

Food in American Culture and Literature

Food in American Culture and Literature:

Places at the Table

Edited by

Carl Boon,
Nuray Önder
and Evrim Ersöz Koç

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Several years ago, the Department of American Culture and Literature at Dokuz Eylül University in Izmir, Turkey invited researchers and academicians with an interest in food or a related field to submit manuscripts for an interdisciplinary research and publishing project titled *Culinary America: Food in American Culture and Literature* to commemorate the 25th anniversary of our department's founding. That project led the way to *Places at the Table: Food in American Culture and Literature*, a volume that covers a wide range of important issues and themes relating to food studies. We are thankful for the continued and generous support from Dokuz Eylül University, the Rectorate, the Faculty of Letters, and the Department of American Culture and Literature. Their support has made this project possible.

INTRODUCTION

NURAY ÖNDER AND CARL BOON

In “A Room of One’s Own,” Virginia Woolf writes, “One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well” (23). Likewise, George Bernard Shaw in *Man and Superman* states, “[t]here is no love sincerer than the love of food” (23). Food is an integral part of our daily lives and assures the continuation of our physical existence. People spend much time dealing with it—shopping, cooking, serving, and eating. In *A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities*, Katharina Vester touches on this idea:

Food-expert discourses tell us how to eat, when, what, why, and with whom. They tell us how to raise food, where to buy it, how to prepare it or have it prepared, how to design our kitchens, which equipment to use, how to spice, how to serve food, how to talk about it, how to reduce or increase calorie intake, how to hold a fork, or how to eat an ear of corn. (196)

The epochs of the civilization have been marked, in large part, by the ways humans have procured their food. They began obtaining food by hunting and gathering and followed by plowing the soil. Thereafter—with technological developments—came the industrial age in which human beings put aside their physical power and yielded towards using their brains. All of these efforts have been directed toward the procurement of food. Cheap and easy ways of reaching for food have historically been among the main concerns of humans. Although the primary function of food is nutritive, history has loaded food with different functions and meanings. Nowadays, food has cultural, sociological, cultural, historical, economic, and biological implications—and these comprise the material of the work inside this volume.

Ancient civilizations have been illuminated through findings related to food. Archeological records provide ample examples of food. They reveal how food was stored and preserved, how it was prepared, what kitchen utensils were used, and what agricultural techniques were employed. In addition to these findings, classical Roman and Greek authors reserved

many spaces for food in their writings. For example, Horace, in his poem "A Cheerful Invitation to Dinner," recommends moderation in eating to his friend when he says, "smallish helpings of vegetarian food" (n.p.). Plutarch advocates the consumption of vegetarian food in his *Moralia*, a collection of short pieces on contemporary customs and mores. Even Aristotle in *Politics* discusses food referring to the poor who have no slaves but still have to feed their families.

More contemporary writers have also reserved a place for food in their writings. British writer Ben Jonson, a contemporary of Shakespeare, in a poem entitled "Inviting A Friend to Supper," includes olives, capers, mutton, lemons, and wine in his menu. Jonathan Swift, in "A Modest Proposal," puts forth "a plan to breed children for food" in order to prevent the famine in Ireland in an ironic way. Such examples abound in different nationalities.

Food can be examined through various theoretical lenses, each of which dictates to its group members foodways, food work, and food meanings. These concepts include class, ethnicity, gender, religion, and nation. Different religions set certain rules about eating and drinking. For example, Hindus are instructed not to eat beef, whereas Muslims are told not to eat pork. According to Christianity, drinking wine is a part of Communion, whereas drinking wine is abominable in the Quran. Ethnicity is another lens that impacts food preparation, ingredients, and eating habits. When a society is made up of different ethnic groups, it is inevitable not to encounter differing culinary ways. For example, in the United States, New Orleans cuisine is a combination of food consumed by Creoles, Cajuns, Native Americans, and others, so it has gumbo, po'boy, sugary beignets, jambalaya, and *muffuletta*, offering the tastes of these ethnic groups. In such a diverse background, communities naturally bloom in every aspect.

Since foodways can vary from one ethnic group to another, it is natural to have variations among nations. The food peculiar to a nation is determined most of the time by its climate, topographic resources, and where it is situated. National traits are marked most of the time, according to citizens eat and drink. France is always associated with wine, Irish with whiskey, and Turks with *raki*. The traditional Japanese food is sushi, whereas Italians are famous for their pizza.

Besides its diversity on different levels, food has a nation-building power, as is the case of the United States. When the first settlers from England

arrived in Jamestown in 1607, they survived abiding by John Smith's dictate, "he who shall not work, shall not eat." In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles*, Captain Smith narrates that they "escaped [death and] lived upon sturgeon and sea crabs" (92) to illustrate the importance of the region. In addition, the indigenous people were of great help in their survival. In *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles*, Pocahontas explains her ideas about "peace and warre," noting:

Captaine Smith, you may understand that I having seene the death of all my people thrice, and not any one living of these three generations but my selfe; I know the difference of Peace and Warre better then any in my Country . . . What will it availe you to take that by force you may quickly have by love, or to destroy them that provide you food . . . And why are you thus jealous of our loves seeing us unarmed, and both doe, and are willing still to feede you, with that you cannot get but by our labours?" (158)

In her anger against what the whites had done to her and her family, Pocahontas implies that the Powhatans had helped the whites in providing food. Thus, the food supplied by Native Americans was crucial in the founding of today's United States. Their kitchen has naturally contributed to the formation of American cuisine. American food has also been enriched with the importation of slaves from West-Central Africa starting from 1619.

All nationalities have been influenced by various factors while creating their cuisine. This diversity has initiated interest for academicians, business people, and ordinary people all over the world. Food has been a hot topic over the last couple of decades concerning ideas ranging from the environmental to the political, financial, and social. Much literature is available on how to prepare food, how to reach healthy food, how to cultivate organic food, how to save food, and how to cook food. There are many cooking programs presented by famous chefs on TV. Some broadcasting companies reserve special channels for such programs. Recently, many academic works have been published on the topic, and discussions and meetings have been held by different institutions. The scholarly work that appears in *Places at the Table: Food in American Culture and Literature* reflects the diversity of food studies today.

In "Safety for Our Souls: Food Activism and the Environmental and Women's Movements, 1960s-1980s" Annessa Ann Babic and Tanfer Emin Tunc chart the surprisingly intimate relationship between Americans' changing

ideas about nutrition and their changing perceptions about what it means to be a woman. As they note, “Food-related concerns between the 1960s and 1980s overlapped with (trans)national social movements such as environmentalism and feminism.”

In “From a Commodity to an Instrument of Social Interaction: The Sociology of Coffee in the United States,” Gaye Gökalp Yılmaz leads readers through the three major coffee waves in the U.S., from mass-produced cans of Maxwell House mid-century to Starbucks' specialized offerings today. In doing so, she finds an ideal means by which to evaluate—also—how Americans' ways of coming together have changed.

In “The Addictive Foods of Neoliberal Capitalism: From the Success Ethic to Consumptive Happiness in Ursula Le Guin's *The Poacher*,” Esra Coker Korpez reminds us that the American dream is “a model of manhood by which society measures the individual, and in turn the individual measures himself,” and finds in Le Guin's story the ideal for the exploration of that truth.

Yeşim Başarır's “Pastoral Simplicity and Nostalgia: Corn as a Trope for Culinary Minimalism and National Identity in Early American Literature” explores the role of corn in the construction of a uniquely American national literature. Başarır seamlessly weaves textual and historical analysis to produce a much-needed return to Joel Barlow's “The Hasty Pudding,” a seminal poem in the nation's literary canon.

Nuray Önder's “Food as an Insignia of Social Status in *The Age of Innocence*” is an intensely detailed examination of food and its symbology in Edith Wharton's masterpiece. As Önder explains, “The ritual dinners hosted by the New York families in *The Age of Innocence* reveal how food and the ritual of dining are coded to express the social structure.”

Evrin Ersöz Koç's “Food as Metaphor and Body as Matter: Rage against Docility in Karen Finley's *We Keep Our Victims Ready* and Holly Hughes's *World without End*,” a timely work in the face of renewed questions about gender in today's America, explores how two controversial performance artists use food to protest the denigration of women's bodies.

In “The Woman's Body as A Site of Resistance and Surrender in Lori Gottlieb's *Stick Figure*,” Ezgi İlmen presents the haunting, heartening arc of Lori Gottlieb's memoir on anorexia. As much as İlmen's work is a treatise on the threats of peer pressure inherent in growing up, it is equally

powerful in its exploration of the mother-daughter relationship, one tangled in tradition and expectation.

Carl Boon's "To Beer a Perfect Appetizer": Food in the Poetry of William Carlos Williams" traces how the American modernist used food images in his work to call attention to class conflict in mid-century America. While most readers will be familiar with Williams's "plum" poem, Boon's work provides an array of tastier—and deadlier—treats.

In "Food and Bonding in Sam Hamod's 'Dying with the Wrong Name' and Naomi Shihab Nye's 'Red Brocade' and 'Arabic Coffee,'" Asila Ertekin provides a glimpse into the multi-textured world of Arab American poetry. While Hamod and Nye both place food centrally into their work, their ideological differences are compelling and worthy of examination.

In "Voices in the Kitchen: Soul Music and Soul Food in Nina Simone's 'Give Me a Pigfoot' and Ray Charles's 'Sweet Potato Pie,'" Erkan Avcı reveals the intimate connections between food and song at the core of African American culture. As he explains, "The unifying element is . . . 'soul,' the keyword that, in simple terms, constitutes the space occupied by taste and tune to cry out the pain and grief that are inflicted in the songs and inscribed in dietary fashions and habits."

A companion piece to Avcı's work on music, Esra Sahtiyancı Öztarhan's "Eating and Cooking in the South: Representations of Food in African American Cinema," displays the centrality of cooking and eating in the African American experience. She looks closely at three films: *The Help*, *Soul Food*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and discovers surprising differences and similarities among them.

Serkan Koç's "Back to the Roots: The Matriarchal Nature of Cannibalism and the Transformation of Patriarchy in Marshall's *Alive* and Bird's *Ravenous*" expertly draws on religion, mythology, and sociology to reveal dynamics of cannibalism often overlooked in the humanities. His discussion presents analyses of two recent films, *Alive* and *Ravenous*.

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SAFETY FOR OUR SOULS: FOOD ACTIVISM AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS, 1960S–1980S¹

ANNESSA ANN BABIC
AND TANFER EMIN TUNC

As members of the social movements of the 1960s and 70s, American women transgressed prescribed gendered norms in all aspects of life, including the expectations of industry, big business, and mainstream mass marketers. They began distrusting the so-called “limitless progress” of science and technology as well as corporate powers, especially their persuasive product ideology. Aligning themselves with environmental concerns, they started what would eventually become ecofeminism, which rests on the belief that women and the environment share a common agenda because both have been abused, oppressed, and exploited by the same patriarchal, commercial, and technoscientific forces.² With the Vietnam War came an increased sensitivity to what chemicals, such as Agent Orange and Napalm, do to the human body and the food chain. This concern, in conjunction with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), brought to life the horrors of the pesticide DDT and prompted many

¹ We thank the following archives for their financial support during the research phase of this essay: Moakley Archive, Suffolk University, Boston, Massachusetts; Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Iowa City; Oregon State University (Corvallis), Special Collections and Archives Research Center; Wisconsin Historical Society (Madison), Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections; and the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising and Marketing History, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina. Earlier drafts of this essay were presented at research colloquiums at some of these archives, as well as at the Third Biennial EAAS Women’s Network Symposium, Thessaloniki, Greece, 6 April 2019.

² Coined in 1974 by French feminist Françoise d’Eaubonne in *La Féminisme ou la Mort*, ecofeminism “refers to the diverse range of women’s efforts to save the Earth, as well as to the transformations in feminist thought that have resulted in new conceptualizations of the relationship between women and nature” (Mann 1).

women in the United States to reassess what was being served at their dinner tables. It also contributed to their participation in the food movement through numerous forms of activism, ranging from lobbying for new safety laws, measures, and nutritional labeling; to aligning with unions and workers' rights groups to seek food security and justice; to efforts concerning organic and green consumption.

Food-related concerns between the 1960s and 1980s overlapped with (trans)national social movements such as environmentalism and feminism. In fact, the labeling of food products began with grassroots initiatives as empowered women's groups, homemakers, and concerned consumers alerted their favorite magazines and companies that packaged foods were not as healthy as they claimed to be. Campaigns for quality regulations, price controls, and safety standards were intricately connected to women's activism, which, to a certain extent, ensured their momentum and overall success. Moreover, consumer safety as a mature social movement overlapped with the environmental and the women's liberation movement and, in many ways, continued beyond the latter well into the 1980s.

This essay investigates what we call "food feminism"—a type of activism that resists and subverts the ways in which American institutions, especially science, industry, and the legal system, dominate women and what they eat; empowers women to seek alternatives to commercialized and processed food; and encourages reform and change in American nutritional practices. Between the 1960s and 1980s, women's participation in food safety, nutritional labeling, and farming and rural life prompted changes in American foodways; specifically, how Americans ate, thought about, produced, and regulated food. Examining these narratives places their food activism at the American dinner table and agency at the grocery store in the larger context of what was occurring politically and socially across the United States during the 1960s and 70s, especially in terms of the consumer safety, environmental, and feminist movements.³ Moreover, by doing so, we hope to extend common discussions concerning food by connecting urban and rural food activism to consumer activism and social and civil rights, particularly within the environmental and women's movements. Issues such as food safety, sovereignty, security, justice, regulation, and labeling paralleled concerns within the environmental movement over pollution (smog and acid rain), nuclear power (radiation

³ This essay will deploy Carole Counihan's definition of food activism: "The conscious effort to promote social and economic justice through food practices" (100).

and fallout) and the use of chemicals in farming and manufacturing (fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, hormones, preservatives, and additives). Furthermore, their impact on what we ingest echoed concerns in the (eco)feminist movement, such as the dual, and closely intertwined, exploitation of American women's bodies and the American ecosystem, and the power of rural and farm women to change the way food was produced and consumed. Clearly, this complicates the macrohistories of larger movements by calling attention to the microhistories that enrich, complicate, and sometimes even contradict, grand narratives.

Food and Social Activism

For women of the 1960s and 70s, collective action became a way to define themselves and challenge pre-existing and emerging forms of power. Numerous social movements developed under the umbrella of Second Wave feminism, but all had a common goal: to react against power structures that controlled society and to transform the social order by disrupting the line between the personal and political (Hysjulien 10). For feminists, the social order was comprised of institutions where women lacked power. While some women targeted education and labor, others focused on consumption, the environment, and one intersecting issue: food. Something as personal as what we eat became political during the 1960s and 70s and served as a flashpoint for many women activists because it included different aspects of the consumer and environmental movements such as anti-corruption efforts; quality, safety, and price controls; nonprofit consumer rights organizations; and legal activism. Women involved in the food movement not only sought to reform practices, principles, and policies but more significantly, they also sought to change the fundamental ideology and culture of consumerism. In other words, how Americans ate and thought about food, and in particular, the pathway it took from farm to plate (Kozinets and Handelman 691).

As Grace Curran conveys, “food justice movements and women’s rights movements have deeply entwined histories. The 1960s marked the beginning of second wave feminism and the first murmurings of a food movement. Both [movements] began as responses to the same political conditions” (Curran 57). Specifically, “women were entering the workforce and the supermarket supply chain,” which was “churning out highly-processed and frozen foods” (Curran 57). However, initially, the place women would occupy in the food movement was unclear since for many, food was associated with traditional, domestic, female gender roles and the baggage

of the feminine mystique, and therefore inherently problematic as a subject of activism. Traditionally, women had power over “family food intake, acting as shoppers, cooks, home economists, dieticians, and consumer activists. In the mid-sixties, housewives organized protests against rising food prices” (Belasco 34). Yet, in the 1960s New Left counterculture, women continued to be upstaged by male actors. While “underground food columns were written by women, men took most of the front-page hard news stories” (Belasco 34). Moreover, women also disagreed on processed foods. Feminists “debated whether the priority of craft over convenience was sexist, for women did most of the cooking. On the one hand, rejecting convenience products reasserted female competence and control,” while on the other, cooking without such products was more work, especially since women were still expected to carry the burden of domestic labor (Belasco 54). Eventually, processed foods lost much of their allure as their health risks became widely known in the 1960s and 70s, and they too became part of the 1950s feminine mystique against which American feminists were rebelling.

Clearly, women who took up food as a cause were reacting against numerous forces, particularly the post-World War II consumerism of their parents’ generation. Other counterculture activists—ranging from “hippies” who were rebelling against the restrictions of mainstream culture to more conservative groups, such as Midwestern farmers who would never identify with the New Left—were engaged in a “back-to-the-land” movement that was growing out of public concerns over environmental health and food safety. Food activists saw the hub of American life—the suburbs—with its pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, and synthetic foods as ecologically contaminated and even dangerous. They challenged the Cold War consensus, especially the military-industrial complex, the sanctity of the affluent suburbs, the limitless possibility of technology and science, and the benevolence of the government through their rejection, resistance, and subversion of such “sacred” institutions. Moreover, they also sought to dismantle sexism, racism, and classism by exerting agency from inside, and outside, American society.

Despite their diverse backgrounds and geographical locations, these groups shared common goals, adversaries, and strategies. They were unhappy with what the profit-oriented mainstream food industry was selling—artificial processed, precooked, shrink-wrapped, dehydrated, canned, and frozen products laden with additives, preservatives, hormones, and in some cases, carcinogens—in other words, products that were just about as far away from food as one could get—and sought to empower

American consumers by disrupting established patterns. The organic movement, which was a “response to federally-subsidized industrial agriculture that harmed the environment and produced unhealthy, low-quality food *en masse*,” usually through the exploitation of human labor, was a key participant in this re-visioning of the American diet (Curran 58–59, 63). Moreover, in every region of the country, but especially on the coasts, food activists, which included diverse groups such as organic farmers, back-to-landers, dieticians and nutritionists, various members of the counterculture like off-grid utopians and commune dwellers, as well as feminists, came together to form new food production and distribution systems. Worker-owned cooperatives, bakery collectives, buying clubs—or “food conspiracies” as they were sometimes called—natural foods stores, and farmers markets would, they believed, not only allow Americans to eat better but would also be more environmentally and economically sustainable (Fairfax, et al. 107).

Activists also sought to revolutionize the way that food was distributed and governed, adopting “participatory democracy practices,” such as consensus decision-making, that rejected the corporate management structure. A mantra became “food for people, not for profit,” which echoed their desire to make food affordable, especially for the working class. Activists realized that food is always political, and chose to take a firm position against agribusiness. They supported projects that focused on agricultural sustainability, established relationships with local organic farmers, and helped organize pro-labor protests, such as the grape and lettuce boycotts of the 1960s and 70s, in collaboration with activists from other movements, such as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, who advocated for Mexican American workers’ rights through the United Farm Workers (Knupfer 8). In short, for members of the “countercuisine,” food became an intersectional platform for broader change and a matter of social justice. Unlike occasional protests, “dietary rightness could be lived 365 days a year, three times a day. The New Left had always insisted that the personal was political. What could be more personal than food? And what could be more political than challenging agribusiness, America’s largest and most environmentally troublesome industry?” (Belasco 28).

Clearly, Second Wave feminists, environmentalists, and back-to-the-landers were inspired to take action by the same social and political conditions. As a whole, they rejected the capitalist, regulatory, and conformist aspects of the United States and called on Americans to “reimagine intimate, individual, and seemingly benign experiences as potential acts of political action and resistance” (Curran 59). Consequently, by the 1970s, it often

became difficult to distinguish where one movement ended, and the other began. However, that was the whole point: like a Venn diagram, these social actors overlapped at various points, and it was from these intersections that they drew their strength. While their common goals—of eating healthier, fresher, organically, locally, and in a slow, honest, more socially conscious and sustainable way—eventually became mainstream, Second Wave feminists had more political success, especially in terms of changing attitudes, social practices, fighting big business and patriarchal forces in the public sector, and passing legislation in areas such as food labeling and safety, than the back-to-the-landers, whose causes were, in due course, subsumed into the broader environmental movement and, ironically, into corporate practices and marketing itself—the exact system against which they fought (Curran 63–64).

Feminist Food Narratives

The activism of Second Wave food feminists was mostly concentrated in three areas: focusing on disparities while also embracing other forms of social justice activism and advocacy; challenging and restructuring the dominant food system; and promoting consumer food safety (Gottlieb and Joshi ix). Early on, they discovered the political implications of food choices, the power of food justice, and how it could bring about community change. Moreover, they connected advocates from disparate movements, such as those concerned with gender equality, “health, the environment, food quality, globalization, workers’ rights and working conditions, access to fresh and affordable food, and more sustainable land use” (e.g., Gloria Steinem and Dolores Huerta, for example, became allies through their work on the grape and lettuce boycotts) (Gottlieb and Joshi 5). Food feminists were among the first to recognize that “institutional racism, in its intersections with economic inequality, stripped communities of color of their local food sovereignty” (Alkon and Agyeman 12). As a result, they focused on changing attitudes and social practices privately, fighting big business and patriarchal forces publicly, and passing legislation in areas such as food labeling and safety, which, they believed, would benefit far more Americans, especially those who lacked food security.

Clearly, food feminism was not an isolated personal interest; rather, it was a part of much larger political projects that included the fight for democracy, equality and free speech, access to resources and rights, and social and economic justice, especially for minorities and the working

class. It also involved recontextualizing food as part of local communities and interpersonal interactions, for connecting producers and consumers, activists maintained, would allow both groups to acquire a sense of local place. These advancements, in turn, would enable “eaters to better understand the social and environmental processes through which their food is produced,” encouraging them to support “positive social and environmental change” by rethinking the nature of consumption itself (Alkon and Agyeman 1–2).

The idea that personal issues could serve as political vehicles united the New Left counterculture movements, which, as a whole, believed that individual action could result in systemic change. For Second Wave food feminists, the “politics of personal narrative” that emerged out of these intertwined movements was paramount (Curran 62). “The act of narrativization,” or “the establishment of a story of self,” as Michael Mikulak conveys, is “part of the self-transformation” to “an (ecological) subject position capable of biosocial production.” It is a process that prompts individuals “to consider their own everyday lives and practices as embedded in various structures of knowledge, power, and everyday practice,” and also acts “as a means of negotiating alternative value practices to capitalism” (Mikulak 135). As the narratives of activist women convey, on local farms, in food cooperatives, or simply at supermarkets, re-visioning the production and consumption of food was a way to resist agribusiness, government domination, and repressive social relations and institutions (Curran 62). Feminists created numerous narratives in the area of food activism. Two of them—women’s involvement in food safety and nutritional labeling, and their role in farming and rural life—can serve as windows into how factors such as gender, class, culture, and politics played out in different regions of the United States.

Food Safety and Nutritional Labeling

With the increase in postwar consumption came a new consumer movement that, in many ways, continued the sanitation and health reforms of the Progressive Era (1880s–1910s). In the 1960s and 70s, product safety became a concern as wave after wave of defective products, from cars like the Chevy Corvair and Ford Pinto to pesticides like DDT, alarmed American consumers. Food, especially, became “a matter of life and death” (Elias 145). The preface to Adelle Davis’s revised version of *Let’s Cook It Right* (1947; 1962) reflected this new concern: “During the last

fifteen years, chemicals by the thousands have been poured into our foods,” including “a large variety of preservatives and bleaches; artificial sweeteners, flavorings, and dyes; texture modifiers, softeners, agers, and fresheners; emulsifiers, fumigators, anti-foaming and anti-sprouting agents, and paraffin sprays” (Davis 8). Moreover, chemicals used in packaging also leached into food, an idea that further alarmed American consumers.

Inspired by early consumer activists such as Ralph Nader and Rachel Carson, who were veterans of the labor and environmental movements that were successful in lobbying for protective legislation that prioritized citizen interests, Americans began to investigate everything they were consuming, especially the agricultural products that were being sprayed with fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, herbicides, and other carcinogens, and the industrially-produced foods that were saturated with mysterious preservatives and additives (Johnston and Cairns 224). Much like Adelle Davis, they wanted to know what they were ingesting, how it could harm them, and how they could safeguard themselves. Thus, they began to organize, with the assistance of public health professionals and nutritionists, to protect themselves against toxic food (Fairfax, et al. 74).

Food activists found support in the federal government from individuals such as labor organizer Esther Peterson who, in 1964, was appointed Special Assistant for Consumer Affairs by President Lyndon Johnson. Peterson, who saw herself as the torchbearer of Eleanor Roosevelt’s Progressive activism in the post-World War II era, not only supported consumer choice, but also “truth in advertising, standardization in packing and pricing, and consumer rights across industries” (Fairfax, et al. 79–80). In fact, she was an early driving force behind the food labeling movement, which was later adopted by feminists involved in the food movement as well as politicians, such as the Democratic Congressman from Massachusetts, Joseph Moakley, who were also involved in environmental reform.⁴ Specifically, Peterson is responsible for much of the labeling information that is now standard, such as the unit-pricing information on supermarket shelves, the “sell before” dates on perishables and nutritional

⁴ Congressman Moakley supported the *Nutrition Labeling and Education Act* (1990), which mandates clear and concise information on food labels and bans unsubstantiated health and nutritional claims. He also was behind the extension of these restrictions to food advertising. For more information on this, see the Congressman John Joseph Moakley Papers, Suffolk University (Boston). “Food Labeling: Nutrition Information Labeling Act of 1987 (H.R. 1902), Correspondence, 1987. Series no. 03.05, Box 3, Folder 34.

content labels. Unfortunately, she was forced to resign due to pressure from food retail interests, which, understandably, did not want such industrial secrets to be exposed (Fairfax, et al. 79–80).

Nevertheless, Peterson, who, in the late 1970s, would serve as President Jimmy Carter's Director of the Office of Consumer Affairs, opened a Pandora's Box of possibilities in terms of food activism. Her causes resonated with the goals of various anti-establishment, counterculture New Left movements (environmental, consumer, back-to-the-land, and feminist, among others) and were adopted by these groups over the course of the 1960s and 70s (Molotsky n.p.). Her work was continued by Bonnie Liebman and Michael Jacobson, nutritionist activists from the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) in Washington, D.C., who ensured that her reforms would be implemented in the decades to come. Established by Jacobson and his colleagues in 1971, the CSPI "combined scientific expertise with a shrewd sense of how to capture public attention." As Jacobson, who had recently received his Ph.D. in microbiology from MIT and, at the time, was interning with Ralph Nader, recalls, "[w]e were very anti-establishment, countercultural, really took every opportunity to slam the food industry" (Charles n.p.).

Soon after, Bonnie Liebman joined the CSPI, and their food activism went national: "They organized a Food Day, modeled on Earth Day, with concerts and other public events in cities across the country; sent a bag full of extracted, decayed teeth to the Food and Drug Administration, to illustrate the dangers of sugar; and invited journalists to watch them measure the calories and salt in restaurant meals" (Charles n.p.). Their publication, the *Nutrition Action* newsletter, became the most widely-read nutrition-based publication in the United States, disseminating the latest research in the field, providing advice on what to eat/not eat, and encouraging support for the activist organization, which eventually became a driving force behind the "honesty in food" and food labeling movements. The CSPI also campaigned against hazardous food dyes, soda, and junk food in schools, trans-fats in processed and restaurant foods, and in particular, the dangerous levels of sodium in packaged meals and canned foods (Brody n.p.). Advocating a "public health approach" combined with "government intervention"—in other words, making sure that activism was translated into legislation—the CSPI is the reason why today food labels list potentially fatal allergens, alcoholic beverage labels carry warnings concerning unborn children, and the term "organic" has a legal definition (Brody n.p.).

However, some of the legislation and reform efforts of this era continued to reflect the gendered nature of the food movement. For example, Tab—the first diet soda—was fortified with calcium, and initially marketed as a health food option that, with its pink can, targeted women. While weight loss continued to be feminized, and not (yet) a major concern for activists, heart health and cancer became masculinized, and growing sources of national concern which in the 1970s and 80s, prompted meaningful reform with respect to food labeling. As documents housed at Suffolk University’s Moakley Archive in Boston reveal, Congressman Joseph Moakley was an outspoken critic of the lack of information that was available about what Americans were ingesting and how food impacted health; speaking and writing about the subject publicly, he made it one of the key points of his political agenda. One of his more visceral articles, “The Food-Label Fable, or You Aren’t What You Eat,” was published in *The Boston Globe* in 1989, and became a call to action, especially for women who were tired of being the target of diet products and who wanted serious dietary research and reform that acknowledged that they too were at risk for “male” diseases such as atherosclerosis and colon cancer. In “The Food-Label Fable,” Moakley expressed the urgency of food labeling and reform, demanding greater accountability from food manufacturers who were basically killing consumers with high-sodium convenience ingredients that were even making their way into so-called “healthy” home-cooked meals (11).

Moakley’s editorial came in the wake of a watershed article in *The New York Times Magazine* entitled “The Salt Alarm,” which alerted readers about the growing threat of sodium, its presence in everything from bottled beverages to frozen packaged vegetables, and its connection to high blood pressure and other conditions (Bennett A30). This salt alarm, however, was beyond alarming: despite over two decades of food activism, the deadly ingredients that were harming Americans in the 1950s were still hidden in what they consumed in the 1980s, signaling that the supervised and scientific testing and labeling of food was the only way to end the deception embedded in the food industry. Thus, the concerted effort to know more about what Americans were putting in their bodies, the demand for small-batch, non-corporate options, and the desire to recapture control of the food that Americans purchased, made, and ate, forced change. In 1990, Congress passed the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act (NLEA), which mandates detailed nutritional content labeling—down to the milligram—on packaged food. It also requires these foods, and any health claims they may make, to adhere to the terms specified by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the Department of Health and Human

Services (Department of Nutritional Sciences n.p.). In short, the activism of women such as Esther Peterson and Bonnie Liebman, and their allies' commitment to end poor nutrition and the corporate manipulation of food, culminated in legislation that has had an enduring impact on what Americans ingest. The "detailed, standardized nutrition facts panel" that appears on all packaged products, which "includes information such as the amount of calories, fat, cholesterol, sodium, carbohydrates, and protein, as well as select vitamins and minerals" is one of the many results of their efforts (Department of Nutritional Sciences n.p.).

Farm Women, Rural Life, and Agrarian Food Activism

Women engaged in farming and gardening realized the interconnectedness of food and health earlier than many other women involved in the food movement. Jeanie Darlington, who published *Grow Your Own: An Introduction to Organic Farming* in 1970, described how initially she believed that organic farming and gardening was something "weird old spinsters" did, but that once she became involved with growing her own vegetables and flowers, she soon wanted to instruct others on how to do it because, as she espoused, "not only did the food taste better, but, most important, it was 'better for your soul' to garden organically" (qtd. in O'Sullivan 76). Darlington maintained that those who used chemical fertilizers disregarded "the fact that soil was a 'living breathing thing'" (qtd. in O'Sullivan 76). Poison sprays, she said, "polluted the atmosphere and killed harmless insects and helpful predators" (qtd. in O'Sullivan 76). Whereas such sprays "destroy[ed] the balance of nature," organic farming and gardening meant "working in harmony with nature" (qtd. in O'Sullivan 76). While for some, the organic revolution promised safer and more nutritious food, for others, "the symbolic connotations—such as the indication of a 'natural' lifestyle" were most convincing (O'Sullivan 89).

Even though agrarian feminists like Darlington were accused of reinforcing the biological determinism and essentialism that connect women to nature and men to culture, their work actually complemented Second Wave feminism by laying the groundwork of what would become ecofeminism, which stresses the idea women and the environment share a common agenda because both have been abused, oppressed, and exploited by the same patriarchal, commercial and technoscientific forces. As Jenny Barker Devine has argued, such "'agrarian feminisms' offered an alternative to, but not necessarily a rejection of, second-wave feminism" (Devine inside cover). Like members of the women's liberation movement, rural women

were not intimidated by the male-dominated worlds of mechanized production and agribusiness. Rather, they “asserted their identities as agricultural producers and demanded access to public spaces typically reserved for men” (Devine inside cover). In blending local, rural traditions with female empowerment, their grassroots agrarian feminism prioritized cooperation, collaboration, women’s contributions to agricultural production, and male/female partnerships—especially between spouses—that balanced competing forces, such as feminism and the patriarchy (Devine inside cover).

By the 1970s, agrarian feminists in Iowa were claiming a voice in the public sphere, organizing, critiquing farming techniques, and demanding funding and changes in policy. They challenged male political authority, labor unions, and agribusiness, all while carefully balancing their gender roles as wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters since many of them were related to the men, either through family bonds or community ties, they were confronting. Meanwhile, Iowa farm women’s groups, such as the Iowa Farmers Union, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Organization, and the Iowa Porkettes, “navigated gendered dynamics and sexism in the countryside as they dealt with the power and the limitations of social feminisms and transformative leadership experiences in all-female settings” (Devine 2). They “adapted their rhetoric and politicized aspects of their daily work, responded to female leadership at the state level, related to male leaders, coped with limited resources, and claimed a presence in male-dominated spaces in order to work toward favorable agricultural policies” (Devine 2). These steps involved employing “careful phrasing and subtle strategies that remained in keeping with local customs,” since the “patriarchy remained firmly entrenched in the countryside, and few women offered direct challenges to male privilege because doing so undermined the social networks vital to small communities” (Devine 9).

Although they rejected direct affiliation with Second Wave feminism, agrarian feminists co-opted the strategies and rhetoric of this and other social movements of the postwar period, including the environmental and food movements, as they began to experience the limitations of working within the all-male system to change the system. This suggests that the agrarian feminism of this era was a “flexible, malleable framework” that permitted a wide range of responses, including the prioritization of female leadership in their movement (Devine 11). Ultimately, Iowa farm women did not choose to align themselves with other women’s groups, which could potentially destabilize social relationships and kinship networks in

their rural world and threaten their economic survival, but instead sought solidarity with the food movement.

In the 1970 and 80s, agrarian feminists in Iowa mainly focused on improving the quality of what they were feeding their families. Like the Iowa Porkettes, groups such as Mothers for Natural Law deployed traditional gender roles to help bring the message of food labeling and safety to the attention of (male) lawmakers. Documents at the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa show that they lobbied for the elimination of genetic engineering in food production, as researchers were correlating the rise in cancer rates and obesity to what Americans were eating. However, while arguing for these changes, such women's groups also had to stress that they were not against science, for that would allow them to challenge larger technoscientific forces from within the system.⁵ Once again, they acted strategically, as women, mothers, and daughters demanding the right to prepare healthy and natural foods for their families without fearing what was hidden inside. In the 1980s, their activism at the local level became part of the national discourse, contributing to the passage of the 1990 Farm Bill, which aimed to improve rural development, create standards for organic certification, and open commodity promotion programs.⁶

Concerns over food security, sovereignty, and justice increased in the American heartland during the farm crisis of the 1980s, as the handful of small family farms remaining were being forced out of operation by agribusiness and large corporations, such as Wal-Mart, that could drive prices down, sometimes below market value, just to attract customers (eventually, the retailer was able to sell a gallon-sized jar of Vlasic pickles for less than \$3, which basically drove competitors out of business) (Fishman n.p.). Midwestern farmers lacked the protective laws found in other states—e.g., New York and its Dairy Law, which prohibits unfair competition—and their long-documented plight only worsened. Farming profits stagnated, and in some instances, it cost more to grow crops than they were worth on the open market (Pratt 24–25).

Agrarian food feminists fighting these trends benefitted from the transnational activism that was emerging during the 1980s, as the United

⁵ Iowa Women's Archives, University of Iowa, Mothers for Natural Law Information Sheets and Publications, 1998-2000 and undated. Box 1, "In the Name of Science."

⁶ Food, Agriculture, Conservation, and Trade (FACT) Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-624).

Nations began to raise international focus on women and food security, especially in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and impoverished and rural areas in the developed world (Carney; Shiva). It was a time when NGOs were beginning to adopt food security agendas to bring about meaningful, sustainable change, permanently shifting away from momentary monetary relief and handouts towards systemic reform. Rural, impoverished, and underdeveloped areas began to draw attention, and grassroots feminist activists in Iowa and elsewhere started to impact the transnational dialogue with their mantra of “think globally, act locally.” These women called for access to land, water, seeds, and economic opportunities, especially through microfunding, so they could produce food independently from the corporate structure that exploited workers and poisoned consumers at every level.⁷ Women’s groups in the U.S. and beyond also began demanding food security, sovereignty, and justice while calling attention to the plight of local farmers and the damage being done to their environment and food supply.⁸

While American farming was dying in the 1970s and 80s, junk food—with its preservatives, additives, and harmful chemicals—was booming. Initially, the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulated the products sold by school vending machines with the idea that it would allow students to make healthier choices, but in the fall of 1972, it caved to pressure from manufacturers and for the first time permitted big vendors like Coke, Pepsi, and the makers of candies and potato chips to sell their mass-produced, sugar-laden snacks and drinks to America’s children. These regulations would also guarantee future customers, as these children would become hooked on these products for life, and would most likely continue to purchase such junk food items for themselves and their children.⁹

⁷ Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa. Denise O’Brien Papers, Box 4. Conferences: Rural Women’s Workshop, 6–8 November 1996 (folder 1 of 3), “The Rural Women’s Workshop Statement for Action”; Denise O’Brien Papers, Box 7. Conferences: United Nations General Assembly hearing on Agenda 21, 23–27 June 1997 (folder 2 of 2) and Updated Advance Unedited Copy, 5 May 1997: Proposed Outcome of Special Session.

⁸ Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa, Aldeen Davis Papers, Box 4, Ericka Peterson-Dana folder. *Organic View: A Publication of the Organic Consumers Association*.

⁹ Oregon State University Archives (Corvallis), Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon Nutritional Council, Legislative Committee 1971–1979, Box 1. “Press Release,” 29 April 1977. Sen. Brown Bill on Junk Food in School Vending Machines.

Like the agricultural feminists in Iowa, Oregon, women also turned to activism to protect their children and families. They called for a reconsideration of what was being sold in vending machines, but also for wider reform of school meals. In particular, they wanted a reduction in salt and sugar, and an increase in fruit, vegetable, and grain consumption, which would also benefit local farmers. Grassroots women's groups also started calling for labels on foods, and while this concern had been voiced as early as 1967, by 1988 labels were still missing on vast numbers of products. Discussions on the growing rate of caffeine consumption also fueled the discourse, especially as the soft drink industry was creating beverages with higher and higher additive contents. In 1987, Red Bull debuted on the U.S. market, with other beverages like Jolt having captured niche markets. Artificial sweeteners were also increasing in popularity alongside the growing beverage industry, despite nutritional concerns and their carcinogenic effects. Aspartame—the first sweetener to be approved in twenty-five years—was processed like a protein in the body and was particularly dangerous since it could do permanent cellular damage.¹⁰

Following the lead of women in Iowa and elsewhere in the country, Oregon women exposed the dangers of additives, genetically modified produce, sugar/salt, and chemically “enhanced” foods. They deployed their farm councils and extension offices to work with industry advocates and reformers for healthier food. The Oregon State University Archives' Extension Family and Community Health Program Records illustrate a concerted effort to teach nutritional health to local citizens as by the 1980s, processed and fast foods were destroying basic skills such as informed grocery shopping, smart food selection, effective storage and preservation, and healthy home cooking. The educational flyers that have been preserved in the archive represent just a sampling of the topics these activists believed were of the utmost urgency: “Better Breakfasts,” “Keeping Food Safe to Eat,” “Food Safety Decisions,” “Food for the Preschool Child,” and “Calorie Sense and Nonsense.” These educational outreach flyers elucidate that in the 1980s, local groups had to instruct Oregonians how to prepare homemade peanut butter and jelly, which were

¹⁰ Oregon State University Archives (Corvallis), Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Oregon Nutritional Council Newsletters, 1977–1986. *Oregon Nutrition Council Happenings*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 1983. “Caffeine Update,” Pam Fitzpatrick; *Oregon Nutrition Council Happenings*, vol. 11, no. 4, October 1983. “America’s Sweetheart.”

far healthier than store-bought options laden with trans-fats, salt, and sugar, and how to stock their pantries. Cooking skills that were once considered basic knowledge and had been taken for granted had to be taught, exemplifying the extent to which industrial foodways had destroyed American culinary knowledge. Moreover, food that had been staples of the American breadbasket for centuries, as well as newer, healthier, and more economical options, had to be (re)introduced to the public, who had been deprived of these choices by agribusiness and corporations that had eliminated, or repressed, them as possibilities. Cornmeal, cracked wheat, whole grain, enriched breads and cereals, macaroni, rolled wheat and oats, dry split peas and other legumes, fish, poultry, eggs, dried fruits, enriched all-purpose flour, and evaporated milk suddenly emerged as much more attractive options.¹¹

Archival material housed at the Wisconsin Historical Society demonstrates that women in that state also rallied for the same causes supported by activists in Iowa and Oregon. Wisconsin women organized through the Wisconsin Rural Development Center and fought for sustainable land use, farming protection, economic initiatives, public education, and an end to harmful processed foods.¹² Like other Americans involved in agriculture, Wisconsin farmers continued to struggle throughout the 1980s as declines in profits, the rise of corporate farms, and big business takeovers dismantled small local family farms. Moreover, changes in eating habits eroded established patterns of food production and consumption. As home economics departments began to close in the 1980s, activist women began to take matters into their own hands. While in Oregon women trained each other, in Wisconsin, women pressured the state to confront food security at the local level. Using the argument that states are allowed by the federal government to experiment with farming and food production, they helped farmers in Minnesota voice their concerns at symposiums on ecology and agriculture. Their activism spread throughout the state and beyond, resulting in consciousness-raising and tangible reform that even prompted rural farmers in the Ozarks to demand a cleaner, healthier food supply

¹¹ Oregon State University Archives (Corvallis), Special Collections and Archives Research Center, Extension Family and Community Health Program Records, 1956–2012. Box 5: Acc. 2013: 019 (RG 252).

¹² Wisconsin Historical Society (Madison), Division of Library, Archives, and Museum Collections, Fair Share CSA Coalition, WRDC, Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws, 1983, 1996–1997, 2000. Box 1, Folder 1.