Lobster Night at Boston University: Creating Community through Regional Foodways and Symbolic Consumption

Published by Emily Contois

It’s that time of year again for Boston University Lobster Night. Held annually in the dining halls, Lobster Night welcomes students to campus and a new school year, with a festive New England-themed dinner. This year’s event takes place this Thursday, on September 13 in the main dining halls across campus, and is open to students and the public.

Lobster Night serves as both a community celebration of regional foodways and an academic indoctrination through food, teaching lessons that will aid students in the classroom and beyond. By sharing a locally sourced, celebratory meal together, students are transformed into a cohesive student body, grounded in the common culture of Boston University and the region of New England. Consuming lobster, an exotic other for many new students, and an iconic symbol of New England (Lewis 1998), is an intimate sensory experience that creates a lasting community memory that helps students to develop a spirit of exploration and openness.

Touted as the “Event of the Year” for Boston University Dining Services (BU Dining), Lobster Night began in 1985 and has grown to now serve approximately 8,000 lobsters at dining halls across campus (Fichera 2011). When I attended Lobster Night 2011, the dining hall was a frenzied environment, filled to capacity with lines stretching out the door. Once inside the dining hall, students attempted to form lines at several stations serving the lobster dinner; the lines oft converging into one dense crowd.

Once at the front of the line, each student exchanged a ticket for a thick paper plate of “Steamed Native Maine Lobster” from Trenton, Maine, accompanied by “Local Steamed Corn on the Cob with Local Chervil Butter” from Ward’s Berry Farm in Sharon, Massachusetts and Cabot Creamery in Cabot, Vermont, and “Baked Local Maine Potatoes” from the Maine Potato Growers Co-op in Presque Isle, Maine. Additional local items included “Grilled Local Squash and Fresh Local Dill,” “Fresh Local Apple Cider,” and “Local Peach Trifle.” The menu also featured a regionally iconic, but not locally sourced “Roasted Corn, Red Pepper and Crab Bisque.”

By featuring locally sourced, regional cuisine, Lobster Night fosters “local patriotism” (Tuan 1974: 101, quoted in Bell 1997: 149) among the students in attendance, which manifests in knowledge of New England foodways, a connection to the culture of the region, and a commitment to Boston University. Serving locally sourced items also places each food within the context of a distinct farm, city, state, and region. This literal connection to New England’s soil and water bodies connects the eater to not only the food item, but also to the region and its food culture. For a student new to Boston University and the region, the consumption of local foods of regional significance aids in creating a new sense of home and belonging.

Navigating the crowd grasping a plate piled high, students stake out places to sit like city drivers seeking available parking. Once seated, Lobster Night serves as both a rite of “conspicuous consumption” (Neustadt, 1992:151) and a “seasonal rite of passage” (145). While, at first glance, a jovial and messy dinner, Lobster Night is also a highly symbolic event. First, Lobster Night unifies both insiders and outsiders into a cohesive body. This unification process includes induction to not only eating
 Lobster Night Menu

lobster, but also to Boston University and New England. Second, through eating lobster, new students literally consume a symbol of New England, which makes them figurative citizens of a new region. In this case, consuming the exotic other, a lobster, is an intense sensory experience and a highly memorable undertaking.

For students, and all diners for that matter, eating lobster for the first time can be an intimidating experience requiring new knowledge, including the use of unfamiliar tools, and a willingness to look and feel a bit silly wearing a bib and eating messily. While some food festivals specifically target and welcome insiders — those with expertise or passion for the festival’s main foods — Lobster Night enthusiastically welcomes outsiders, particularly those who may have never before eaten lobster. Eating a lobster is tactically intimate. While students experience the crab in the bisque from a distance, separated from the seafood by the eating utensil, the spoon, this is not the case with the lobster.

Eating lobster requires an adventurous eater, open to new experiences, qualities that will also serve students well in their academic pursuits. The adventure begins by extracting meat from the shell, which requires firmly holding the lobster with one hand and pulling the lobster’s limbs from its body with the other hand. The eater then crushes, cracks, and literally imparts violence upon the crustacean, using the potent lobster cracker.

This tactile experience also lends itself to play. At Lobster Night, several students held up their lobsters, making them talk to one another like dolls, and many squealed and giggled in surprise and delight when juice squirted into the air as they dismembered their lobsters. By participating in the overtly sensory experience of eating a lobster, students fully partake in a regional ritual and actually ingest a symbol of regional identity. In doing so, students become unified as a group and linked to the university, and the region, in a memorable way.

In speeches and messages shared each fall, university leaders encourage students to be active and engaged citizens, to explore their city, and to be students of the world. Boston University also imparts this message for one evening through lobster, speaking to students through foodways, inviting them to feel at home within the Boston University family and in New England, and to lay down a solid foundation for their collective academic journey.

References

What this means for you is that I’ll happily continue blogging, but likely only once a week. So please do continue to visit me, but know I’ll only be posting new content on Mondays — like today!

Drive (2011), directed by Nicolas Winding Refn, turned out to be a film that viewers either adored or loathed. My husband and I were in the adoring camp — and not just because we both have huge crushes on the Gosling.

After seeing the film, we read James Sallis’ novel by the same name on which the film is based. As is always the case, the novel provides far more context and depth to the character of Driver. The role of food in the final scene also struck me.

In the novel, after many deaths have occurred, Driver’s antagonist, Bernie Rose, invites him to dinner. They meet at Warszawa, a small 1920s Craftsman bungalow with hardwood floors, large, double-hung windows, French doors, and lace curtains converted into a Polish restaurant — an unexpected setting for a meeting between two violent men settling some very bloody business. [In all honesty, it sounds a lot like the restaurant where we had our wedding reception].

The irony does not end there. When Driver arrives, Rose has already started drinking wine, a Cabernet-Merlot blend, revealing himself as a bit of a wine connoisseur. As he pours a glass for Driver, he shares his wine knowledge, commenting on the current state of the wine industry and the new wines coming in from Chile, Australia, and the American northwest. Notably, the first words shared during this meal are not about the murders that have taken place or the uncertainty of these two men’s future, but about wine.

After introducing Driver to the wine, he starts with the menu, saying,

I can recommend the duck. Hell, I can recommend everything. Hunter’s stew with homemade sausage, red cabbage, onions, and beef. Pierogi, stuffed cabbage, beef roulades, potato pancakes. And the best borscht in town—served cold when it’s hot outside, hot when a chill comes on. But the duck’s to die for. (p. 153-54)

As occurs in many mafia movies, Rose is passionate about food, as we can see in how he describes a menu that he has enjoyed for nearly two decades. The phrase “to die for” seems a bit odd coming from a boss of organized crime, but perhaps it is meant to create trust, intimacy, and rapport with Driver?

They both end up ordering the duck, though Driver wonders if he has ever in his life eaten duck before. It is a new gastronomic experience for him, but one that he enjoys. As Driver meets with the man responsible for ordering multiple attempts on his life, Rose is also Driver’s Virgil on this journey in fine dining.

Over the course of the meal, these two men relax into an unexpected rhythm:

Working their way through a second bottle of Cabernet-Merlot and the second inning of this expansive meal, ordinary life going on about them, they’d landed for the moment on a kind of island where they might pretend to be a part of it. (p. 155)

Using the language of driving, which guides most of the narrative, Sallis describes their after dinner experience as “cruising” into coffee and cognac” (p. 155). Following the meal, they leave the building and walk to their cars. But when they reach to shake hands, [SPOILER ALERT!] Rose holds a knife intent on killing Driver, but Driver is able to instead kill Rose.

This ‘last supper’ is not included in the film adaptation. Driver and Rose instead meet in a large and ornate Chinese restaurant with heavy red hues, where they do not eat or drink, and only discuss business.
The non-existent 'last supper' as it transpires in the film adaptation of "Drive."

Let us ponder then, what this last supper means in the book:

- What does it mean for these two grave enemies to share a meal together, discussing only pleasant, and often gastronomic, topics?
- It is relevant that Rose invites Driver to a small, family-run restaurant at which he has dined himself many times. Is this a hospitable action? Is this a moment when a mature gangster shows a young buck one good meal before he plans to kill him? Is this meal a gift? A farewell? A long, slow warning?
- A theme I’ve observed in other films, such as *Pulp Fiction* and *A History of Violence* (check out my blog post on food in *A History of Violence* here), is that food can serve as an “appetizer” of sorts for scenes of violence. Is this meal thus a sensory lead in for the violence that follows; a similar yet different engaging of the senses?

I’m obviously still chewing on the meaning of this ‘last supper,’ but you’re welcome to join in my ruminating — and to enjoy the film. If nothing else, you’ll get a delightful dose of Ryan Gosling through a food studies lens or otherwise.

September 3, 2012 — Leave a Comment

Film

Can Culinary Diplomacy Achieve World Peace? Maybe…

Published by Emily Contois

While I can’t agree with all governmental policy, I’m a huge fan of the U.S. Department of State’s new Diplomatic Culinary Partnership Initiative. Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, explains:

> Showcasing favorite cuisines, ceremonies and values is an often overlooked and powerful tool of diplomacy. The meals that I share with my counterparts at home and abroad cultivate a stronger cultural understanding between countries and offer a unique setting to enhance the formal diplomacy we conduct every day.

As a food studies student, I couldn’t agree more that meals are rituals full of cultural meaning and unspoken dialogue, providing endless opportunities for developing understanding and connection. Every element speaks, such as: what foods are served; how the meals are prepared, plated, served, and introduced; who prepares the meals; and where the ingredients come from.

From the Kennedy’s Continental flair with French White House chef, René Verdon, to LBJ’s barbecue diplomacy — not to mention George W. Bush’s own version of barbecue diplomacy — culinary diplomacy has been informally utilized for decades. On September 7, 2012, however, the U.S. Department of State and the James Beard Foundation will formally announce their partnership and the launch of the Diplomatic Culinary Partnerships initiative, working to create global understanding through food.

Read More about the Diplomatic Culinary Partnerships Initiative
One of the reasons I went to public health school was because the public tends to think that eating well is a complicated endeavor from a nutrition perspective. If one allows herself to be buffeted by the waves of new research studies with their ever-conflicting results, then yes, eating well does become a daunting task.

New research on eggs has brought these thoughts to the forefront, yet again. Hence, I quip, which came first: the fear of cholesterol or the egg? If you’re not familiar with the flip-flopping advice to either abstain or enjoy eggs, here are a few (totally randomly selected) studies that demonstrate the ever-oscillating status of eggs in the American diet.

1958: First published in 1928, *Nutrition: In Health and Disease*, a reference collectively written by Lenna Cooper, Edith Barber, Helen Mitchell, and Henderika Rynbergen—which I bought at a used bookstore in Duncan, Oklahoma—imposes no limits on egg consumption, rather recommending, “The ideal standard is 1 egg a day if possible.”

1999: The International Task Force for the Prevention of Coronary Heart Disease recommended limiting egg consumption to two eggs per week. You can read the full text article here. [If you’re anything like me, you get a bit of a thrill over FREE full text articles.]

2001: A meta-analysis of 17 studies confirmed that dietary cholesterol increases the ratio of total to HDL cholesterol and came to the remarkably wishy-washy conclusion that “the advice to limit the consumption of eggs and other foods rich in dietary cholesterol may still be important in the prevention of coronary heart disease.” [Despite its frustrating conclusion, you can still read the FREE full text here.]

2006: Harvard Medical School (consistently ranked the best medical school in the U.S.) wrote that eggs aren’t the dietary demons they’re cracked up to be, concluding that it should be just fine to eat an egg a day.

2011: New USDA data revealed eggs to be lower in cholesterol than previously thought, thus “eggsonerating” eggs, and again giving the all clear to egg-lovers that an egg or two a day can be part of a healthy diet.

2012: And then BAM! A new study released this month found that eating egg yolks regularly increases plaque buildup about two-thirds as much as smoking does.

So what’s an egg-loving girl to do? Unless you’re a bodybuilder (like my darling husband) and eat dozen-egg breakfasts during training, *Cool Hand Luke* betting you can eat 50 eggs in a single sitting, or *Rocky* drinking raw eggs upon waking, your egg consumption is likely a non-issue. Truthfully, there’s more compelling evidence for being concerned with eggs...
from a food safety perspective than for their cholesterol effects. [You can read up on egg food safety on Marion Nestle’s awesome blog, Food Politics.]

The key to a healthy diet consistently recommended throughout history, however, is moderation and balance. Love your eggs. Eat them. Just eat other things as well. A life of only omelets will grow boring. Your outlook and your cholesterol levels may both benefit from the spice of life—variety.

August 27, 2012 — Comment 1
Public Health/Nutrition
Eat Up: ‘A History of Violence’ Sandwich

Published by Emily Contois

While by no means a “food film,” food plays an interesting role in David Cronenberg’s *A History of Violence* (2005), a marvelous film — albeit as you can likely deduce from the title quite, ahem, violent. I’ll focus on two food-centric scenes, which sandwich much of the violent action of the film.

A man with a history of violence, Tom Stall, played by Viggo Mortensen, has a new family-centric, pie-serving, church-going, All-American life, which is astutely symbolized in the business he owns, Stall’s Diner. As discussed in the BBC News article, “Why the Diner is the Ultimate Symbol of America,” a diner proves to be the perfect food-centric foil to the violence of Tom’s past.

The freshly wiped-down surfaces, the democratic side-by-side seating at the counter, the ever-flowing coffee on the warmer, the simple “open” sign on the door, and the “friendly service” tagline on the sign that marks the storefront — all of these features clearly delineate the wholesome character of Tom, the loving Stall family, and the small, supportive community in which they live. The Main Street diner also serves as a poignant setting and a powerful polar opposite for the unexpected bloody acts that occur at the diner counter.

Another supremely wholesome food scene concludes the film. After the violence has concluded, Tom returns to his home, where his wife and two children are seated at the dining table for an All-American, comfort food meal of homemade meatloaf with mashed potatoes, corn, peas, and carrots. Serving these particular foods is meaningful. Imagine how the scene would read differently if the family ate McDonalds, TV dinners, or, say, an “ethnic” dish, such as enchiladas or lo mein. Just as the diner symbolizes a red-white-and-blue-America-on-Main-Street unity and prosperity, so does the homemade meatloaf.

It is also through the language of food that Tom is welcomed back into his family. Rather than get up from the table and hug him, his daughter instead retrieves his place setting, welcoming him not only to the meal, but also back into the family. His son also engages in this unspoken dialogue, as he passes his father the meatloaf. We’re left with an element of painfully perfect ambiguity as the film cuts to black before Tom’s wife makes any meal-related gesture or before the family engages in the communal ritual of eating together.
While we are left to wonder exactly what will happen to the Stall family, the scenes in the diner and round the dinner table eloquently use food-centric devices to characterize this family and the intense, unexpected events that befell them.

August 22, 2012 — Comment 1

Food News Round Up: On Obesity, Eating Rodents, & the Economy (Yes, in that order)

Published by Emily Contois

The past couple of weeks have provided fecund fodder for the food news enthusiast.

Any fan of the CDC’s year-by-year ever-increasing obesity map will be intrigued that the 2011 data was released recently, alongside other obesity news. The news also turned up studies of disgust, which you can explore firsthand in articles on cooking up rat and squirrel. And finally, the struggling economy continues to affect life in the U.S. and abroad, especially dining trends.

So, dig in to this edition of Food News Round Up...

Food and Obesity

Obesity remains a key issue both culturally and politically, especially with the release of the CDC’s most recent obesity statistical analysis.

- New 2011 obesity statistics analysis finds 12 states exceeding 30% obesity
- Pondering Mississippi obesity: Southern diet or culture on the skids?
- Study links healthier weight in children with strict laws on school snacks

Food and Disgust

Disgust is an always interesting element of eating. Would you consider rat or squirrel?

- How and why to eat rat meat
- ‘Chicken of the trees:’ A history of eating squirrel

Food and the Economy

As the ‘Great Recession’ continues to be felt by citizens across the globe, the restaurant industry also tightens its belt.

- Dining survey shows New Zealand residents dine out despite economic struggles, but less
- Chefs in Spain must adapt to economic crisis or fail
- In struggling economy, shopping malls consider sit-down restaurants
- Even for gastrocrats, luxury foods aren’t worth it

Delightful Leftovers

These tidbits of food news defy categorization this week, but should still satisfy.

- Studying India’s changing food culture
- Artist/chef, Julia Ziegler-Haynes, captures death row inmates’ last meals
- Chef argues story-telling is key to making good food television
- Food waste prompts the most green guilt, survey finds

This post was originally published as part of a recurring feature called ‘Food News Round Up’ on the Gastronomy at BU blog.
Food lovers the world over adore Julia Child — and as a current student in the Master of Liberal Arts in Gastronomy program at Boston University, which Julia co-founded with Jacques Pépin, I can’t help but feel more intimately connected to her now than ever before.

I also recently had the opportunity to learn more about Julia from her personal assistant of nearly 16 years, Stephanie Hersh, a food legend in her own right. You can read the Stephanie Hersh profile (hot off the press today!) on the Gastronomy at BU Blog.

And while you’re at it, check out these fifteen (Get it? Her birthday is August 15!) delightful ways to engage all of the senses in celebrating Julia Child’s 100th Birthday today — and everything about her that lives on.

Read

- Read Jacques Pépin’s article on remembering Julia Child in the NY Times
- Read the article, Fond Memories of Julia Child’s Kitchen, from the National Museum of American History blog, written by Julia Child’s niece, Philadelphia Cousins
- Read Marlo Thomas’ article, Bon Appétit! It’s Julia Child’s 100th Birthday, on the Huffington Post Blog, complete with a Life of Julia Child slideshow

Look, Watch, Scroll

- Spend some time taking in PBS’s celebration of Julia Child centenary with exclusive, limited-time-available episodes on PBS Food and TV Marathon
- Check out Cookstr’s Happy 100th, Julia! on Pinterest
- Visit google.com to view the Julia Child birth centenary Google doodle
- Scroll through the images in JC100 on Tumblr

Listen

- Listen (and watch) the Julia Child [auto-tune?] Remix
- Listen (and watch) the PBS tribute video, set to “Sweet Child of Mine”

Participate

- Register for the Siting Julia Seminar, hosted by the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University
- Complete every item on Mother Nature Network’s delightful list of 8 ways to honor Julia Child’s 100th birthday
- If you’re in DC, celebrate today at the Smithsonian
- If you’re in Boston, celebrate with the BU MET Programs in Food, Wine & the Art over the course of two festive evenings—Tuesday, October 2, and Wednesday, November 7

Cook and Eat

- Whether you can book a reservation for Julia Child Restaurant Week, cook one of her recipes, or simply honor her
A 'Public Health Nutritionist’ Attempts Food Writing

I was jump-up-and-down and grinning-ear-to-to-ear-excited to be quoted recently on NPR’s Food Blog, The Salt, in the post, “Long Before Social Networking, Community Cookbooks Ruled the Stove.” I did a bit of a double take, though, when I was identified as a “public health nutritionist and food blogger.” While I have an MPH with a concentration in Public Health Nutrition and I blog on food-related topics, I’d never before identified myself that way. But hey, I’ll run with it, especially in this post where I dive into something new.

In the BU Gastronomy program, I study alongside many talented, aspiring food writers. While my work tends to focus more on the social, political, and historical context of eating, here, I’m going to attempt to try my hand at actually writing about food...

After wading through streets clogged with rowdy Red Sox fans, I take a quick right turn through a break in the crowd and walk beneath a vibrant red awning into Eastern Standard. Upon entering the softly lit, but energetic, dining room, a hostess gestures for me and my fellow classmates from Boston University’s Food and Art course to follow her, saying with a knowing nod and quiet professionalism, “We have your table all ready for you.” She leads us, a group equal parts hungry and excited, through the buzzing restaurant, animated conversations and upbeat Elton John tunes embracing us. We reach our destination at the back right corner of the restaurant, near the kitchen and the gleaming oyster bar.

In the center of our private dining room stands an uncovered dark wood table, simply dressed with two sets of tall, curvaceous salt- and peppershakers. Alongside each of the seven place settings sits an ivory plate marked with two concentric burgundy rings and the Eastern Standard moniker at the edge. A knife and fork of heavy weight, a water glass, and a white napkin, folded around the menu card featuring the evening’s special fare, complete the setting with a restrained simplicity.

Like the dark table, the walls of the private dining space are also a rich, dark brown, bordered near the ceiling with large squares of deep red paneling, adorned with gold nailheads. Radiance from the single light fixture above creates orb-like reflections on the red surface, creating a warm, inviting environment. Carpet of a brownish burgundy hue covers the floor. We are completely enveloped in dark, rich colors, masculine textures, and simple, clean lines. Opposite the double doors, a dark wood sideboard hugs the wall. On top of it rests a mostly green arrangement with several round, lavender-headed flowers at the top, reaching as high as the red border. On either side of the vase perch two wooden pig sculptures, as if standing guard.
After soft bread with a gentle brown crust, even softer butter, and crisp, pickled vegetables quieted the initial pangs of our hunger, two female servers process round the table, pouring glasses of chilled white wine. With the arrival of the first course, plates begin to populate the expansive and empty city that is our dining table. Each place receives a shallow dome of mixed greens topped with thinly sliced cucumber and radish, lightly tossed with sherry vinaigrette that makes the varying lettuces glisten. Three settings of charcuterie balance the bright colors on our plates. Geometric arrangements of meat line up like little soldiers on the wooden serving boards, placed at intervals down the center of the table. The round slices of meat are well paired with shallow cups of condiments and a small mound of tiny pickles. Slices of crusty baguette and dark brown bread rest near the wooden serving boards, ready to enter into gustatory matrimony with the meats and mustards.

Following on the heels of the first course comes the main. Large oblong plates of simply arranged steak, accompanied by small cups of béarnaise sauce and piles of thin cut herb fries are placed before some of us. The rest of us feast our eyes on a large fillet of Faroe Island salmon, soft and pink inside, slightly crispy and auburn outside, topped with an herb salad. In a vertically stacked presentation, the fillet rests atop a salad of chopped fingerling potatoes and fava beans, very near raw, with a creamy-tasting bacon Dijon vinaigrette. The circular arrangement of the potato salad, as well as the ring of vinaigrette that encloses it, mirror the concentric burgundy lines that encircle the plate itself, softening the straight form of the salmon fillet that stretches across nearly the entire diameter of the plate. As we begin to eat, three votives of medium height are brought in to dress the center of the table, like breadcrumbs to lead us the way home once our meal is complete. As I create delicious bites of salmon coupled with the haute potato salad, I may indeed forget my path.

After the entrée plates are cleared and our wine glasses house only a final sip, two medium sized plates of fresh baked cookies arrive. In three gentle lines of three cookies each, oatmeal, chocolate chip, and macaroon varieties lie ready to be enjoyed. The oatmeal cookie in particular elicits a surprised gasp of pleasure, as an unexpected hit of spicy molasses merges with the soft currants and raisins, creating a harmonious mouthful.

Beyond the delight of magically appearing food, the most memorable component of the meal proves to be the feeling of conviviality, the pleasure of my classmates’ and professor’s company, our dancing conversation, and our, at times, uproarious laughter. It is a long-standing cultural custom to break bread together to cement relationships. As a food studies student, I often partake in end-of-the-semester potlucks. But to gather as a small group in a delightful restaurant, unchallenged to pay the bill, I am able to effortlessly soak in every element of the meal. After completing study in art history, I am also able to bring a new visually analytical eye to the table, which further enhances the pleasures of the palate.

August 13, 2012 — Leave a Comment
Food & Art / Food-ish Writing
Seven Simply Smashing Food Exhibits: No Tickets, Shoes, or Shirts Required

Published by Emily Contois

One of my favorite things on a weekend afternoon, a weekday evening—well, we can go ahead and say just about anytime—is to spend a few glorious hours of levity and escape at a museum. I’m lucky to live in Boston where world-class museums abound as plentifully as colleges and universities, but sometimes, I hear you, we get busy and don’t make it out the door to enjoy the many intriguing exhibits on display.

Here you’ll find seven excellent online food museum exhibits that you can visit anytime you like from your computer—and in your pajamas if you so desire. There are likely many more delightful virtual expos, but these seven, listed in no particular order, can be a very filling place to start...

1. Julia Child’s Kitchen

Even if you aren’t in Washington D.C. you can peek in the drawers and cupboards of Julia Child’s kitchen, view selected culinary objects, and peruse an interactive timeline that chronicles her love of cooking.

*Exhibit by the Smithsonian, National Museum of American History*

2. War-Era Food Posters
Check out dozens of posters from during and between the World Wars with food-focused messages, such as “Eat more cottage cheese,” “Every garden a munition plant,” and “Have you eaten your pound of potatoes today?”

Exhibit by Cory Bernat from the Collection of the National Agricultural Library

3. What’s Cooking Uncle Sam?

Trace the Government’s effect on how Americans eat, exploring the farm, factory, kitchen, and table. This exhibit ran at the National Archives from June 2011 to January 2012, but you can still experience much of it through the online exhibit preview. I highly recommend purchasing the exhibit catalog.

Exhibit by the National Archives

4. counter space: design + the modern kitchen

Explore the twentieth-century kitchen as a nexus of technology, design, culture, and aesthetics through items in the MOMA collection, including a recently acquired, and unusually complete, example of the iconic “Frankfurt Kitchen,” designed in 1926–27 by the architect Grete Schütte-Lihotzky.

Exhibit by the Museum of Modern Art

5. Key Ingredients: America by Food
Emphasizing regional traditions and international influences, this exhibit takes you coast to coast through 500 years of food in America. Through a selection of artifacts, photographs, and illustrations, you’ll explore within the home, as well as restaurants, diners, and communities.

*Exhibit by the Smithsonian Institute*

6. Chosen Food

Click through this beautifully done online exhibit dedicated to American Jewish identity, cuisine, and culture. You’ll find tantalizing stories and facts, from Chinese food on Christmas to the Gefilte Fish Line to latke mix in a box.

*Exhibit by the Jewish Museum of Maryland*

7. A Visual Feast

The National Association for the Specialty Food Trade celebrates the organization’s 60th anniversary with a beautiful (though slightly self-serving) online exhibit of 60 features, including products (from pickles to chocolate), pioneers (such as Julia Child and Martin Yan), organization events throughout the twentieth century, and trends that have transformed the culinary landscape, such as fast food, consumer food movements, and kitchen appliances.

*Exhibit by the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade*

This post was originally published on the *Gastronomy at BU* blog.

July 31, 2012 — Comments 2
Food History / Food-ish Writing

**Food Journals in Popular Culture: Confessing Diet Sins or Legit Rehabilitation?**

Published by *Emily Contois*

At times, diet literature offers the same recommendations that dietitians and eating disorder specialists proffer, but accompanied by an underlying message of guilt—in this case of biblical proportion.

In the article, “Diet Confessions” from the June 2006 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, Jim
Karas (Chicago-based trainer to the stars and the common man alike) discusses keeping a food journal as a weight loss strategy.

The article is accompanied by a disturbing image of a thin young woman kneeling as if at worship itself with her hands pressed together in fervent prayer. A scale lurks forebodingly in the background, a menacing crucifix. Upon her face shines the light of whichever god one confesses dieting sins.

Karas discusses food journals utilizing religious descriptive language, including:

- coming clean
- every bite you take, every vow you break
- confessing what you’ve eaten

The article portrays an extra cookie as a sin that must be confessed to the food journal. Susan Estrich also refers to food journals in her diet book, *Making the Case for Yourself: A DIET Book for SMART Women* (1997), saying, “You won’t want to write down two potato chips, so you won’t eat them. Forced to confront what you’re doing, you won’t do it” (56).

Ironically, food journals are used in bulimia treatment “to provide the foundation for effective [therapy]” by identifying disordered behaviors and providing a forum for the therapist to offer suggestions and encouragement (Riess and Dockray-Miller 2002: 17). Dietitians often use a food journal as a diagnostic tool to help clients recognize nutritional deficiencies or excesses as a means to create more balanced meal plans. Food journals are not proof of an individual’s mistakes or a deterrent to eating, but a simple way to assess eating patterns so that positive changes can be made if necessary (Hollis 2008), which, as a 2008 study confirmed, effectively aids weight loss (In this study, it doubled the weight loss.)

The improper use of food journals is yet another example of how the diet industry employs faulty psychology in its products and marketing practices. In fact, *Oprah* reader and recovering anorexic, Sarah Cole-Hamilton, critiques Jim Karas’ “Dieting Confessions” article (2006: 26) saying,

I could have written that article on my worst day as an anorexic.

The same damaging ideas about food and weight, which comprise the psychology of an eating disorder, are inserted into articles, advertisements, and books on dieting. This psychology renders dieters unable to relate normally to food or weight, and consequently, perpetuates dieting in the United States at the expense of the health of millions of Americans.

References

Nancy Meyers’ older bird chick flicks, *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003) and *It’s Complicated* (2009), provide both escape and hope to middle-aged female audiences, whose views on love, sex, and relationships are both informed and complicated by life experience — including marriage, motherhood, and divorce — and the stereotypes that accompany being middle-aged.

*Something’s Gotta Give* is the story of fifty-three-year-old Erica (Diane Keaton), the successful, divorced playwright who in the setting of her luxurious Hampton beach house falls in love with both her daughter’s sixty-three year old boyfriend, Harry (Jack Nicholson) and a handsome thirty-something doctor, Julian, (Keanu Reeves). *It’s Complicated* also tells the story of an accomplished, divorced woman in her fifties, Jane (Meryl Streep), but in this version of the story, she is caught not between a man her own age and a younger man, but between her ex-husband, Jake (Alec Baldwin), and her new boyfriend, Adam (Steve Martin), the architect she has hired to build her dream home.

Food and cooking serve as symbols and narrative devices in these two films, representing and communicating the multidimensional nature of middle-aged women in not only the traditionally feminine roles of mother and housewife, but also the pro-feminist roles of career woman and lover. These different roles need not be in conflict within Meyer’s leading women, however. The older bird genre tells stories of sexual reawakening, a process that thus shifts the balance and requires ongoing negotiation of the self within the characters’ heretofore established identities.

In a delightfully palatable twist, this process is played out through the sub-text of food. In scene after scene, food, cooking, eating, feeding, and food-centered settings progress each film’s narrative and provide depth to the exploration of middle-aged female identity. Kitchens in particular serve as both symbols of identity transformation and meaningful settings for significant narrative action, specifically as spaces for romantic relationships to progress. The kitchen in each film personifies the female lead, transcends the screen to capture the aspirational hearts of viewers — and the professional eye of designers and bloggers — and finally, embodies Meyers own life experience and trademark visual style.

**Kitchens that Personify Female Leads**

When surveying sets for *Something’s Gotta Give*, Meyers noted that homes in the Hamptons all featured “blowout kitchens” — large kitchens equipped with commercial appliances, custom cabinetry, granite countertops, and other high-end, expensive features. Thus, Erica’s magnificent kitchen is realistic for her character. Beyond fact-checking realism, however, Meyers also says, “The house had to reflect Diane’s character, who is a very successful, accomplished New York playwright in..."
Diane Keaton stars as Erica in “Something’s Gotta Give,” a woman of a certain age, whose sexual repression is symbolized by her wardrobe, often confining turtlenecks and unadventurous whites. (Collins 2003). Meyers describes the kitchen itself, saying, “It was a cook’s kitchen, a bountiful kitchen” (Green and Baldwin 2006) and “a little too big” (Collins 2003).

![Kitchen from “Something’s Gotta Give”](image)

Just as Meyers herself finished her dream home following her divorce from Charles Shyer, Meyers outfits both Erica in *Something’s Gotta Give* and Jane in *It’s Complicated* with their own “blowout kitchens” that serve as self-gifts for achieving professional success and surviving divorce. In addition, while some individuals furnish lavish kitchens for show, both Erica and Jane love to cook, making the kitchen a space where what is a domestic chore for some women, is elevated as a hobby and creative endeavor for Erica and Jane.

Beyond markers of status and functional spaces for cooking, Scott Rudin, a producer of *It’s Complicated*, suggests that Meyers’ sets also reveal meaning and further develop characters. He says, “Everything — the silverware, the food in the fridge — is part of the narrative” (quoted in Merkin 2009). Indeed, Meyers represents and negotiates character identity within kitchen spaces. For example, while Erica’s preference for all white clothing and white stones are construed as part of her controlling personality, her gleaming white kitchen bursting with sunlight is an ideal representation of who she is. As she negotiates her newfound sexual self, she is always comfortable and in control within her kitchen.

Rudin also discusses the set design for *It’s Complicated*, saying, “We had a lot of conversation about the size of Jane’s house. Her bedroom is a small bedroom and her kitchen is a small kitchen that’s falling apart. She’s saved for 10 years to change it. Nancy’s worked hard to [create a kitchen that would] justify the plot” (Merkin 2009). Jane takes a longer road than Erica to establish her identity and develop self-worth after her divorce. This state of prolonged negotiation and struggle is personified in her “small kitchen that’s falling apart.”
Kitchens that Transcend Film: Viewer and Blog Attention

These two set kitchens not only progress the narrative and support character development, but also provide fecund fodder for design enthusiasts and aspirational viewers. The kitchens in both films garnered significant attention from viewers, home décor magazines, blogs, and designers alike. The attention garnered by the *It's Complicated* kitchen reveals that Meyers may have missed the mark creating Jane’s “before kitchen,” which many viewers actually enjoy and aspired to as it appears. For example, the design website, *Remodelista*, highlighted the kitchen in its “Steal This Look” feature, applauding it for its attention to detail. Following the blog entry are 122 comments that have been posted since it was published on December 22, 2009 that share a desire to copy the look and feel of Jane’s kitchen, which Meyers tries to portray as too small and requiring renovation.

While some viewers desired Jane’s “before” kitchen, the gleaming white English Colonial kitchen in *Something’s Gotta Give* all but revolutionized kitchen design. The Fran Jacoberger blog describes it as, “flooded with milky white hues, soft finishes and subtle detailing, its clean design packs universal appeal.” Erica’s kitchen is called the “most copied kitchen of all time” (Killam 2010) and Lee J. Stahl, president of the Renovated Home, a design-and-build company serving Manhattan’s most posh ZIP codes, confirms, “It’s the No. 1 requested style” (quoted in Green and Baldwin 2006). “Julia” the blogger responsible for *Hooked on Houses*, agrees, saying, “I copied as much of it as I could! I later found out I wasn’t the only one inspired by it. Every home show I went to the following year seemed to have its own version of this look.”

The set home, including the kitchen, was even featured in an issue of *Architectural Digest*, after which the set’s kitchen became one of the most searched features on ArchitecturalDigest.com (Friends of the Kitchen...). Meyers claims to have been annoyed by this set-centric press, saying,

> It got to the point where I started to resent the whole house. It seemed like people were giving it more attention than the movie (quoted in Green and Baldwin, 2006).

Unpacking the Meyers Mark

But perhaps Meyers ought not to have been surprised by this attention. In her *New York Times* cover story, Daphne Merkin chronicles the evolution of Meyers’ “trademark aspirational interiors,” which take center stage in both of these films. This Meyers mark has also been termed “architecture porn,” the “gracious home aesthetic,” and “the cashmere world of Nancy Meyers” (Merkin 2009). Merkin concludes that Meyers “prefers for her movies — for life itself — to have a rosy, unconflicted presentation. My sense is that whatever warts exist, she airbrushes out, the better to come away with a happy ending” (2009).
The “Something’s Gotta Give” set living room effectively demonstrates the “gracious home aesthetic.”

And this is indeed part of the fantasy that Meyers creates within the older bird chick flick genre in which she is building a monopoly. Meyers creates not only romantic fantasies, but also magazine-worthy dream homes in which these fantasies unfurl. Even Harry utters, “Wow, it’s the perfect beach house,” when he first arrives at Erica’s home in *Something’s Gotta Give*. Merkin’s word choice is interesting, however, as she attempts to pin point what it is about Meyers’ films that appeal to “older bird” audiences, saying,

But in the end she’s dipping deep into the bourgeois mainstream, with its longing for Oprah-like ‘closure,’ its peculiarly American belief in personality makeovers and its abiding love for granite kitchen counters (2009).

The symbol of the trophy kitchen and the luxe life that Meyers incorporates into her films are certainly part of the equation.

**Conclusion**

As Meyers creates fantasies in which older women have it all — including career, family, financial success, love, and sexual fulfillment — this state of fantastical bliss is manifested within the film sets, particularly within the kitchens, which her viewers love as much, if not more so, than the films themselves. With so much emphasis placed on the kitchens, these two films function as food films where food is far more than a prop, but rather an element of characterization, plot development, and social critique. Through food — and juxtaposed with food — socio-cultural beliefs about middle-aged love and sexuality are explored in new ways. While Nancy Meyers’ packaging of middle-aged love includes considerable fantasy, it also reveals and affirms the very real conditions, desires, and hopes of a growing demographic of American women. As foodie culture and food films also continue to garner increasing attention, food-centered narratives provide unique sub-text to explore the multidimensionality of women of a certain age.

**References**

Phallic Produce and Over-Sexed Peasants in 16th and 17th Century Italian Art

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the comedic produce paintings of papal Rome and the naturalistic peasant paintings of northern Italy both presented erotic situations that at surface level appear as juvenile examples of low humor. Analyzing these paintings within the large social and political context of the time, however, reveals tensions, transitions, and insecurities within the Church, class relations, and art itself.

Varriano cites the popularity of witty puns in the sixteenth century, contending that they embody the instability of politics and the Church (2009: 118). He argues that lusty fruit and vegetable paintings proved to be:

The perfect metaphor for the culture of post-Reformation Rome, in which the quest for religious and political orthodoxy may have increased uncertainties and humor was the only acceptable outlet for transgressive desire (Varriano 2009: 125).

In fact, erotic pun paintings were most popular in Rome, where these suggestive works may have provided sexual release from the repression required by Catholicism, especially for the clergy.

Caravaggio’s Still Life with Fruit on a Stone Ledge is a particularly strong example of these erotic paintings, as it portrays a veritable produce orgy. A ray of light beams down from the upper left and the heads of two brightly lit, erect gourds emerge from the upper right. These diagonal lines bring the eye to the center of the painting, where one gourd appears ready to take a perfectly round melon from behind. Bursting melons and figs fill the foreground, while a basket of yet to be deflowered fruit looks on from the upper left.
American Coffee Culture in 1872: So Different from Today?

Since the seventeenth century, Americans have roasted, steamed, and boiled coffee, causing its gradual transformation into our national beverage and a potent patriotic symbol. In his 1872 text, *Coffee: Its History, Cultivation, and Use* (read it for free on Google Books) Robert Hewitt Jr. captured the historical prominence of coffee in the United States, saying, “Since cotton has been proclaimed ‘king’ in the realm of commerce, coffee should be styled ‘queen’ among the beverages of domestic life” (Hewitt 1872: 11).

Coffee has since risen from its status of queen of the domestic realm and emerged as a leading global commodity, second only to petroleum oil (Pendergrast 1999: 1). Coffee thus exerts considerable political and economic power. The United States has led world coffee consumption for the past two hundred years (Tucker 2011: 18). Coffee plays multiple social and cultural roles within American daily life as a beverage consumed upon waking, shared in social settings, enjoyed at the end of a meal, savored during the workday coffee break, and so on. In his historical text, Hewitt depicts coffee as a socially accepted stimulant that fuels and enlivens the mind, body, and spirit.

A Short Coffee History

Hewitt traced coffee’s origins to Ethiopia where it had been consumed “from time immemorial” (1872: 16). He then dated coffee consumption in Persia to the fifteenth century. Sr. Henry Blount, who visited Turkey in 1634, described coffee as,

> Made of a berry as big as a small bean, dried in a furnace, and beat to a powder of a sooty color, in taste a little bitterish, that they seethe and drink, hot as may be endured. It is good at all hours of the day, but especially at morning and evening, when to the purpose they entertain themselves two or three hours in cauphé-houses, which, in Turkey, abound more than Inns and ale-houses with us (quoted in Hewitt 1872: 23).

Hewitt cited coffee consumption as fashionable in both Paris and England around the mid-seventeenth century with coffee introduced in the United States a short while later (1872: 23; also Ellis 2008). For example, a Bostonian woman received the first license to sell coffee in 1670, and by 1690 there were at least two operating coffeehouses in Boston (Stavely and Fitzgerald 2004: 270).

Four Reasons Coffee Became the American National Beverage
Several converging factors influenced the transformation of coffee into American “necessity of life” (Hewitt 1872: 30) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the first of which had roots in New England.

1. **Patriotism.** Following the Boston Tea Party of 1773, avoiding tea was considered “an American patriotic duty” (Stavely and Fitzgerald 2004:270; Pendergrast 1997:15) and coffee proved a perfect substitute.

2. **Affordability.** The declining cost of coffee made it an affordable choice for an increasing proportion of society (Stavely and Fitzgerald 2004:270; Pendergrast 1997:15).

3. **Tastier technology.** Advancing technologies for grinding, roasting, and brewing coffee resulted in a tastier product with broader appeal (Tucker 2011:19).

4. **Productivity.** Some scholars contend that the Industrial Revolution dramatically altered eating and working patterns and created even greater need for stimulating beverages that promoted worker productivity (Pendergrast 1997: 16-17).

### Coffee’s Socially Acceptable Stimulating Power

Hewitt praised coffee’s caffeine kick, referring to coffee as “the magic drink” that “achieved an incalculable amount of good, in rendering people more happy... as well as more thoroughly equipped for encountering the battle of life” (1872:11). Hewitt even used poetic prose to describe one man’s early morning coffee experience at an outdoor stand in New Orleans:

> Look at the recipient, who with blanched face, dull eyes, and depressed mien, reaches out his hand and seizes upon the nectar. The moment the fragrance reaches his nostrils a transformation for the better commences, the eyes grow bright, a healthful color and natural fullness returns to the cheeks, smiles wreath the mouth, the mind becomes active, the fogs, the dark air, effluvia of all sorts are exorcised like ghosts fleeing before the penetrating rays of the unobstructed sun (1872: 30).

Here Hewitt portrays coffee as a savior that awakens the consumer, bestowing energy and clarity. Hewitt likens the awakening power of coffee to the sun, making coffee the center of the universe, a source of life and power like the sunrays required for photosynthesis and the survival of all plant life on earth.

Hewitt also posited coffee as an acceptable stimulant, unlike alcohol and tobacco. He argued that coffee ought to be considered “an auxiliary to temperance” (1872: 41), as coffee was “an exhilarating drink, possessing the good qualities of wine without any of its bad consequences” (1872: 75).

### The Historically Laborious Coffee-Making Process

Preparing coffee was a laborious and complex process until the twentieth century (Stavely and Fitzgerald 2004: 272). In *Coffee Culture*, Tucker quips that if coffee had not promised the enlivening effects of caffeine, it is unlikely that people would have pursued the multistep process of preparing it (2011: 6). Indeed, Hewitt admitted that making good coffee was considered a problem that “Yankee ingenuity has not been idle in trying to solve,” noting that the United States Patent Office had issued 175 patents for coffeepots alone (1872: 78). Hewitt recommended using Count Rumford’s percolator.

Making fresh coffee in nineteenth-century New England required a fair amount of work and number of kitchen gadgets; one had to:

1. **Procure whole coffee beans,** often from a local grocer or supplier; then wash and dry them.

2. **Roast the beans** in a pan set near a fire or cool oven, constantly stirring the beans to achieve even brownness. Hewitt referenced a superior method of coffee roasting where one used a hollow cylinder made of perforated iron, consistently turning it over the fire until the beans turned a deep cinnamon color. Whatever the roasting method, early techniques required near constant attention to avoid burning the beans.

3. **Grind the beans** using an iron coffee mill, although Hewitt argued that the Turkish method of pounding the coffee with a mortar was superior to grinding (1872: 70).
4. Pour boiled water over the grounds. Hewitt admonished the reader to never perform the reverse and add grounds to boiling water.

The Fragrant Coffee Berry: A Political Commodity

The main ingredient in a cup of coffee is the bean itself. Coffee berries grow best in warm climates at high elevations. Then and now, coffee is a tropical commodity that is grown in a variety of locations near the equator. Very often in high demand, coffee’s production was and is similar to that of sugar, rum, and other tropical commodities, each rife with political and economic conflict, as well as affronts to social and environmental justice. Although such issues were not a key focus in Hewitt’s text, he did express concern that coffee bean production was supported by forced labor conditions that were worse than those of American slavery (1872: 58).

Notable, however, is Hewitt’s repeated reference to coffee as “the fragrant berry,” revealing a more intimate knowledge of the bean’s origin. Typically commodity fetishism manifests in dissociation between the commodity and the consumer’s knowledge of its production. From Hewitt’s descriptions however, it appears that this knowledge remains intact, at least among those interested in coffee.

Conclusion

Although its health effects have been contested within the medical community for hundreds of years, coffee in the United States began as and remains a socially acceptable drug that fuels labor, intellectual thought, and creativity.

Catherine Tucker pondered the role of coffee as fuel in her work, Coffee Culture. She described a frantic morning when she was running late to teach one of her classes at Indiana University, but needed to stop for a quick cup of coffee. Her search for a coffee shop without long lines proved difficult and in considering the situation, she mused, “Going by the number of busy coffee shops, someone might think that the campus runs on coffee. Maybe it’s true” (2011: 18). Dunkin’ Donuts’ most recent marketing slogan, “America Runs on Dunkin,” also builds upon this construct of coffee as a potent fuel that runs humans like machines, just as gasoline runs automobiles. Robert Hewitt Jr.’s nineteenth-century text reveals not only historical evidence for the concept of coffee as fuel, but also demonstrates the command coffee has had over Americans for centuries.

References

We recently passed the approximate half-way point of summer, a fact worth celebrating in a half-glass-full kind of way — and a reason to perform a mid-point status check. Are you making it through that reading list? Have you spent enough time at the beach? Have you tried at least half of those recipes you’ve been marking, saving, and creating?

If not, you have approximately another half to go; plenty of time to fit in everything you planned for your summer. Regardless, you can enjoy these “half and half” edition of Food News Round Up.

Research: 1/2 Science + 1/2 News Reporting

Media coverage on eating behavior research abounds, but the relationship between science and science news is often tenuous. These three studies were reported in the media this week and are presented here with the study or abstract to ensure research integrity.

- Due to perceived anonymity, food orders place online are more fattening, complicated
  - Read the study
- Neuroscience study finds fat in foods directly impacts taste perception
  - Read the abstract
- Restaurant meals a bit healthier after menu labeling law
  - Read the abstract

Food Policy: 1/2 Foreign and 1/2 Domestic

Food policy news this week spans both international and US concerns:

- Will food security be Obama’s foreign policy legacy?
- 2012 hottest year on record; FAO debates how much is attributable to livestock
- Africa’s looming food crisis could affect 18 million people
- Record drought increases corn prices, gives urgency to farm bill
- Wholesome Wave CEO makes the economic case for Food Stamps
- Could newly enacted school lunch rules result in more wasted food?

Food and Culture: 1/2 the Arts + 1/2 Cuisine

This week provides a veritable smorgasbord of interesting tidbits involving food and culture, divided between the visual and linguistic arts and culinary trends:

- *Sport Your Food* exhibit combines Olympic spirit, food, and art
- San Francisco chef finds poetry in food and food in poetry
- Hispanics in nursing homes increases along with culture shock in language and food
- Bagels on the rise in Jakarta, India
- Vegan food on the menu for NASA Mars mission

*This post was originally published as part of a recurring feature called ‘Food News Round Up’ on the Gastronomy at BU blog.*

July 23, 2012 — Leave a Comment

Food Politics / Food-ish Writing

**Chicken Fricassee Face-Off: 18th Century Haute Cuisine versus 1950s Can-Opener Cooking**

Published by Emily Contois
When I was a graduate student in the Boston University Gastronomy program, Ken Albala assigned an intriguing final exam question in the course "A Survey of Food History:" to compare and contrast two Chicken Fricassée recipes.

While it may appear at first glance that Francois Massialot’s recipe, “Poulets en Fricassée au Vin de Champagn” from *Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* (1748), is the culinary superior of Poppy Cannon’s “Chicken with White Wine and White Grapes” from *The Can-Opener Cookbook* (1953), such an assumption ignores the complexity of each recipe as a unique product of a particular time and place. As Anne Bower contends, a cookbook can be read as a “fragmented autobiography” (Bower 1997: 32) that reveals unique details not only of the author’s experience, but also those of his or her time. Cannon’s recipe in particular fulfills Bower’s assertion that the main theme of cookbooks is the “breaking of silence” (1997: 46-47), as it reveals the struggles and desires of the 1950s American housewife.

**Examples of Period Food Trends**

First published in 1691 and in revised additions throughout the early eighteenth century, *Le Nouveau Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* featured haute cuisine, a new culinary tradition first articulated in seventeenth century France. Rather than the strong, heavily spiced flavors that had previously characterized European court cuisine, haute cuisine featured harmonious flavors, derived from the foods themselves. For example, the “Poulets en Fricasée” recipe does not include exotic spices or sugar, but instead showcases the flavors of the new cuisine with a sauce based on butter, aromatics, such as the onion and mushrooms that accompany the chicken, and sparse use of salt and parsley.

American cuisine of the 1950s also emphasized simplicity, though in a different way. Following World War II, manufacturers sought domestic markets for products, such as ready-made foods, that had been developed for military use during the war. Home economics texts, women’s magazines, product-sponsored recipe booklets, and advertising alike aggressively promoted processed “convenience foods” as time and energy saving wonders, suited to simplify the busy housewife’s labors.

**Specific Types of Food Systems**

Massialot’s recipe depends upon a food system that is more intimately connected to nature and Cannon’s one that is more industrialized. While Cannon simply instructs the reader to “open and empty a can of chicken fricassee,” Massialot’s recipe requires far greater investment of time and intimacy with the dish’s main ingredient. His recipe calls for one to work from whole chickens and connects the reader to the animals in a possessive, familiar way, calling them “your chickens.” Like a senior surgeon gently guiding one through a new procedure, Massialot instructs the reader to gut the chickens, remove their skin, and states exactly where and how to cut.

Conversely, *The Can-Opener Cookbook* places distance between the cook and the chicken. It instead depends upon the technology of mass produced canned goods, which were, and are, a legacy of the Second Industrial Revolution. Canned foods first provisioned Napoleon’s troops in the early nineteenth century. By the end of the century, however, canning had been industrialized on an international scale. Coupled with nineteenth century advances in transcontinental transportation, canning played an increasing role in changing the way Americans ate. And, processed foods were strongly promoted following World War II. Cannon’s twentieth century recipe embodies these converging effects with the first ingredient, “canned chicken fricassee.”

**Unique Ways of Communicating**

Massialot’s recipe builds upon the legacy of haute cuisine and the Apollonian codification of French cuisine, cooking methods, kitchen organization, and recipes. American recipes also experienced a codification of sorts at the turn of the century. Fanny Farmer of the Boston Cooking School aggressively promoted cooking with scientific accuracy, down to the fraction of a teaspoon, the legacy of which is clear in Cannon’s recipe. Massialot offers
no specific amounts for ingredients, using phrases such as “some,” “a little,” and “a bit,” which depend upon a chef’s intuition, sensory involvement, and experience. Cannon, on the other hand, spells out for the reader at the beginning of the recipe exactly what ingredients are needed. Throughout the recipe, she qualifies specific amounts, such as “4 tablespoons” and “½ teaspoon,” ensuring that even the novice housewife with minimal cooking experience could make the recipe with ease.

The Intended Audience

Massialot worked extensively in court kitchens and this popular cookbook packaged that knowledge for the upper middle class of seventeenth century France. Cannon, however, provided recipes for middle-class housewives of mid-twentieth century America. Cookbooks for busy American housewives were not new, however. For example, Hannah Glasse’s *The Art and Ease of Cooking* (1747) was one of the first cookbooks printed in the American colonies, instructing housewives on how to feed their families in accordance with English tradition.

Poppy Cannon’s *The Can-Opener Cookbook* is unique, however, in that it acknowledges the challenges of the housewife who also works outside of the home. In the 1950s, increasing numbers of middle class women remained in, or joined, the workforce, which affected cooking and eating practices, as well as American society more generally. In her chapter on Poppy Cannon in *Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in the 1950s America*, Laura Shapiro reveals that it was these women who Cannon sought to serve, stating, “At the center of Poppy Cannon’s culinary life was an American housewife, and she just got home from work” (2004: 89).

The Authors

As a thoroughly experienced chef, Massialot’s recipe exudes a calm confidence as it communicates culinary insight, gained from courtly kitchen experience. Cannon speaks with a straightforward confidence as well, as she endeavors to bring busy housewives into the fold of quick and easy gourmet cooking. Shapiro states that Cannon, “Had always considered herself far above the marshmallow-salad school of quick cooking, because her business was imitating great cuisine” (2004: 107). This is evident as her recipe offers a quick version of a gourmet dish. Indeed, Cannon was proud to be called “the original gourmet in a hurry” (quoted in Shapiro 2004: 111).

National Identity in Recipes

Massialot provided a French recipe for a French audience at a time when French cuisine was becoming more democratized and increasingly viewed as a unifying element of French culture. Alternatively, Cannon’s recipe is an example of an “ethnic” dish portrayed as part of American cuisine, which is largely the product of immigrant cuisines. Some contend that this resulted in “Americans lack[ing] a sense of having a national cuisine that unites them across ethnic and regional boundaries” (Gvion 2009: 56). With regard to French cuisine, Americans have considered it both something to be emulated, as well as something to avoid at different times throughout the twentieth century. Cannon’s recipe both elevates French cooking as the height of elegance, but also devalues it by Americanizing it. For example, while the ingredients include canned chicken fricassee, the recipe title has been thoroughly Americanized to the simple (and rather boring) “Chicken with White Wine and White Grapes.”

While she Americanized the dish for her readers, Cannon was fully literate in the world of fine dining and French cuisine. Like other epicures of the day, Cannon had traveled extensively in Europe, publishing *Eating European at Home and Abroad* in 1961. As wife to both Claude Philippe, a culinary powerhouse of the Waldorf-Astoria, and Walter White, a prominent civil rights leader, Cannon had considerable gastronomic experience. Thus, her statement, “Much of the difference between just cooking and epicurean cooking is the difference in the way the food is served” (quoted in Shapiro 2004: 125), was based upon a wealth of knowledge. This recipe demonstrates Cannon’s faith in presentation, as the “serving time” instructions dictate, “For the utmost in elegance serve with wild rice or saffron rice,” but she is also quick to assure the reader that such an effort can be simple and quick, since wild rice “can be bought canned and ready for heating.”
Conclusion

Massialot provides clear instructions for crafting a culinary masterpiece that builds upon what many consider to be the preeminent haute cuisine of the world, for all time. But Cannon’s French-inspired meal from a can is one that endeavors not only to make cooking dinner easier for the workingwoman, but also assists her in crafting the ideal of the gourmet meal for two. Cannon valued romance in both her personal life and career, which is evident in her recipes.

This recipe also serves as a “breaking of silence” (Bower 1997: 46-47) as it expresses the inner conflict and hopes of many housewives in the 1950s. For many women at that time, cooking dinner may have been a daily act of not only wifely and maternal love, but an act to erase the pain and suffering of the war. As films like The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956) tell the story of men coping and adjusting in post-World War II America, Poppy Cannon’s recipes tell part of the women’s side of the same story. Even when newly burdened with the stress of working outside the home, a speedy (but gourmet) meal from a can ensured that a woman could still serve a dinner that would nourish her family. She could feed them physically and emotionally, with nutrients, epicurean presentation, and genuine love — easing the memory of a painful past and looking to the future with hope.

References

RECENT POSTS

The Changing Nutrition Landscape for Whole Grains: Insights from History & Pop Culture — In November 2018, I had the opportunity to present at the Oldways Whole Grains Council... December 3, 2018

A Student Interview on Media Studies + Food Studies — I chatted with a first year TU student about researching and teaching in media... November 9, 2018

Announcing a New Food History Fellowship at the University of North Texas — Jennifer Jensen Wallach and Michael Wise discuss the new fellowship, food studies at UNT... November 1, 2018

Why I'm Still Blogging After 6 Years & Being Trolled — I blog as an academic for a number of reasons, but this year... July 31, 2018

What Jonathan Gold Taught ASFS Food Scholars — A roundup of tweets from a writing workshop Jonathan Gold taught at the 2017... July 22, 2018

EXHIBIT: FOOD SYSTEM HISTORY

(Image of a market with various fruits and vegetables on display)
“Making the Modern American Food System: An Online Exhibit” depicts the U.S food system’s history – how it came to be, who the key players were, and how we might imagine a future of food.

FOOD STUDIES LINKS

Association for the Study of Food & Society
Graduate Association for Food Studies
Food Studies at Brown University
Boston University Gastronomy Program

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

November 1, 2018
Announcing a New Food History Fellowship at the University of...

June 14, 2016
Publishing in Food Studies Journals: An Index

June 24, 2014
17 Conference Tips for Graduate Students

March 5, 2014
‘Graduate School Will Kill You’ and Other 18th...

October 1, 2013
How to Write a Statement of Purpose

September 16, 2013
4 Steps to Find the Right PhD Program for You, Food Studies or...

June 24, 2013
Graduate Food Studies Programs: A List

INSTAGRAM

ABOUT
I'm Emily Contois, Assistant Professor of Media Studies at the University of Tulsa. Click through this site to learn more about my work.

INSPIRATION

Find something you're passionate about and keep tremendously interested in it.

– Julia Child

WORDPRESS

MORE INSPIRATION

Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see a shadow.

– Helen Keller

FOLLOW BLOG VIA EMAIL

Enter your email address to follow this blog and receive notifications of new posts by email.

Join 7,586 other followers
Latest Posts from Matt Mullenweg’s Blog #. Matt is the founder of WordPress. Oh, really, is that possible to get his posts? 🌟 Let’s look at a very very simple example: // connect to the website endpoint with wp_remote_get() function // pass params as URL query args, full parameter list is here https WP Latest posts is the most powerful and unique WordPress news plugin. Navigate through the main menu and see how you can display your WordPress latest news with themes included in the pro addon. Got a question? Don’t hesitate to post a pre-sale question on our dedicated