimate object of inquiry in many disciplines. In *Food: The Key Concepts*, Warren Belasco claims that while food studies is “now ‘respectable,’ it is also inherently subversive. To study food often requires us to cross disciplinary boundaries and to ask inconvenient questions.”³ Because those inconvenient questions often target powerful interests or critique prevailing social structures, paying attention to food and insisting on its importance is not just *academically* revolutionary (i.e. a challenge to traditional canons and disciplinary approaches) but also *politically* revolutionary. As Belasco elaborates, “the academic left has found food studies to be a fertile base for activist analysis of hunger, inequality, neo-colonialism, corporate accountability, biotechnology, globalization, and ecological sustainability.”⁴ In other words, people who study food and insist on its importance are generally not just trying to correct a traditional oversight in the production of knowledge, but also seeking change. Similarly, when popular writers like Michael Pollan and Mark Bittman insist that “food matters,” they not only imply that their target audience takes food for granted, but also that if they paid more attention to food, they would behave differently.

This logic follows from the culinary enlightenment thesis: if the reason that more people have begun to eat “better” since the 1980s is that they discovered the importance of food and became better educated about matters of taste, health, purity, and authenticity, then people who are not interested in eating “better” must be ignorant and apathetic. Indeed, Pollan conflates eating industrially with eating “in ignorance”: “The pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say eating in ignorance, are fleeting.”⁵ Apparently, no one could believe that food matters, be educated about the source and process and costs—apparent and hidden—of food and still choose the industrial option. However, the evidence that industrial food is necessarily, objectively inferior in terms of

³ Belasco, 2008: 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pollan, 2006: 11.

taste, nutrition, ethical purity, or authenticity is often far from conclusive.

The Fantasy of the Golden Yolks

In June 2010, I bought my first carton of non-specialty eggs. I knew they were laid by hens housed in battery cages that had likely been de-beaked and unable to fully extend their wings for the entirety of their short, miserable lives. I hesitated before putting them into my basket and looked around guiltily. “You care more about climate change than chicken happiness,” I reminded myself, “And the chickens in the 'free range' coop were probably not meaningfully happier anyway.” Then I willed myself to walk away. My momentary egg crisis was prompted by two articles that had rocked my belief in the superiority of specialty eggs.

The new information did not concern chicken welfare. I had already accepted the fact that labels like “cage free” and “free range” were unreliable indicators of humane egg production. “Cage free” eggs are laid by chickens that may be able to extend their wings, but they still live in cramped conditions with no access to the outdoors; additionally, without the protection of the cages, they are far more susceptible to injury or premature death by pecking and clawing, which crowded confinement encourages.⁶ “Free range” and “USDA organic” eggs come from hens that often have only token access to the outdoors in the form of a small, concrete patio attached to the side of a cage-free coop.⁷ According to a 2010 report by the Cornucopia Institute, 80 percent of eggs that bear the USDA organic label are laid by hens with “no meaningful outdoor access.”⁸

⁶ In a 2010 report, the American Veterinary Medical Association (a non-profit professional association of licensed veterinary practitioners and academics) concluded, “alternative systems also have considerable liabilities in terms of animal health, biosecurity and economic efficiency. It cannot be assumed that hens in non-cage systems will experience improved welfare.” AVMA, “Backgrounder: Welfare Implications of Laying Hen Housing,” March 2010, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

⁷ Catherine Price, “Sorting Through the Claims of the Boastful Egg,” *The New York Times*, 16 September 2010, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

⁸ Defined by the National Organic Standards Board’s Livestock Committee as outdoor space sufficient “to satisfy [the chickens’] natural behavior patterns, provide adequate exercise area, provide preventive health care benefits and answer consumer expectations of organic livestock management.” The Cornucopia Institute, *Scrambled Eggs: Separating Factory Farm Egg Production from Authentic*

Nonetheless, I had long assumed that even if the difference in chicken welfare between caged and cage-free industrial coops is very small, it would probably be worth the slight difference in cost to support producers who give their chickens the freedom to walk around and extend their wings fully. Additionally, I suspected—apropos of essentially nothing—that specialty eggs also were also healthier and better-tasting. In part, that was probably inspired by claims on specialty egg packaging like “all vegetarian feed” or “rich in omega-3s.” However, the main reason I believed that there was really a difference was because of the difference in the color of the yolks.

Specialty eggs tend to have darker-colored yolks. In 2008, when a bottle of 1893 Veuve Clicquot was discovered locked away in a sideboard at a Scottish castle, I read somewhere that the bottle's distinctive yellow label (which had been perfectly preserved by the dark conditions it was stored in) was the first real evidence that the now-trademarked color was in use that early in the brand's production. According to company lore, the label was one of the innovations of Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin (aka the Widow Clicquot) herself, and was originally based on the color of egg yolks.⁹ Or, as Mireille Guiliano notes in her account of the brand's rise, “what used to be the color of egg yolks when all chickens were free-range.”¹⁰ Ah ha! I thought: *this* is how eggs yolks laid by healthy, natural chickens are supposed to look. Every time I saw a Veuve Clicquot label, it confirmed my belief that the rich, golden yolks of my specialty eggs were more authentic to the true essence of eggs, and probably more nutritious, and—I truly believed—better tasting than conventional eggs with their small, pale post-it-colored yolks.

I was not alone in those assumptions. In June 2010, *The Washington Post* published an article by freelance health writer Tamar Haspel about a blind taste-test she

Organic Agriculture (September 2010), Web (10 April 2011).

⁹ The BBC story about the bottle's discovery does not mention egg yolks, but many other accounts of Clicquot Ponsardin confirm the color story, see the reference below or Natalie MacLean, *Red, White, and Drunk All Over: A Wine-Soaked Journey from Grape to Glass* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007: 110)

¹⁰ Mireille Guiliano, *Women Work and the Art of Savoir Faire: Business Sense & Sensibility* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2009: 82)

had arranged to compare eggs from her own backyard hens to “ordinary supermarket-brand eggs, organic supermarket eggs, [and] high-end organic Country Hen brand eggs.”¹¹ Haspel, her husband, and six other tasters, including the publishers of *Edible Cape Cod* and the owner of a well-regarded local restaurant, took turns donning blindfolds and spoon-feeding each other soft cooked eggs. Tasters scribbled notes in-between bites, but audible comments were discouraged. In the end, “every egg got both good and bad comments, and the votes for the best-tasting were split almost evenly.”¹² Furthermore, all acknowledged it had been difficult to differentiate between the eggs at all. Haspel interviewed Pat Curtis, a poultry scientist from Auburn University, who confirms that Haspel's results mirror years of egg industry research:

'People's perception of egg flavor is mostly psychological,' she told me in a phone interview. 'If you ask them what tastes best, they'll choose whatever they grew up with, whatever they buy at the market. When you have them actually taste, there's not enough difference to tell.' The egg industry has been conducting blind tastings for years. The only difference is that they don't use dish-towel blindfolds; they have special lights that mask the color of the yolks. 'If people can see the difference in the eggs, they also find flavor differences,' Curtis says. 'But if they have no visual cues, they don't.'¹³

Curtis also noted that freshness can affect the moisture content and acidity of eggs, which may affect their taste and texture. The whites of fresh eggs tend to be stiffer, which can make them more difficult to beat into the stiff peaks required for meringues and sponge cakes. However, differences in the final product are small. As Haspel notes, “For those of us who wanted to believe that homegrown eggs just taste better, that wasn't much of a consolation prize. Okay, there's a difference, but it's small, and it isn't even lifestyle-related. Any super-fresh egg would outperform any older egg, cage or no cage.”¹⁴

¹¹ There are no official stats on how many people have backyard chickens; like the “hipsters on food stamps” trend, the evidence cited in trend report articles is largely anecdotal: interviews with a few participants and a few people in the business, like chick suppliers, talk about how they're experiencing high demand. Jack Shafer, “Bogus Trend of the Week: Raising Backyard Chickens,” *Slate* 14 May 2009, Web (accessed 10 April 2011), and references therein.

¹² Tamar Haspel, “Backyard Eggs vs. Store-Bought: They Taste the Same,” *The Washington Post*, 02 June 2010, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Nonetheless, she tried one more test, baking a simple spice cake with her fresh eggs (all laid within 36 hours), and ordinary supermarket eggs. The batters looked different: “Our version was a brighter color and held together better than its supermarket counterpart.” However, after baking and cooling, “they were absolutely indistinguishable in flavor, in texture, in appearance.”¹⁵ Apparently, with eggs, as with wine, the differences people perceive are based more on expectation and framing than any objective qualities.

Disturbed but intrigued, I went looking for more information about the nutritional content of conventional and organic eggs, thinking (or *hoping*) the darker color was still an indicator of some beneficial vitamin or omega-3 fatty acids or something, anything at all. Instead, what I found is that yolk color depends primarily on the concentration of yellow pigments (mostly carotenoids) in the chicken feed that have no necessary relationship to the taste or nutrient profile of the eggs. Some carotenoids, like beta-carotene, have nutritional value. Not all of them do. According to Marion Nestle, New York University Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health, “deeper-colored egg yolks only indicate the presence of carotenoids in general, not necessarily the presence of beta-carotene.”¹⁶

Much of the debate about the nutritional quality of eggs centers on fatty acid composition, and particularly the amount of omega-3s. However, in 2002, a team of animal scientists at Oregon State University found that “specialty” (free-range, organic, and vegetarian-fed, antibiotic-free) eggs were not nutritionally superior than conventional eggs based on the fatty acid profile either. (They did find that they were significantly more prone to breakage—not exactly good news).¹⁷ The authors explain that while fatty-acid composition can sometimes be affected by chicken feed, it also varies based on the age, size, and breed of the hen. Several studies have shown that the eggs

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Marion Nestle, “Does the Color of an Egg Yolk Indicate How Nutritious It Is?” *Chow Nudging Question*, 15 June 2009, Web (10 April 2011).

¹⁷ G. Cherian *et al*, “Fatty Acid Composition and Egg Components of Specialty Eggs,” *Poultry Science* 81 no. 1 (2002): 30-33.

laid by chickens raised on pastures with a lot of legumes like alfalfa and clover may have higher levels of omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins A and E.¹⁸ However, not all grasses provide the same benefits, according to Heather Karsten, Assistant Professor of Crop Production and Ecology at Penn State. “The leafier the plant, the higher the digestibility for the animal,” says Karsten. If a pasture is overgrazed or the grass is too mature and ‘stemmy,’ the nutritional benefits fall off.”¹⁹ In any case, most specialty eggs come from hens that eat chicken feed composed of corn and soy, just like conventional chickens. Organic eggs must come from hens that eat *organic* corn and soy feed, but the resulting egg nutrient profile is the same.

CHERIAN ET AL.

TABLE 1. Major fatty acid composition of specialty eggs¹

Fatty acid (%)	Control	SP1	SP2	SP3	SP4	SP5	SEM
Palmitic	26.1 ^a	24.6 ^b	25.6 ^{ab}	25.8 ^a	25.6 ^{ab}	25.5 ^{ab}	0.26
Stearic	8.9 ^{ab}	8.7 ^b	9.0 ^{ab}	9.6 ^a	9.2 ^{ab}	8.7 ^b	0.20
Palmitoleic	3.2	3.2	3.8	3.4	3.7	3.3	0.20
Oleic	42.6	45.2	43.5	43.9	43.7	43.7	0.60
Linoleic	16.2 ^a	15.2 ^{ab}	15.2 ^{ab}	13.8 ^b	14.8 ^{ab}	15.7 ^{ab}	0.47
Arachidonic	2.0	1.9	2.3	2.2	2.2	1.9	0.10
Docosahexaenoic	0.7 ^b	1.4 ^a	0.6 ^{bc}	1.2 ^a	0.7 ^b	0.5 ^c	0.05
Total lipids	25.1 ^{abc}	27.7 ^a	24.6 ^{bc}	26.2 ^a	22.9 ^c	25.9 ^{ab}	1.05
Total SFA	35.2 ^a	33.3 ^b	34.6 ^a	35.5 ^a	34.9 ^a	34.3 ^a	0.32
Total MUFA	45.8	48.4	47.3	47.2	47.4	47.6	0.61
Total n-6	18.2 ^a	17.1 ^{ab}	17.5 ^{ab}	16.0 ^b	16.9 ^{ab}	17.6 ^{ab}	0.50
Total n-3	0.7 ^c	1.5 ^a	0.6 ^c	1.2 ^b	0.7 ^c	0.5 ^c	0.07
Total PUFA	18.9	18.6	18.1	17.2	17.7	18.0	0.34
n-6:n-3	27.3 ^b	11.5 ^c	28.9 ^b	13.1 ^c	23.1 ^b	39.2 ^a	1.95

^{a-c}Within a row values with no common superscripts indicate significantly different ($P < 0.05$).

¹SP1 = eggs from hens fed a diet free of animal fat; SP2 = certified organic free-range brown eggs; SP3 = uncaged, unmedicated, brown eggs; SP4 = cage-free animal-fat-free diet brown eggs; SP5 = naturally nested, uncaged hens fed diets with no steroids or no stimulants; n = 6. SFA = saturated fatty acids; MUFA = monounsaturated fatty acids; PUFA = polyunsaturated fatty acids.

Figure C.2/Cherian *et al* (2002)²⁰

My last line of defense was the environmental argument. Even if the chickens that lay the eggs aren't meaningfully happier, and the resulting eggs don't really taste better,

¹⁸ Karsten *et al*, “Vitamins A, E, and fatty acid composition of the eggs of caged hens and pastured hens,” *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems* 25 (2010): 45-54.

¹⁹ Joanna Lott, “Pasture-ized Poultry,” *Penn State Online Research* 24.2 (May 2003), Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

²⁰ The eggs labeled “animal fat free and high in omega-3” (SP1) had the highest percentage of omega-3 fatty acids and lowest ratio of omega 6: omega 3. The “cage free, natural” brown eggs were also significantly better by that measure. However, the “organic free range (SP2) and “cage free all-vegetarian feed” eggs (SP4) had similar omega-3 content to the conventional eggs (Control). Oleic acid, the predominant fatty acid in chicken eggs, only varied from 42 to 45 percent across the different samples. Reproduced from Cherian *et al*, 2002: 32.

and the eggs aren't any healthier, perhaps the fact that feed is grown without the use of pesticides and herbicides makes them ecologically more sound. This turns out to be an incredibly difficult claim to evaluate. In lieu of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, some organic farming operations rely on fish meal or guano, the latter often harvested on islands off Peru where the dry climate preserves the droppings of seabirds.²¹ Furthermore, although chemical-free farming is usually portrayed as inherently better for soil and water quality, the no-till movement claims that herbicide use is justified because it can limit tilling, which releases carbon trapped in the soil and leads to topsoil erosion.²² An article in *Slate* published the same week as *The Washington Post's* article about the taste test acknowledges the myriad unknowns involved in evaluating the environmental impacts of eggs, but notes that there is one factor where the data is clear—feed efficiency:

Data from Europe indicate that chickens raised in conventional cage systems—the much-maligned "battery" cages now being phased out in the European Union—are the most efficient layers: It takes them about 2 kilograms of feed to produce 1 kilogram of eggs. Chickens raised in cage-free or barn systems . . . require about 14 percent more food. Free-range birds, with access to the outdoors, require about 18 percent more than conventional caged birds. Organic chickens, whose feed is grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides, need roughly 20 percent more food than birds kept in cages.²³

The main reasons for the difference, according to Hongwei Xi, director of the Egg Industry Center at Iowa State University, are 1) uncaged birds waddle around a lot more, expending more energy than caged birds and 2) it's easier to control the temperature in closed hen houses, so the chickens expend less energy keeping themselves warm. There are other factors working against the specialty eggs, too. The higher rates of mortality

²¹ The current export of guano to wealthy nations where organic produce is in high demand reprises some aspects of the nineteenth century imperialist scramble for guano. Then, as now, it was valued as a nitrogen-rich fertilizer. The U.S. actually authorized citizens to forcibly occupy islands where guano was found. Although technically renewable, guano is a limited resource with some people predicting that Peru's supplies will be exhausted within the next decade or two. Simon Romero, "Peru Guards Its Guano as Demand Soars," *The New York Times* 30 May 2008, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

²² Rattan Lal, *et al*, "Managing Soil Carbon," *Science* 16 (April 2004): 393.

²³ Nina Shen Rastogi, "The Environmental Impact of Eggs," *Slate: The Green Lantern*, 01 June 2010, Web (accessed 10 April 2011).

and injury uncaged chickens cause each other are a drain on efficiency. The weaker shells (documented by Cherian *et al*) mean more eggs are lost to breakage. Chicken waste is harder to collect and control in free-range coops, which can produce higher ammonia emissions (technically classified as an environmental toxin, but primarily of concern for people who work in or live near the hen houses).²⁴

The efficiency argument is what finally rattled me. My decision to purchase specialty eggs was based on the assumption that I was supporting a small improvement in chicken welfare at a minor personal cost with no other downside. The possibility that there might also be a higher environmental cost associated with organic eggs suddenly made the decision less clear. I could commit to buying only local, pastured eggs from the farmer's market, which are probably laid by less-miserable chickens. But that might also involve a higher environmental cost and would raise the personal costs—I'd have to go to the farmer's market more often (and be sure to get there before the eggs are sold out) and they would probably cost more. Or I could stop buying eggs entirely, even though there's no guarantee that whatever would take their place in my diet would be any better for animal welfare, my health, or the environment. Meanwhile, I would definitely be losing out on the vast range of culinary applications for which there really is no substitute. And that's how I ended up in the supermarket, buying conventional eggs and feeling weirdly ashamed.

In one sense, my discomfort with buying the regular eggs is diametrically opposed to Michael Pollan's claim that eating “with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake” is deeply satisfying. However, both emotions reflect the significance invested in food over and above rational calculations about what is better for the environment, or personal health, or the ultimate in culinary pleasure. If the choices advocated by the food revolution were rational—a matter of balancing costs and benefits with a clear answer—there would be no reason to feel superior for making the “better” choice or ashamed

²⁴ Ibid.

about making the “worse” one. The rational actor doesn't feel bad for making the wrong choice, she just doesn't make it.

I am not suggesting that the vast majority of American consumers who buy industrial eggs do so because they believe those eggs are environmentally superior. Nor am I convinced that by purchasing industrial eggs, I am making the right choice. I don't know how to balance competing concerns like animal welfare, personal pleasure, health, and environmental effects. I'm not sure I could evaluate everything “at stake” in my purchases even if I devoted every waking minute to trying. How should I weigh the hypothesized health benefits of quinoa against the fact that the growing Western market for it has made it too expensive for many of the Peruvians who grow it? Does the fact that the tomatoes from my garden don't have to be transported anywhere make up for the inefficiencies caused by my indifferent weeding, over-watering, and tendency to let half the crop rot on the vine when the growing season and academic year collide? Does anyone really benefit from me signing up for a CSA again this year and dutifully consuming bundle after bundle of kale? This dissertation does not seek to answer those questions. Instead, I have sought to explain the emergence of what Belasco describes as an “unprecedented array of restaurant and supermarket options” and a “well-educated, trend-conscious public.”²⁵

Not a Gestalt, Not New, Not Better

The dominant explanation for the “food revolution” is a narrative of inevitable progress and democratization. As more Americans started vacationing in Paris and became more tolerant of European immigrants, they began drinking table wine and discovered that they liked it. Meanwhile, doctors and nutritionists began to suspect that dietary cholesterol and fat cause heart disease, so health-conscious people stopped eating lard and butter and started buying skinless chicken breasts and eating more

²⁵ Belasco, 2006: 6.

vegetables and whole grains. Environmentally-concerned farmers and agricultural scientists began innovating or recuperating traditional methods of growing food that don't rely on oil-based pesticides and fertilizers, and more consumers began clamoring for organic and locally-grown produce with a smaller carbon footprint and improved sustainability. Immigrants from Asia and Latin American brought new flavors and recipes to a growing number of cities, enlivening and diversifying American palates and restaurant cuisine.

The first hole in this narrative is the fact that the trends that make up the “food revolution” are not always compatible. The culinary enlightenment thesis relies on the presumption that they form a gestalt—that the increasing sophistication of Americans' taste goes along with increasing health-consciousness, a certain ethical sensibility, and a cosmopolitan embrace of culinary diversity. And while many consumers do take part in all four of the pillars of enlightened eating, the new trends that emerged in the mainstream simultaneously often work at cross purposes: the sudden trendiness of triple-cream cheese and low-fat or skim milk; artificially-sweetened “diet” products, but also “natural” foods; locally-grown produce, but also exotic, imported spices; ethically-raised meat, but also vegetarian options like tofu. If the “food revolution” were the result of an enlightenment, there ought to be some consensus on what the “right” way to eat is. Instead, the only commonality seems to be that it is *not* the industrial, processed diet that prevailed until the 1970s.

The second hole is that none of the trends that emerged in the 1980s were really new, and not in the sense that there have been vegetarians since at least the sixth century BC. There was a serious flowering of interest and concern in eating better—again in multiple, contradictory ways, at the last turn of the century. French food, slimming diets, the Pure Foods movement, international foods, and ethnic foods were all popular with the urban professional class at the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, there's a

broad consensus that all of those trends declined in popularity after the Great Depression. Although some people continued to diet for weight-loss, eat whole grains, and explore the “ethnic food” available in enclave restaurants and markets, the mainstream trend was represented by the rise of the processed, industrial, meat & potatoes cuisine that people often still associate with American food and especially fast food joints selling burgers and fries.

The third hole in the culinary enlightenment thesis is that the kinds of foods widely assumed to be better are not necessarily so. More expensive wine doesn't necessarily taste better. Eggs with darker yolks aren't necessarily healthier. Eating a low-calorie diet and exercising won't necessarily make you thin. The kinds of foods we imagine to be authentic are often based on a romanticized notion of the past or beliefs about other people and places that are as much myth as they are reality. It is not the case that everyone who believes that *food matters* will come to the same conclusion about what kind of food is *best*. The most fundamental goal of this dissertation, then, is to show that what it means to eat “better” is a shifting construction. It's not that Americans in the 1950s didn't care about food or didn't want to eat better, it's that what counts as eating “better” changes over time.

In the course of my research and writing, I encountered and considered a wide array of different theories about why the particular trends that are part of the food revolution would have become mainstream in the 1980s. One had to do with postmodernism and the idea that the creation of culinary rules was an attempt to make up for the loss of older rules that would have restricted how we eat—rules based on tradition, religion, or simple economic restriction. Or that it might be a reflection of post-Fordist consumer capitalism and identity being ever more tied to how we shop. But the earlier history of these ideals already began to challenge that theory. Religious studies scholar Michelle LeWica, in particular, argues that weight-loss dieting has

become a kind of religion for American women to substitute for the loss of “real” religion. However, the religiosity theory is undermined by popularity of the “food revolution” and the participation of many people who identify as religious—often articulating their engagement in practices like weight-loss dieting or the craft food movement or eating locally as an expression of their faith. Contrary to Lelwica's theory, religion actually figures very prominently in popular weight-loss narratives.

What I was left with was the correspondence between the popularity of the pillars of the food revolution and the striking changes in American income structure. The idea that eating “better” was a response or form of compensation for class stagnation was reinforced by the pervasive anxiety about class in popular representations of food and mainstream discourse about the “food revolution.” The threat of food snobbery on the one hand and the risk of being a “rube” on the other suggest that food is a highly salient indication of class identity and form of distinguishing cultural capital.

Not Just Food

Although I think food is an especially powerful and attractive arena for class aspiration, I do not think it is the only place where class anxiety manifests as aspirational consumption. Two additional areas where taste, pleasure, and class distinction collide stand out in particular: clothing and home décor. Mass media texts about clothing, fashion, and home decorating have proliferated in the last three decades right along with food media. A wide range of incredibly popular television shows, films, magazines, books, and product lines like *Sex and the City*, *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, Vera Wang's exclusive Kohl's line represent a dramatic increase in the popular interest in high fashion. Alternative clothiers like American Apparel, Urban Outfitters and the rise of thrift store chic and DIY parallel the interest in ethical, alternative, and craft foods. Celebrity fashions on “the red carpet” and

the “fashion weeks” hosted by many major urban centers have gotten increasing attention from traditional news media, lifestyle magazines, and blogs.

Of eight major categories of household spending that Jerome Segal catalogs in *Graceful Simplicity: Toward a Philosophy and Politics of Simple Living*, only food and clothing declined throughout the twentieth century.²⁶ According to Segal, “If one expected to find a powerful escalator of inflated desires, an escalator that makes people need for more and more, it would be in this area. But no such escalation has occurred.”²⁷ However, the fact that people are spending less in those areas does not necessarily mean they care less—that their desired have not been “inflated.” The proliferation of cultural texts and popular discourse about food and fashion suggest that instead, many people care far *more* than their mid-century counterparts about eating and dressing *aspirationally*. And yet, clothing purchases and home décor have not taken on quite the same moral significance as food. The mandate to “shop local” may sometimes encompass more than food, but so far, there are no *New York Times* columnists urging people to find out where their t-shirts come from and publishing manifestos titled *Clothes Matter*.

If the only effect of aspirational eating was that some middle-class strivers like Michael Pollan and myself might stand around in supermarket aisles or farmer's markets feeling bad or good—but definitely *feeling something*—about their purchases, I might be able to dismiss the phenomenon as relatively benign, or maybe even positive. It might even seem like a bit of resourcefulness: if you cannot expect to do better in material terms, why not strive for immaterial rewards? But like all forms of cultural capital, culinary capital isn't just a way for classes to express value-neutral taste preferences. As a new aesthetics of the middle class, aspirational eating helps reinforce class hierarchies. Like the bourgeois ethics of sexuality, the bourgeois ethics of food can be deployed like a weapon to defend privilege and reproduce power.

²⁶ Jerome Segal, *Graceful Simplicity: The Philosophy and Politics of the Alternative American Dream* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003: 62).

²⁷ *Ibid*, 59.

Even if the moral stakes and implications of individual food choices are greater than other forms of consumption (which is debatable), that doesn't mean that the disproportionately white, affluent food revolutionaries ought to assume that everyone will share their beliefs about how to balance the costs and benefits of eating industrially. If food revolutionaries really want more people to make the choice to eat what they think is "better" food, they're going to have to work on making healthy, sustainable, and humane foods answer the masses' needs and desires. They're not going to get anywhere by declaring the masses ignorant for wanting cheap, convenient, reliable, good-tasting food or trying to convince them that what they *should want* is expensive, inconvenient, unfamiliar, or less immediately palate-pleasing food.

I'm not actually sure it's possible to create a food system that would satisfy both the desires of the "food revolution" and the needs of the working class, but if it is, it will require letting go of the narratives about sacrifice and virtue. As long as eating "better" is constructed as dependent on hard work and self-sacrifice and concerned primarily with personal consumption (e.g. feeling good about where you shop), the "food revolution" is going to continue to appeal primarily to the left-leaning elite and efforts to get other people to join them will be—rightly—portrayed as "elitist." Until that changes, natural, local, sustainable foods will continue to serve primarily as markers of belonging to the progressive, urban, coastal elite rather than the seeds of any real revolution.

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