AFTERTASTE:

AN EXAMINATION OF PERPETUATION AND CHANGE OF FOOD SERVICE DURING COVID-19

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A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Anthropology

Northern Arizona University

December 2022

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ABSTRACT

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Food is perhaps the most ubiquitous cultural signifier for all peoples across the globe. What people eat and why they eat it denotes heritage, geography, movement, ritual, stratification, and technology. It is through the combination of these elements that food is, first and foremost, political. In communities, how food is produced, procured, exchanged, and laborers compensated are all emblematic of how the dominant power structure is enacted. This has been true since sedentary agriculture and animal husbandry became dominant modes of caloric sustainability and only became more apparent as the world turned increasingly globalized through empire giving way into capitalism. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, what foodstuffs were available, how people got food, then how and where people ate, all became questions of state authority and efficiency as well as calling into question personal agency and social responsibility. These were not new issues then, and have not been for millennia, however COVID-19 offers a lens through which to examine what a food system says about the society in which it exists. Values are exposed by food all the way from the fields to the bank accounts of fast-food employees. COVID-19 was a showcase for the tenuous nature of a for profit system being coupled with survival.

To explore the political nature of the food industry during COVID-19, I conducted a media analysis of world and United States news articles and commercials pertaining to the food industry during the pandemic, as a retrospective of the pandemic and how the pandemic changed or maintained, the infrastructure of food service, such as the supply chain and production of

foodstuffs. The shift in marketing of food that was necessitated by lockdowns and the somber nature of the current reality. Worker safety and elevated position of turning *front line workers* into *heroes* became the norm as frame of reference for the occupation. How workers were or were not compensated for keeping such a large sector of the economy running at great personal risk, and how adversarial that conversation became as the rejection of wage slavery grew in prominence, and, how food establishments and corporations engaged in political theater during the ideological battles taking place on the political spectrum.

I found confirmation of the adage that, "the more things change, the more they stay the same," insofar as that, many issues which arose during COVID-19 were only new because the virus was, but the systemic nature that had brought them to exist was not new.

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ARTICLE PREFACE: PLAN, PROCESS, AND PRODUCTION

I situate myself regarding food service as an insider. In 2013, I graduated from Aguste Escoffier Culinary School in Boulder, Colorado, which specializes in French techniques and fine dining approaches. After graduation, the demands of making a living in a kitchen burnt me out quickly, and this is when I began my academic journey, never losing a love for food or an appreciation for how it is prepared. Combining my culinary background with academia is what inspired me to approach the topic of capital and food methodologically with an industry mentality. It is with a great deal of sympathy to the plight of restaurant employees that I describe my findings, while also keeping at the forefront that what people eat, how they get it, and why they eat it have always been intertwined in politics and that this was still true in a pandemic, if not more apparent.

As with most everyone, COVID-19 severely impacted my life. In a way, I am fortunate that it affected me in no greater way than substantially altering the path of developing and bringing this thesis to fruition. My initial research design, and subsequent alterations bringing me to this point are as follows.

For the summer of 2021, I had an arrangement to go the "Great White North", into the Northwest Territories (NWT) of Canada. In the NWT, I planned to work based out of a local farm, the Northern Farm Training Institute (NFTI), located just on the outskirts of the town of Hay River, which is situated on the southern bank of the Great Slave Lake. NFTI is, "…an experiential farm school that provides immersive training aimed to empower people through local food. [They] support a vibrant regenerative landscape while building productive local farms and thriving, resilient communities." This encapsulates the core of what my thesis was at that time: to anthropologically explore what the relationship between a small community and food in

such a remote yet industrialized region of the world. In the NWT, growing seasons are incredibly short with stereotypically harsh winters. It was my aspiration to investigate how Hay River and the NWT's capital city, Yellowknife, negotiate their relationship with foodstuffs, both what could be produced locally and what was deemed as necessary and/or desirable to have imported.

The parameters of my agreement for working at NFTI was to labor 25 hours a week on the farm, during which time I would have conducted participant observation and informal interviews with others at the farm and at the local farmers market. When I was not at the farm, my plan was to conduct structured observation of menus at local restaurants and of what was stocked at grocery stores by taking notice of items that may be unique regionally (e.g. fish from the lake) or seem to be imported to the area en mass (e.g. fruits and vegetables that cannot be grown locally), along with noting how common specialty ingredients were (e.g. foie gras) and how prohibitive or inclusive prices were. These observations were to be accompanied by semi-structured interviews with the owners/managers of said establishments. My initial introductions led me to an interesting dichotomy that seemed to exist in the NWT, which has persisted throughout my research to this final product. That dichotomy is between profit and desirability when it comes to food in the capitalist system. For instance, in my preliminary research, I found that tomatoes were commonplace, though in the dead of winter they must travel vast distances, thus becoming extremely expensive. Noting preference for certain foods spurred my interest to explore why people may be willing to pay more for something they want, but is not readily available versus what is easiest to get access to and yields the highest dividends.

Unfortunately, I was denied entry into Canada at the border with Montana by a single Border guard who said, and I will never forget it verbatim, "I do not believe your research sufficiently benefits Canada," and dejectedly turned around, to begin the drive south to where I

would summer in Colorado. This is when my research made its first shift. I wanted to continue researching the correlations between political structures and the food that people eat, but with the difficulties of the world at the time, I began to heavily incorporate COVID-19 into my articulation of these relationships.

My research shifted to a focus on tourist towns in Colorado, since I saw this keeping with many shared elements from my previous design, specifically structured observations of menus and semi-structured interviews with owners/managers/chefs from those restaurants. My criteria for selecting what classified as a tourist town was fairly simple: that the town be located on the Western Slope of Colorado, because there is simply nothing close to a major city on that side of the Great Divide. While not as remote as Hay River, there are still no major throughfares that pass through that portion of the state south of Interstate 70, so many of my previous questions would still be directly pertinent. With many towns this size, tourism is, whether outdoor recreation or the town itself, a crucial factor for the local economies. With locals, transient workers, and vacationers severely impacted by COVID-19, I sought to explore how local restaurants managed their changing demographics. Were they looking to rely wholly on locals to stay afloat? Were they attempting to accommodate what few travelers there were in new ways? How had purchasing and staff changed throughout the previous year?

I spent the summer sending emails to restaurant's corresponding "contact us" information or traveling to various towns and going to establishments in person to make direct contact. These towns included, but were not limited to, South Fork, Pagosa Springs, Durango, Telluride, and Cortez. These were a major focus because of their placement along Highway 160, a major tourist route, as I was hoping to find pertinent trends, or lack thereof, in a specific geographic region. However, whether through the internet or in person, obtaining any interviews was fruitless, as I

received zero responses. I believe that even at the best of times, replies may have been minimal since as I noted above, making a living through food service does not allow for a lot of spare time. I find it likely that due to the increased pressures of the pandemic, my interview requests were found to be entirely extraneous for whomever it was that replied to emails on behalf of the restaurants.

As I returned to Flagstaff at the end of July, 2021 to begin the semester, my pool of prospective interviews had to be expanded once again. I opened it up to tourist towns in New Mexico, and Arizona along with Colorado. I also became less stringent on what I had perceived as the best options to yield results from my attempts in Colorado, which was high end/fine dining restaurants. For this search I went to google and typed in: "best tourist towns in [name of municipality]" and received top ten lists. From here, I explored those cities on Trip Advisor and emailed restaurants top to bottom as they appeared on the website. This endeavor yielded only two interviews, one with a head chef out of a hotel restaurant in Telluride, CO, and an owner of an establishment in Williams, AZ. The former was a candid and honest conversation about the trials and tribulations of running a restaurant during cataclysm, with the particularly illustrative fact that the only time the interview could be conducted was while Chef was literally doing prep work for service. The latter, seemed more like a PR exercise where nothing came up that could paint the establishment in a negative light, even things beyond their control. Two interviews were canceled with no new dates able to be arranged, and more telling were two responses saying that due to the pandemic, they simply did not have time for an interview and wished me well.

It was with these disappointing results that the final shift to this thesis was made. Since COVID-19 has made such a massive impact on my research of the food industry my committee

chair, Dr. Emery Eaves, suggested I lean into this topic and explicitly delve into a media analysis of COVID-19 and food on a grand scale, outside of the diminishing returns of restaurants in the Southwest. This was done through multi-media such as commercials, what was said and shown by how food was advertised as the pandemic progressed.

I used commonly known news outlets to understand how food was represented in mainstream media. I chose to include the BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Fox News, Bloomberg, MSNBC, and Reuters. The time range for the searches began when states began locking down in March of 2020, up until the summer of 2022 as ramifications upon restaurants, and particularly restaurant employees, continued. I also explored specific publications such as Food and Wine Magazine. I never went past a paywall, so some prominent exceptions have not been included such as the New York Times and Newsweek.

The words I used in the websites' search engines were simple combinations like, "food service and COVID-19, "Pandemic and Restaurants," or "Food supply and corona virus." I was focused on both how restaurants operated and how customers interacted with them. My final analysis contained 73 articles (see Appendix 1) which I coded with 41 emergent codes.

In keeping with my original research design, the domains I was looking for in the articles were focused on access to food and restaurant/food choices, as well as themes of interest that emerged from initial reading. Given how the pandemic changed how people got food, articles with themes pertaining to food access and what people chose during this time were of particular interest. Code domains included: Access to Food; Adaptations made by restaurants and individuals to meet pandemic guidelines or navigate closures; Comments about social class, community, and culture or cultural norms; Discussions of cost and difficulty during the

pandemic; Safety and safety requirements; Skilled vs essential work; Comments about government oversight; and comments about basic nutrition and staple food access.

I used Atlas.TI qualitative data analysis software to log and maintain both the articles and the codes. There were no parameters set for article length, author, or style (e.g., editorials or opinion pieces) if it was a published news article from the aforementioned criteria. My goal is to capture the sentiment and zeitgeist of the time as well as empirical facts. I first read the entire article and determined the author's message, and then would go back through the article and code from this point of view.

How I chose codes was twofold. First, there were key words I looked for verbatim, then there were themes that those words could be extrapolated, for example, *adaptation*. Adaptation was sought literally and utilized if an article was talking about change in general caused by the pandemic. I found grouping codes thematically important because as stated, it is my goal to capture the zeitgeist rather than only relying on systematic and clinical approach.

In my analysis, I also included searches on YouTube to analyze advertisements made during the pandemic in order to explore the tonal shift from the onset of the pandemic to the return to normalcy, though what that means and whether we have returned to normal is contentious in itself. Something that sparked my interest in this topic that I wanted to systematically examine was a Burger King ad which will be discussed at length later, and from attempting to find that, I explored related videos on YouTube, clicking on relevant suggestions from the side bar, as well as letting those instigate new searches. It was particularly hard to find complete versions of recent ads. I do not know if this is due to some sort of copyright or lack of interest in maintaining them. It is because of the lack of consistent of access that I used compilations that do not specifically pertain to food, but did include food advertisements.

Theory

One of the most effective theories for examining people's modern relationship with food comes from Arjun Appadurai (1990) and his theory of scapes. As described in *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,* scapes described as follows: 1) ethnoscapes, or the movement of people; 2) mediascapes, modern mass media and what it proports; 3) technoscapes are correspondence of technological advancements; 4) financecapes is the transference of global capital; and 5) ideascapes, or the ideology of nationalism or communities and how it interacts in the modern world. Using these five scapes, it is possible to consider most facets of my proposed research, what people eat, why it is eaten and how it will continue to be eaten.

Appadurai argues against the prevailing anti-neoliberal notion that globalization is a domineering force that usurps identity in favor of homogenization into the capitalistic tendencies of expansion. Appadurai instead claims that globalization is more of a dialectic. He posits that there is a conversation occurring between the local and the global rather than a simple process of homogenization. This leaves an end product of a synthesized culture that amalgamates portions which it sees preferential to maintaining its uniqueness. The example Appadurai uses is that, even though a McDonald's can be seen the world over, it takes on distinctive elements in each respective culture. He explains that "the new cultural global economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping disjunctive order which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center periphery models…the complexity of the of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctions between culture and politics" (Appadurai,1990, 296).

In understating Appadurai's theory, it is also crucial the comprehend what he means by 'disjuncture,' which is to separate what seems like the all-encompassing force of globalization into sects of difference that individual communities have applied them. As mentioned above,

although the famed golden arches of McDonalds are the same, and can be seen everywhere, there are important differences within each community where you find them. The ubiquitous brand is tuned personally to the preferences of locals. It is in the dissection, or examining the disjuncture, that agency can be found, and this is done with the application of Appadurai's five scapes. In other words, disjuncture is the discussion that keeps any element of a society from being the only defining factor of it.

Even though Appadurai does not use his own terminology, his theories can clearly be seen applied in his piece, *How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India* (Appadurai, 1988). At the forefront of the article, both technoscapes and mediascapes are present as Appadurai points to a particularly unique facet of cookbooks in India, or rather the historical lack of them. An oddity, Appadurai points out, is that in India the written language has been around for millennia, but only in recent times have begun to be codified into texts in a nationally standardized way.

Appadurai describes the technoscape's influence on contemporary Indian cooking by stating that, "construction of a national cuisine is essentially a post-industrial, post-colonial process" (Appadurai, 1988). Technology is a requirement because of the modes of production and transportation necessary in order to transmit a homogeneity across such a vast geographic region as the Indian sub-continent. The access to food and tools to cook them are also essential for the home-cook. Once people stop subsistence agriculture and can begin to experiment with foodstuffs that are not typically regionally available, entails the ideascape as well.

Because of the technoscape creating availability, some traditional values have found an avenue to break down. Whereas the caste system in India has historically prohibited certain peoples from eating certain foods and also mixing with those who are either above or below their

status, the introduction of outside influences has created safe public spaces for intermingling where it would have been taboo in the past. Appadurai states, “a post-industrial, post-colonial middle class is constructing a peculiar sort of polyglot culture” (1988). While not making a judgment on the ethical nature of outside pressures and the consumerist nature of capitalism, it has a net positive on how people can interact in new ways because, the “exchange of recipes…is the first stage of a process that leads to carefully controlled interethnic dining” (Appadurai, 1988). With new ideas transmitted by way of food, Indian society is moving away from a previous mode of hierarchy towards new forms of equality, although with all ventures in capitalism, it has just morphed into a new form of stratification, as it is with the rest of the world where wealth instead of birth determines status (Dewey, 2012).

Another important theory that informed this research is Benedict Anderson’s (1983) theory of Imagined Communities for the reason that so much comes down to nationalism and identity. According to Anderson, how people group themselves together both nationally and within groups within a country are both constructs. This is not to say nationalism or identity are fake or unimportant, but instead, are a choice. Understanding how people group themselves together and comparing which elements are included/excluded along with where and why, is useful for understanding how the importance of food was negotiated during a global pandemic.

The third key theoretical element is Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood’s Consumption Theory (1996), which is exemplified in two main conduits. First, and an essential one, being class. Regardless of relevance or history, certain foods are ascribed to status. For example, in the United States, champagne and caviar are equivalent to high society. Furthermore, foods for status are not static and can shift in perceived prestige, a prime example being lobster. Lobster used to be considered a poor man’s food and now many find the crustacean cost

prohibitive (Mac Con Iomaire, 2004). Second, using Consumption Theory, one can see what is important to societies, an example being food drives during the holiday season. Poverty and hunger are not seasonal, but because of the correlation between eating specific foods from Thanksgiving to Christmas, American society is more acutely aware and has deemed it worthy to make a concerted effort to feed people during the season.

Historiography

For the foundation of the current state of the world, the most important development in food was the development of sedentary agriculture for the purpose of growing grains perennially, such as rice and millet (Kelly 2016). There are not many foods that humans can eat raw, those that can be eaten raw, or with little technological alteration, have both a short growing season and a short *shelf life*, which required a nomadic lifestyle for most peoples. The ability to grow and store grain was a massive shift in how humans had previously operated and began a new era (Kelly, 2016). It is with grain production and its surplus that a centralized and hierarchal authority first took shape. With the consolidation of food there was too the consolidation of people for the purposes of its production, its defense, and the taxation of said people (Lauden, 2013, Scott, 2009). It is important to note that using food as a metric for power is not unique to societies that practice sedentary agriculture, as exemplified by Boas in detailing the potlatch gatherings amongst the Kwakiutl (Barnett, 1938). However, for this analysis I detail the global through a lens of the *first world nations* (as defined through political science), which are those governments with the most geo-political power and have laid the foundation for the modern diplomatic status quo through capitalism. It is with sedentary agriculture and then the exchange of food that globalization (most notably East to West, Asia to Europe, by way of the Silk Road) began, thus laying the foundation of the modern globalized world (Frank, 1998).

Through the implementation of hierarchy in agricultural societies, accompanied by the written record, through bureaucratic necessity (Scott, 2009) that rules and rituals were formalized by stratification and can notably be viewed by what one ate and how they ate it (Visser, 1991;). This is visible in European aristocracy with *haute cuisine* or "high cooking" as well as in Hinduism, where diet was, and in some cases still is, dictated by one's position in the caste system, which is fundamentally religious (Dewey, 2012). While these systems are intrinsically ancient, and it would be easy to dedicate a breadth of space to a litany of examples, it is easiest to examine the visibility of stratification and the sacred through colonialization.

The epitaph of the Spanish empire reads as, "God, gold, and glory." With the Iberian Peninsula being taken back in the name of Christendom from the Moors in 1492 by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, one of the major prerequisite goals of the *new world* project was to proselytize to the inhabitants of those lands with the sacrament of communion being seminal to that venture. This sacrament is founded on the last supper of Christ and his disciples, who were participating in the Seder meal for the commemoration of Passover. Under Papal doctrine, the ritualistic reenactment of that meal becoming a sacrament requires two specific foodstuffs, bread, and wine, with the former being made from wheat and the later distilled from grapes. As such, one of the first requirements upon settling these new lands, to Catholic Europeans, was to produce these crops (Pilcher, 1998).

Juxtaposed to those who required sacred wheat were those in the largest settlement in the Western Hemisphere at the time when the Spanish arrived. It was the people populating Mesoamerica and their own sacred food, *maize* (corn), predominately in and around *Tenochtitlan*, modern day *Ciudad de Mexico* (Mexico City). For the indigenous people in this geographic region, though not unique to them, corn was not only the stapple crop, but was a crux

of their spirituality, believing that the origin of humans came from these kernels (Pilcher, 1998; Lauden, 2013; Galvez, 2018). This is picturesque scenario of globalization. Not only were these the two dominant state powers at the time they first interacted, respective to their hemispheres, with vastly different views of the sacred, but also crucially different in their views of the role of specific crops.

The result of the interactions between these two people was a victory for the Spanish, not through prowess, but primarily through disease and the *Mexica's* (Aztec's) established domestic political rivalries. However, one way in which the Spanish could never attain primacy was in agriculture, particularly in the realm of promoting wheat over corn. Spanish inability to promote wheat was in part because of the ecological nature of the region, but also was due to the rejection by the indigenous population towards the foreign grain (Pilcher, 1998). This persists even today, as one can tell where a person is most likely from geographically in Mexico by what sorts of tortillas they use because flour tortillas are more prominent in the north due to wheat growing more readily. Furthermore, disposition can be observed by how any given family prepares *tamales* at Christmas time. It is in my experience growing up in Colorado, if they are cooked with a single olive (representing baby Jesus), a crop from Europe, thy are more likely to embrace Spanish ancestry. The same can be observed further south in the hemisphere with the inclusion/exclusion of raisins in *empanadas,* though not for the iconography, solely based on the crop. Notably, and displaying the agency of food, there are no such assertions made by the inclusion of any derivation of a beast of burden in foodstuffs (e.g., beef, pork, lard, chicken, cheese). With disjunction in mind, the agency is derived from the ability to have choices. Exclude foodstuffs that do not suit them ideologically yet include other ones from the same

people that they have found agreeable to their lifestyle and tastes. There are no absolutes; it is personal choice.

The imposed social order of colonialization goes far beyond the sacred, and for the Spanish the second ‘g’ of the aforementioned epitaph, gold, was motivational. The mineral was not the only avenue for profit but was also agricultural (Barry, et al., 2020). This predominately took form in cash-crops, and not necessarily edible ones, such as indigo for dyes. However, one of the primary edible products, particularly in the Caribbean and Brazil, was sugar (Mintz, 1985). For my purposes, I will not discuss the role sugar cultivation has played when it comes to the cost of human lives, but why sugar was imported for those to eat, or to ferment and the legacy that it still leaves behind today.

It is either through homesickness or disdain for the local fare that the viceroys of Caribbean islands relied on imports to satiate their hunger. This took the form of food that was neither local nor fresh and would more than likely come in a can, such as sardines (Wilk, 1999). Importation of canned goods has set status upon that medium of foods to where even today portions of the population will forgo nutrition, financial security, and their own culinary history to purchase these products solely for the perception of being a member of the elite and choose these products as a public performance (Turner, 1988; Geertz, 2000). This performative act has led to further erasure of what imperialism already destroyed about local cuisine in favor of status, calling deeply into question what is practical versus what social imposition of power and status has left behind in a system that values accumulation of wealth and displaying it in lieu anything else (Wilk, 1999; Barry, et al.,2020). This is where food and value were re-negotiated as a consequence of COVID-19. There seems to be no discernable gain in prestige by having food delivered. Anybody can have a meal delivered by way of any number of services now available,

but the equalizer is that no matter what, it will be in a bag with no markings of status, driven by a car that is going to be economical by nature because of who operates it and is in need of employment. Is this an equalizer in modern times? Or, has the acquisition and ingestion of food transferred from the public purview to the private?

Prior to COVID-19, epicureans seemingly reached an epoch of "imperialist nostalgia," a sentiment defined by the state's lamentation for the past of which it, in and of itself, has destroyed (Rosaldo, 1993). There is no better place to look than modern day Mexico, once again, creating a picturesque scenario between Spanish colonialism and neo-imperialism perpetrated by the United States. Due to nefarious and benign appropriation, there are new styles of food that heavily incorporate Mexican culture and ingredients.

Corn, once derided by those who could afford to not eat it, now has reached an international status among foodies, with famous chefs, containing no heritage stemming from modern day Mexico, giving instructions on how to make authentic tortillas and in turn making a staple food into a fetish for profit by way of *narrative capital* (Galvez, 2018; Marx, 2017). Even amongst locals in Mexico, the search for *authenticity* has become a fetish, due to the creation of a middle class that has disposable income and is in search of their own domestic nostalgia (Bordi, 2006). The development in reaching for heritage is not inherently bad, for the women who have the knowledge and access to heirloom corn varieties and the skills of how to produce tortillas from the kernels now have a brand-new avenue into the workforce. Making these specialized tortillas is giving themselves an opportunity at economic liberation (Bordi, 2006, Galvez, 2018). Similarly, COVID-19 has afforded those in food service to develop new methods that have worked to the benefit in unforeseen ways, as well as making things materially worse in others. The ebb and flow of innovation, capital and oppression carries on.

Food is a technological power. With the ability to reliably grow perennially in one location and create a sedentary population with technology an enforced a hierarchy was also created. After stationary codified systems were put in place, food also become as entrenched as a commodity fetish (Marx, 1873). Once, no matter where, there was a surplus of food, and a social order that is organized top-down, certain foods become more valuable. Sometimes based on rarity or difficulty in processing, a specific ingredient and the exquisite nature of its taste becomes exclusive. More commonly, however, it is on the perceived merit. These tastes ebb and flow much the same way that fashion does. The story of the lobster in the United States, noted above, is exemplary to illustrate this case (Mac Con Iomaire, 2014).

Food as a commodity goes beyond the edible nature of what is on the plate. How one dines is also an expression of class because it can be observed as a public display of policing oneself and abiding to the social structure in an appropriate way. These theatrics played such a prominent role for King Louis XIV that one's position in court could shift by the determination of how well they ate. How well they ate, being manners the King valued, could elevate their position, thus giving them access to better food and position in court (Visser, 1991). Eating in public was also present in the Soviet Union where having a product of the capitalistic *West* visible, such as a can of Coca-Cola, show ones monetary and social capital (Caldwell, 2002). COVID-19 has changed the nature of public displays. Not only for status, but for business dinners, celebrations and other avenues in which food is used in the public sphere and the importance of doing so.

The disjuncture continues as, how people dine can again also be used as agency to gain prestige. For instance, Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaido (Japan's second largest island) have used food as an avenue to reclaim their cultural heritage, which was maliciously attacked

by hegemonic Japan's authority in 1899. Ainu, since official repression has ended in 2008, are using food to engage Japanese people through dining to learn and grow to have a greater understanding and appreciation of their culture; however there are many events in which outsiders are not welcome to attend, as to keep power through privacy (Iwasaki, Goodman, 2004).

Throughout history, food has been tied to the consolidation of power. Power is maintained by both the tangible ability of being able to feed, maintain, and protect a geographic area filled with taxpayers and as an affectation to display and codify authority, cultural norms, and social facts (Durkheim, 1982). Food must be used practically to nourish, but furthermore it contains the strength to simultaneously affirm and display change in a cultural zeitgeist.

As people have traversed the world for exchange, conquest, economic purposes or emigration, food has invariably traveled to and from every destination along with humans. As people have traversed, so too has it necessitated food to change, depending on circumstances, to swing from sacred to profane, from staple crop to luxury good and vice versa. How one situates themselves with their relationship to food can inform much about how they view the world. With the rise of the middle class, it is particularly true as food has become an avenue for disposable income. Under the economic system of capitalism, much of a person's *social capital* can be displayed colloquially by "voting with their dollar" (Huang, 2019). Purchasing power has become acutely apparent during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Under pandemic guidelines, restaurants became a stage for the owners and customers to partake in political theater. How any given person chose to adhere to state regulations was a display of their predisposition on the political spectrum. Through these reactions, it became a showcase of how essential food is to identity, for where one simply purchased food, regardless of

what that foodstuff was, became the venue to exhibit and coalesce identity. Under capitalism, these statements went further with the actions taken by companies through media portrayal.

Through capitalism, corporations, like media companies, are directly tied to state power, as both heavily rely on public perception and advertising, or monetary propaganda, all three can be seen by how the stock-market is portrayed. Just as people acted to show ideological beliefs, food industry leaders used their social capital to cater to their clientele. Many companies tried to garner goodwill with their demographics through ad-campaigns that cost exponentially more than any actual help they contributed to easing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The media's contribution to the dialogue of the pandemic's grandiose nature of where they are situated was no clearer than the portrayal of workers throughout the height of the pandemic to the current discussion.

Food service employees were among the most affected during the peak of the pandemic. At this point in time, they were ascribed the position of *essential workers*. As noted, there is the obvious fact that people must eat, however, food service played an equally important role in keeping the economy functioning. Both, when it comes to the stock market and as a projection of state power by way of displaying that the government could keep supply lines open. Food was used as a tool to demonstrate the effectiveness of infrastructure. This led to adulatory epitaphs being ascribed to food service employees, such as calling them *heroes.* It is through this sort of nomenclature that said heroes, on a new scale, realized their worth. If they were indeed "essential", why were they compensated so poorly? There is a disconnect between being critical to the economy while living paycheck to paycheck, and this disconnect reignited the organization of unions or simply quit until a wage for the risk and labor provided was fair.

As laborers reacted to their role, many media outlets changed their verbiage in speaking about restaurant employees. There was no singular turning point when essential workers went from hero to lazy and leech upon the government, but as the vaccine rolled out these positions were relegated to whence they came, a largely ignored or disrespected stature where customers expect impeccable standards. However, workers now knowing their worth, change has occurred and is an ongoing process.

Food and food service during the pandemic affirms the importance it has always had in statecraft and identity. While COVID-19 provided a new and unique opportunity to observe it, the role what people eat, how and why it is eaten persists. In the article that composes the main element of this thesis, I describe emergent themes in food representation, negotiation of identities through food, and cultural ideals called into question over discussions of food and value. I explore food, particularly high cuisine and restaurants that promote it, through the lens of multiple scapes to understand how media discussions were part of a larger ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural value in the midst of a global crisis.

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the pandemic, what foodstuffs were available, how people procured food, and how and where people ate all became questions of state authority and efficacy as well as bringing into debate personal agency and social responsibility. These were not new issues then, and have not been for millennia. However, COVID-19 offered a new lens in which to examine what our food system says about the society in which it exists. Values are exposed by food all the way from the fields to the bank accounts of fast-food employees. COVID-19 laid bare how tenuous the nature of a for-profit system is when coupled with the most basic elements of human survival. In order to explore the political nature of the food industry during COVID-19, I conducted a media analysis on news articles and commercials pertaining to food services during the pandemic, as a retrospective on what the pandemic changed or maintained. This includes the infrastructure of food service, such as the supply chain and production of foodstuffs. The shift in marketing of edibles that was necessitated by lockdowns and the somber nature of the current reality. Worker safety and propagated position of turning *front line workers* into *heroes* became the norm as frame of reference for the occupation. Using media analysis, I explore discussions of how workers were or were not compensated for keeping such a large sector of the economy running at great personal risk, and how adversarial that conversation became as the rejection of wage slavery grew in prominence. Finally, I consider how food establishments and corporations engaged in political theater during the ideological battles taking place on the political spectrum. Finally, I link these findings to larger anthropological discussions of the ongoing relationships between food, labor, and power structures.

KEYWORDS *Food Service, COVID-19, Labor, Capitalism, State Power*

INTRODUCTION

In Castle Rock, Colorado on Mother's Day, 2020, just twenty days after Colorado enacted the safer at home order, a restaurant proudly and defiantly opened their doors to full house without adhering to any restrictions. After being brought to court by the state of Colorado, the owners' lawyers stated defense was that "the matter before this honorable court is more than just a case of executive authority overreach and constitutional violation…it implicates core principles of our nation's founding and the rule of law" (Keith, 2020). There are innumerable cases such as C&C Breakfast & Korean Kitchen in Castle Rock, where questions about the core

foundation of what forms of governance in the United States should/can take place by way of restaurants. Restaurants as a public space make the conversation inherent to them but happenstance in this case is specific to COVID-19. Both make a clear case for how the obfuscation between social justice and personal freedom works to the benefit of the state (Wallerstein, 2007).

Food is typically most commonly spoken of academically in regards to its contribution to varying cultures' habitus (Bourdieu, 2018). Here, however, I will discuss not only the role it plays in statecraft, and the construction/maintenance of the social order by the power it holds in caloric value, but also in symbolism and ritual in society, and how it shapes cultures. Food in society is not a static topic, but one that is ever-changing and nebulous. Unequivocally, this is because food, while being directly tied to state power, and social stratification, such as gender and class, can also be used as a tool for agency, emancipation, and rebellion. Here I will expound that a precedent was set by the social elites since the beginning of sedentary agriculture the world over that has been carried through to COVID-19 lockdowns**.** Access to food, whether it be grocery stores or restaurants, during the pandemic was a projection of state power and the capitalist system while simultaneously maintaining the status quo by the way workers were treated via safety and compensation.

It is inconceivable to describe a culture's identity without discussing food. What is consumed, how it is procured, and then the final production of a dish can explain countless aspects within any given society. Most basically, what is eaten tells us the geography and ecology of the people who first innovated its creation. How and when certain foods are eaten can espouse a culture's taboos or religious practices. Who has opportunity to access, or even is allowed to eat certain products displays a society's hierarchal system. The ability to produce,

distribute and protect food establishes a state's authority and power. While these are just a few in a litany of ways food is inextricably linked with cultures and society, I will use this link as a basis to display that food is, and always has been, inherently political when capital is involved, whether political, social or monetary.

First, it is essential to acknowledge that the cooking and production of food is inextricably linked to technology and is argued that it is a technology in its own right; that, "with cooking, plants and animals became the raw materials for food, not food itself" (Lauden, 2013). Many attributes of global cuisines do not stem from a palate preference but from discovered techniques and available resources to particular geographic ecologies. These can be preservation technologies like pickling (such as pickled herring's link with Scandinavian cuisine), curing (of meats being one of Italy's most famous exports, such as prosciutto and salami), transformative (turning milk into cheese), and fermentation (the ubiquitous food of the Korean peninsula, kimchi). Beyond these listed techniques, there are ingredients equated to flavor enhancers that were initially utilized because of their propensity to deter bugs and kill bacteria. Such ingredients include plants such like those in the horseradish family (wasabi being the unique variant to Japan) and turmeric (an essential ingredient for most curries coming from the Indian sub-continent). While these techniques all date back millennia, methods to keep food accessible continue to develop and can be acutely seen adapting to modern predicaments as observed during the pandemic. These technologies also include practical considerations of supply and demand as codified by capitalism, such as shipping, and considering the potential changes in preferences because of experiences and safety concerns.

While food's political power has become increasingly complex, particularly since innovations due to the industrial revolution, food's efficacy of authority through stability has

persisted. It is through the unfortunate circumstances of a global pandemic that it is possible to examine these old truths through a new lens. Food's ritualistic aspect changed due to the circumstances of lockdowns and social distances, but remained ritual nonetheless. Instead of meals being used as a means for celebrations or affirming official agreements both big and small, a new morality emerged around dining, as well as revealing how different sects of society view kinship ties, both being essential to the power food has in society (Visser, 2, 1991). Food becomes a performance through these actions. How one dined, or more specifically how they voiced their desires related to dining during the pandemic was a way to espouse a political position as much as it conveyed a desire to consume food in a public space. The intertwining of food to the political realities of a pandemic can be considered a form of gastronationalism in the sense that eating habits became an important part of displaying political identity (DeSoucey, 2010). Furthermore, food has consistently been an important demarcation of class structure during times of intense uncertainty cross-culturally (Weber, 2010), and the fact that affluence is directly related to safety, particularly when it comes to food preparation (Visser, 1991). It is due to these inequities of certainty in daily life that a new class consciousness has awoken particularly in the food service area.

Appadurai (1990) argues against the prevailing notion that globalization is a domineering force that usurps identity in favor of homogenization into the capitalistic tendencies of expansion. Adversely Appadurai argues that globalization is much more of a dialectic. That there is a conversation occurring instead of acquiescing, leaving the end product of a synthesized culture that amalgamates portions that it sees preferential maintaining its uniqueness even though a McDonald's, for instance, can be seen the world over, that "the new cultural global economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping disjunctive order which cannot any longer be

understood in terms of existing center periphery models…the complexity of the of the current global economy has to do with certain fundamental disjunctions between culture and politics" (Appadurai,1990, 296).

Appadurai uses a model to break down the dialogue between modernity and native tradition in terms of five different 'scapes.' Ethnoscapes take into consideration the movement of people, both citizens of a nation-state and those who pass through it for any number of reasons. Technoscapes are the way technologies, which are "both mechanical and informational," (Appadurai,1990, 297) move through the world and how they are distributed and applied. Finanscapes take into consideration the international nature that money takes currently, both physically as currency and by way of international markets. Mediascapes, are the myriad of ways in which information is disseminated throughout the world, "newspapers, magazines, television stations, film production studios, etc.…" (Appadurai,1990, 299). Finally, ideascapes are the transmission of new thoughts and ideologies, Appadurai saying that for this context they are mostly political influence or a reaction against certain political agendas.

In understating this it is also crucial the comprehend what Appadurai means by 'disjuncture,' which is to separate what seems like the all-encompassing force of globalization into sects of difference that individual communities have applied them. That as mentioned above, although the famed 'golden arches of McDonalds are the same, and can be seen everywhere, that there are important differences within each community where you find them. They are tuned personally to the preferences of locals rather than an all-consuming behemoth. It is in the dissection, or examining the disjuncture that agency can be found, and this is done with the application of Appadurai's five scapes.

Even though Appadurai does not use his own terminology, his theories can clearly be seen applied in his piece, How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India (Appadura, 1988). At the forefront of the article both technoscapes and mediascapes are present as Appadurai points to a particularly unique facet of cookbooks in India, or rather the historical lack of them. An oddity Appadurai points out is the fact that in India, the written language has been around for millennia, but it is only in recent times that recipes have begun to be codified into texts. This, Appadurai points to as the problematic nature of trying to define an actual "national cuisine." Appadurai juxtaposes Indian culinary history to that of Chinese and European, who, although like India, are regional, because of more centralized power systems.

Appadurai acutely describes the technoscapes influence on contemporary Indian cooking by stating that, "construction of a national cuisine is essentially a post-industrial, post-colonial process" (5). Technology is a requirement because of the modes of production and transportation are absolutely necessary in order to transmit a singularity across such a vast geographic region as the Indian sub-continent. The access to food and implements to cook them are also essential for the home-cook. Once peoples stop subsistence agriculture and can begin to experiment with foodstuffs that are not typically regionally available, I believe entails the ideoscape as well.

It is with the rise in prominence of sedentary agriculture that many facets of the state and central authority first took shape and became codified. This includes such things as written records beginning with grain production, permanent population centers becoming common, and accumulation of wealth (or who could grow and keep the most food) became justification for placement in a social structure (Scott, 2009). Sedentary agricultural practices also increased the importance of geographical positions, such as having access to a predictable water supply, which then necessitated the ability to protect them in ever more elaborate ways (Lauden, 2013). Finally,

by being stationary, there became a surplus of certain items and then lack in availability for others. This why some states would seek to become empires and the creation of an early form of globalization was propagated by way trade routes such as the silk road (Frank, 1997). It is with the rise of empire that the movement of both food and people is possible in acutely discernable ways (best exemplified by beasts of burden, coming to the western hemisphere and crops such as tomatoes and chiles becoming commonplace in Europe, Asia, and Africa). The transportation of foodstuffs coupled with people emigrating, by choice or by force, has led to hybridization of diets and overall reduction in famines across the globe.

It will be through the literature review that precedence will be proven of foods historical coupling with political power will be displayed. With that groundwork laid, I then show the direct correlation between the past and present realities the COVID-19 has revealed, but not wholly created.

METHODS

I situate myself regarding food service as an insider. In 2013 I graduated from Aguste Escoffier Culinary School, which specializes in French techniques and fine dining approaches. After graduation, the grind of making a living in a kitchen burnt me out quickly and this is when I began my academic journey, never losing love for food or appreciation for how it is prepared. This experience is what inspired me to approach the topic of food methodologically, while maintaining my culinary arts mentality, With a great deal of sympathy to the plight of restaurant employees I describe my findings, while also keeping at the forefront that what people eat, how they get it and why they eat it have always been intertwined in politics and that this was still true in a pandemic, if not more apparent.

It was my aspiration to investigate how people negotiate their relationship with foodstuffs, by what is deemed as necessary and/or desirable. There is an interesting dichotomy that seems to exist in the relationships between profits, desirability, and food in the capitalist system. COVID-19 laid this foundation apparent, in which food and food service became far more than what was simply consumed, although food as a comfort plays heavily into the allure during such stressful times. It is an amorphous, symbolic, and simultaneously tangible by way of necessity for survival.

The process of this exploration was carried out through a media analysis, which was accomplished through multi-media such as commercials, what was said and shown, and through the written word.

How I implemented the search for news outlets was to seek out those that are commonly known, or at the least not obscure. I chose to include the BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Fox News, Bloomberg, MSNBC and Reuters. Search terms utilized were variances of food, food service, restaurants, kitchens, COVID-19, pandemic. The time range for the searches began when states began locking down in March of 2020, up until the summer of 2022 as ramifications upon restaurants, and particularly restaurant employees, continued. I also explored local media outlets and specific publications such as Food and Wine Magazine. I never went past a paywall, so some prominent exceptions have not been included such as the New York Times and Newsweek.

My final analysis contained 65 articles which I coded with 41 emergent codes. I utilized Atlas.TI qualitative data analysis software to log and maintain both the articles and the codes. There were no parameters set for article length, or who wrote it, (e.g., editorials or opinion pieces) if it was a published news article from the aforementioned criteria; for my goal is to capture the sentiment of the time as well as empirical facts. I first read the entire article and

determined what the authors message was, and then would go back through the article and code from this point of view.

There were two criteria for codes. First, there were words I looked for verbatim, then there were themes that those words could be applied to, for example, *adaptation*. Adaptation was sought literally as to examine the process of change with food during the pandemic, but also utilized if an article was talking about change in general, such as difference between pre-pandemic and during. I found grouping codes thematically important because as stated, it is my goal to capture the zeitgeist rather than only relying on systematic and clinical approach.

In my analysis I also utilized YouTube to specifically analyze advertisements made during the pandemic. This was to explore the tonal shift from the onset of the pandemic to the roll out of the vaccine. This was in order to see what the messaging was and how it was adapted to the atmosphere of public sentiments. This stemmed specifically from a Burger King add which will be discussed at length later. With that as a starting point I also accessed similar and pertinent adds. It was particularly hard to find complete versions of recent adds. I do not know if this is due to some sort of copyright or lack of interest in maintain such pages. It is because of this that compilations were used that do not specifically pertain to food, but did include such.

RESULTS

Three main themes emerged in my analysis that order the results. First, it was apparent that restaurants as a physical space played a prominent role in public discourse. How people acted in restaurants, how people thought restaurants should operate and how restaurant owners either adapted to or maintained the previous trajectory were all forms of public theatre in which politics were displayed. Second, they way laborers were treated and described during the

pandemic, and how that has been part of discussions of change since the beginning of lock downs. Being deemed essential without favorable compensation while also putting their wellbeing at risk all have shaped workers movements at the time of this research. Third, media, news and advertisers shifted tone over the course of COVID-19. Either as a form of propaganda for purchasing goods or to shift the narrative of the pandemic, media drove the discussion of essential vs non-essential, skilled vs unskilled, and what behaviors were appropriate for consumers. These discussions also became the focus of advertising campaigns, which I describe below.

Restaurants as Public Theater

Gastronationalism, as defined by DeSoucey previously (2010), emerged as central to my research because, in MacClancy's (2007) words, "turning foodstuffs and dishes into bearers of national identity is a down-to-earth way to make an otherwise abstract ideology more familiar, domestic even palatable". Sydney Mintz's (1996) words, although focused on a nation-to-nation scale, are also relevant to understanding how food was a central element in the negotiation of political and national identity during COVID-19, because food is "a holistic artifice based on the foods of the people who live inside some political system" (1996). In simpler terms, being able to delineate where one wants to eat became a political choice rather than a purely gastronomic one during COVID-19. Signs I periodically observed on front doors of establishments over the course of the pandemic, both in Colorado and Arizona read, "we are understaffed because no one wants to work anymore" or posting a Black Lives Matter sign in the window will display the owners' political tendencies and thus which clientele are more than likely their benefactors. One way that food impacts and changes culture, as seen through this public display of allegiances on a political spectrum, is easily attributed to personal ideals of morality, because Americans during

the height of the pandemic were attempting to discover and then define brand new culturally situated taboos (Visser, 1991).

A romanticization of the past swept the United States during the pandemic. This "nationalist nostalgia" (Muro, 2005) took many forms. An example of this can be found in a CNN article titled "Carhops: 1950's Nostalgia is the Latest US Food Trend." The author details how with the advent of car-based infrastructure in the United States, carhops, or the service where the customer parks their car, orders are delivered on foot (or more theatrically, on roller skates) has had a revival. Initially, the author states that due to COVID-19's social distancing practices this methodology of delivery was a necessity to bring back, but then through the entrepreneurial spirit, leaned into the aesthetic aspect of this practice from the past (Kamin, 2020). For a specific segment of the US population, the 1950s carries a sense that it was the pinnacle of American exceptionalism. Thus, in the stressful time of the pandemic, such callbacks to that era became a great source of comfort and therefore enhancing economically viability.

The restaurant as a physical space underwent vast transformations since the pandemic began, either through alterations made to the establishment itself, or the restaurant as a public space. Of course, due to limited capacities, social distancing, strict sanitation guidelines, and opening new outdoor spaces all changed how customers interact with the spaces and is either entirely new, or what used to be taken for granted has come to the forefront for many people. This is wildly apparent now as all these factors are taken into account in the design of new spaces. Using the gambit of experts, from architects to professors of hotel management, Food and Wine Magazine details the preparations restaurants underwent to be economically viable in new construction for both customers comfort to precautions in design to be prepared for another pandemic scenario. These changes include, partitioning to be easily put back into social

distancing alignments, customizing verbiage on display for the restaurants identity when it comes to safety, to the deciding of materials used for chairs and booths that meet somewhere in the middle of being easy to clean, but without feeling like a "bleak, Formica-only world" (Babur-Winter, 2021).

During stressful times, exemplified perfectly by the pandemic, Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities (2016) is an apropos method for understanding how eating became a way people grouped themselves together. In the state of agitation that accompanied COVID-19, there was intense discourse as to how society should handle such upheaval, and therefore what society is supposed to look like and what the state's role in it should be. Deep questions about what "normal" is came to the forefront as a new reality took shape by way of social distancing, lockdowns, working from home, and face coverings. At the precipice of the socializing aspects of these conversations was food, because "in seeking to study the lived reality of nationalisms, food as an everyday point of reference is a useful lens through which to consider such movements" (Johannes, 2020).

The United States' relationship with food, on both a cultural and political level, was already a factor that played a prominent role during the pandemic, waiting to be awoken before the first cases were ever even reported domestically. A well-documented fact is that the United States is one of the global leaders in obesity. Having insufficient metabolisms is a major deficit in one's immune system, thus ability to stave off the new virus. Poor health due to diet related illnesses was major contributor, though one of a many, that led to the United States having a higher ratio of fatalities per-capita than the global standard (Goel, 2020). Obesity in the United States has directly arisen from the combination of food insecurity, by way of having fast food

options being the easiest choice on a dollar/calorie ratio, and the absolute inundation of cooperate options and advertising.

Amongst several actions taken during the height of the pandemic, such as debating the efficiency and this implementation of masks and vaccines, food became one of the most emblematic and universal acts by both the average citizenry and the state. As DeSoucey (2010) explains, “food production, distribution and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of nationalist sentiments to produce and market food”. The state attempted to display its efficacy by re-establishing supply-chains and guidelines to create affections of normalcy by having business stay open in some capacity, and to keep the gears of the economy turning. The average person, on the other hand, became an actor in public theater. The most tangible way this can be observed is by the wardrobe, or costume, chosen. The simplest act to display publicly one’s beliefs in an unspoken way was (and still is) to wear a mask or not. Furthermore, masks became a new avenue for people to proselytize by getting customized ones that espoused anything from hobbies to politics. Having an outward facing display is a ritual and cultural form of communication that has an intent to enact and influence discourse that will yield results (Douglas, 2013). Restaurants and individuals in food service are directly in the confluence of these public displays, for “food is fundamental to this realm of objects…it also has a fraught relationship with morality” (Sutcliffe, 2019).

The relationship between perception and display was noted directly in an aptly titled HuffPost article (published August 18, 2021), “Hell is being a Restaurant Server Right Now.” The author addresses the impact that removing mask mandates and lifting seating capacity has on the people who work inside of those parameters. The employees interviewed chose to keep wearing masks despite it no longer being a legal necessity in Texas , and were met with hostility,

One worker explained, “When I told them (customers being served) I still prefer to still wear it (their mask), to protect my co-workers and other guests, one of the people at the table said, ‘Oh, he thinks he’s smarter than us,” (Wong, 2021). The precedent is nothing new for a food service establishment to be a place of public/political discussions, a prime example being the coffee houses of Vienna at the turn of the 20th century. However, it seems because of the pandemic, restaurants have become a place for public vitriol and condemnation, where it is now a question of with or against, rather than any form of discourse. Brick and mortar locations are not a place where ideas alone are discussed or are popularized by the sorts of crowds they attract; but the buildings themselves and how one interacts with them are an effigy. Brick and mortar alone have become a political stance.

This added stress has been noted and addressed by the fast-food chain Bojangles, who closed their restaurants for two Mondays, August 30th and September 13th. A corporate release stated that “From navigating a global pandemic to adjusting to new safety measures to picking up shifts for those unable to come in for work, we've asked, and they've delivered. But this has not been easy, and we know many people are physically and emotionally drained, so we hope these extra two days will provide rest and refreshment" (Riess, 2021). Cynically this would appear to be nothing more than a bourgeois band-aid. No long-term changes were addressed to improving the lives of these workers. No pay increase for those who had stayed or to incentivize new employees to apply to alleviate the staff shortages. No mentions of health care. No continuations of periodical times for “rest and refreshment.” Possibly this was truly driven by altruism, but with no long term support being implemented, to me this likely was a ploy to garner good will from potential/continued customers more than for their employees. Again, like using

politically provocative signage, the pandemic was used as a tool to bolster their public persona as a restaurant.

Similarly, when preparations were being made for the vaccine roll-out at the beginning of 2021, Starbucks corporate volunteered to be a cooperate liaison in their native and corporate headquarters of Washington, with an important caveat being "Starbucks is helping the state behind-the-scenes; at this time, there is no indication that it will turn its cafes into vaccination centers" (Castrodale, 2021). On a practical level, this does make sense, as Starbucks coffee shops a well-established part of many people's routine and being familiarized with maybe a positive boon to public perception or at least a financial one. However, once again, this is a façade of caring for an average American through their own version of political theater. Why announce a corporate entity is helping facilitate the vaccine roll-out if the public would not see the company doing it at their stores, as it will be all behind the scenes. As has been well documented throughout their history and particularly during the post pandemic era, Starbucks is firmly into union busting and actively fighting against giving their employees a living wage. They seemingly continue to prove that they do not actually care about people as much as they care about profits and implement virtue signaling, such as the vaccination depot, to garner them.

Food for Profit: The food industry's capitalization on food as public theater

In analyzing elements of media during the pandemic, there is one advertisement that exemplifies, better than any other, the shifting mores of how to live in a pandemic while existing in a capitalistic society; it was to sell Burger King. In April of 2020, what is called the "Stay Home of the Whopper" commercial begins with several protagonists, alone, laying horizontal on their couches with a heavy sense of despair, displaying the reality of the situation most were in, stuck at home staring at a TV (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aH0Y-315uJs) . Then a call to arms occurs with

the voiceover saying it is not only okay to be lazy and not move from the sofa but invokes this action as a paramount duty to society, and to take pride in staying home. The audience is not only told to stay put, but that they can still get their burger and fries while doing so. The culmination is for the couch, with its occupants firmly attached, to tilt ninety degrees upright and conclude with a salute from its inhabitant whilst holding the product shifting the attitude into positivity as well. This iconography is reminiscent of seminal pieces of World War II propaganda such as Rosie the Riveter, but instead of promoting unity for producing for the war effort, it had the motive of instigating the population to begin having fast food delivered for the first time.

After the reality of a global pandemic had set in, television marketing predictably followed suit. As noted by the Wall Street Journal published on August third, 2021 (Ives, 2021), commercials initially began as a somber affair about the world's current predicament. Truly embracing the apocalyptic scenes, there was an inundation of empty highways, persons longingly looking out windows in solitude, slow solemn music with a tinge of an uplifting tambour, and audible lamentations, a key facet was focusing on forced and unfortunate loneliness. As the gravity of the situation was beyond apparent, this tone was intentionally shifted to present a more light-hearted and comedic take for capitalistic ventures. However, through examples illustrated by the video, there appears to be two consistent modes displayed; first that even though the predicament was dire, consumers could still, by and large, get the things that they wanted, and it was only how that was changing. Second, that the onus was put on the general population to still consume. In the insecurity particularly in the initial months, the Impetus of capitalism that inspire viewers to purchase commodities was displayed as a paramount duty for the betterment of all.

While this is certainly a pessimistic out-look, taken through subtext rather than anything explicitly stated, O'Shaugnessy (2004) pointed out that the goal of advertising is to play on

emotions to best sell a product. When using the lens of emotions, it is clear when one approaches the advertisements and sees the parallels between them and outright propaganda. Due to the ubiquitous nature of the pandemic, the verbiage used in both only commercials and by policy makers, was that of fighting a war, inciting what Neiburg, et al (1998) call the "national character," something in between pride and shame, first introduced to rally the United States population after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The slogans utilized during COVID-19 make this apparent alone: "we are all in this together," the instillation of the term "frontline workers" and then calling them "heroes, and calls to action that begin with, "in these unprecedented times…" were omnipresent to display an attempt at solidarity and unity against a common enemy. However, in this case the enemy was a microscopic virus with no political motivations and with the added caveat of focusing on consumerism.

Referring back to the Burger King ad, there is no question that Americans have a great affinity for hamburgers and French-fries and that these foods, and access to them, is tied with the perception of being American. Another clearly demonstrated propaganda effort from the 2003 Iraq war by way of the insistence of some institutions to switch the nomenclature of French-fries to "freedom fries." Therefore, the link between food, wartime and propaganda was well-established prior to the pandemic (Nononi, 2013; Metejowski, 2010). It is new territory, however, to portray a simultaneous message of, "this is what you want and this is how you can get it during 'these trying times'" and to imply that acting outside of these parameters is the wrong thing to do morally. While altruistically, staying home was the correct recommendation, the manipulation to spend money while doing so was new ground that seemed to be easily exploited by fast food chains. These sorts of advertisements played on an old trope perpetrated as long as advertisements have existed, which Parkin (2006) referred to as *perpetuated entitlement,*

which is, an affirmation to continue as you are, for it is being done for the greater good. The insinuation of this specific Burger King commercial, and others of a similar ilk, is that "you *deserve* this for doing exactly what it is you are already doing."

A fascinating turn about this ad and the idea of delivery for Burger King in general is that fast food restaurants hardly rely on their dining areas. Just about every chain company would boast about their ability to have contactless delivery, grocery stores having pickups, it was ubiquitous. Drive-through restaurants are by far the prevailing medium for purchasing and receiving food of this type, yet with the ceiling of delivery options busted open, establishments that never required it are taking advantage of this enhanced revenue and telling consumers to use, their apps or services to the betterment of society.

Twenty-five percent of advertisements since 2019 have been in the food delivery sector, of with the majority selling highly processed foods (Martins-Horta, et. al., 2021). Another study identified that 14 out of 20 companies deemed to sell un-healthy products directly invoked COVID-19 as part of their advertising campaigns with the intention of appealing to community via brand loyalty (Gerritsen, et. al., 2021). The immense irony is clear that companies who profit off products that contain little benefit nutritionally and exacerbate the United States' epidemic of obesity, diabetes, heart disease along with other preventable diseases use health and safety as their tool of encouragement to purchase their products to be healthy by avoiding the virus (Limb, 2020).

Coca-Cola ran a brazen and emblematic ad, only on their website, displaying just such an act. It uses both formulas laid out by the earlier discussed Wall Street Journal piece perfectly. Beginning with showing empty streets, somber music and wistful looks out of windows, the tone shifts with the pop of a bottle, music transforming to an ecstatic tone and families stuck inside

begin cooking meals together. Smiles and camaraderie ensue as people gather around tables and stoves, all with a Coke in hand. Coca-Cola's own website (https://www.coca-colacompany.com/news/around-the-table-around-the-world-coca-cola-celebrates).Coca-Cola Trademark Brand Director Erica Tuggle states, "Food is integral to the brand's DNA, "This felt like the perfect brief for these times," she said. "It not only recognized how people are spending more time cooking together and sharing meals and special moments at home, but also the comfort and authenticity of Coke's connection to food. We see this campaign as a big, unifying sentiment that's right for both the moment and the brand." There is much candor in their messaging, that in a time of such misery it is simultaneously a good thing for business.

Another company that also used idea of strengthening community in their branding is Dominoes. In a video, Dominoes extolled their role in the community by donating pre-loaded gift cards to local business to hand out so people can support and help keep neighborhood operations open. While an obvious ploy to ingratiate consumers to view Dominoes as a positive force, the duplicity is not only apparent from the video itself, but with a little digging can be seen as outright nefarious. As noted from a separate New York Times piece, Dominoes has no interest in people's wellbeing but only the perception of it. In Southern California, Dominoes employees were forced to go on strike due to working conditions (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCDhHR_101Q). These employees were forced to purchase their own PPE, franchises would not close after contact tracing led COVID-19 to their doors and did not help with paid sick leave, all while being one of the companies that did very well on the stock market due to the circumstances COVID presented.

President Trump in late April of 2020 he directly "invoked a Korean War-era law from the 1950s to mandate that the plants (Tyson Chicken) continue to function, amid industry warnings of strain on the supply chain" (BBC, 2020). This Tyson plant is the same plant where

late the bosses placed wagers on employees contracting COVID-19, and a statement disseminated to employees that, “we all have symptoms. You have a job to do” (BBC, 2020). There is a clear disconnect between the need to keep facilities that produce frozen chicken products open and its equation to security. There was no subterfuge to whose security was in question. It was certainly not those who worked inside the facility but to the security of Tyson Foods, a publicly traded company whose loyalty is to their shareholders. The discrepancy goes deeper, as health concerns rose, so did a desire for healthy foods as processed food became the most readily available, particularly for those in quarantine.

What is “Essential”?: The distinguishing of essential work from skilled work

The advertisements described above are not the first occurrence of preferential treatment given to mass producers over local producers, individuals, and health. In an examination of the status of a pre-WWII New Orleans, Young (2022) noted, “local residents estimated that of the approximately 4,000 vegetable peddlers serving the city before the war, only a handful remained by the summer of 1944”. History is potentially repeating itself as noted with Tyson, and by where PPP loans have predominantly been delivered to, large, rich companies. However, in the same article examining the situation in New Orleans, there is hope that from learning from the similarities in the past. COVID-19 was an opportunity for neighborhood agency and autonomy to come into play in order to affirm food security for what people want and need, and simultaneously to help those nearby who produce it, noting that “city officials and urban residents began to see street food as an economic and cultural plus — not a threat to established urban businesses.”

It is with this new adaptation to the propaganda machine that I will argue a new class of person has emerged, the *essential worker*. During times of great upheaval, it is common for the

economy to quickly adapt to the circumstances. A clear example is the inclusion and necessity of incorporating women in the job market during war times, primarily in the industrial sector. While this work was ubiquitously essential, I have not been able to find any articulation that is present in the historical record where in one breath these workers were praised and in another were demeaned the way that has occurred during COVID-19 to those that operate establishments that had to stay open or were able to argue that they must. COVID-19 was both at the same time, praise, through salutes, and thanks then in another context, complaints about unionizing/minimum wage, "no one wants to work anymore."

While most who work in food service are counted as essential workers, there are facets of the industry who have more recently become viewed as expendable, mostly those in high end or fine dining scenarios. It is worth discussing the practicalities of this scenario. Are fast food restaurants safer from contracting COVID-19, perception or both? Is it because the purchasing power at fast food chains is perceived as greater? Were marketing campaigns that successful? Is this a case of habitus and social capital not carrying influence because of the necessary safety implementations during COVID-19 (Bordieu, 2018). Or is it simply due to the joy of dining out being lost and just choosing the easiest option of prepared food? Regardless of the answer, the National Restaurant Association says that approximately 110,000 restaurants shut their doors for good by the conclusion of 2020 in the United States (Nivedita, 2021).

One particularly notable position that pertains to this discussion would be that of the sommelier. A sommelier is a prestigious position attained through training and the sorts of establishments which employ them are normally only those characterized as fine dining. This is not to say sommeliers have to be equated with suit and tie dining, however for a sommelier to be able to thrive, the restaurant would normally be required to have an extensive wine cellar, with

huge mark ups per bottle that would exclude many customers either by cost or by stigma. The primary task of a sommelier is to facilitate a guest's particular taste in wine with what the restaurant serves and find pairings that accentuate the food and the guest's beverage into harmony, and opening up new unbeknownst flavor combinations. Those in the industry noted that there were "fears the pandemic will reinforce a misconception that sommeliers are high labor costs, even though beverage sales account for a restaurant's greatest profit margins" (McIntyre, 2021). Prior to the pandemic it is, in my estimation, fair to say that most people who dine out would not regularly be eating at an establishment where a sommelier is employed, due to prohibitive costs. However, understanding is prudent because the pandemic has, with long term effects to be determined, changed the relationship between customers and restaurants and how those inside of them are viewed. Much of what is consumed when dining out is symbolic and theatrical just as much as what is physically ingested (Douglas, 1970). I posit that fine dining is as much about the ritual as it is about the food. The experience of high-quality service in aesthetically pleasing settings with ornate and intricate plating are not something that is transferable to take out and has lost much of their appeal.

Essential workers in restaurants are simultaneously considered unskilled labor while those positions that are required to have training, whether through certification such as a sommelier, or through training and experience for establishments with formidable and extraordinary techniques required. Though there are many echelons of skills, certifications and awards that can be attained for those employed at a restaurant, an average person still considers it all the same sector, which is service industry. In one interview conducted, the chef lamented that with labor shortages, staffing his kitchen had become difficult to find qualified personnel that meets skills deemed necessary for fine dining. Noting that most new hires came from places

where “Chef Mic” would do the bulk of the cooking. Chef Mic being an industry slang referring to places that rely heavily on microwaves in their food preparation rather than skill. In near totality, there has always been a wide discrepancy in the salary or hourly wages of chefs, regardless of the type of establishment in which they work, I say with certainty from my experiences in the kitchen and still having ties to people currently working back of house jobs. Fine dining restaurants rely heavily on their employees being willing to work for cheaper solely for the experience of studying under masters. Many Michelin Star restaurants (an award ratting going 1-3 stars, considered the most prestigious in the culinary world) rely heavily on stages, which is an equivalent to unpaid intern/working interview. Therefore, having Chef Mic does not necessarily make labor cheaper, but it does keep production costs down as most things can be assembled or prepared off site in mass, off site. Furthermore, as explained to me in culinary school as a reason to particularly avoid working in chain hotel kitchens, cooking in this style is how national chains feel they must operate. By taking human creativity, style, and many mistakes out of the equation, such chains can guarantee their food will taste the exact same at a location in Topeka, Kansas as it will at another in Las Vegas, Nevada. Consistency and safety are what their product is, not quality or flavor.

DISCUSSION

Throughout history, food has been central to the consolidation of power. This is both through the tangible ability of being able to feed, maintain, and protect a geographic area filled with taxpayers and as an affectation to display and codify authority, cultural norms, and social facts. Food must be used practically to nourish, but furthermore it contains the strength to simultaneously affirm and display change in a cultural zeitgeist. This began with the introduction of sedentary agriculture, developed further as the world became globalized through

trade and empire and is currently manifested in the form of capitalism within the modern nation-state.

As people have traversed the world, regardless if by way of exchange, conquest, economic purposes or emigration, food has invariably traveled to and from every destination along with humans. This has necessitated food to change, depending on circumstances, to invariably swing from sacred to profane, staple crop to luxury good and vice versa. How one situates themselves with their relationship to food can tell you much about how they view the world. This has become particularly true as food has become an avenue for disposable income. Under the economic system of capitalism, much of a person's *social capital* can be displayed colloquially by "voting with their dollar." This has become acutely apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Under pandemic guidelines, restaurants became a stage for the average person to partake in political theater, for both owners and customers. How any given person chose to adhere to state regulations was a display of their predisposition on the political spectrum. This is a showcase of how essential food is to identity, for where one simply purchased food, regardless of what that foodstuff was, became the venue to exhibit and coalesce identity. Under capitalism, this went further with the actions taken by companies through media portrayal.

Given the onslaught of the pandemic and the fact that it affected everyone, it would seem fair to conclude fighting a battle that can best be won by unity. This is done by propaganda, but instead of Uncle Sam during World War Two, corporations are pointing their finger at the customer stating how can contribute. However, there are major differences in the discourse between that of an actual war, which would preclude extravagance and overabundance. Instead of deprivation as the patriotic duty, media surrounding the pandemic insinuated that the opposite

was what was best, to buy more. This idea would come about shortly after the conclusion of World War II and was dubbed "institutional propaganda" that covertly embedded "intra-societal psychological warfare" where not doing anything besides feeding the economy is victory (Pearlin & Rosenberg, 1952). However true that advertisers target specific segments of society and has been doing so since the 1920s, separating gender, race/ethnicity and class, the pandemic has opened a new door for advertisers (Parkin, 2006). While certainly not decisive and income-based, advertising persists throughout the pandemic, the very nature of COVID-19 affected everyone, negating large swaths of the need to target specific demographics.

Outside of healthcare professionals, there is perhaps no sector that has been put on a pedestal as much as those in food service; grocery stores, restaurant employees, and delivery workers, all have been considered *front line workers.* Using the aforementioned Dominos ad, one can see the discrepancy between the valorization of working-class status and their actual station in society, which is wage slavery. What Dominos was selling to the public beyond pizza was a desire to help these people by donating $100,000 to help keep persons employed and help small businesses stay open, the company spent 50 million dollars to tell us this (Whelan, 2022). The incongruity between virtue signaling and help is dangerously evident, but far from the only case in which it can be observed. This discrepancy deserves a holistic critique as there is no better way to see how well anything functions than when it is under stress, as was witnessed during the height all the way until the end of lock downs in regards to those deemed to be *essential* to handling our food (Bourdieu 1977:2).

With stats such as this, claims that no one wants to work anymore can be seen as slanderous, for no one expands their operation 25% during an actual labor shortage. The feeling portrayed is to bully the once praise *essential workers* into selling their labor at a devalued cost.

Max Weber, in 1895, wrote about the hinterlands of Germany, although speaking mostly on a nationalist level, Weber's considerations are transferable to *essential workers* and the pandemic. For, instead of living in a nebulous geographic region, those deemed to be essential workers live in the economic peripheries, "from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, we find that essential workers comprised approximately half (47%) of all workers in occupations with a median wage of less than $15 an hour" (Brookings). Weber states that, "the person who is least threatened by an unfavorable market is the one who takes his products to the place where they are least devalued by a collapse in prices-his own stomach" and "that the victorious nationality is the one possessing the greater ability to adapt itself to the given economic and social conditions of life" (2010). Essentially, that during a crisis those with the least are best suited to survive said crisis because of the knowledge of what it is to do without and the ability to obtain true necessities in order to survive. Therefore, wage-slavery plays such a prevailing role in what was classified as essential work and how those who perform those jobs are corralled into performing them.

The people who are best experienced to adapt to economic turmoil are those that are already on the threshold of poverty. This is why, I believe, that this time has been rife with labor movements and those who have the gumption to not work until they find a job that is worth it for the risk and tangible labor involved; simply if one is already poor, they know how to be in poverty where as a person who is new to that station will find the adjustment much more difficult. Maintaining the status quo is why federal government legislation has been procrastinating in raising the minimum wage and why there was at best a moratorium on rent or utility bills, if any at all. Moratorium being the key, temporary, there has been little to not systemic change. Such little and temporary change is an attempt to usurp the power of the

dispossessed and the growing acknowledgment of the paradigm between use-value and labor value (Marx, 1978).

The pandemic has exposed the capitalist economy for its foundation that necessitates consumption and constructed scarcity. Essential workers are outside of the class in which, ‘the fulness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property” (Polanyi, 1953).

THESIS CONCLUSION - AFTER TASTE: THE ONGOING LEGACY OF COLONIALISM ON FOOD BY WAY OF TRANSPORTATION, VISIBILITY AND STATUS

There are myriad ways in which colonialism is an ongoing process despite any official ends made on a governmental level. It is a dialectic that is continuously developing and negotiating itself in tangible ways that are never straightforward or one sided (Appadurai, 1995). Food situates itself uniquely in this conversation because in several ways, it is the foundation of the colonial process and has shaped how people perceive foreign and indigenous foods throughout subjugation and through to today.

One of the first and most important foreign institutions brought to a colonized land by Europeans was their agricultural system (Barry, et.al, (2020). This was for, being colonialism largely by way of cash crops that were edible and not, such as cotton and sugar. However, bringing foods of cultural importance to new lands was also of paramount importance, and one that has never ceased and can be seen even more acutely today. To display a particular case, the Spanish provide an excellent opportunity to display cultural importance that has morphed over time and now has an impact on modern day Mexico. Due to rigid adherence to Catholicism by the Spanish Empire (important to remember that the impetus to sail west coincided with the Reconquista as a political and religious action), producing wheat and grapes were literally day one concerns because of their essential role to the sacrament of communion. This has left a divide that exists to this day in Mexico between flour tortillas predominately consumed in the north and pre-Colombian corn tortillas for the majority of the rest of the nation (Pilcher, 1998). This is partially due to ecological practicalities, but with modern access is now down to preference. One can see these predilections, particularly around Christmas time with the production of tamales, a pre-Colombian food in essence, and whether the cook chooses to include a single olive inside, representing baby Jesus. Similar sentiments carry weight with

empanadas and whether raisins are an important ingredient or not throughout much of Latin America. While there is debate on the implementation of these non-indigenous foodstuffs, there seems to be no aspersions when it comes to consuming beasts of burden that the Spanish also brought with them. Olive and raisins may show allegiance in one way or another but utilizing pork lard in the same dish will tell you nothing.

Beyond religious purposes, food in lands formerly colonized are now directly associated with status. Of course, there is nothing unique geographically or culturally in associating ones station in society to the food they consume, but in lands that were colonized it differs as it is easier to observe what was foisted upon a local population from those who administer them from vast distances. In the Caribbean it is particularly notable that imported foods carry prestige, regardless of their banal appearance or nutritional value, many of which come out of a can (Wilk, 1999). Furthermore, because of the status associated with them, many may decide to spend more money than is in their means so to be seen as having purchasing power. Purchasing like this is not only obviously negative for people on a monetary level but also when it comes to nutrition as it is decided that getting calories in a beneficial way is secondary to the status; thusly less food and worse for a person (Barry, et.al, (2020). Whether a nefarious intent by foreign interests or simply an unintended side effect, this has also continued to obfuscate local foodways and the indigenous people's relationship to them. Processed foods have become the norm for much of the globe, the benefits of which can be debated ad nauseam. However, status and societal positions have become more apparent with COVID-19 as costs and access have become more complicated, or at least more clearly articulated (Alkon, et al, 2020). Further, due to fear of public gatherings, logically, and issues with the supply chain, rural communities in Latin America relied more heavily on pre-packed food rather than fresh options, thus leading to

corporations thriving during the pandemic while many small-scale farmers have suffered even more (Tittonel, et al., 2021).

A similar vein of nutrition and status but on the opposite end of the spectrum is occurring in India, specifically used as an example is Mumbai (Dewey, 2012). Dewey details how *western* foods, particularly those high in fat, sugar along with carbohydrates are seen as desirable, again because of perceived prestige behind them. The elites of Mumbai have taken to looking down upon local dietary staples, primarily rice and vegetables, as unsuitable for the lifestyle of the young and affluent. Due to the wealth of these individuals, they can afford upscale gyms and personal trainers so can have an outward appearance of being fit, but internally may be deeply un-healthy. Further research is required to determine if these foreign-styled foods are a legacy of colonialism and the wealth associated with those who ranked highly with in them, or if it is the rise of a new middle class within the continent and their desire to display their newly achieved position. Appadurai would point out that this is the exact negotiation that occurs in a post-colonial society and is the tenuous nature of de-colonizing a country where it is the give and take to forge a new identity by necessity as to situate themselves in their world, which has irrevocably changed due to the result of being colonized.

Newer scholarship on the impacts of settler-colonialism argue that being inclusive of ethnic foods is a continuation of imperialism and paternalism (Kepkiewicz, et.al, 2015, Gray & Newman, 2018). The latter saying that gastronomic multiculturalism is culinary colonialism. While seemingly counter intuitive to cultural preservation the argument is simply that inclusion is not altruistic, but is an effort for appropriation by white middle class settler who are deciding who needs help and who gets to give it.

On the surface, all genuine representations seem like a good idea. Exposure to other peoples and philosophies of which culinary proclivities certainly are a part. However, as discussed with the issues of authenticity, it can certainly be an effort to construct a narrative, thus maintaining control of oppressed and minority peoples. Navajo Fry Bread is a particularly good example. Attending a Native American-serving institution for my bachelor's degree at Fort Lewis, I do not think I have personally ever seen such a contentious food that causes outright arguments, though there are certainly are others. For one side of the argument, it is a food of oppression and subjugation. Given only flour and fat, native peoples had to, by necessity, develop these fried breads that were not previously included as native foods (Maillard, 2019). For those on the other side of the argument, it is proverbially making lemonade out of lemons. Both sides certainly recognized the commoditization aspects of the food, the important distinction is how much agency there is involved in it. On the negative side, how it can be perceived as insulting that the only food many may associate with indigenous people within the confines of the United States comes from forced relocations and institutional threat of starvation. Adversely, it is, in this capitalistic society, a way for native peoples to make money and have one easily accessible thing to introduce outsiders to their culture and food. Furthermore, even with its negative history, it is now a native food, it is choosing how and if it is representative that must be answered for those people.

There is much difficulty in discerning between participation, representation and genuine sharing of honest aspects of a culture. Is it better to be mis-represented and still have a seat and the table for conversations, or to exclude yourself (choice being the imperative factor here) to be honest and not a pawn?

Using this framework to look at the development of Italian American cuisine starting in the 19th century, most famously and predominantly in the North-East of the United States. It would explain that the difference between food from the boot and what is predominantly available in the states is down to hegemonic powers accepting only the simplest of food preparations from the boot, predominantly red sauce with some form of pasta and pizza. There are important considerations this theory ignores the practicality of access to ingredients from the homeland. Food adapts to its environment by necessity. Ignoring environment would pre-suppose that only one type of Italian would have emigrated, ignoring that vast regional differences that occur in Italy. To simplify recognizable foods because of what is available, and to have solidarity as an immigrant community with creating a new shared cuisine is to me, likely the more probable. This s not to say appropriation can/does not exist.

Looking at the U.S. Southwest/Texas and the incorporation with Mexican food can display a similar, yet different side of the argument. Sharing a border and similar climate, to a point (I do not want to diminish the array of Mexican geography and people) one would think there would not be such a stark difference on each side of the border with clearly defined differences between Mexican food, New-Mexican/Mexican food and probably the most prolific, Tex-Mex. This is where an argument of co-option is more acute. There are dishes that are certainly and unequivocally Mexican that have been altered to look and taste more American. It is in this region as well, that settler colonialism relatively recent and has noticeably shaped the regional culture and demographics. Is this simply taking non-white foods and adapting them for the purpose of the market, a capitalistic venture, or is the argument that this has been done to neuter, co-opt and therefore pacify the people who were already living in the area with a unique and more importantly different culture then the settlers who were moving into the land by ill-

gotten gains? The simplest answer is that this is the liminal space of foods and thusly is a new creation, not one of nefarious intent.

As it goes with the vast majority of these sorts of conversations, it really comes down to the question of agency. To choose what represents one's own culture is the key. It is not for outsiders to decide what is or is not authentic. Nor is it for those in power to decide how it is or is not shared. It must take place outside of the power structures in order to empower people and not be coopting.

Through capitalism, corporations are tied to state power, as are media companies as both heavily rely on public perception and advertising, or monetary propaganda. Just as people acted to show ideological beliefs, food industry leaders used their social capital to cater to their clientele. Many companies tried to garner good will with their demographics by ad-campaigns that cost exponentially more than any actual help they contributed to easing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The media's contribution to the dialogue's grandiose nature of where they are situated was no clearer than the portrayal of workers throughout the height of the pandemic to the current discussion.

Food service employees were among the most affected during the peak of the pandemic. At this point in time, they were ascribed the position of *essential workers*. As noted, there is the obvious fact that people must eat, however, food service played an equally important role in keeping the economy functioning. Both, when it comes to the stock market and as a projection of state power by way of displaying that the government was capable of keeping supply lines open. Food was used as a tool to demonstrate the effectiveness of infrastructure. This led to adulatory epitaphs being ascribed to food service employees, such as our right calling them *heroes.* With positive or diminutive nomenclature that said heroes on a new scale were able to realize their

worth, that if they were indeed essential, why were they being compensated so poorly? That there is a disconnect between being critical to the economy and living in wage slavery, and thusly began to organize unions or simply quit until recompense monetarily was equal to the risk and labor provided.

As this occurred, many media outlets changed their verbiage in speaking about restaurant employees. From hero to lazy and leech upon the government, these positions were relegated to once they came, a disrespected position in places people have high expectations of how they operate. However, now knowing their worth, things have changed.

Food and food service during the pandemic affirms the importance it has always had in state-craft and identity. While COVID-19 provided a new and unique opportunity to observe it, the role what we eat, how we eat it and why we eat it persists.

From Food as a Profession to Food as Academic Interest

In my experience, most people who *consciously* identify with food do so because of a strong cultural and familial connection stemming from childhood. For me, this existed, but in hindsight was nominal. My Italian heritage was present, having lots of pasta, polenta, antipasto, and never knowing anchovies were a contentious ingredient until much later in life. All of this considered though, there is no one in my family that was an exceptionally renowned cook. I am told my grandmother was but had since stopped her laborious efforts by the time I was forming memories. My grandpa is proficient at *Americana* cuisine of meat and potatoes, never straying away to flavors beyond salt and pepper (again to my memories). My mother's repertoire, while excellent in execution, is minimal in breadth and technique. Thus, encapsulates those who predominately cooked for me as a child.

The only times food was a centerpiece of my growing up was on holidays and parties. This is not to say I did not eat well, as most meals were home cooked and enjoyable, just that largely it was never drilled into me as "this is something *we* do." Never was there a dearth for love of food, only that there was no dogmatic connection made, but an obtuse secondary symbiosis to family life, never lauded. In essence, identity does not have to equate intentionality, but is the mixing of *purposity*, happenstance and circumstance.

I was however, encouraged to, and did, start cooking as soon as my eyes could make their way across the stove; scrambled eggs and French toast being my first forays. Whether this was by way to make my mother's life easier or her general positive nurturing to follow passions, the result is the same. This went hand and hand with the onset of The Food Network into my life. I was not picky about which programs I consumed, however the show that really captured my attention was Iron Chef (the original Japanese).

A profound, and now prophetic, memory of the first-time watching Iron Chef was not what took place on the screen, but how those around me reacted to it. I recall something to the extent of my mother saying, with exacerbation, "how could someone win cooking with crab brains!?" while my reaction can by no means be verbatim, I have no vagueness about how I felt. I distinctly remember my internal dialogue of feeling, "why not?" "how would we know?" This spark of curiosity, that I can now put into words is, that just because it is not *our* lived experience that does not make it automatically bad or 'weird', and the only way to know is to participate.

I became obsessed with Iron Chef. This literally foreign show consistently blowing my mind (even now watching episodes again on YouTube), with so many ingredients being on an almost ethereal plane. Romantic, unattainable; invoking as much wonder as reading stories about dragons or any hero from the Greek Pantheon in my adolescent mind. More powerfully though is

that the food I was seeing prepared was real. I may not have had access to it in late ‘90s early ‘00s Denver, but unlike a princess in a tower, it was out there and someday I could get to it.

My interest in food and the wanderlust it provoked met with perfect and seminal timing in my development. Puberty and all that it entails led me face first into the deep end of the punk scene and therein came the ideal companion with my ever-burgeoning interest in food, Anthony Bourdain. Here was a guy that was basically everything I liked. He was undoubtedly punk, said what he thought in an unabashedly ‘fuck you’ attitude that was simultaneously crass and eloquent; he smoked and drank, had what on the surface appears to be a dream job and he was open minded.

Reading his book, Kitchen Confidential, inspired me to go to culinary school. It was not immediately after dropping out of high school, but eventually I made it and was working in the industry. I soon found out however that cooking for a paycheck was destroying me, both physically and mentally. So, I quit my job and took a month off to go camping and figure out what my next move was. Through this soul searching and recuperating venture I realized that what I like about food and cooking has nothing to do with being in an industry kitchen, but that I still absolutely had passion for learning about the different peoples and cultures of the world and the tangible avenue food lends itself to that end. This realization led me to community college with a goal of at least attaining a associates degree in history and see what happened from there. Things changed when, as an elective and on a whim, I took intro to anthropology course. In this class I had an epiphany, I can get paid to be an academic version of “Uncle Tony”

It is with no sense of shame that I first learned of the indelible link between food, culture and identity that came to me through Bourdain, as he made it clear through every episode that what tastes good, comes by specific means. Taking what one has available and myriad reasons

for that (historical context, socio-economic, geographic, political upheaval…it goes on forever),) is what defines a cuisine). All the factors that create uniqueness amongst differing peoples is absolutely and unequivocally the same story that drives the development of their cuisines. Delineating how, why and future longevity of it is my goal with holism as my guide.

In this thesis I have described how COVID-19 became a stage for the negotiation of political identities through food at multiple levels. Restaurants became venues for public displays of political affiliation and personal belief; the food industry capitalized on this and on changes in demand during a global crisis; and determinations of essential skill and labor led into commentaries on what elements of culture are necessary or valued. Food's centrality to culture and identity must be part of considerations of food security, food access, and how power and representation can be co-opted under the guise of necessity and safety. Future research should consider how class and value are negotiated through discussions of and support for fine dining and high cuisine.

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APPENDIX 1. NEWS ARTICLES ANALYZED

	Article Source Link
"5 Ways to Safely Grocery-Shop during the Coronavirus Pandemic | World Food Programme." Accessed December 21, 2021	https://www.wfp.org/stories/5-ways-safely-grocery-shop-during-coronavirus-pandemic.
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