Talking with Your Mouth Full:
Using Political Photo-Ops to Reveal the Communicative Power of Food

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Abstract

Humans are beholden to food. We are not creatures with specialized diets, and because of that, we are both allowed and forced to make choices. Through choice and physical consumption, food becomes an extension of human identity. It is an identity we grab and ingest; a way of transliterating a mental and emotional state to a physical product. Yet despite this incredibly magnetic force that food exerts on the human experience, food is often taken for granted—excluding physical necessity, its significance fades into the background. Despite this naturalization, food is consistently being used as a way of communicating subliminal messages. Using Roland Barthes’s theoretical framework of food mythologies, which argues that mythology forms a second-order semiotic system, this thesis looks to the tradition of politicians publically eating and posing with food as the most visible example of the communicative power of food. By campaigning with cutlery in the United States, candidates are demonstrating a belief that eating certain foods has the power to shape how they are seen in the eyes of eligible voters. They are attempting to profit from an underexposed connection between food, identity, socio-economic class, and political affiliation. In other words, they are playing into cultural mythologies to highlight facets of their character or to exude a quality that they lack but feel is necessary to appear to possess. This thesis also compares the communicative function of food in a U.S. context to that of Italy, where the food holds a more central position in everyday life and therefore is utilized by politicians in a different way. In both of these countries, politicians use culturally-significant food items to communicate with their citizens or potential constituents. With food, politicians are able to convey messages or affirm positive characterizations that would be unbelievable if simply spoken. Food is rarely (if ever) just food and a lot is said when your mouth is full.
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Introduction: You Are What You Eat? Food as a System of Communication

Americans like to believe that what they choose to eat is just that—a choice—and not the conclusion of a chronology of historical events, a web of political maneuvers, a cacophony of sensationalized health and nutrition reports in the media, and millions of dollars in marketing research all convening in their shopping carts. What we choose to eat is an inherently political decision, whether or not we are aware of all the political implications of the banana in hand or McDonald’s bag being offered through the car window. With the 2016 presidential election, as with most major American elections in the past, “food politics” took on a literal manifestation as candidates visited local establishments and attempted to appear like average American citizens by consuming the typical fare (or at least getting photographed with it to appear like they ate it). This theatrical performance can be viewed in the video compilation created by The New York Times of candidates seemingly campaigning with their plates during the New York primaries, tasting sandwiches, hot dogs, cheese cake, and pizza—the so-called “common man’s cuisine” of New York City—in a bid for voters’ hearts.¹ This gastronomic courtship is far from unique to the state. The internet abounds with digital slideshows and articles with titles like “Everything You Thought about the Presidential Candidates Is Confirmed by Photos of Them Eating Food,” “Campaign Cuisine,” and “Campaign Trail of Crumbs: Presidential Candidates Eating.”² It appears candidates will eat just about anything if they believe it will endear them to voters.

Additionally, it is not just what candidates are eating that has attracted attention but also how they are eating and, subsequently, what that means about them. Donald Trump mocked fellow presidential...

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candidate John Kasich for his “disgusting” mode of eating, while both were ridiculed for their individual pizza eating methods (the first by sliding off the toppings because he refuses to eat the dough and the latter by using a fork and knife). As will be discussed later, it is often through such cultural gaffes that the public’s attention is drawn to this political food tradition, whereas when it goes smoothly it blends into the background and appears insignificant. Yet even when this political tradition goes wrong, there is a lack of contemplation over why this practice occurs in the first place. This tendency to comment on candidates’ eating habits is probably what Hillary Clinton was referring to when she declared to reporters, “I learned early on not to eat in front of all of you”—although this morsel of campaign wisdom has definitely not stopped her from being intentionally photographed holding food.

It is no secret that eating certain foods in public attracts commentary and ridicule—especially if the food in question is particularly difficult to manage or seeped with sexual innuendo (like most of the phallic foods on sticks widely consumed at the Iowa State Fair). So why would politicians, who tend to carefully cultivate poised public personas, invite such personal mockery? Because by campaigning with cutlery, candidates are demonstrating a belief that eating certain foods has the power to shape how they are seen in the eyes of eligible voters. They are attempting to profit from an underexposed connection between food, identity, socio-economic class, and political affiliation. By consuming certain foods, politicians are playing into cultural mythologies. They are utilizing societal connotations to foods, often veiled in an idealized concept of “American tradition,” to highlight facets of their character or to exude a quality that they lack but feel is necessary to appear to possess. They are using culturally significant foods to communicate with potential constituents. With food, candidates are able to convey messages or affirm

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5 Or notable lack thereof, considering many of the “checkbox” campaign food items are handheld and do not require the use of utensils.
positive characterizations that would be unbelievable if simply spoken. Food is rarely (if ever) just food. Food—and food choices—tell a complex story.

The stories that foods tell are not concerned with ideals of “truth” or “authenticity,” but rather they reveal a coded message that can be received without consciously comprehending that a transaction of information had just occurred. This part is crucial. In actuality, these are not stories so much as they are mythologies, to employ Roland Barthes’s terminology. In his 1954 book *Mythologies*, Barthes builds upon Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotics of language to develop a theory of mythology as a second-order semiological system.¹ This theory can be applied to understand how certain food items come to be imbued with particular messages, which draw from the food’s cultural and historic significance. Once laden with subliminal messages, these foods become a means of communication.

To understand Barthes’s theory, one must first revisit Saussure’s original semiological system of language. As depicted in Figure 1, in the first semiological system—language—the *sign* (the whole of what is understood) is comprised of the *signified* (the concept) and the *signifier* (the sound or image that prompts the concept). For example, when one hears or reads the word “apple,” there are two simultaneous factors at play. One is the mental concept of what an apple is and the

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¹ In 1954, Roland Barthes was asked to write a monthly column for a Paris literary magazine *Lettres Nouvelles*. This two-year long essay series later evolved into his 1957 text, *Mythologies*, in which Barthes explores the semiology of myth creation and how the value systems of contemporary societies attach deep mythologies to everyday objects and concepts. What I’ve termed “food mythologies” are the chapters from this book that deal with specific mythologies involving food items, such as “Wine and Milk” and “Steak and Chips.”
other is the linguistic form, the word—which is completely meaningless when detached from its concept. These two facets together make up the signification: the concept of an apple linked to its linguistic signifier.

Figure 2 depicts Barthes’s semiotics of mythology, which builds upon Saussure’s first order. In this second-order system, the sign from the first system—the totality of the signified and the signifier—becomes the new signifier. To differentiate in terminology, Barthes calls this second-order signifier the form. The form along with the second-order signified, or the concept, comprises the totality of the sign—called the signification in the second-order. Figure 3 displays how the two systems work together, the second-order building upon the first. The second-order can only operate on the presumption of the first-order, or to use Barthes’s words, “Mythical speech is made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.”

Mythology cannot function without a shared basis of language; the concept needs the meaning to form the signification. The benefit of this relationship is then that the second-order relationship can draw from the first-order without having to rebuild it.

Looking at Barthes’s system, as the second-order meaning, the signifier is already full; it has a “sensory reality,” its own value. An apple means “apple.” When it becomes a form, however, it is

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8 Ibid., 116.
emptied of this *meaning* and selectively refilled. An apple can then be used to mean “knowledge,” “temptation,” or “health” depending on the context and the selective cultural connotations it draws from. Barthes explains, “The meaning contained a whole system of values: a history, a geography, a morality, a zoology, a Literature. The form has put all this richness at a distance: its newly acquired penury calls for a signification to fill it.”⁹ The key phrase here is “put…at a distance,” since the *form* does not completely erase the *meaning*, but “impoverishes” it, manipulates it. Myth serves a “double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us.”¹⁰ When used in a symbolic setting, the apple as “health” (or whichever other *concept*) is imposed on the audience, its alternate symbolisms and literal substance is suppressed. The meaning of “apple”—the *concept/form* duo—is replaced by this new, second-order *concept*.

Barthes describes the shared positon of *meaning* and *form* as a “constant game of hide-and-seek”:

One believes that the meaning is going to die, but it is a death with reprieve; the meaning loses its value, but keeps its life, from which the form of the myth will draw its nourishment. The meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alteration: the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there.

Later adding that “through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth,” but I would argue that it is not always an entirely new history as much as it is a selective history.¹¹ That is, the specificities of historical details are blurred, some are retained and others forgotten, some highlighted and others swept under the rug to set the scene for the *signification* that is being transmitted by the individual myth. The *form* is emptied of *meaning* and filled with the details—both true, elaborated, and fabricated—that best portray the *concept*, but the *signification* is the only aspect that can be seen in “a full and satisfactory way, the only one which is consumed in actual fact.”¹² While he does describe it as a “whole new history” he later clarifies:

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⁹ Ibid.
¹⁰ Ibid., 115.
¹¹ Ibid., 117
¹² Ibid., 120.
Truth to tell, what is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept. In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. One must firmly stress this open character of the concept; it is not at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function.\textsuperscript{13}

Myths need to be used in order to define their \textit{signification}, as it is in the context and function that the \textit{form} is filled. In other words, “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention.”\textsuperscript{14} As the intention of the mythology is repeated, the mythology itself becomes more grounded in its selective history, in the pieces that it has selected to highlight from the original \textit{meaning} in order to fill the new \textit{form}.

Along the same logic, these mythologies are not universal. Rather, they require a culturally-specific historical foundation in order to function. Since the \textit{concept} that fills a \textit{form} (thereby transmitting the \textit{signification}) is solidified and made coherent through its function, it is completely defined by the society that uses it. For example, the entirety of Barthes’s examples pertains specifically to France. While someone from outside of France can appreciate the mythological structure that Barthes reveals, the myths themselves are particular to the French context and not transposable to another country. This is because a key facet of mythology is the illusion of nature—myths feel as if they always \textit{were}, rather than existing as a part of human history and intention. In order to achieve this, myth transforms history into nature, making objects/signs/symbols appear as if they inherently mean something.\textsuperscript{15} This cannot be achieved the same way in every context since what is natural in one society would appear foreign to another.

After achieving a guise of nature, myth, “at the moment of reaching [you,] suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is suddenly driven away once more by the literalness of the meaning.”\textsuperscript{16}

Once the receiver of the mythology begins to realize the message that is being conveyed through the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{14} Barthes uses the term “speech” not to mean audible language but as a system of communication which can be transmitted both visually and audibly. Ibid., 121.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 124.
apple (health), the individual suspends the myth, discounts it, because the apple is just literally an apple. The individual once again sees the meaning, rather than the signification. This further underlines the cultural specificity of myth because something carefully absorbed into the fabric of routine for an American would flash conspicuously for an outsider—objects and concepts connected by mythological speech within a society do not appear innate to those existing outside of that socio-cultural context. Moreover, the messages communicated through mythology are absolutely dependent on appearing natural because if attention is drawn to them, as will be explored in detail in Chapter Two, the illusion of insignificance would be shattered and the myth would be deprived of its power.

Adopting Barthes’s theoretical framework, this thesis demonstrate how food can be—and is—used as a system of communication. Chapters Two and Three in particular mimic the narrative style of Barthes to establish and reveal two American food mythologies, that of the hot dog and pork chop. Food touches all aspects of life and therefore there is no singular lens or theoretical basis to adequately explore all aspects and impacts of food. Therefore, given that this thesis explores the communicative capabilities of food, it chooses to emphasize the link between Food Studies, linguistics, and anthropology over some of the other likewise fundamental disciplines.

It is impossible to explore the concept of food as a system of communication without first dealing with the theories and impact of the French structural anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss. He is considered by many to be the founder the discipline of food studies, or to quote Marion Nestle, “the inventor of Food Studies before the field existed.”\(^{17}\) His structural theory of the “Culinary Triangle,” shown in Figure 4, is a foundational work of food anthropology.\(^{18}\) It first appeared in 1964 as a part of The Raw and the Cooked, the first volume in his four-part work, Mythologiques. He, like Barthes, was highly influenced by linguistics, particularly by the concept of “minimal vocalism,” which breaks down language into a universal system of opposition of phonemes that comprise the most elemental building

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blocks of all of human language. He argues that “the methodological principle which inspires such distinctions is transposable to other domains, notably that of cooking which, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food.” He utilizes the idealist logic that the two supposedly universal systems (language and cooking) must share the same code, the same structure. Consequentially, his “Culinary Triangle” mirrors the contrasting points of the linguistic model (the “vowel triangle” and “consonant triangle”), with his points signifying the “raw,” the “cooked,” and the rotted.” He believed that food preparation and consumption could be broken down to reveal meaning common to all of mankind.

While a pivotal text in that it pioneered the academic study of food, Levi-Strauss’s universalist approach to food symbolism is easy to criticize. His examples seem cherry-picked, and it is not difficult to imagine that for every example he chose there were many that he discarded. In addition, he relies too heavily on similarities in language to substantiate universal concepts of food. For one such example he writes, “As for the boiled, its affinity with the rotted is attested in numerous European languages by such locutions as pot pourri, olla podrida, denoting different sorts of meat seasoned and cooked together with vegetables.” While the term “rotted pot” is fairly explicit in drawing a connection between the boiled and the rotten, both French and Spanish evolved from Latin, suggesting that the similarity in terms is due

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19 Phonemes are the smallest unit of speech that can be used to make one word different from another word. Levi-Strauss, “Culinary Triangle,” 40.
20 It is now known that certain animals, like dolphins and crows, share complex means of communicating amongst themselves. While not understood in the same sense as human language, vocal systems of communication are no longer thought to be exclusive to humans. Cooking still might be. Ibid., 40.
21 Ibid., 42.
less to universal truths of cooking than shared linguistic roots—the dishes themselves probably likewise sharing influences. There is no guarantee that this linguistic link would be the same in every human language. In her essay, “Deciphering a Meal” (which will be discussed shortly), British anthropologist, Mary Douglas also points out that Levi-Strauss’s focus on binary oppositions ignores their syntagmatic relations. That is to say, two opposites do not exist in isolation but rather are connected by a chain of other elements that are equally important to giving meaning to the binaries.  

Although there are similarities between Barthes and Levi-Strauss, Barthes’s theory exists entirely within the realm of linguistics while Levi-Strauss attempts to transpose a linguistic theory to a physical phenomenon, making it an interesting theory but less convincing in practice. His theory is static and homogenous across all of humankind. Barthes, on the other hand, does not attempt to condense every contemporary myth down to a universal archetype. Rather, he explains a general process for how objects or concepts are transformed into mythologies but does not attempt to universalize the meanings of those myths. His theory not only allows for the evolution (and eradication) of certain mythologies and the particularities of different societies, but requires it. To quote Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s novel *The Leopard*, “If we want everything to stay as it is, everything needs to change.” While paradoxical at first, the quote quite beautifully describes the effects of time located by Barthes: if something is to remain the same, to retain the same cultural significance and contemporary meaning, it must evolve with the times in order to stay relevant. Mythologies that are not used, that do not evolve to accept new facets and reject outdated ones, become relics.

While recognizing the importance of Levi-Strauss, this thesis favors the theoretical framework of Barthes, arguing that eating is a universal principal but what to eat, how to eat, and what those things mean are products of individual societies. Although food myths and symbolism exist universally, the

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24 Although, it must be noted, “edible” and “inedible” items are universal to human biology. However, no culture incorporates all technically edible foods into what that society considers “palatable.” I am looking a social factor of “palatability”, not a biological concept of “edibility.”
messages of particular food items can hold a drastically different meaning across varying societies. It is society, rather than a food item itself or the way in which it is cooked (or not), that determines a food’s meaning within that specific context.

Working on the periphery of the same ideas, anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote an essay in 1972 titled “Deciphering a Meal” which attempts to answer the question: “If food is a code, where is the precoded message?” She hypothesizes that “if food is treated as code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed.”

Following this structural logic, she first looks to her own home and tries to figure out why some things constitute a “meal” and others do not. Once her dinner suggestion of soup was rejected because it was not substantial enough, she asks a new question: why does one immediately know what does not constitute a meal but finds it extremely difficult to break down what does? She ascertains that there is a “complex series of syntagmatic associations [that] governs the elements in a meal, and connects the meals through the day.” This is the reason why, for instance, when one wakes up at 10:30 and eats her first meal at 11:00, one could still call it “breakfast” (or “brunch”), even though it is closer to “lunchtime.” There is a sequence to meals and a context that contributes to the definition of the terms we use to describe them. Moreover, within each meal there is specific social code which dictates how it should be served. “To sum up,” Douglas clarifies, “the meaning of a meal is found in a system of repeated analogies. Each meal carries something of the meaning of the other meals; each meal is a structured social event which structures others in its own image.”

Food cannot be fully separated from its context. Despite the formality of many of Douglas’s examples, her study remains relevant to a contemporary context. There are socially understood structures to meals that appear natural for reasons humans rarely pause to contemplate but are in fact inventions of human behavior and particular to individual environments. Douglas tries to map out these structures, which is a more technical endeavor

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25 Ibid., 61.
26 Ibid., 65.
27 Ibid., 69.
than is relevant to this thesis, but the concepts are important. In Chapter Two in particular, I will be examining these ideas of undefined-yet-understood rules about food and its consumption. It is important to recognize that these food rules exist, even if mapping them out, as Douglas tries to do, would prove tiresome and rife with exceptions. Therefore, rather than attempt to condense many examples into a formula, I aim to uncover some contemporary constructs through breaches in status quo, thereby displaying how prevalent and relevant these constructs are in everyday life. In other words, while seemingly natural and therefore taken for granted, these societal food constructs are most apparent in their negative form—once they have been inverted.

One of Douglas’s other points which provides theoretical depth to the phenomenon of politicians eating with constituents along the campaign trail, is her discussion of the social categories that emerge from these meal structures—notably her distinction between the social meaning of drinks and meals. She says, “Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance.”28 Figure 5 depicts this distinction. Using that logic, if sharing a meal is an intimate interaction, breaking bread with a public figure develops an illusion of intimacy. Breaking bread once in a public setting does create intimate familiarity, but it does allow potential constituents to feel as if they experienced an authentic individual instead of a merely a campaigning “politician.” They may not be familiar, but they shared an intimate experience.

Commensality, as will be explored more thoroughly throughout this thesis, is a strong community-building force. By eating with possible constituents, politicians are appealing to that same force to create a sense of “togetherness” or “sameness” (consequentially excluding those who do not eat certain foods).

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28 Ibid., 66.
Moving away structural theories, “Roman Taste” by food historian Charles Feldman explores the particularities of what it means to have “good taste.” While his case study is firmly rooted in ancient Roman culture (particularly amongst the aristocracy), his thesis transcends its context. He argues that taste is more influenced by societal factors—like culture or status—than by pure physiology.\(^9\) In other words, he says that taste is a social construct rather than a facet of biology. This is why initially aversive substances (like coffee, Kombucha, or potent cheeses for example) are labeled an “acquired taste.” Few people enjoy these bitter, acidic, or intense flavors at first taste, but they are nonetheless widely enjoyed by the same society that initially disliked them. This is the same reason why one culture savors a flavor that another despises: humans are socially conditioned to like particular flavors.\(^\)\(^\)\(^0\) To support his argument, Feldman relies heavily on Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, which views taste as a top-down social judgment system. While I do not contend that pressures from an elite group of tastemakers have no effect on the wider society, I reject the assertion that taste is only developed in a top-down structure. As will be developed more fully in Chapter Three, and as argued by anthropologist Sidney Mintz, preferences towards (or against) certain foods can arise due to unique pressures on a community of any economic status. That is not to say that those external pressures are not coming from a higher authority, but the taste preferences then devised as a means of adaptation are created by those within the subjected group.

One additional facet of Feldman’s essay of particular relevance to this thesis is his description of “elite moralists”:

Certain Roman aristocrats, for instance, supported their social position through an association with simple living. To these elite moralists, the idealized Roman past was unified, simple, and uncorrupt—and so was the food. Pliny, for one, filtered the values of tradition and national pride through an association with rustic foods … Turning to Cato’s book, a recipe entitled *putlem puniciam* (Punic Porridge) provides a good example of culinary rusticity. Soaked grouts are combined with cheese, honey and egg: the recipe is simple, the ingredients are local, and the message is *Romanus* (Roman tradition).\(^\)\(^1\)

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\(^0\) Ibid., 19.

\(^1\) Ibid., 17.
Some Roman aristocrats, in a food culture known for nearly unimaginable excess in quantity and theatrics, made conscious decisions to assert their Roman identity through eating in such manner that harkened back to an idealized past. By supposedly eating a simple porridge, these aristocrats were able to silently declare “We are true Romans.” They were savoring local ingredients, and therefore favoring the patriotism of home-grown food over the exoticism of foreign delicacies. This is remarkably similar to the modern-day phenomenon of politicians eating typical blue-collar foods to appear more relatable, when in reality they often hail from a different class of individuals. Not all campaign food photo-ops are rooted in class identities, but these do factor in to a number of them. This quote also touches on the ability of food to convey a nationalistic, regional, or hyper-local sense of pride or identity. Feldman’s example supports the argument that one can radiate a particular identity through the foods one chooses to eat—regardless of whether or not the identity that one is trying to portray is authentic to that individual. The old adage says, “You are what you eat,” but what is it exactly that political candidates are trying to be?

Finally, to further help explain how food is transformed into a system of communication, I turn to anthropologist Sidney Mintz, who argues that food meaning is derived from an interdependent relationship between “outside meaning” and “inside meaning.” Outside meaning is determined by external structures like work hours, mealtimes, buying power, child care, and the “arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy.” As these external structures change, individuals are forced to “integrate their newly acquired behaviors into daily or weekly practice, thereby turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, imparting additional meaning to the material world, employing and creating significance at the most humble levels.” This process of integration is what creates inside meaning:

People alter the micro-conditions as much as they can and according to their emerging preferences—the where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why—thereby changing what the things in question signify, and what they mean to the users…Individuals are thus presented with a series of situations within which they may begin to make meaningful constructions for themselves, as long as such constructions do not violate the outer situational boundaries that have been established for them.\textsuperscript{32}

There are uncontrollable pressures put on any social group, but it is the combination of those pressures and how individuals adapt to those influences that determines the meaning of a particular food within a societal context.

In the next chapter, I will explore what I call the “negative” aspect of food mythologies, in that their existence is only noticed once the unspoken social constructs surrounding them have been inverted. To do this I will turn to a series of food gaffes committed by politicians along the campaign trail, exploring the range of unnamed values revealed by passionate reactions to those gaffes. Unexpected nonconformities are felt as perversions of societal values, yet these values are often only apparent after they have been inverted. Merely surveying the food headlines from the 2016 presidential election provides support for this argument. Apart from failing to eat pizza in the proper manner, which has caused similar uproar in the past, food faux pas abounded at every turn: Donald Trump’s celebratory Cinco de Mayo taco bowl as well as his in-flight KFC enjoyed with a fork and knife, John Kasich’s over-consumption of Italian deli food, and Mike Pence’s New York City dinner at Chili’s are just the tip of the iceberg of food gaffes that evoked uproar on social media and were consequentially covered by traditional news sources. Social constructs surrounding food are not often given much conscious thought, that is, they are not written down in some societal rulebook, and in all likelihood they feel like “common sense” rather than a learned behavior—but these cultural rules are immediately apparent when broken. An individual simply does not eat KFC with cutlery, rendering Trump’s attempt to appear down-to-earth—and subsequent failure to do so—immediately visible. Likewise, as in the case of Pence, a candidate does not come to New York City and choose a national chain over a local establishment—at least not if he hopes to be liked by the electorate. Had Pence chosen differently, his meal might have gone either

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34 And, as it should be added, while sitting on his private jet…
unnoticed or earned him some favor. In other words, proper food behavior is not codified by law but it is understood by society. Those who fail to conform are effectively marking themselves as outsiders, a mistake politicians want to avoid.

According to Barthes, anything can be turned into a myth (as he proves in the French context with chapters like “Steak & Chips” and “Wine & Milk”), and this is displayed in full force in Chapters Three and Four. These chapters explore two of the most recurring campaign foods—the Coney Island hot dog and the Iowa State Fair pork chop. Following the example of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, the reader is allowed to experience the myths before they are exposed. Readers are invited to see the mythologies at work before they are shattered. To do this I utilize a range of sources but rely heavily on journalistic accounts, ranging from the early 19th century to contemporary times. These sources are often admittedly biased with unprovable claims, but mythologies are not so much concerned with concrete facts as they are with accepted truths. For example, Chapter Four will discuss how the fledgling newspaper industry and the Iowa State Fair became strategic partners from the start; there was a vested interest on both sides to lift the other up. Therefore, praise of the Fair and accounts of its growth are potentially exaggerated, yet these accounts should not be discounted because of ambiguous truth. The stories that are repeatedly told are the ones that contribute to the meaning of a food item—not necessarily what can be definitively proven. This is the same reasoning that justifies employing sources like *Famous Nathan: A Family Saga of Coney Island, the American Dream, and the Search for the Perfect Hot Dog* in Chapter Three, which is written by the grandson of the man who founded Nathan’s Famous, the restaurant in focus. While some stories are possibly marketing fabrications, they were believed and retold so that, factual or not, they are now part of the hot dog mythology. As was described above, mythologies are not concerned with truth so much as with reoccurring narratives.

This thesis studies the phenomenon of politicians eating and posing with food not to prove that food is integral to politics, but to display how food can—and is—used as a system of communication. Of the multitude of articles, videos, and photo series documenting every bite that politicians took during the 2016 election cycle, only one *Sporkful* podcast took a dive into the significance of eating while
campaigning. Despite the widespread interest in the foods politicians eat and intense reactions to politicians choosing poorly or eating something incorrectly, no locatable academic study has attempted to break down this tradition and reveal the communicative powers of food. We see the spectacle happening, but no one has asked why it happens. This thesis endeavors to fill that gap.

The phenomenon of politicians eating along the campaign trail or using food to emphasize a point are not the only instances in which food is used as a system of communication, but this thesis uses politicians as a framework to explore the communicative powers of food. Most Americans have witnessed this phenomenon without pausing to contemplate it. It is seen, not understood. What is extremely important to comprehend before starting this discussion is that these food photo ops are planned, they are not spontaneous and they are not simply candidates eating food because they are hungry. The implications and characterizations of individuals based on personal food choices and preferences would make an interesting thesis topic, but this thesis is concerned with the way politicians (and their campaign teams) use planned appearances to craft a story and communicate a message through food mythologies.

It was difficult to narrow down my scope to just these two American food mythologies, as there are many others that would prove to be just as interesting and applicable. Barbeque in the Carolinas, pizza in New York City, home-style food at Mid-Western diners, or cheesesteak in Philadelphia are just a handful of the other food mythologies I had to choose from. The hot dog and pork chop are not necessarily more important, but they ultimately allowed for exploration into the greatest variety of factors contributing to the creation of food mythologies. The hot dog mythology draws from the immigrant experience, differences in class taste preferences, food safety concerns, and Americana. The pork chop, on the other hand, permits discussion on the gender politics of meat, the strong influence of agro-industry in the United States, as well as the religious and cultural significance of pork. These items are admittedly both meat products, which does not allow for much variety in substance, but most of the campaign food photo-ops are noticeably meat-heavy. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the United States of America has never elected a vegetarian president.

To be clear, eating the “right” things the “right” way does not mean automatic election for a
political candidate. It is plainly and undisputedly part of a much larger formula. But it is part of it, and that part reveals a greater importance and cultural relevance of food than it is normally granted in a U.S. context. The tradition of politicians eating very calculated food choices along the campaign trail to portray themselves in a particular way is a behavior which alludes to the obscured power of food, whether or not a politician is successful in his or her campaign. Perhaps candidates themselves only recognize the backlash of not participating, without realizing the true significance of the food mythologies in which they are partaking. Regardless, their actions exhibit both the power of food and the American tendency to normalize food to the point of making it appear like a minor entity, which, in turn, obscures its semiotic significance.

Chapter Five leaves the United States to explore how food holds communicative powers across cultures, yet the way food is used to communicate messages is influenced by its cultural context. In Italy, a country in which food and cultural identity to cuisine holds a very central role in everyday life, politicians also use food to communicate with constituents. However, whereas it is essential for U.S. politicians to divert attention away from their manipulation of food connections and connotations, Italian politicians perform with food to communicate loud, bold messages. While Italy does have a very different food culture from the United States, making it a good place of comparison, any country outside of the Anglo-American context would have provided a likewise interesting discussion. However, this thesis was limited by language and personal experience. In nearly all cases, the English translations from Italian are my own.

By unpacking this tradition of politicians talking with their mouths full, I aim to unveil how food is imbued with deep meaning apart from physiological need, and bring to light how this significance and connection to identity is used to communicate messages and manipulate public perception. I ultimately aim to prove that food is not just good to think or good to eat, but an integral part of human identity which, in the U.S. context has been naturalized to the point of nearly complete devaluation.
Chapter Two: Inversions as Perversions Using the Negative to Illuminate Food Constructs

As a general rule, if food did not come in a package, there is no accompanying instruction manual. The implication, however, is not that anyone can eat it however they want, but rather, everyone knows how to eat it. If this is hard to visualize, try eating an apple from the bottom to the top—instead of around the sides—and see what others say. Eating an apple with this bottom-to-top method causes the “core” to essentially disappear—it becomes unnoticeable apart from a few seeds. *The Atlantic* went as far as to say, “The core is a product of *society*, man… If each of us eats an apple a day, as we all do, and we are all wasting 30 percent of our apples at $1.30 per pound, that's about $42 wasted per person per year—which is $13.2 billion annually, thrown in the trash or fed to pigs.”\(^1\) Every single American is not eating an apple every single day, but the economic argument is still interesting. Why, then, did trying this experiment for myself cause one friend to exclaim, “*What are you doing*? That is… that is *unnatural*” before she documented the entire bottom-to-top apple eating process on social media? She used a key word there. Societal food constructs—like the “correct” way to eat a whole apple—appear natural. The way groups of people—whether nationally, regionally, or in even smaller communities—eat food appears like the natural, rational way to people within that given social group. Yet, for the most part, there are no laws, neither legal nor natural, dictating these actions. It appears natural to eat an apple around the core because most people in America eat it in the same manner.\(^2\) An individual is unlikely to deeply reflect on the procedure for eating a whole apple because until an unexpected nonconformity displays a different way to eat an apple—bottom to top—there was just *the* way to eat an apple. That is, there just seemed to be the singular, correct method.\(^3\)

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2 There are, of course, other ways to eat apples by slicing it into pieces. For the ease of explanation, I am just concerned with how Americans bite into whole apples.
3 Physically speaking, there are not many different ways human can bite into an apple. However, the action of eating a whole apple by biting into it would be an entirely foreign concept in itself to some other
In the case of the apple, choosing to eat it differently may attract horrified looks and a line of perplexed questioning, but since apples themselves are largely unattached to identity, this breach in status quo is just that: a nonstandard way to eat an apple. There are certainly symbolic and cultural connections to the apple, like the adage “An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” the biblical fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,\(^4\) or the image of an apple on a teacher’s desk. Yet while apples can symbolize things, they are not imbued with the same *signification* as defined by Barthes’s mythologies. Unless used as a part of a grander system of symbolism, as exemplified in Chapter One, eating an apple does not communicate anything. There is no mythology because it has not been attached to a greater identity; the consumption of apples has not been repeatedly linked to a certain behavior or social group.

The foods publicly consumed along the campaign trail are different from the apple for precisely that reason: these foods *mean* something to their prospective populations. If nobody cared, those foods would not make up the orchestrated photo opportunities that they do. Similar to the case of the apple, however, is the necessity of inversion to illuminate one’s own customs. People often do not realize that they care so deeply about food and its consumption until their customs surrounding a particular food are inverted.

Take pizza, for example. While it is now a relatively generic and widely-adapted dish, pizza has strong ties to two U.S. cities in particular: New York and Chicago. In New York, there is only one socially accepted way to eat a slice of pizza: with one’s hands, preferably after folding the slice in half. No cutlery needed. Paper plates topped with greasy slices are not handed over with a quick rundown of the proper procedure, nor are friends or fellow customers likely to clue a first timer in.\(^5\) One is just *supposed to know* how to eat a slice of pizza because it is the *right* way to do it. In other words, one is

\(^4\) Even though many historians argue that the “fruit” (which is never named) would have contextually been something else, like a pomegranate or fig, rather than an apple.

\(^5\) They are also not handed over with a fork and knife, which really should be the first clue that cutlery is unnecessary—but I am exhibiting my own bias on this one.
expected to conform to this socially understood rule—especially if that individual is there to garner votes.

During the lead up to the 2016 election, John Kasich put a knife and fork to his Queens slice and New Yorkers roared in protest. The *New York Post* covered the story under the headline, “WTF Is Wrong with John Kasich?,” describing how “Mr. Midwestern Manners resorted to silverware.”\(^6\)

CNN Politics chose “Kasich’s Pizza-Gate in NY: He Used a Fork!” to cover the mistake:

![Figure 6: John Kasich eating pizza with a fork. | Photo credited to CNN](image)

This is a gaffe that could really come back to bite him. With weeks to go before the important New York primary on April 19th, Ohio Gov. John Kasich came to the state looking for votes and a little something to eat…Good move: He had pizza. Bad move: He ate it with a fork…The unforgivable food faux pas—liable to send New Yorkers into a tizzy.\(^7\)

*GQ* used the headline “John Kasich Humiliates Himself, Eats Pizza like an Idiot,” before unleashing a few choice words on the matter:

> Eating pizza with a fork is just wrong. We in the western world are too beholden to our utensils. There’s something amazing and ancient and important about occasionally eating with our hands. It's immediate and intimate; using a fork just makes you look like a nerd. A guy who eats pizza with a fork is the guy at the accounting firm that the other accountants make fun of. He's the kid who didn't play at recess because he didn't want to get dirty. He’s an out of touch billionaire asking his butler to go out and get him some “peasant food” to try. It's a garbage move made by garbage people. So John Kasich, get your shit together and eat pizza like a normal human being.\(^8\)

Even his home state of Ohio had something to say. Under the headline, “Gov. John Kasich, Presidential Candidate, Doesn't Know How to Eat Pizza,” WCPO Cincinnati described how:

> The public was shocked by the offensive behavior of a GOP presidential candidate this week. But for once, it wasn’t the ever-controversial Donald Trump making headlines. This time, Ohio’s own

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\(^6\) Marisa Schultz, “WTF is Wrong with John Kasich?,” *NY Post*, March 30, 2016.

\(^7\) Wright, “Kasich's Pizza-Gate in NY.”

Gov. John Kasich gave us all something to think about when he publicly revealed he doesn’t know how to eat pizza…Even worse, the pizza debacle came as a flip-flop move for Kasich, who just one day earlier turned down some frozen custard in Wisconsin because he has “to stay thin”…This could go down in history as the pizza that cost Kasich the presidency.\(^9\)

In response to the uproar, Kasich was forced to defend himself not once but twice on national television.\(^10\)

However, his explanation of “it was too hot” did not stand up to the masses: “No One Cares How Hot Your Pizza Was, John Kasich,” responded journalist Ellie Shechet, echoing the sentiment of many other headlines.\(^11\) Fellow candidate Bernie Sanders even rode the wave of Kasich’s mistake, demonstrating the proper way to eat a slice of New York pizza while making an appearance on *The View*—tear off a slice from the pie, fold in half, bite and finish with a shrug to show just how easy it is.\(^12\)

There is a lot to be unpacked from just these few sound bites—nevermind the fact that these articles are just five amongst many others. Kasich’s action of eating pizza with a fork and knife is described as both incorrect and offensive, which illuminates an interesting depth to food identity. It is one thing to not “know how to eat pizza,” even if such a thing is hard to grasp, but these articles do not just point out an error, rather they criticize and make character judgments. The *New York Post*’s descriptor of “Mr. Midwestern Manners” implies Kasich is too much of a delicate, sheltered country boy to be relatable to hardened New Yorkers. It is an insult—a defect. He lacks a requisite laid back personability. He is not eating like the masses, and therefore he is not of the masses; he is another, he is not a “normal human being.”

What is more, these articles read as if responding to a personal attack. Kasich’s action is not seen as an honest mistake. It is not just “incorrect” but rather it constitutes “unforgivable,”

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“shock[ing]…offensive behavior,” to use the language of the earlier articles. By eating a slice of pizza at a local joint, Kasich was rightly paying his dues to the city where he was campaigning, but the moment he put metal to his slice he told the world that he either did not know or did not care about how things are done in New York—both of which are equally damning while campaigning for the nation’s highest office. Kasich’s inversion of New York pizza-eating custom was felt as a perversion of societal values and as a cheap attempt to appeal to voters without taking the time to understand them.

Now a reader may argue that there are certain instances in which it is necessary to use cutlery to eat pizza—like when faced with flimsy crust or unwieldy toppings—and while it is possible to refute that argument with ideals of pizza purism, at least one prominent New Yorker, Mayor Bill de Blasio, would agree, so the point is valid. However, it is important to keep in mind that in the instance of campaign photo ops, authenticity is unimportant. John Kasich could eat pizza with a spoon in private and that would be his choice. While campaigning, personal preferences have no role in food choices. Eating pizza in New York City in the lead up to the state’s primary is not about demonstrating one’s personal way of doing things and staying true to one’s self. It is definitely not about eating pizza because one is hungry. Pizza in this instance serves to communicate a message that nobody would believe in words: I understand New Yorkers. Even though I am not from here, I am just like you. Who cares if I get grease on my hands? I’m laid back and relatable. Had he not acted against New York custom and displayed his otherness it is likely that this message would have been understood without realization of its transmission. His use of food mythology to communicate to potential constituents would have easily flown under the radar.

As social scientist Claude Fischler wrote in his article, “Food, Self, and Identity,” “The question of identity only arises when identity is disturbed,” and the same is true with food mythologies. Attempts to communicate through food, to manipulate and benefit from food mythologies, are only realized when they

13 Although, it should be noted, he was also mercilessly ridiculed for his preferences. Michael M. Grynbaum, “A Fork? De Blasio’s Way of Eating Pizza Is Mocked,” The New York Times, January 10, 2014.

are unintentionally inverted. Often the intended message is only recognized once the actor is proven to be the exact opposite of the identity that he was trying to exude. By using a fork and knife and thus displaying how not relatable, not the same, and not laid back he is, Kasich revealed what he was trying to do—what he was trying to say through the action of eating pizza.

It may seem extreme to say, “This is a gaffe that could really come back to bite him,” or, “This could go down in history as the pizza that cost Kasich the presidency” as the articles proclaimed earlier. After all, it is just pizza, right? Politicians may have gotten away with worse things, but in this case, no, it is not just pizza—although the mythology hinges on individuals thinking this. As discussed in the introduction, a key facet of food mythology is the illusion of insignificance. Therefore, by appearing to be “just pizza,” nothing greater than its physical presence, the mythology stays hidden. As Barthes writes, “…at the moment of reaching [you, the myth] suspends itself, turns away and assumes the look of a generality: it stiffens, it makes itself look neutral and innocent. The appropriation of the concept is suddenly driven away once more by the literalness of the meaning.”\textsuperscript{15} Once the receiver of myth begins to see the messages being communicated, the form is emptied of the concept, reverting back to the meaning. Suddenly, pizza just seems like pizza again. The mythology— the signification—is obscured because, once again, the object in question appears insignificant and the communicative powers are discounted.

In addition, Kasich’s pizza catastrophe was not the first time in the U.S. that a food gaffe has been attributed to the loss of a presidential election. If not the first, definitely the best-known case is what was dubbed “The Great Tamale Incident.” On April 10, 1976, President Gerald Ford was campaigning in Texas\textsuperscript{16} when he decided to partake in the local cuisine and try a tamale after a tour of the Alamo. A tamale is a Mesoamerican dish made with masa, a type of corn-based dough, which can be filled with variety of meat and vegetables. The masa is wrapped and steamed in a “shuck,” most commonly a corn

\textsuperscript{15} Barthes, Mythologies, 124.
\textsuperscript{16} As the reader may remember, this was a unique election because, although a current president, Ford had never previously been elected to the White House. After the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew, President Nixon nominated Ford as a replacement. This was the first—and so far only—instance in which the proceedings in the 25\textsuperscript{th} amendment were ever used to fill a VP vacancy. Then, of course, Nixon resigned and Ford became president.
husk but sometimes a banana leaf. Two-term Governor of Arkansas and former presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, who was living in Texas at the time, remembers what happened next:

So he took it and he tried to eat it, but he didn’t take the shuck off. So he left the shuck on the tamale. Well, every newscast in Texas, all weekend long, all they did was show Gerald Ford not knowing how to eat a tamale. To this day, I am convinced, that it was that gaffe with the tamale that cost him the state of Texas. Carter won Texas and Carter won the presidency. And it may have been the tamale that did it.\textsuperscript{17}

It is tempting to attribute the attention paid to candidates’ food consumption today to heightened scrutiny due to the rise in media coverage across traditional and non-traditional sources, but Huckabee shows that not to be the case. Even with Ford, which was still in the relatively early days of television news broadcasting, viewers zoomed in on the tamale incident.

Newspapers revisited the incident for weeks. “President Ford was saved from a gastronomic gaffe Friday in San Antonio, TX., by a member of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas,” announced column syndicated in an Ohio newspaper.\textsuperscript{18} “After he messed up trying to eat a tamale,” started the Texan Denton Record Chronical, “President Ford found himself in more trouble than did Col. Travis.”\textsuperscript{19} While many sources reported the incident, some were worded more strongly than others: “And how about Ford EATING THE SHUCK on his tamale before someone warned him! Aw, shucks, Man, where ya been all yer life. Tamales are as historical as filet mignon!”\textsuperscript{20} “What with the notorious importance of tamales in Texas politicking,” explained one article, “the [Daughters of the Republic of Texas] aid will be prized by

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{tamale_incident_headlines.png}
\caption{Various headlines covering the Great Tamale Incident.}
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\textsuperscript{18} AP Reports, “Newsmakers,” Lima News (Lima, OH), April 10, 1976.

\textsuperscript{19} Colonel Travis was the Texas commander at the Battle of the Alamo. Patrick Conway, “First Momma, How Can Regan Cope with Betty Ford’s CB Chatter?,” Denton Record Chronical (Denton, TX), April 25, 1976.

\textsuperscript{20} Deming Graphic (Deming, NM), “Habla Mucho: Cadidates,” April 19, 1976.
the President as he makes his way through the state.”21 Tamales are to Texas what pizza is to New York City. It is more than something to eat; it is connected to identity and continuously used to reaffirm that link. Tamales have a food mythology.

In the aftermath of the faux pas, one editor remarked, “During the course of the sessions earlier I had heard some editors chortling at the President’s gaffe in San Antonio, when he started to eat a tamale without removing the corn shucks. They seemed scornful that he didn’t know how to eat a tamale—forgetting that tamales are alien to the culture of the President’s home state of Michigan,” which further illuminates the depth of this incident.22 In a fashion similar to Kasich’s pizza gaffe, the media response was not neutral. They were “scornful.” It was shocking that a presidential forerunner was so ill-informed about the “notorious importance of tamales” in the state most important to his election. While his gusto to try the local delicacy was to be commended, his ignorance was abrasive. He silently told the public that he might not always know what to do, but instead of asking for advice, he will dive right in. He emphasized his status a non-Texan. He suggested that as such, he was uninformed and uninterested in the issues salient to Texan citizens. The latter part may not have been true, but messages do not have to be true in order to be communicated. His wife, First Lady Betty Ford, tried to redeem the president by expertly consuming a tamale ten days later, and while she won some praise for herself, her husband’s reputation in Texas was unrepairable. “A recent poll indicates,” starts one Texas source, “that if there were to be a Ford in the White House in January next, they would just as soon it be Betty—or as she is known in Texas—first Momma… Poor old Gerry Ford. Can you imagine the indigestion he must have taken with him back to Washington after eating a tamale with the corn husk still around it?”23

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21 *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, TX), “Aw Shucks, Mr. President,” April 10, 1976.
Just like how Bernie Sanders stood to benefit from Kasich’s mistake, so too did Democratic candidate Morris Udall who stopped to enjoy a tamale in New Mexico. Figure 8 shows a side-by-side comparison of coverage of Ford’s tamale experience and that of Udall. While Ford’s gaffe garnered ridicule and an irresistible pun, Udall’s successful tasting was headlined with “Udall Draws Support in N.M.” With his tamale, Udall communicated a message to voters: *I am familiar. I understand you and I can fight for you.* It was a message heard without being discussed.

![Figure 8: Comparison of the coverage of Ford’s gaffe (left) and Udall’s successful attempt at appealing to the tamale’s food mythology (right).](image)

NPR’s *Sporkful* podcast explored this particular gaffe amongst others in “When a Tamale Determines the Presidency.” In the podcast, Jonathan Prince, who worked on both of President Bill Clinton’s campaigns (as the director of national targeting in 1992 and as a senior advisor traveling with the president in 1996), argues, “So the thing about all these gaffes across the board, and there are food gaffes and non-food gaffes, is that they generally are damaging when they play into preconceived notions
that people already have about the candidate.”  

24 Kasich’s “Mr. Midwestern Manners” mistake supports this claim, as does an older gaffe from President Barak Obama’s first election campaign: the so-called “Arugula-gate.” While in Adel, Iowa—population 3,682—to discuss “rural issues,” he tried to touch upon stagnated crop prices by asking, “Anybody gone into Whole Foods lately and see what they charge for arugula?”

25 Unfortunately, as Newsweek explains, “Adel isn't exactly arugula country. [Someone in the crowd] whispered, ‘What's arugula?…You can’t find that in Iowa.’ Same goes for Whole Foods. The closest locations, reported The New York Times that evening, are in Omaha, Neb.; Kansas City, Kans., and Minneapolis.” Obama was already fighting the characterization of an elitist liberal and his reference to arugula seemed to affirm those qualities. Not only did he choose a type of food foreign to the people he was speaking to, but he also chose a grocery store with a highbrow reputation—often referred to critically as Whole Paycheck—that did not even exist in the state. He showed his ignorance of the issues faced by Iowan farmers. He communicated his otherness.

Yet, while there is such evidence to support Prince’s claim, there is also cyclical logic at work here. Candidates are more likely to do something wrong—to reveal their attempt to utilize food mythologies—when they are trying to appear to possess qualities that they otherwise seem to lack. But candidates are also less likely to utilize food to communicate messages and emphasize good qualities that everyone knows they have. Candidates use foods that are connected with certain identities or populations to either appear to possess different qualities—down-to-earth, laid back everyman in the case of Kasich’s pizza—or to appeal to a constituency outside of their main support base—Texans and Mexican-Americans in the case of the Ford’s tamale. There is no need to appeal to one’s main support base through food, nor is one likely to make a gaffe when emphasizing one’s own identity. Therefore, yes, gaffes tend to be damaging when they play into preconceived notions of candidates, but these are also the same

24 Jonathan Prince served as senior advisor under the Clinton administration and as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Obama administrations. Dan Pashman, “When a Tamale Determines the Presidency.”


26 Ibid.
notions that candidates are attempting to overpower through the utilization of food significations. Plus, it should be noted that Obama’s gaffe was not an attempt to utilize the power of food mythologies but was rather a poorly chosen food analogy.

Moreover, not every food photo op—and consequentially food gaffe—is just appealing to the characterization of the candidate. Like with the tamale, food mythologies are often utilized to appeal to a certain demographic—both regionally and nationally—rather than to counteract characterizations. In the 1972 presidential election, Democratic candidate George McGovern stopped at a hot dog stand in New York City and asked for a kosher hot dog. The mythology of hot dogs will be unpacked in the next chapter, but here McGovern was attempting to utilize the hot dog and its connection to New York City Jews to appeal to Jewish voters. To his detriment, he also asked for a glass of milk to wash it down.27 Other than being an odd request in its own right, McGovern’s disregard for kosher dietary laws reveals how he only ordered a “kosher” dog to appeal to that demographic. His attempt to manipulate the connection between kosher hot dogs and Jewish voters was revealed, and rather than endear him to that population, he communicated his ignorance for basic tenants of Judaism and suggested that he was only interested in Jewish citizens as a voting bloc.

A similar blunder was committed by Democratic Candidate John Kerry when he stopped by Pat’s King of Steaks in Philadelphia in the lead up to the 2004 presidential election. In an ill-calculated move, Kerry ordered his cheesesteak with Swiss cheese. The Philadelphia Inquirer explains the error, “Swiss cheese, as any local knows, is not an option. The Massachusetts Democrat may as well have asked for cave-aged Appenzeller. But even when Kerry was given a proper cheesesteak hoagie, he made matters worse by

delicately nibbling at it as if it were tea toast.” Had Kerry stopped and appeared to enjoy a Cheese Whiz-topped cheesesteak, he might have, like Udall did in New Mexico, succeeded at endearing himself to the local population. Instead, he ordered in the most pretentious way possible—Swiss cheese, lettuce, and tomato—and thereby communicated a sense of uptight pickiness and difficult snootiness. Making the situation worse, he did not even eat his “healthy” cheesesteak, he just “nibbled” it, further revealing how he was pandering for votes through eating. While this is certainly not a revolutionary tactic, it never goes over well when people can bluntly recognize the action. When the attempt to wield food mythologies in one’s favor is highlighted, the mythology shatters.

Perhaps the most famous food gaffe in the 2016 election was also an attempt to appeal to a specific demographic: Donald Trump’s Cinco de Mayo taco bowl. In celebration of the Mexican holiday, Trump tweeted a picture of himself along with the caption, “Happy #CincoDeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” Other than the political issues (given Trump’s campaign stance on illegal immigration from Mexico), there are two major issues with his tweet. Firstly, Cinco de Mayo is not a Hispanic holiday—it is a Mexican holiday. Secondly, taco bowls are not Mexican (or even Hispanic for that matter), they are an American invention. This particular gaffe does not even reveal a manipulation of food mythologies because Trump failed to locate one.

A subtler and more interesting food gaffe from the 2016 election was committed by Hillary Clinton. In a radio interview on “The Breakfast Club,” a hip-hop morning show, Clinton was asked about the items she always carried with her. Clinton immediately answered: “hot sauce.” Her comment was quickly linked to the Beyoncé’s “Formation,” which includes the lyric “I got hot sauce in my bag, swag.”

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28 Craig LaBan, “Photo oOop: Kerry Eats a Cheesesteak Hoagie ... with Swiss,” Philly.com, last updated July 2, 2009, http://www.philly.com/philly/food/restaurants/Photo_oop_Kerry_eats_a_cheesesteak_hoagie__with_Swiss.html.
The song has become a sort of anthem for embracing facets of black culture that have been repressed or shamed in mainstream media. Clinton was criticized for selecting a stereotypically black food item while on a radio show that targets a black audience. Social media saw through her attempt to appear hip to young, black voters. The fascinating part of this gaffe is that, in all probability, that was not what she was doing. Hillary Clinton’s love of hot sauce and spicy peppers is well documented even if it has not become a visible part of her characterization. In this case, Clinton was likely telling the truth about the hot sauce in her bag. However, like Kasich’s cutlery or Kerry’s Swiss cheese demonstrates, there is little room for authenticity when it comes to food along the campaign trail. Food is a system of communication; to be unaware of its implications while campaigning for office is ill-advised. Clinton unintentionally referenced a food item with a deep, cultural mythology and it struck a chord. As Mikki Kendall explains in her essay, “Hot Sauce in Her Bag: Southern Black Identity, Beyoncé, Jim Crow, and the Pleasure of Well-Seasoned Food”:

There may be white Beyoncé fans who also carry around their own personal bottles of hot sauce, but hearing her say she has hot sauce in her bag isn’t a shout-out to them. She’s talking to the Southern and Great Migration Black Americans listening—to them, to us, it hearkens to home. To childhoods spent at fish fries, church picnics, and visiting relatives. It’s a reference to a cultural connection, one that spans the diaspora of Black American Identity. You might prefer Crystal to Louisiana, you might only use it on greens that your Grandma didn’t cook, you might rely on someone else having it, but you definitely used hot sauce. You definitely grew up seeing it used by the people that raised you, the people who gave you a sense of your roots, no matter where you were in America…In a society where people vocally take offense to the statement that Black Lives Matter, Beyoncé telling us she has hot sauce in her bag isn’t just a line about how she likes her food. It’s a relic, and a reference, and a reminder. The Jim Crow mindset isn’t wholly in the past.

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31 For a more detailed breakdown on Clinton’s spicy preferences, see: Scott Timberg, “Hillary’s Hot Sauce Long Con: If Clinton Is Pandering with This Latest Food Revelation, It’s the Most Impressive Suck-Up Ever: Hillary's Problem with Authenticity Is So Bad, It's Easy to Believe She Time Traveled Back to '92 to Plant the Seed,” Salon, April 18, 2016, http://www.salon.com/2016/04/18/hillarys_hot_sauce_long_con_if_clinton_is_pandering_with_this_late t_food_revelation_its_the_most_impressive_suck_up_ever/.
It is not likely that everyone who identifies as black likes hot sauce, as there are always exceptions despite Kendall’s insistence, but the mythological link between hot sauce and the Black experience has been strengthened by continual usage. In this particular context, Clinton evoked the hot sauce mythology whether she meant to or not, and people saw it as a cheap attempt to co-opt the trendy parts of Black culture while demonstrating how little she actually understands the Black community.

Food mythologies are not just connected to food items but can also be connected to eating in general—table manners, if you will. There are two cases in particular that provide quintessential examples of this idea, the most recent being attributed to John Kasich. Following his infamous pizza gaffe, perhaps in an instance of overcompensation, Kasich ravenously dug into piles of food at Mike’s Deli in the Bronx. Piles may be an exaggeration, but only slightly:

Kasich sat before a spread that might have given even the most hardcore nonna a case of agita. Antipasti, hero sandwiches, and salumi were piled high as onlookers gawked. He downed one plate of spaghetti. Then he ate another. He gobbled up at least part of a Yankee Stadium Big Boy Hero, which was stuffed with mortadella, ham, salami, capicolo, mozzarella, lettuce, and peppers. He also indulged in the eponymous JK Hero, made up of salami, pepperoni, provolone, pepperoncini, pickles, and creamy Italian dressing. Still feeling somewhat puckish, Kasich then ordered pasta fagioli. There was also some fresh mozzarella and prosciutto involved. And homemade wine.

He ate so much food that, after he left the deli, the owner told reporters, “He had a lot. I was just saying to my coworker, ‘My god, he was just walloping everything.’”34 The sheer amount of food he consumed was shocking and slightly disturbing. It is rare that a politician is seen eating so much food because it is not often that candidates are actually hungry whenever it is that they arrive at their scheduled photo op.

Kasich’s lack of restraint was noticed and criticized, but it was fellow candidate Donald Trump who labeled Kasich’s eating “disgusting” and drew further attention to his gaffe. While at a rally in Rhode Island, Trump said, “I've never seen a human being eat in such a disgusting fashion.” Later, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, he remarked, “Did you ever see a man eat like this? ... It’s pouring out of his mouth... That's not presidential, I can tell you.” Trump’s commentary on Kasich’s eating crosses a line from criticism to mean-spirited jabs, but it is nonetheless true that people pay attention to how other people eat. Eating too much or too ravenously displays a lack of decorum, a tendency to overindulge. Trump may not be the best judge of “presidential” decorum, but there is something distinctly unpresidential about Kasich’s sloppy, gluttonous eating. It shows a lack of self-control, like he is incapable of polite dignity heretofore expected of the role.

The second archetypal example comes from 2012, when Congresswoman Michele Bachmann was running for president and decided to have a snack at the Iowa State Fair. Governor Huckabee recounted the event, “There’s a very famous picture of Michele Bachmann in 2012 eating a corndog at the Iowa State Fair that was, let’s just say, less than flattering. And, you know, there are certain foods that you have to be careful not only how it tastes but how it looks.” Huckabee was being diplomatic with his phrasing. Frankly, the photo in question, Figure 11, looked overtly sexual. As Jonathan Prince put it simply, “There is no politician who ever looks good with a corndog in their mouth.” How someone eats

35 Slack, “Trump Slams Kasich’s ‘Disgusting’ Eating Habits.”
36 Ibid.
37 Since it is too good to go unmentioned, Kasich’s team had a great response to Trump’s insults: https://twitter.com/TeamJohnKasich/status/724665158979694592.
38 Dan Pashman, “When a Tamale Determines the Presidency.”
39 Ibid.
can be just as revealing as what they eat. As a female, the criticism of Bachmann was especially harsh. The gendering of foods and campaign photo-ops will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Four.

If food photo opportunities can go awry so easily, why do politicians continue to have them? Why not just *not* eat in front of cameras? While there is clear logical reasoning in that train of thought, it undervalues the importance and significance of food in favor of overvaluing the danger in eating publically. As Mary Douglas argues, there is an intimacy in sharing food.\(^4^0\) While on the campaign trail there are limited opportunities to personally connect with voters. Politicians tell the personal stories of specific individuals as a means of displaying how closely they connect to their voter base, but the fact of the matter is that politicians cannot talk to everyone. They need a way to appeal and relate to a large number of individuals at a time. Food is the most accessible way of doing that. As Prince writes, “Food really is the lowest common denominator.”\(^4^1\) Simply put, people care about food. They identify with certain foods. They accentuate particular qualities within themselves by eating particular foods, and when candidates successfully consume and elevate those foods, a bond is created—an illusion of intimacy that is invaluable to a campaign. Food is a language that is felt if not heard.

Apart from the benefit of using food as a means of communication, there is a distinct danger in turning down foods. Former Congresswoman Pat Schroeder explains from her personal experience, “You always have to eat what’s there or else it’s like you’re making a comment about the food and the people.”\(^4^2\) Governor of Iowa (and former Secretary of Agriculture) Tom Vilsack, who also worked on

\(^{4^0}\) Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal,” 66.
\(^{4^1}\) Jonathan Prince, “What Happens When Politicians Eat?”
\(^{4^2}\) Dan Pashman, “When a Tamale Determines the Presidency.”
President Obama’s 2008 campaign, states, “People do pay attention to that. They get concerned if you
don’t go to the iconic place in their community, if you’re not willing to take a bite of a big pork
tenderloin, then you’re not, you’re not one of them.”43 In one of the articles quoted earlier, Kasich’s pizza
gaffe was labeled a “flip-flop” move since “just one day earlier [he] turned down some frozen custard in
Wisconsin because he has ‘to stay thin.’”44 Not eating food can be just as communicative, just as
damaging, as eating food incorrectly, unattractively, or offensively.

There does appear to be a middle ground, however. Both Trump and Hillary Clinton are rarely
seen in the act of consuming food. As quoted earlier, Clinton has even remarked, “I learned early on not
to eat in front of all of you.”45 Yet despite the fact that they are rarely caught in the act, both candidates
were often seen near, holding or posing with food. Photographs capture a single moment in time. To state
the obvious, they are not videos. That is to say, even if candidates are not captured physically consuming
food, there is an assumption that they did, in fact, eat whatever food they were seen posing with. This
may save candidates the embarrassment of an unflattering snap, like that of Bachmann, but it does not
deny the communicative significance of food. It also does not safeguard candidates from making another

43 Ibid.
44 James Leggate, “Gov. John Kasich, Presidential Candidate, Doesn’t Know How to Eat Pizza.”
45 Caroline Bankcoff, "Sanders Enjoys a Hot Dog."
type of gaffe and facing corresponding criticism, like with the photo of Trump in Figure 12. While a fairly flattering photo of the candidate himself, the picture drew criticism. KFC with a fork and knife? On a private jet?\footnote{I will allow someone else’s very thorough analysis of this photo to tell the rest of the story: Chris Cillizza, “I Did a Very Deep Dive into Donald Trump’s KFC Picture,” \textit{The Washington Post}, August 2, 2016. One colleague pointed out that Trump’s use of utensils for fast food items could be him demonstrating the “presidential” way to eat food. However, Trump has been eating food this way since before he decided to run for president and therefore it should be noted that it is not a behavior he started for the sake of seeming “presidential.”}

While to some observers these food gaffes may just seem like natural, human errors which are being blown out of proportion—they just made a bad food choice—make no mistake, every single one of these campaign events were planned and intended to tell a story. What should a candidate order? It depends on the message the campaign wants to transmit, the story they want to tell. “Some of these events are about the place,” Price begins in the \textit{Sporkful} podcasts. “The character there is the restaurant, the character there is the waitresses who have been working there for 30 years and the stories that they tell. There are other times where the food really is the character, and especially when you get into kind of regional specialties, local specialties, in those places obviously part of what you’re looking for is to actually try out the specialty.”\footnote{Dan Pashman, “When a Tamale Determines the Presidency.”}

\footnotetext{\textcolor{red}{46}} Josh King, a former White House aide, elaborates on the stage setting for these events: “Who’s the quintessential waiter or waitress that I might want to have serve the candidate? Is there going to be room to bring in about fifteen members of the press? I’d love it if ideally the candidate will be captured in a place that just looks like they’re having a natural snack or a lunch and it doesn’t seem to be this circus atmosphere that actually has twenty people brought in to gawk.”\footnote{Ibid.}

Candidates are not being adventurous when they sample local dishes. In most cases, they are not even hungry when they are eating. The food featured in campaigns does not function solely as sustenance; it is about communicating, not eating.

The American tradition of eating along the campaign trail is somewhat unique to the United States context, and in effect, so too are the corresponding messages communicated through those
campaign foods. That being said, there are similarities between the U.S. and U.K. that allow politicians from both places to attempt—and fail—to manipulate food mythologies in related ways. For example, on June 25, 2013 at 10:04pm, then Chancellor George Osborn, tweeted a picture of himself eating a burger from a Styrofoam container, alongside the caption “Putting the final touches on #SR2013.”49 The reaction was immediate. People were up in arms, “saying it was a publicity stunt, an attempt to project a populist image.”50 That was before the Sun newspaper investigated and discovered that the burger was from the upscale chain, Byron. They labeled it a “poshburger.” Osborn defended himself, arguing that McDonalds does not deliver. However, neither does Byron.51 Osborn was trying to portray himself as a hard worker throwing down some late-night fuel to enable him to craft the “finishing touches” on his spending review (which cut £11.5 billion from government spending).52 However, his “poshburger” had the opposite effect. It made him seem remarkably out of touch rather than hardworking and relatable.

In 2015, former Prime Minister David Cameron faced a similar food controversy. While on a campaign visit to Dorset in south west England, Cameron ate a hot dog…with a fork and knife. At this point it is fairly baffling how politicians manage to continually make the same utensil blunder, but alas. While not as fiery as the reactions to Kasich’s cutlery faux pas, Cameron, like Osborn, was branded

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51 Ibid.
overly “posh.” But as an “Eton-educated lineal descendant of King William IV,” “posh” was not something Cameron was trying to hide. In response to the controversy, Cameron said, “I went to a very posh school, I had a very privileged upbringing with parents who were incredibly loving and brilliant. I’ve never tried to hide that, I’m not going to change my accent or talk in a different way.” It is unclear whether or not Cameron intended to communicate this message through his hot dog, but he does not deny the message was received by viewers of the photographs. Some people argue that Cameron was trying to appear more dignified in the wake of the ruthless internet ridiculing of then Labour party leader Ed Miliband who struggled with a bacon sandwich the year before. As will be seen in the next chapter, Cameron has been photographed eating hot dogs in the past and had always used his hands. Since this was an anomaly, it is reasonable to analyze this event as an attempt to communicate Cameron’s poise and good table manners in the wake of Miliband’s struggle. Unfortunately, since the Anglo-American hot dog already comes with an attachment to the “everyman,” eating it with a fork and knife makes Cameron seem out of touch and troublesomely snobbish.

To reiterate Jonathan Prince, as “the lowest common denominator,” food feels accessible. Everyone has to eat. People interact with food in some form every day, and because of this, many feel the authority to judge the “right” and “wrong” way to eat something—they should know, they eat it every day. Why is it so blasphemous to eat pizza with a fork and knife in New York? After all, pizza is often

eaten with utensils in southern Italy, its place of origin.\textsuperscript{55} This could make an interesting research paper, but is unfortunately out of the scope of this thesis. The fact remains, that to a large population of NYC, it \textit{does} feel blasphemous and \textit{it} is insulting when high-level individuals come try their food and completely disregard the way the natives eat it.

\textsuperscript{55} Supposed because although pizza was introduced from Italian immigrants, New York pizza is not Italian pizza (although “Italian pizza” is a bit of a fallacy in itself). While there are “Italian” pizza joints in New York City, this does not discount the fact that “New York” pizza is its own dish.
Chapter Three: Hot Dogs & the American Dream A Hot Dog Food Mythology

The hot dog, one could proclaim, is as American as apple pie. That is to say, not at all American in origin but so successfully scrubbed clean of its historical context—both internationally and domestically—that it now exists as a ubiquitous symbol of Americana. Today, when hot dogs are available on street corners in New York City at all hours of the night, found perpetually rotating on convenience store grills throughout the country, enthusiastically hawked at baseball games, unfailingly included on children’s menus, and dutifully prepared on patriotic holidays, it is hard to imagine a time when the term “hot dog” would have been understood literally. Yet, having gained public recognition just barely over a century ago, the hot dog is still a fairly new arrival to the continent. Its history and ultimate success satisfy all of the best tropes of the American Dream. In the example of Roland Barthes’s food mythologies, this chapter will break down the cultural symbolism of hot dogs in the United States and how an otherwise unremarkable food became infused with the language of its historical context, giving it the ability to convey a complex message. Food has a habit of blending into the fabric of everyday life, but as discussed in the prior chapter, societies nonetheless attach intense value systems to foods that transcend any nutritional purposes—even if these constructs are not understood until they have been perverted. To discover the subsumed language of food, the following two chapters look towards politicians, on both a regional and national stage, who regularly attempt to wield the power of food’s subliminal messages in a calculated effort to appeal to voters.

While the rise of the modern hot dog in America is not particularly difficult to trace, its initial introduction is a bit of a mystery.1 It is perhaps obvious to anyone familiar with both the sausage and hot dog that the two encased tubes of meat share a familial lineage, but the consumption of the sausage goes

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back to at least the ancient Greeks, and therefore no one location (or multiple locations, as so often is the case) can convincingly claim itself as the origin of the sausage. However, a particular type of sausage placed in a bun—the hot dog—is a much more recent phenomenon and two European cities claim to be its creator. The people of Frankfurt, Germany hold that the hot dog was invented there in 1482, leading to one of the hot dog’s many names: the “frankfurter” or “frank” for short. Nearly four hundred miles away in Vienna, Austria, however, people tell a different story. They believe that the hot dog was invented by Emil Reichel and Sam Ladany, both Austro-Hungarian immigrants who eventually moved to Chicago and sold their hotdogs at the 1893 World’s Fair. Vienna, known as “Wein” in German, is the source of another of the hotdog’s many titles: the “weiner.” While most tales of the hot dog’s birth lead back to one of those two cities, the details are fuzzy and often conflicting. Due to a lack of convincing evidence and general abundance of contradictory origin stories, it seems the safest statement to make on the birth of the hot dog is this: the hot dog, European in origin, was transposed to the United States some time during the mid-to-late nineteenth century. One thing is clear, though: whenever the hot dog first appeared in the United States, it was not known by its modern moniker.

The most compelling—or at least well-known—claim to U.S. parentage comes from Charles Feltman, a German immigrant who arrived in Brooklyn, New York in the 1860s. In 1871, Feltman opened a fine-dining restaurant, Ocean Pavilion, along the Coney Island boardwalk. While the Ocean Pavilion primarily sold seafood, for some time least, it also served boiled sausages in “milk buns” at ten cents a piece. While considered by many to be the father of the American hot dog, Feltman was not particularly sympathetic to the handheld sausage. In fact, in 1886 he spearheaded a “crusade” to close down small

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2 Another origin myth attributes the invention of the hot dog to Johann Geroghehner, a butcher who allegedly brought the hot dog to Frankfurt. While this story also points to Frankfurt as the birthplace of the modern hot dog, having been born in Kolberg, Poland in the 17th century, this invention would have occurred much later than most people claim. Jason English, “Who Invented the Hot Dog?”

3 Today this term is seen with a variety of spellings. “Wiener” is the most popular variation, although “weenie” is also common. Ibid.

4 Bruce Kraig, *Hot Dog: A Global History.* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009), 34. While this date is stated in numerous locations, at least one source qualifies it by saying “from perhaps 1871,” adding a hint of uncertainty to the timeline.
sausage vendors that had popped up along the boardwalk, proclaiming that the “sausage must go.”

This could be interpreted as a desire to shut down any competition, but that would be too simplistic. When Feltman started selling sausages in buns on Coney Island, he was, as far as documentation can discern, the only one. This was a new food in the American context, but Feltman never claimed to have invented it; it was just another food he sold. When the sausage broke out of his restaurant and began rapidly proliferating along the shore, it gained a popular association that Feltman abhorred. “The Coney Island sausage is a remarkable production,” writes one journalist in 1886:

Its characteristics are as unfamiliar to this generation as those of the dodo. Nevertheless, like our flag, the sausage is still there and if we do not, as in the case of the ensign, “hail it with three loud huzzas,” we are still compelled to recognize its existence…Indeed, the insular sausage has always, from the day of its projections upon the populace, exhibited peculiar strength in the tenacity of its hold and the facility with which it gained access to popular favor. Whatever may be thought of it by epicures its pervasive and seductive qualities can no more be denied than its odor can be concealed.6

This article reveals both the newness of the sausage and its inexplicable, but undeniable, popularity. It also alludes to the snobbery exhibited by Feltman and other gastronomes once the fragrant food was absorbed by the unwashed masses. Had the sausage gained popularity in respectable, sit-down establishments like Feltman’s, perhaps the hot dog’s smelly, quick, and portable qualities would have been overlooked instead of repackaged as reasons for its damnation. Yet it is equally possible to speculate that those same qualities contributed to making the sausage was so readily accepted outside of traditional restaurants. Ironically, the sausage Feltman grew to despise became his legacy, a legacy that would later be eclipsed by a successor’s decision to hire Nathan Handwerker at the restaurant Feltman founded.

The story goes that while working at Feltman’s, Handwerker overheard Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor, then merely singing waiters at Coney Island, complaining that at a dime, Feltman’s frankfurters were overpriced. While this story is likely little more than local legend, for one reason or another:

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6 Ibid.
Handwerker was compelled to open his own single-counter stand in 1916. When he first opened, he sold only one item: frankfurters in a roll, slathered in mustard, a nickel each.

In many ways, Nathan’s stand grew up alongside Coney Island, each influencing the other and physically expanding at a parallel rate. Handwerker opened his stand as Coney Island was slowly shedding its reputation of “Sodom by the Sea” and emerging as “America’s Playground.”7 Prior to 1917, there was no subway line connecting Coney Island to the rest of the city, greatly limiting its attractiveness as both a destination and a place to live. In 1920, Coney’s desirability multiplied twofold, as it was now not only connected by a third subway line, but in addition, fares on those lines were cut in half.8 The next year, a famous New York City columnist, O. O. MacIntyre wrote:

Coney Island—reasonable in price and generous in provision—is the stomping ground these hot days for the city workers seeking relief from the enervating heat. Coney Island is the glorified county fair. It is blatant, tawdry, the apotheosis of the ridiculous, but is essentially America at play.

It affords the young clerk, the factory worker and tired mothers with children in arms a few hours of make believe, for at Coney there is no tomorrow. Surf Avenue is Coney’s Bowery, filled with an army of cheap tenements and modest homes.

There is a roar of band cafes, side show ballyhoos, squawking street vendors, the popcorn and hot-dog sellers and the clip of the rifle shots in the shooting galleries….

Coney is to New York’s poor what Newport is to the rich.9

Coney had become the daydream of the New York City working class: an easily-accessible wonderland of grand proportions and modest fees. It was in this setting that the immigrant hot dog was reared and the place to which it would forever be linked; Nathan’s Famous would become synonymous with Coney Island.10 This particular profile was written by a man who, in the 1920s, was considered by some to be

10 “Although his name will be strange to the multitude lining the avenue, the men behind the scenes in Coney Island will know that there couldn’t be a more appropriate Grand Marshal for Coney’s biggest festival, because Murray Handwerker is the executive vice president of the place that’s synonymous with Coney Island, Winter and Summer, Nathan’s Famous.” The Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, New York), “Hand at Nathan’s Helm Wields Marshal’s Cane in Mardi Gras,” September 12, 1954, http://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/53705582/.
the most famous New Yorker alive. His daily column “New York Day by Day” was syndicated in more than 500 papers throughout the United States. For many residing out of state, his column was New York City. 11 The accuracy of his representation of Coney—and his reputation gives reasons to suspect at least some inaccuracy—is not as important as the picture he paints.12 He was in the unique position of cultivating the public perception of a place, and after all, what lasts in public memory is not what something was, necessarily, but how that something was perceived to be. To those dreaming of New York through MacIntyre’s column, Coney Island was the beach getaway of the masses and the hot dog was the food that fed them.

The hot dog was a product indicative of its time, with each of its qualities contributing to its ultimate success. As discussed in the introduction, anthropologist Sidney Mintz argues that food meaning is derived from an interdependent relationship between “outside meaning” and “inside meaning.” Outside meaning is determined by external structures like work hours, mealtimes, buying power, child care, and the “arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy.”13 The process of adapting to changing external structures, of integrating new actions and activities into regular behavior, creates what he terms “inside meaning.” While external pressures are beyond control, the way individuals and communities choose to navigate the particularities of their situation is what ultimately creates meaning and collective identity. It is through this process that the Coney Island hot dog become a food for and of immigrants: it too migrated from the Old World, it too was of humble means, and it too was able to earn success nickel by nickel. Or perhaps more accurately, it was a reminder that “I too” can achieve the

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12 Oscar Odd MacIntyre was a journalist who wrote primarily about New York City. His annual output was about 300,000 words, and at estimated yearly income of $200,000, he was purported to be the highest paid and most widely read writer in the world. His column often read like musings, and his New York Times obituary remarks, “His map of New York came from his own imagination, with Hoboken next to Harlem if it suited his fancy, as it often did.” He hated crowds and often preferred to stay inside of his apartment, further casting doubt on his description of the crowded Coney Island. Greg Daugherty, “Odd MacIntyre.”
American Dream. Economic circumstance made hot dogs an attractive option both to sell and consume, but it was a warm and flavorful meal; there was no shame in a hot dog, and eating it did not feel like settling for less. It came wrapped in its own edible carrier; quick and portable in an era when time was money and the population craved efficiency but “fast food” had not yet made its way into the cultural lexicon. It was a food to rally behind.

This class distinction between hot dog eaters and disdainers may appear obsolete today, as the qualities that led to the working-class attachment to the hot dog were eventually absorbed into a greater American value system, but the hot dog’s label of “food for the poor” was not easy to overcome. Handwerker, seeing that the upper classes were, as the New York Times put it, “stand-offish toward the cut-rate frank,” came up with a plan. He hired six hospital orderlies, outfitted them in white lab coats complete with stethoscopes, positioned them at his counters, and paid them to be seen scarfing down his hot dogs. He then invested in a new sign to display over his counter, one that read: “If Doctors Eat Here It Must Be Good!” This trick may have helped to warm the middle class to the working class’s favorite portable meal, bringing in an immediate revenue boost, but it did not completely obscure the connection between the hot dog and the class that first accepted it.

An article from a 1921 Alabama newspaper bemoaning the spread of the “odoriferous” hot dog demonstrates how the Coney Island treat was capable of obtaining a wider audience while still staying firmly attached to those at a lower stratum of society:

The business referred to is that of dispensing the odoriferous and invigorating combination referred to as “Coney Island” wiener, otherwise known as “hot dog,” or simply as “dog” for short. This business today is booming in Montgomery; and it is notable that the patrons of the Coney Island joints are today more well dressed and prosperous looking, on the whole, than ever in the past. The “dog” has ceased to be solely the bite purchased by the honest, but impecunious citizen suffering from financial embarrassment. It is today that appetizer and substitute meal for a growing number of citizens who find in the “hot dog” and cold drink a combination easily

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15 Handwerker and Reavill, Famous Nathan, 94. Any story coming from the mouth of Nathan’s should be taken with a grain of salt. This story is retold in many different sources, but there is no way of knowing if it was an actual occurrence or a PR myth as no photos exist of the stunt. However, it is nonetheless a part of the cultural mythology.
obtained and moderately priced. Whether it is the Bohemian charm of brushing shoulders with the multitude in partaking of the fragrant preparation, the acceleration of the American desire for eating in a hurry, or the fact that five cents is easier said than fifty, it still remains that the Coney Island product is to all appearances growing in popularity in Montgomery.

The hot-dog is not an aristocratic dish, but a gift to the epicure from the man who toils. It would, I surmise, be a boon to the starving thousands of Bolshevik Russia.

The hot-dog has done away with the old-time bar-rail instep, but in the absence of this token of good fellowship has appeared the onion-breath, which while keeping friends at bay yet marks the bearer of this breath as a man of the people.16

Hot dog customers may have been better dressed than they were in the past, but the author of this article was loathe to forget the hot dog’s beginnings as a food for those “suffering from financial embarrassment.” To those that could afford better, the hot dog’s ease of acquirement and moderate price were not praised but belittled. The author attaches the hot dog to “the man who toils,” and if that alone were not enough to convince the upper class to stay away from the lowly hot dog, the author describes the offending “onion-breath” of hot dog eaters. Remarkably to contemporary readers, the author of the article manages to make “man of the people” sound like a slur. Additionally, despite diffusing across the country, the hot dog retained its association with Coney Island.

Regardless of class prejudices, the hot dog—through Coney Island—became a symbol of the New York City, and politicians (and political wannabes) took note. In 1932, millionaire businessman Cornelius “Sonny” Vanderbilt Whitney set his sights on Congress and employed the humbling powers of the hot dog to help him reach Washington. “‘Sonny’ Whitney Eats Hot Dogs at Queens Democratic Fete,” was the headline from his first campaign event. “Sonny,” the article reads, “ate hot dogs with the rest and seemed to be having a swell time. He smiled when asked for a statement and replied that he was just having a good time, and beginning his personal contact campaign.”17 By eating a hot dog, Whitney was showing the crowd that he could be just like them—only richer. He ate his hot dog “with the rest,” he was cheerful

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and unfussy, and willing to chat with constituents as he dined with his hands. It is hard not to wonder if his congressional bid would have been successful had he ended his sentence at “just having a good time.” By admitting that he was starting his “personal contact campaign,” Whitney reminded the public that his food choice was calculated: he was not eating a hot dog because he was, in fact, like them, but rather because he needed to appear to be like them in order to win over their votes. As discussed in Chapter Two, food loses its power when an audience realizes how it is being manipulated. Admittedly, it seems like a stretch to blame this one instance for the failure of Whitney’s campaign, especially since it is likely that a meaningful proportion of his potential constituents were either illiterate or non-English speakers and would not have been swayed by a newspaper. Nonetheless, this account shows a calculated attempt to appear relatable through the subliminal messages encoded in the hot dog.

While local politicians dutifully consumed hot dogs to prove that they both understood and were just as much regular “New Yorkers” as their prospective constituents, presidential candidates likewise learned to pay their dues to the Coney Island hotspot. On his second day campaigning as Richard Nixon’s running mate during the 1960 presidential election, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. hit up the New York City beaches to mingle with the locals. A headline at the time read: “Lodge Campaigns at City’s Beaches: Has Hot Dog and Kisses His First Baby—Shuns Talk about Running Mate,” a three-step guide to making oneself relatable. Shortly after his arrival, “Mr. Lodge had shed his coat, his tie and any remnants of United Nations protocol. In another ten minutes his white shirt was drenched with perspiration as he shook the hands of well wishers.” Lodge doffed his elite political status and assuming the role of the everyman. After moseying his way through the throngs of people enjoying the tail end of summer, Lodge, accompanied by two high-profile New York locals—Governor Nelson Rockefeller and Attorney General

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19 Lodge was appointed U.S. ambassador to the United Nations under the Eisenhower administration.
Louis J. Lefkowitz—reached Nathan’s Famous. Lodge “munched two of the succulent sausages, liberally smeared with yellow mustard. They were handed to him with an expression of good luck by Joe Handwerker, a Nathan’s employe [sic] for thirty-seven years.” The crowd surrounding the snacking politicians “was so dense that six mounted police were brought in to hold it back. ‘I can’t breath [sic],’ Mr. Rockefeller said. ‘But the dogs are awfully good.’ ‘Delicious,’ said Mr. Lodge.”

Standing at the counter, the three politicians enthusiastically ate their Coney Island hot dogs in full view of the flashing cameras, with Nathan Handwerker and his wife Ida right beside them. Both Rockefeller and Lodge were deeply familiar with the political powers of the hot dog (as will be explored more fully shortly). They played everything just right: sleeves rolled up, surrounded by hundreds, in the company of the hot dog’s champion—and perhaps most importantly—dogs dressed with yellow mustard, the customary condiment in Brooklyn. All three of these men were well-known politicians, but on this day, they successfully doffed their official hats; they were just people enjoying a summer treat. Lodge avoided overtly discussing his running mate or the fact that this was an official campaign stop, and by doing so he expertly evaded Whitney’s mistake. Lodge’s hot dog meal, unlike Whitney’s, appeared genuine, not calculated. The Massachusetts native may have ultimately lost the election, but the voters on the beach that day were smitten.

20 Joe Handwerker was also both nephew and brother-in-law to Nathan Handwerker. He served as the company’s vice president from 1923-1973 and was undoubtedly well-versed in such political interactions.

21 Salisbury, “Lodge Campaigns at City’s Beaches.”

22 As illustrated elsewhere in the article: “And almost everyone who saw him wished him well — including quite a few persons who said they were Democrats and expressed sorrow that they could not vote for Mr. lodge because he was sharing a ticket with Mr. Nixon, whom they opposed…. ‘Certainly I’m
Flash forward to 2001 and grabbing a Coney Island hot dog during a New York political campaign is a given. After participating in Staten Island’s annual Independence Day parade, where the “politicians immersed themselves in the time-honored tradition of person-to-person contact,” the city’s mayoral candidates made their way to the Coney Island boardwalk where they “used the holiday as a chance to be seen by ordinary New Yorkers.”23 One candidate, Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer, made it a point to watch the annual hot dog eating contest sponsored by Nathan’s Famous before making his way to the stand for his own frank. The New York Times picked up on the symbolism of this decision, commenting, “Mr. Ferrer himself went to the Nathan’s stand to engage in a ritual more political than competitive: eating a hot dog at Coney Island.”24 The article’s language—“time-honored tradition,” “ordinary New Yorkers,” “ritual”—points to the well-established political nature of the hot dog in New York City. These candidates are following the steps prescribed by their predecessors to be normalized in the eyes of the everyday voter. There are few ways other than through food that politicians, often of the educated elite, are able to convincingly transmit the message I am just like you to people very different from themselves.

There was one politician in particular who famously realized and subsequently declared the power of the hot dog on the New York political stage. During his first successful gubernatorial campaign in 1966, Nelson Rockefeller proclaimed, “No one can hope to be elected in this state without being photographed eating a hot dog at Nathan’s Famous,” while posing for photos, Nathan’s hot dog in hand.25 Rockefeller did not attribute any mystical powers to a Nathan’s hot dog; simply consuming one of the famed franks will not propel a candidate into political office. Removed from its context, a hot dog is merely an emulsified and spiced animal (by-)product pressed into a transparent casing, cooked, placed

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24 Ibid.
into a bun, and dressed with condiments. It is not inherently symbolic of anything. Rather, it is important that a candidate is *photographed* eating at Nathan’s; he must be seen by those lucky enough to be there in person as well as the many multitudes who were not. The message that *I am a real New Yorker, I know the local spots and I too eat hot dogs at the beach*, must be amplified.

That statement, later to be named “Rockefeller’s Dictum” by some hot dog enthusiasts, dynamically illustrates the annexation of the hot dog into a wider context of American culture.\(^{26}\) His quote is found with so many variations that it is hard to track down the original statement. One such variation makes minimal changes in wording but an important alteration in meaning: “No *man* can hope to be elected in *his* state without being photographed eating a hot dog at Nathan’s Famous.”\(^{27}\) The deletion of one letter, from “this state” to “his state,” removes the Coney Island hot dog from its original New York context and elevates it to a national level. By the time this misquote was published online, it would have been possible to find a Nathan’s hot dog outside of New York.\(^{28}\) However, this does not explain why being photographed either in New York or at a franchised location of a New York business in another state would help a politician endear himself to home voters. Another variation of the dictum makes more liberal alterations: “*No candidate for any office* can hope to get elected in this *country* without being photographed *eating a hot dog*.”\(^{29}\) Here the dictum is inflated to much grander proportions and stripped of geographic identity, but interestingly enough, it might be the closest to the truth.

\(^{26}\) The internet is full of attempts to chronicle the importance of the hot dog. Both http://frankfurterchronicles.blogspot.com/2012/10/hot-dog.html and http://presidentialwiener.blogspot.com refer to Rockefeller’s quote as “Rockefeller’s Dictum.” It is unclear who invented the phrase, but it is often repeated alongside the quote.


\(^{28}\) Nathan’s Famous brand hot dogs made their first appearance in grocery stores in 1983 and five years later, in 1987, the Handwerker family sold the company to private investors who then expanded the business to franchised locations. Nathan’s Famous, “Celebrating 100 Years of Nathan’s,” accessed November 26, 2016, http://www.nathansfamous.com/anniversary.

Like the original Nathan’s Famous slogan boasted, “From a Hot Dog to a National Habit,” the hot dog did not stay put in New York City. Popularized by Nathan’s, the hot dog soon spread across the country. In Michigan, the “Coney Island,” or simply the “Coney” is the name for a hot dog coated in chili sauce, propagated by Greek and Macedonian immigrants. On one street in Detroit alone there is both “American Coney Island” and “Lafayette Coney Island,” different establishments with the same inspiration. In Tulsa, another Greek immigrant popularized the “Coney Island-lander” chain, serving hot dogs with a “Greek-style” sauce. Greek and Italian immigrants in Chicago invented the “Chicago dog,” a hot dog dressed with green relish, sport peppers, pickle spears, tomatoes, and mustard, and served in a poppy seed bun. Rhode Island is home to the “New York system,” a hot dog featuring a spicy meat sauce, introduced by yet another Greek immigrant. It seems as if to European immigrants in the first decades of the twentieth century, the hot dog was a heavily spiced and handily packaged, single portion-sized American Dream. It is unlikely that all—if any—of the immigrants popularizing their versions of hot dogs in other parts of the country ever visited Nathan’s Famous stand, but the association between the name “Coney Island” and the hot dog was hard to shake.

As glowingly successful as the partnership between immigrant and hot dog was, there was anxiety bubbling under the surface. After the publication of The Jungle in 1906, Upton Sinclair’s graphic depiction of health violations and immigrant exploitation in the Chicago meat packing industry, the country was wary of processed meat products. The hot dog—unidentifiable meat now being pumped out

30 Kraig, Hot Dog.
31 Ibid., 88.
on an industrial level and sold by immigrants—was the perfect target for post-Jungle speculation. The very name “hot dog” prompted gossip. “Very Rosy Frankfurters Get Complexion by Illegal Rouge; Flour another Adulteration,” read one 1927 headline. The article describes the manipulations discovered by one food inspector, “In order to make the frankfurter appear well smoked the law is sometimes broken by the use of Zanzibar carbon, which looks like gunpowder and adds a high, ruddy color to the inferior dog.”

In 1929, there was “Gloom at G.O.P. Convention” when hot dogs were banned. Health officers of “Kansas City got together with the National Committee in advance and banned all hot-dog stands, on the theory that too many people got indigestion from eating them. As a result, in all the din of this convention, there is no cry of the weenie man to tempt the crowd with his sizzling ‘frank’” The hot dog would be similarly banned as a foodstuff for WWII soldiers for causing a “lack of proper nutrition.”

In 1929, German manufacturers of “genuine frankfurters” attempted to retain exclusive right to use that name out of frustration of being “insulted through promiscuous association with a breed of dogs whose contents includes cereals and other items not in the orthodox recipe.” The article goes on to explain how “American ingenuity along certain lines has found that by adding five pounds of cereals to 100 pounds of frankfurter meat, the indulgent frankfurter-eating public would not object strenuously. Frankfurters are eaten with buns anyway—so why not put some of the bun into it in the first place?”

The article patriotically pokes fun at the “serious-minded” Germans given to “unemotional, scientific analysis” and notes that, “regardless of who won the war, America pauses to take reverent note of any official pronunciamento which may issue forth from the headquarters of the frankfurter concerning the said frankfurter.”

36 Ibid.
adulterations on an international stage. The hot dog may have begun a German creation, but just like the immigrants who brought it over, it had become American.

Regardless of how satirically the article is written, the concerns described were still very real. In each of these examples there is a push and pull between the desire to continue in the habit of indulgently consuming hot dogs and the sensationalized fear of what may be hidden inside—and what likely was hidden inside on at least some occasions. Unsurprising to the modern reader, the prior desire won. As Mintz points out, “To be sure, it is far more common to add new foods to one’s diet than it is to forgo old and familiar ones.” Habits of consumption are hard to break, even when there are moral or health-related reasons to do so and especially when the food in question is now entwined with identity.

The hot dog prevailed over European slander, unsavory additives, and health concerns. It grew past its infancy at the beach and childhood friendship with immigrants, achieving an all-American status by expanding into concession stands at sporting events, roadside convenience markets, and family refrigerators. It was cheap, enjoyable, convenient—and most importantly—it was there. The hot dog ventured out of the cities that popularized it. It no longer belonged just to New York, Chicago, or Detroit; it was carried across the country and made familiar to all. The hot dog became America’s sausage, and as such, it was given a permanent place at the table on Memorial Day and Independence Day—summer occasions which nod towards the hot dog’s seaside beginning while incorporating its newly achieved status as a symbol of Americana. This successful infiltration into American identity inspired Nathan’s Famous to start sponsoring a hot dog eating competition annually on July 4th, broadcast live by ESPN. The contest officially started in 1972, but “legend states” that on July 4, 1916, “four immigrants held a hot dog eating contest at Nathan’s Famous stand in Coney Island to settle an argument about who was the most patriotic.” It is a “legend” that did not exist prior to the invention of the modern contest, but one that

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Health concerns have been raised as recently as 2015, when the World Heath Organization’s International Agency for Research on Cancer announced that eating processed meat probably increase’s risk of contracting cancer, but as of yet, no significant decrease in consumption has been detected.

Nathan’s Famous, “Celebrating 100 Years of Nathan’s.”
nonetheless reveals some of the cultural weight of the hot dog and the desire of Nathan’s to retain its holistic association with everything hot dog.

With the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, the hot dog completed its assimilation into American culture, entering the White House and the stage of international politics. Roosevelt and his wife, Eleanor, were both native to New York and fiercely loyal to their state’s famous snack. In addition to enjoy the taste, the Roosevelts also wielded hot dogs politically. In 1938, Roosevelt received Crown Princess Louise of Sweden at his home in Hyde Park, New York for a summer open-air luncheon. At the “demand” of the First Lady, “honest-to-goodness hot dogs” were served.40 This surely came to the chagrin of the journalist who proclaimed, just seventeen years earlier, that “the hot-dog is not an aristocratic dish.”41 While the menu attracted some headlines laced with mild disbelief, the commencement of Roosevelt’s legacy of “Hot Dog Diplomacy” had a relatively quiet start.

The next year, a new set of Scandinavian royals came for a visit. Prince Olav and Princess Martha of Norway also joined the president for picnic, and once again the president served hot dogs.\textsuperscript{42} The group was preparing for the opening of the New York World’s Fair the following day, but the luncheon was overshadowed by another, more sinister event looming in the near future. The article’s second paragraph reads, “White House attaches declined to discuss whether the President would refer to Adolf Hitler’s rejection of Mr. Roosevelt’s peace guarantee proposals in the address [he would be giving at the fair’s opening].”\textsuperscript{43} This was April of 1939; war would break out in Europe in less than five months.

Two months later, in June, suspecting that war was eminent, King George VI and Queen Consort Elizabeth made their own appearance at Roosevelt’s country home. If England was to be entangled in battle, the United States could be a vital ally. This was the first ever visit to the United States by a British monarch; not even during the colonial period had the King set foot in the New World. In reverence of the historic event, President and Mrs. Roosevelt served their honored guests nothing less than an American delicacy: hot dogs. “The hot dog has been ennobled,” the newspapers declared the following day:

\begin{quotation}
No greater tribute could have been paid the American 5-cent sandwich than this, that sponsored by our President’s wife, even over her mother-in-law’s objections, it had graced royal palates and been approved.
\end{quotation}

Both Their Majesties seemed a little bewildered about procedure, but picnic guests reported that they had paused only long enough to watch Mr. Roosevelt, who, according to the National Sausage Manufacturers’ Association pamphlet, prefers the “overhand method” of delivery to the mouth, and followed suit. The King and Queen weren’t sure either, about the mustard application, but they dipped into it with royal delicacy.

That moment was a triumph for Mrs. Roosevelt, who had insisted from the first that hot dogs were fit for a king, while the President’s mother, Mrs. Sara Delano Roosevelt, had argued that they weren’t.\textsuperscript{44} Europeans were flabbergasted. The Roosevelts were not ignorant of diplomatic protocol, especially not after six years in the White House. Nor were they unaware of hot dog’s symbolism. With their decision to


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.

serve hot dogs at such a historic and sensitive meeting, the Roosevelts were making a statement. Sure, they were serving a meal they enjoyed, that was (and still is) emblematic of the state in which the luncheon took place, but they were also rejecting the assumption that the American head of state must conform to any aristocratic European traditions.\textsuperscript{45} Domestically they were showing the public that our traditions and our values are important and do not have to bow down to anything else. Serving hot dogs was a power move—subtle, but remarkable. Europe was descending into chaos, and here were the seemingly untouchable British monarchs making their maiden journey to the United States with their heads characteristically high, but their knees metaphorically on the ground. Britain \textit{needed} the United States. There was no precedent for receiving the country’s former monarch, and so, with the power of creating history, hot dogs were served and the royals chewed obligingly.\textsuperscript{46}

It should be noted, in contrast, that Prime Minister Winston Churchill had a very different wartime reception in the U.S. In her reflections of time spent with Churchill at the White House, Eleanor Roosevelt writes:

Cigars Mr. Churchill brought himself, but the drinks and the food we always tried to remember to have according to his liking. Like all Englishmen he was very fond of beef in every form. I don't remember what his special dishes were that he liked, but I don't think he was at all finicky. Things had to be well cooked and nicely served, and he often spoke of the difference in our country where we did not have the strict rationing which they had in Great Britain. There they could have game and poultry, but little else. It was agreed, as a rule, that we would not serve too much of the only types of food which were available in his own country at that time.

Sir Winston did not believe in suffering where it was not necessary to do so as far as food was concerned. Something hot, something cold, two kinds of fresh fruit, a tumbler of orange juice, and a pot of weak tea were suggested for his breakfast tray. For "something hot" he was

\textsuperscript{45} While by no means authoritative, one 1938 article reads, “Persons wishing to see President Roosevelt eating hot dog at a roadside stand or J. Edgar Hoover leading a raid on some well publicized criminal are likely to be disappointed. The president doesn’t often eat hot dogs, contrary to popular belief, and in Washington rarely appears in public.” This article, at least, suggests that FDR’s hot dog consumption was largely confined to the public, adding more substance to the argument that the Roosevelts were not just serving hot dogs because they enjoy them. \textit{Brooklyn Daily Eagle} (Brooklyn, New York), “News behind the News in Washington,” January 15, 1938, http://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/52631147.

\textsuperscript{46} While not a documentary, there was a dramatic film, \textit{Hyde Park on the Hudson}, released in 2012 that is based the weekend of the royal visit and the infamous hot dog luncheon.
given eggs, bacon or ham, and toast. "Something cold" was translated into two kinds of cold meat with English mustard and two kinds of fruit plus a tumbler of sherry. Mrs. Roosevelt had a complicated relationship with Churchill, to say the least. Particulars aside, she was nonetheless hyper-aware of the preferences of Churchill. Things “had to be” a certain way and the White House made sure to provide some relief to the rationing he was subjected to back home. The difference in reception between the royals and the prime minister goes to show that the Roosevelts were not just thoughtlessly serving hot dogs when they compelled the monarchs eat with their hands. It was a calculated choice.

Roosevelt’s decision made waves across the media, but hot dog sales soared. Two decades later, the hot dog made an encore appearance at a likewise historic and unprecedented diplomatic visit. On September 15, 1959, Nikita Khrushchev touched down in Washington and became the first Soviet head of state to visit the United States. Over the next twelve days, Khrushchev would visit New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Des Moines on a bizarre and incredibly tense Grand Tour. Not knowing how to react, Americans lined the route to get a glimpse of the Soviet leader, but they dared not clap or cheer. They stood silent, staring. Henry Cabot Lodge, then the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, both planned and accompanied Khrushchev on the trip. On day eight, the group visited the sausage making department of a meat packing plant in Iowa. Biting into his first hot dog, Khrushchev expressed his approval. “The soviet may be ahead in moon rockets,” he said, referencing the Lunik 2’s successful impact on the moon just a day before his arrival, “but [the U.S.] seems to be ahead in sausage making.” Khrushchev’s son, Sergei, later recounted the event, “He was smiling. He said, ‘you want to use me to promote your product, it’s a good product, I’d be happy to promote it.’” At this point in time it was

48 “Up until the time President and Mrs. Roosevelt served King George and Queen Elizabeth with hot dogs the consumption at the Golden Gate International Exposition was about 16,000 daily. Since then it has averaged between 21,000 and 24,000.” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, New York), “Hot Dogs Are Hotter,” July 2, 1940, http://bklyn.newspapers.com/image/52606654/.
50 Ibid.
unlikely that the hot dog was wanting for free advertisement, nor was it assured that the Soviet leader’s approval would have had a positive impact on sales, but Khrushchev was successfully promoting something else—himself. As Cold War historian Peter Carlson put it, “He certainly won people over, if not to the idea that communism is better, at least to the idea that this guy is a recognizable human type. He is one of us.” In the photos, Khrushchev did indeed appear friendly and down-to-earth. Beaming, he paused to admire the hot dog in hand. He was not just eating a hot dog, he was enjoying it, appreciating it. His showmanship was so convincing that to the general public, for a short moment now frozen in time, he ceased to be anything more than an average man relishing his hot dog. More than that, he was enthusiastically consuming and praising a symbol of America, and by doing so, he was attempting to bridge the gap between the two countries and show the American people that he was not the monster they expected him to be.

To this day, the hot dog continues to be featured at delicate, diplomatic affairs with the unassuming air that only the hand-held hot dog can attain. For example, in 1999, President Bill Clinton, Prime Minister Ehud Barak of Israel, and the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat each pulled up a chair to the table. The menu that day? Kosher hot dogs. Later, in 2009, President Barack Obama likewise extended the hot dog like an olive branch when he notified U.S. embassies and consulates around the world that they were permitted to invite Iranian representatives to their Independence Day celebrations for the first

Figure 17: Khrushchev beaming at his hot dog in Iowa. | Photo credited to Tampa Bay Times

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51 Ibid.
52 Dan Barry, “Ambassador Hot Dog,” *New York Times*, June 6, 2009. At one point in the article, Barry writes, “In the formal language of diplomacy, perhaps, the presentation of a hot dog may say: ‘On behalf of the United States of America, may we offer you this tubular delight of meat, meat byproducts, curing agents and spices?’ But what it really says is: ‘How ya doin’? Wanna beer?’”
time since the U.S. cut relations in 1979.\textsuperscript{53} This offer was rescinded and Iranian diplomats uninvited after violent clashes broke out in Tehran, but the symbolism of what was to be is still relevant.\textsuperscript{54}

This example is part of Obama’s relationship with the hot dog, which is more complex than that singular example reveals. In many ways, Obama is the politician who most fully exploits the hot dog’s mythology. It is part of his larger down-to-earth persona, one that has attracted both positive and negative attention, mirroring the public’s reaction to the hot dog during its initial rise to fame. Obama, a self-proclaimed Chicagoan, is an open fan of the hot dog, which he often uses as a method of declaring his hometown loyalty.\textsuperscript{55} In a recent interview on Anthony Bourdain’s CNN series, \textit{Parts Unknown}, Obama was asked if ketchup on a hot dog is ever acceptable. He quickly declared “No,” before adding, “I mean that ... It’s not acceptable past the age of eight.”\textsuperscript{56} Chicagoans are notoriously hostile towards ketchup on hot dogs, and by openly declaring his allegiance in the hot dog condiment battle, Obama was staying faithful to his roots (a controversial move that a first term president might have avoided).\textsuperscript{57} Obama, alongside a plethora of foreign dignitaries, has been photographed with hot dogs so often that the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) started a petition in 2012 to ban “staged photo opportunities that show the president,

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure18.jpg}
\caption{President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister David Cameron enjoy hot dogs courtside. | Photo credited to PA}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{55} He is well known on the internet for his love of hot dogs, inspiring social media posts like the one that can be found here: https://li.st/l/ecd8d521-765e-42be-beb9-22c5477ea717.
the first family, the vice president, and members of the president’s cabinet eating unhealthy foods—including processed meats—that can cause cancer and obesity.” In the press release, Susan Levin, the nonprofit’s nutrition education director says, “The White House would never set up a photo op showing the president buying cigarettes, so why is it OK to show him eating a hot dog?” The organization argues that as a role model for the American people, the president has a responsibility to eat healthily in public.\(^5^8\)

Intriguingly, this logic both makes use of the commutative and persuasive power of food while simultaneously ignoring the mythological language of the hot dog. While the amount of junk food Obama is photographed eating is undeniably immense,\(^5^9\) simply swapping unhealthy foods for healthy ones is not guaranteed to have the same effect. Replace Obama’s hot dogs with a tofu-substitute and suddenly he goes from approachable and down-to-earth to unreasonably picky. This was a characterization he consciously distanced himself from after his arugula gaffe discussed in Chapter Two. Michelle Obama has spent her entire time as First Lady creating her Let’s Move! campaign to curtail childhood obesity, yet her crusade for fresh, healthy foods has not affected her husband’s public consumption of junk food and processed meats.\(^6^0\) Vegetables themselves are not inherently problematic, but vegetables in replacement of meat, as will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, is an extremely controversial move in the United States.

The formula for uncovering the buried language of food has yet to be discovered, although it is very clear that such a language exists. As all of these politicians show, attempting to utilize the power of food without revealing the calculated nature of their food choices—thereby shattering the mirage of authenticity—has a possibility of backfiring. Even those, like Lodge, who play every move exactly right

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59 Once again, the internet is eager to archive all the culinary forays of President Obama. For example, see the Tumblr blog completely devoted to “Barack Obama Eating Things.” A quick scroll through the many posts gives an idea of what the petition is trying to combat: http://barackobamaeatingthings.tumblr.com

60 This is not to diminish the efficacy nor the importance of her campaign, which has made many legislative strides in promoting healthier food and drink choices as well as unveil new, straight-forward and comprehensive nutrition labels.
are not guaranteed to attain their goal of being elected. But an unsuccessful political campaign does not invalidate what politicians’ actions prove: food is capable of conveying a complex message. The hot dog, completely meaningless to the United States a little over a century ago, is now permeated with inside meaning. While it is undoubtedly true that the hot dog was not universally praised by Americans, it has been nonetheless symbolically charged with history and supported by the complex language of cultural mythology and inner meaning. An individual’s personal love, hate, or ambivalence towards the hot dog as a food has no effect on its wider symbolism. That person may have a particular association with hot dogs—like the one time he ate one too many and spent his tenth birthday vomiting and now cannot bare to even look at one—but unless that becomes the case for the majority, the language of the hot dog is unlikely to be affected

On the campaign trail, it has the ability to broadcast a message that would never be believed in words: *I am unfussy and relatable. I have to wear stuffy ties and suits, but I really am just like you.* Calling yourself relatable sounds desperate and inauthentic, and convincingly displaying one’s own relatability—and consequentially electability— is difficult to do when living in a different stratum of society. Food is one means of doing so. In delicate diplomatic situations, it can loosen tension and say: *let’s all just relax and chat, we’re friends here.* On patriotic holidays, it can proclaim: *I am American, and I am proud.* It is true that food cannot speak in such exact, vocal words, but its meaning is interpreted all the same.
Chapter Four: Pork Chops & Power  

A Pork Chop Food Mythology

For a brief period of time every four years, Iowa, the 30th most populous state in the country, becomes the center of the presidential race. Since Iowa holds the earliest presidential caucus, the state is in a unique position to influence the primaries with power disproportionate to its population. While candidates weave throughout the state, they convene in one place: the Iowa State Fair.¹ Now spanning around eleven days every August, the Iowa State Fair (Fair) boasts a 600-pound butter cow, star-studded musical performances, fair attractions, and various contests and competitions. Its main attraction, however—the reason why the State Fair is known far and wide by individuals who have never stepped foot in Iowa—is its phantasmagoria of artery-clogging foods on sticks. As the Fair’s CEO Gary Slater said in 2016, “We are a food-centric fair. We try to capitalize on that.”² From deep-fried butter to bacon wrapped ribs, the options are seemingly endless. Among the many choices, politicians almost always go for the pork chop on a stick. Each election cycle, the media pumps out photo gallery after gallery of politicians chowing down on pork chops and sipping soft beverages, as if this political spectacle itself is the Fair’s main attraction. How did an event once called the “Annual Fair of the Iowa State Agricultural Society,” turn into a political flytrap? More importantly, why is it a pork chop that the candidates cannot seem to pass up? In the same format as Chapter Three, this chapter will take the reader through the historical relationship between politicians and pork at the Iowa State Fair, demonstrating how key facets of history and societal connotations have created a contemporary mythology around the pork chop which is used to communicate subliminal messages.

¹ Since the Iowa State Fair was not the only agricultural fair that happened in the state, with counties holding their own, smaller events, this paper has decided to capitalize “Fair” in order to differentiate. As one clipping states, “This Is a State Fair with a Big F.” Ames Intelligencer (Ames, Iowa), “With a Big F,” September 10, 1880.

In 1854, with a budget of just $323, the Iowa State Agricultural Society came together to hold their “First Annual Fair,” an event which would prove foundational to the state. When Iowa came into statehood in 1846, westward movement would not be fashionable for a few more decades and the Iowa pioneers, few and far between, had little more than land to unite them. With the establishment of the Annual Fair of the Iowa State Agricultural Society, however, young Iowa unearthed a means to attain the legitimacy that it deeply craved. Through clever partnerships with the press, railroad industry, and local businesses, the growth of state and State Fair were inextricably linked, cultivating both patriotism and regionalism whilst constructing an official image of Iowa and a greater sense of what it means to be Iowan.

Local newspapers would cover the Fair down to the most minute details, including: advertisements, itemized agendas for the Society’s annual January meeting; premium lists; upcoming schedules; fair previews; overviews of each day on the fairgrounds; long lists of prize winners; and specific names of individuals as they left for the Fair and returned with prizes or accounts of their experiences. The most important contribution made by the press, though, was not publicizing the goings-on of the Fair, but consistently pleading to their local readers to attend the Fair—produce, animals, and crafts in tow—and then offering hearty praise when they did. For example, the Fairfield Ledger reads in 1870:

Heretofore Fairfield and Jefferson county have not been represented as they should be at this great exhibition; let there be a different arrangement entirely this Fall. Let there be a showing in pickles, preserves, jellies, and all articles made by the women of old Jefferson; let the “men folks” show to the people of Iowa and neighboring States, the kind of grain, horses, cattle, sheep

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4 Iowa was granted statehood on December 28, 1846. The territory of Iowa had a population of 43,112 in the 1840 census, which grew to 192,214 in 1850. University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, “Historical Census Browser,” retrieved December 18, 2016, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/.

and hogs they raise, —don’t let our town and county be behind all the others in the State in enterprise in this respect.\textsuperscript{6}

The State Fair was a time for counties to flex their muscles, to show their worth to their state and country. The press urged citizens to show that their farmers could grow the best produce and raise the best animals, that their women could create the most beautiful crafts and most delicious jams.

In addition to forging crucial ties to the press, the game makers of the Iowa State Agricultural Society also cleverly partnered with the railroad industry, hotels, and other local businesses in efforts to avoid exploitation of visitors and ensure that the Fair would be accessible to all. Iowa, the State Fair, and the railroad lines all grew up parallel to one another, each entangled in the growth of the other.\textsuperscript{7} The annual Fair gave rural citizens a reason to travel, habituating individuals to taking trains and promoting the concept of interstate tourism. To gently push farmers and people of limited means into train cars, special State Fair deals were struck each year. Fares were generally reduced by half, often times including free freight for exhibition materials. In addition to being cheaper than normal, trains also ran more frequently, creating a skewed—yet convincing—impression of everyday convenience. As people learned to travel by train, new lines were added. Later on, shorter, electric train tracks were constructed to shuttle people from the city of Des Moines to the permanent fairgrounds.\textsuperscript{8}

On the suggestion of the press, gas lighting—followed by electricity—was added along the route and throughout the fair to allow festivities to continue past sundown.\textsuperscript{9} Like the railroads, hotelkeepers

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{6} Fairfield Ledger (Fairfield, Iowa), “Iowa State Fair,” September 8, 1870.
\item \textsuperscript{7} Gigliotti, “Growing Iowa.”
\item \textsuperscript{8} The permanent fairgrounds were purchased in Des Moines in 1878. Prior to that date, the Fair was located in various cities for two to three year stretches. One 1890 account mentions the electric trains, “The state fair grounds are accessible at all times. The Rock Island railway has a double track to within a few feet of the south main entrance gate and will run trains every fifteen minutes from their city depots to ground …. In addition to above the electric street railway whose line extends to all parts of the city, will put on a number of cars running directly to the fair grounds so that passengers will not be delayed at any time in reaching the fair.” Anita Tribune (Anita, Iowa), “The Iowa State Fair: To Be Held at Des Moines Aug. 29-Sept. 5,” July 31, 1890.
\item \textsuperscript{9} For one such example: “We would suggest to the city authorities the propriety of lighting the streets with gas during the State Fair. The nights will be dark, and the convenience of illuminated streets will be very great to the public.” Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye (Burlington, Iowa), September 23, 1864.
\end{itemize}
agreed to keep their prices low and those who broke these agreements were publically shamed.\textsuperscript{10} Local homes took in guests for a dollar or two, forming a pre-internet room sharing network. Furthermore, camping grounds equipped with water wells were opened free of charge (with the price of admission) to make sure that even those of the littlest means could come visit—and stay at—the fairgrounds.\textsuperscript{11} These tactics were so successful that on at least one occasion the crowd swelled to such a mass that accommodations were drastically inadequate and visitors were forced to sleep in train stations and hotel hallways.\textsuperscript{12}

The Iowa State Fair quickly became the single biggest event in the state, and it was only natural that such a uniquely grand assembly of people would attract individuals with something other than agricultural betterment in mind. The first fifty years of the Iowa State Fair were characterized by shifting tensions between tradition and modernity, temperance and spectacle, rural and urban sensibilities. To encourage more visitors, the Fair added sham battles that provided a thrilling and “interesting exhibition of what the reality of war is like,” Roman chariot races, death-defying stunts, and the “two headed, two bodied lady… one of the few attractions that Barnum has been unable to capture.”\textsuperscript{13} Champions of the Temperance movement pushed back, fighting for the agricultural purity of original intent and scorning

\textsuperscript{10} For example, the \textit{Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye} published the resolutions adopted at the September 30, 1864 meeting of the Board of Directors of the State Agricultural Society. One resolution reads, “\textit{Whereas}, The proprietors of the Barret House, Whitman House and McCutcheon House, did last winter, prior to the location of the Fair, propose and guarantee, in writing that they would keep and entertain visitors during the exhibition at stated prices per day. And, whereas, complaints have been made to us that the agreements have not been complied with, but the proprietors of said houses have charged and are charging from fifty to one hundred per cent., if not more, than said agreement…\textit{Resolved}… the course pursued by all the landlords of the principal hotels in Burlington, with the single exception of the Teederick House, towards the visitors is without parallel in the history of our society, and meets our most hearty condemnation, and that justice to the Society, and the Fair demands that we should thus publicly make this exposition, that the blame and censure may fall where it truly and actually belongs.” \textit{Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye} (Burlington, Iowa), “The Fair,” October 5, 1864.

\textsuperscript{11} Burlington Weekly Hawk-Eye (Burlington, IA), “The Iowa State Fair: The Hawkeye Corresponded Describes the Buildings,” September 6, 1888.

\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Burlington Hawk-Eye} (Burlington, Iowa), “No Place to Sleep: Thousands of State Fair Visitors Walk the Streets at Night: Hotels Fail to Accommodate: Capacity of Every Des Moines Hostelry Overtaxed and Hordes of People Sleep Out of Doors,” August 29, 1903.

such sensational attractions, successfully banning alcohol and gambling on fair grounds. Spectacle and Temperance were engaged in a long tug-of-war battle; just as victory seemed imminent, the other side exerted another burst of energy. However, the desire to make money proved to be an admirable adversary to the virtues of agriculture and, looking to the modern iteration of the Fair, spectacle won out.

The Iowa State Fair that exists today may be almost completely unrecognizable to its founders, but there is at least one notable aspect of the historic Fair that is still in full-swing: the presence of prominent political figures and candidates. There is evidence from as early as 1855—the Fair’s second year—which points to the event as an important time of political convening. In preparation of the 1856 election, the need to hold a State Republican Convention was unanimously agreed upon, but the “manner, time and place of calling it” was not. The *Fairfield Ledger* argues:

> Some suggest holding it at Fairfield at the time of the State Fair. Others suggest a conference of the friends of the movement here during the Fair for the purpose of determining the time, place, &c., of holding the convention. We think this latter suggestion the best one. There will be persons from every portion of the State in attendance at the Fair, and a perfect understanding can then be arrived at relative to the calling of the convention… Next year’s campaign will be a most important one for the country. We should prepare for it in such a manner as will insure such action on the part of the Republican majority of Iowa as will effectually wipe out the last remnant of old hunker doughfacism in the State…With a view of bringing this about let the friends of true Republicanism meet together for consultation during the coming State Fair.

Even in its infancy, the Fair was a unique opportunity to talk to folks from all over the state, and that fact did not go unrecognized. As the *Fairfield Ledger* shows, the State Fair and politics were linked from its inception. Or, as the *Burlington Daily Hawkeye* inquires, “These are stirring times in politics, and if a man neglects so great an electioneering field as the State Fair, wherewithal shall he gather enough votes to carry him through?” Especially as the Fair transitioned from a purely agricultural event to the social and entertainment event of the year, it became imperative for local politicians and political-wannabes to make an appearance.

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14 Gigliotti, “Growing Iowa.”
While this example displays the opportunity for political organizing provided by the Fair, there were also early scandals involving Fair organizers using the event as a means of furthering their own political agendas. For example:

In giving reasons why the Iowa state fair has been a financial failure the Des Moines Register names as one of the principal of them the wholesale distribution of free passes. “These pieces of cardboard are scattered indiscriminately,” says the Register. It is not surprising to receive this information. For several years, the Iowa State Agricultural Society has had a good deal of politics in its management and its officers and directors have in many cases striven harder to promote their political prospects than advance the interests of the fair. Its directory has been a favorite training ground for aspirants for state office. Directors, anxious to get friends in all parts of the state, the distribution of passes has been one of the favorite methods adopted.17

Interestingly, candidates are now required to pay for their tickets, perhaps harking back to a decision made after these initial scandals.18 Not that the $12 admission fee is likely to break the bank, but the transaction is symbolic of the desire to curtail the political reputation of an event that is agricultural in origin. In fact, the Fair has official political guidelines which end by stating, “The Iowa State Fair does not endorse candidates or parties,”19 and while that may be true, it does not make the Fair apolitical. For instance, The Washington Post has published a piece called, “How the Iowa State Fair Became a Political Rite of Passage” which highlights this link between politicians and the Fair, even though the author dates the phenomenon to 1954, devaluing the century of political involvement leading up to that point.20 As demonstrated, the Iowa State Fair did not become a political flytrap—it has always been one.

17 Sioux City Tribune (Sioux City, Iowa), untitled, syndicated in Ackley World (Ackley, IA), September 14, 1984.
While the political aspect of the Fair has remained significant, after scouring through newspaper archives, it still remains unclear as to when the Fair shifted emphasis from displaying food to selling and consuming it. There is very little mention of food consumption in newspapers covering the first fifty years of the Fair, which either suggests that refreshments were either not a huge part of the Fair’s identity or such a basic part that coverage did not seem necessary. Food was displayed in great quantities, but this food would have only been shown-off, not eaten. There are small snippets of evidence that a range of lunch options was present, like this 1871 tiny article in the Cedar Rapids Times which reads simply, “A Popular Place—Cleveland’s Cottage was a popular place during the Fair, and his oyster fries and stews were in great demand, as they still are by all who appreciate a genuine article in this line.”21 By the turn of the century at least, if not earlier, refreshment stands were well-frequented, as described by the Des Moines Daily News: “The dining halls kept up their prices, however, and the places were crowded. Not a stand on the ground complained of poor patronage.”22 Yet, food still did not play as prominent a role in historical newspapers as it does in today’s coverage of the Fair.

Although the shift in emphasis from political appearances to political consumption is nebulous, candidates have been making a point to sample the fatty fare since at least the 1990s. While the 2015 Fair featured nearly 200 options,23 more often than not, it is a pork

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21 Cedar Rapids Times (Cedar Rapids, IA), “A Popular Place,” September 21, 1871.
22 Des Moines Daily News (Des Moines, IA), “Record Being Made: State Fair is now Coming in On the Home Stretch,” August 20, 1900.
23 Stapledon, “Everything to Know About Iowa State Fair Food.” There is no data on the number of foods offered each year, but there are consistently new editions and one-time treats that prove unpopular. That is to say, while the number fluctuates, it is most likely about the same for recent years.
chop “on a stick” that candidates have been seen eating. Chapter Two discussed how both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were often photographed with food, but rarely seen eating it. Interestingly, that pattern was broken for both of them during their perspective visits to the Iowa State Fair, suggesting that either Iowa or pork is so important to their campaigns that they had to eat it. Of the fifteen major presidential candidates who visited the Fair in 2015, only three of them seemed to have to strolled through without trying or grilling a pork chop. Which begs the question, of all the meal options, why do candidates choose a pork chop time and again? What is the significance of pork?

Of the most commonly consumed meats in the United States—chicken, beef, pork, and turkey—only one is native to the Americas. Cows, pigs, and chickens were all introduced to the New World from the Old. The National Pork Board, based in Des Moines, offers a brief history of pork which begins:

The pig dates back 40 million years to fossils which indicate that wild pig-like animals roamed forests and swamps in Europe and Asia. By 4900 B.C. pigs were domesticated in China, and were being raised in Europe by 1500 B.C. On the insistence of Queen Isabella, Christopher Columbus took eight pigs on his voyage to Cuba in 1493. But it is Hernando de Soto who could be dubbed


25 There is no data that lists all of the candidates who made an appearance at the 2015 Iowa State Fair. This number was achieved by cross referencing both a list of candidates from the Democratic and Republican parties who did not withdrawal before the February 1, 2016 Iowa caucus, and then searching for visual evidence of each of those candidates at the Fair. This included: Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump, John Kasich, Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Ben Carson, Jeb Bush, Jim Gilmore, Chris Christie, Carly Fiorina, Rick Santorum, Rand Paul, Mike Huckabee, Bernie Sanders, Martin O’Malley. Of those candidates, only Jim Gilmore, Rand Paul, and Bernie Sanders cannot be seen with a pork chop.
“the father of the American pork industry.” He landed with America’s first 13 pigs at Tampa Bay, Florida in 1539.

Native Americans reportedly became very fond of the taste of pork, resulting in some of the worst attacks on the de Soto expedition. By the time of de Soto’s death three years later, his pig herd had grown to 700 head, not including the ones his troops had consumed, those that ran away and became wild pigs (and the ancestors of today’s feral pigs or razorbacks), and those given to the Native Americans to keep the peace. The pork industry in America had begun.26

Christopher Columbus did introduce pigs on his second voyage—along with horses, dogs, cattle, chickens, sheep, and goats—but the rest of this historiography should be taken with a grain of salt.27 This depiction of valiant explorers taming the wild New World through successful animal husbandry and generous diplomacy towards a vicious, pork-hungry Native population would perhaps give a long-standing legitimacy to the American pork industry if, in fact, this tale was true.

In reality, humans had little to do with the proliferation of pigs in the Americas apart from the initial introduction. With seemingly unlimited space to roam, food to forage, and lack of predators, pigs reproduced at rates difficult to imagine. “Their numbers burgeoned so rapidly, in fact,” begins Alfred Crosby in his groundbreaking work, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492, “that doubtless they had much to do with the extinction of certain plants, animals, and even the Indians themselves, whose gardens they encroached upon.”28 In April of 1514, Spanish conquistador Diego Velásquez de Cuéllar wrote to the King of Spain in April of 1514 that, “the pigs he had brought to Cuba had increased to 30,000,” which Crosby points out is “best translated from the sixteenth-century Spanish as ‘more pigs than I ever saw before in my life.’”29 Taking advantage of the pig’s successful adaptation to the New World, many of the early explorers dropped off Old World pigs on Caribbean islands to provide food for future visitors, as was the practice of sailors for thousands of years prior.30 Pigs very literally fed the conquest of America. Far from domesticated, “Once ashore in America,”

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 76.
30 Ibid., 78.
explains Crosby, “[the pig] became a fast, tough, lean, self-sufficient greyhound of a hog much closer to appearance and personality to a wild boar than to one of our twentieth-century hogs.”³¹ A colonizer in its own right, the pig was determined to make America its new home.

The pig’s relative self-sufficiency has been key to its popularity in Christian countries since at least the Middle Ages. To a contemporary reader who has experienced the recent “Bacon Mania”³², this may prove comically difficult to imagine, but bacon “was always regarded as a typical peasant food.”³³ It was an animal that fed off garbage, wallowed in the mud, and performed no task other than growing meat. Pigs were accessible to the masses and so the nobility wanted nothing to do with them. The most lasting connotations to pork, however, come from religious rather than class-based distinctions. However, as Mary Douglas writes in her seminal text Purity and Danger, “Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas. Hence, any piecemeal interpretation of the pollution rules of another culture is bound to fail.”³⁴ Therefore, this discussion does not pretend to be conclusive, explain complex cultures by religion alone, nor definitively explain why certain taboos exist. Instead, it seeks to point out the unique position pork holds across major world religions as a means of contextualizing the cultural connotations surrounding the animal as food.

Of the five major world religions, two explicitly ban the consumption of pork (Islam and Judaism) and one is primarily vegetarian (Buddhism). In her book Cuisine and Empire, food historian Rachel Laudan chronicles the rise and fall of major world cuisines, most of which were highly influenced by religion. She describes how when a Perso-Islamic cuisine starting to take shape around 800 C.E., only

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³¹ Ibid., 77.
³² Over the last few decade in the United States, as an American reader has surely recognized, bacon has appeared in everything from cocktails to dessert. This phenomenon has sometimes been termed “Bacon Mania” or “Bacon Craze.” For one take on the bacon sensation, see: David Sax, “The Bacon Boom Was Not an Accident,” Bloomberg, October 6, 2014, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-06/bacon-why-americas-favorite-food-mania-happened.
the consumption of pork and blood were forbidden.\textsuperscript{35} Additionally, as anthropologist Marvin Harris
points out in his article, “The Abominable Pig,” other than the ban on pork, the Qur’an “Is virtually free
of meat taboos.”\textsuperscript{36} The Old Testament, on the other hand, is described by Harris as “a treasure trove of
forbidden flesh.” Nevertheless, the Jewish prohibition of pork is still notable.\textsuperscript{37} The basic explanation for
these religious taboos surrounding the consumption of pork is often explained by describing swine as
“unclean.” While that answer is unsatisfactory, it does have some merit.

Despite the saying “sweat like a pig,” pigs actually lack the ability to sweat, yet they require a
cool climate. Therefore, if pigs do not have access to clean mud holes when temperatures rise above 86
degrees Fahrenheit, they will desperately wallow in their own excrement in order to avoid heat stroke.\textsuperscript{38} A
Materialist, like Harris, would use this same biological reasoning to explain the Islamic pork ban too—
pigs are not well-adapted to the climate of the Middle East and were consequentially banned for economic
and logistical reasons.\textsuperscript{39} Christianity accepted pork, which Laudan argues was most likely due to a
combination of environmental factors and a desire to differentiate itself from the Judaic tradition. Judaism
banned blood; Christianity made the symbolic\textsuperscript{40} drinking of the blood of Christ central to its new religion,
additionally using the blood of slaughtered animals to thicken sauces and make sausages.\textsuperscript{41} Judaism
prohibited pork; Christianity permitted it. Although it is important to note that even within Christianity,
pork came with an asterisk: “those who exercise the body” could eat pork, “but it should be avoided by

\textsuperscript{36} It should be noted that Harris is specifically referencing the Qur’an, which is not the only Islamic
religious text. The sayings of the prophet Muhammad in the Hadith literature include more details on
dietary rules. Marvin Harris, “The Abominable Pig,” in Food and Culture: A Reader, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed. (New York,
Routledge: 2013), ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, 59. “These things only has He forbidden
\textsuperscript{37} Harris, “The Abominable Pig,” 59.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{40} Or literal depending on the denomination’s canon on transubstantiation.
\textsuperscript{41} Rachel Laudan, “Christianity Transforms the Cuisines of Europe and the Americas, 100-160 C.E.,” in Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History (Berkley, University of California Press: 2013), 169.
those ‘who devote themselves to the development of the soul.’”\textsuperscript{42} Notwithstanding this caveat, compared to Islamic and Jewish strongholds, Christian landholdings widely accepted and consumed pork.

This is significant because it was Christians who populated the American colonies, founded the United States, and eventually grew the American pork industry. Today, Iowa is 77% Christian while of the remaining 23%, only 2% are practicing non-Christians (21% unaffiliated).\textsuperscript{43} While pork does not play a significant role in Christian doctrine, its importance to Iowa creates a problem for candidates of a religion which forbids its consumption; it highlights potentially controversial differences. While the U.S. constitution separates Church and State in writing, expressly forbidding religious requirements for office, in practice the U.S. government has been primarily Christian. In fact, out of the forty-four presidents of the United States, forty-two have been some Christian denomination while two (Lincoln and Jefferson) had no formal affiliation.\textsuperscript{44} When Bernie Sanders won the New Hampshire in the 2016 primaries, he became the first Jewish presidential candidate ever to win a state primary.\textsuperscript{45} This is a notable event given the historic precedent of Christian presidents, but Sanders’s absence from the Iowa State Fair cannot be attributed to an avoidance of pork because he does not keep kosher. None of this is to say that a candidate must be Christian to get elected into the executive office, but there is something telling in the fact that only two unaffiliated individuals have managed so far.

While religious dietary restrictions can create an obstacle for potential presidential candidates, abstaining from meat for secular reasons can be just as damaging to a political campaign. As mentioned earlier, the United States has never elected a vegetarian president. In the 2016 election cycle, Ben Carson was the only openly-vegetarian candidate. While he has described situations in which he would eat

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\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 169. Quoting Clement of Alexandria.
\textsuperscript{43} Pew Research Center, “Adults in Iowa: Religious Composition of Adults in Iowa,” accessed April 17, 2017, \url{http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/iowa/}.
\textsuperscript{44} David Masci, “Almost All U.S. Presidents, Including Trump, Have Been Christians,” Pew Research Center, January 20, 2017, \url{http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/20/almost-all-presidents-have-been-christians/}.
chicken out of politeness, he claims pork makes him ill. Interestingly, while he opted for a slice of pizza at the Fair instead of the pork chop, he was still photographed flipping pork burgers. Despite not eating meat, hating pork, and proselytizing about the virtues and health benefits of a vegetarian diet, he still took part in cooking pork while in Iowa. Pork is so important to the state that he could not completely avoid it.

Vegetarianism has been problematic for political candidates not just because of pork at the Iowa State fair, but also because of deeper American connotations between meat and masculinity. While the nurturing act of cooking typically falls into a female realm, grilling is a major exception. As professor Rebecca Swenson, who specializes in agricultural and environmental communication, points out in her article, “Domestic Divo? Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity, and Food,” at least thirteen cookbooks intended for men appeared in the United States from 1946 to 1960. Most of these told cookbook writers told men “how to prepare meat over a roaring fire, assuming an innate, caveman-like connection between men and barbequed meat…meat has long been a symbol of masculinity and male power.” Swenson’s term “caveman” seems unnecessarily derogatory, but there is a connection between males and meat that harks back to a distant past in which males hunted and females gathered. In the rationale for his study, “Is Meat Male?,“ psychologist Paul Rozen explores the same concept: “Meat, as the product of the hunt,” he says, “falls into the male domain since cross-culturally and historically, hunting has been an almost exclusively male domain (this is truer with large game animals than with smaller animals and fish). Meat seems associated with strength and power, two features generally attributed to males.”

47 This is not true of the industrial or professional kitchen which is very much dominated by males.
specifically emphasized in grilled meat.\textsuperscript{50}

Rozin et al. later discuss the connection between meat, males, and protein: “It is also commonly understood that physical strength, an attribute more characteristic of males, requires optimal nutrition, and meat is often seen as the most nutritious and strength (i.e., muscle) inducing of foods.”\textsuperscript{51} The literal eating of animal muscle—meat—is perceived to directly become human muscle, a sign of strength, virility, and competence in men. Or as Fabio Parasecoli writes in his article, “Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men’s Fitness Magazines,” “Anyway, everybody knows that cooking meat, as on the occasion of barbecues is a man’s thing. Exceptions are rare.”\textsuperscript{52} The connection between males and meat seems so innate, so “natural,” that it is difficult to parse. A facet which, as explained earlier, is key to the propagation of mythologies. Whether it connects back to hunting, the animalistic image of teeth tearing through flesh, or the high-levels of strength-enabling protein, there seems to be something manly about meat. The association is so ingrained that on some level a man who does not eat meat seems atypical.

This gendering of meat provides an interesting framework through which to analyze the pork photo-ops at the Iowa State Fair. Figure 21 provides a side-by-side of the two most prominent female

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure22}
\caption{Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton in 2007 (left) and Republican candidate, Carly Fiorina in 2015 (right) grilling pork at the Iowa State Fair. | Photos credited to Eric Thayer (left) and Justin Sullivan (right)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{50} Levi Strauss also discusses the gendering of “roasting” or “grilling” (which would fall under the same apex of roasting in his culinary triangle). While he was attempting to discover universal principals, and therefore does not pertain specifically to the United States, he described an “association of the roasted with men, the boiled with women.” Levi Strauss, “Culinary Triangle,” 43.


presidential candidates of the last three election cycles at the Iowa State Fair. Both Hillary Clinton (in 2007) and Carly Fiorina (in 2015) took a turn at the grill. While views are changing, the presidency has historically been viewed as a male role. In the photos, both female candidates are flanked by male grillers, underlining this typically masculine association with the activity while also displaying their ability to do it with just as much ease. They are showing prospective constituents that despite their gender, they are still able to fulfill typically male roles; an unfortunately necessary demonstration for those who aspire to become the first female in the White House. Interestingly, while Clinton stood in line to get a taste of the pork chop at the 2015 Fair, Fiorina could not be seen eating anything (although she did indulge in a lemonade)—nor does a Google image search turn up any results of Fiorina ever being documented while eating. Fiorina appears so hyper-aware of the risks involved with food consumption along the campaign trail that she decided to eschew food photo-ops all together. Clinton, however, disregarded her own advice to not eat on camera and nibbled on her hand-held pork chop while walking around the Fair. Of all the food Clinton posed with along the campaigned trail, the pork chop was the item she deemed necessary to physically consume. As is regrettably the expectation in U.S. Politics, Clinton had to adopt more typically male behaviors—in this case, biting into a hunk of meat—to appear more fit for the nation’s highest office.

With this lens, the ridicule fueled by the photo of Michele Bachmann in Chapter Two (Figure 11) makes more sense. People pay attention to what candidates eat, but for female candidates the commentary is more intensely personal. Bachmann was captured mid-blink, which judging from personal experience, is a relatively common occurrence in photography. However, bad photos with closed or nearly closed eyes are rarely published. Yet, that photo was. Bachmann was intentionally and overtly sexualized because of the photo’s semblance to an act of fellatio, and a sexualized female is the antithesis to the historic characterization of the president of the United States of America. Her corn dog was used to invalidate her.

Of course, most of the candidates who are seen eating pork or grilling at the Iowa State Fair are not female, in which case the gendering of meat functions in a slightly different way. Rather than to
display their ability to perform outside of societal gender roles, male candidates are affirming their ability to fulfil the roles and expectations of their desired position. While manning the grill in 2015, Jeb Bush told the crowd that he is used to being in charge of the grill or his own family on the weekends. “They look pretty good to me…I think we’ve got it under control,” Bush remarked on the chops. His used his time at the grill to highlight his masculine character as a wholesome father and family man. He actions told onlookers that he values family bonding through the American backyard barbeque tradition. He communicated to potential constitutions that as the man of the family, he is the one who grills. Through eating and grilling meat, male candidates are communicating to potential constituents their fitness as Americans and men to take on the responsibility of Head of State. While that message is front and center, is not the only idea communicated through grilling and eating pork chops at the Iowa State Fair.

This particular photo op is also an opportunity to communicate another silent message: I am a friend of the pork industry. As Barry Estabrook concisely summarizes in his book, Pig Tales: An Omnivore’s Quest for Sustainable Meat, “No state raises even close to as many pigs as Iowa.” Figure 23 provides a visual representation of Iowa pork production in relation to the rest of the United States. In

![Figure 23: Democratic candidate, Howard Dean in 2003 (left) and Republican candidate, Rudy Giuliani in 2007 (right).](image)

*Photos credited to Getty Images*

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2015, Iowa produced 35.7% of the total U.S. income for pork, with the second ranking state, Minnesota, producing only 12%. In other words, Iowa produces almost three times as much pork as any other state.\textsuperscript{55} Interestingly, at a cumulative $1.4 billion, Iowa also receives the highest amount of government agricultural payments.\textsuperscript{56} Even more curious is the fact that the second ranking state in this regard is also Minnesota, with $976 million cumulative payment total.\textsuperscript{57} In 2015, Iowa alone received 13% of the government’s direct farm payments.\textsuperscript{58} 2014-2015 did see a particularly deadly virus, Porcine Epidemic Diarrhea Virus (PEDv), which could account for the quantity of government payments received that year. However, this is no way negates the support the U.S. government provides the Iowa pork industry. The Iowa pork industry is in turn dependent on these payments, and therefore must ensure that their interests will be protected as power continually switches hands in D.C.

\textsuperscript{56} These are payments made by the Department of Agriculture, Farm Service Agency to US agricultural producers participating in Farm Bill programs including commodity, price support, disaster assistance and conservation. Farm Service Agency, “Farm Programs Payments,” accessed April 17, 2017, https://catalog.data.gov/dataset/farm-programs-payments.
With that in mind, it is no surprise to discover that the pork industry is a very powerful interest group. For the 2016 election cycle, the National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) was the single biggest political donor in the state of Iowa at $419,000.\textsuperscript{59} The NPPC also spent the most money lobbying of any other livestock industry in 2016; at $1,640,000, they spent almost $1.3 million more than the second ranking lobbying client, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association.\textsuperscript{60} Of money given directly to presidential candidates, both Marco Rubio and Hillary Clinton received a donation of $5,000.\textsuperscript{61} When instead looking at political donations by the entire livestock industry, Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, Hillary


Clinton, Ben Carson, and Marco Rubio comprise the top five recipients.\textsuperscript{62} To illustrate the influence of the pork industry in U.S. politics, Estabrook recounts a personal experience:

As we drove back toward Carroll along Route 30, Rowles’s cell phone rang. A male voice said, “Hello, Craig. Gotta minute?”

Rowles said, “I do, but I have a reporter in the truck beside me, so you might not want to talk right now.”

The guy said, “Later,” and hung up.

“He’s a buddy of mine,” Rowles said. “He’s thinking about running for the US Senate and wants my opinions about it.”\textsuperscript{63}

A discussion between “buddies” is nothing peculiar, but without knowing who was calling or how deep their relationship was, it is a notable occurrence: a political hopeful wishing to discuss a possible candidacy with Craig Rowles, “the unofficial face of Iowa hog farming in the national media”\textsuperscript{64} and member of the Iowa Pork Producers Association (IPPA) Board of Directors. A prospective Iowan senator would need Iowa's biggest industry behind him.

An observant reader may have noticed something that has yet to be mentioned: each of these pork photo ops take place at the Iowa Pork tent. The candidates, with few exceptions, don aprons emblazoned with the National Pork Producers current marketing slogan\textsuperscript{65} that have been embroidered with their names. As underlined throughout this thesis, there is no spontaneity to these food photo ops; they are intricately planned. The pre-embroidered aprons attest to that


\textsuperscript{63} Estabrook, \textit{Pig Tales}, 102.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 86-7.

\textsuperscript{65} “Pork: Be Inspired” replaced “The Other White Meat” in 2011.
premeditation. Through one photo op, politicians are able to simultaneously convey a handful of messages. They can declare their intent to protect the interest of the pork industry as they communicate to Iowans that they fully appreciate their prized export, all the while telling a wider audience that they possess a physical and qualitative fitness for the presidency through the piece of pork they publically consume. It is considered impolite to talk with a full mouth, but it is also unnecessary; enough has already been said.
Chapter Five: Panem et Circenses Food in the Hands of Italian Politicians

The last three chapters have shown how American society is rife with naturalized food constructs and how, in turn, politicians attempt (sometimes successfully) to wield these food mythologies to influence public opinion. The way that the communicative power of food manifests itself in the United States is certainly unique to its cultural context, but food is used as a means of communication across cultures and languages. This last chapter explores the nature of communicating through food in an Italian context, a country which prides itself on a food culture very different from the one found in the United States. In Italy, attachments to particular foods are not veiled like they are in the United States. This peculiar quality of American food identity was demonstrated most fully in Chapter Two, which showed how food constructs must often be inverted before they are noticed by the public. In an Italian context, this inversion is unnecessary; food constructs were never hidden. Attachment to regional and national products and cuisine holds a much more central position in everyday life. Moreover, the political nature of food is known, if even just through the awareness of demarcations of origin protecting “real Italian” (fill in the blank) from imposters trying to profit off of the name. Food is treated differently in Italy and therefore food is used to communicate in likewise distinctive ways. Whereas in the United States politicians often attempt to use food as a means of highlighting or altering their image without drawing attention to their manipulation of food mythologies, in the Italian political arena, food is employed to make a bold statement. If American politicians talk with their mouths full, Italian politicians scream.

In some circumstances, as was the case with Deputy Gianluca Buonanno on April 1, 2014, Italian politicians scream both literally through their words and metaphorically though food. On that day, parliament was discussing legislation that would decriminalize illegal immigration. Buonanno, a member of the Lega Nord,1 was appalled. He stood to speak. “Looking at the clock,” he began, “I saw that today is

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1 In the Italian governmental system, the legislative branch is comprised of the Chamber of Deputies (630 members) and Senate (315 members). The Lega Nord, which literally translates to the “North League” is a far-right political party which was founded on the platform of succeeding from the economically
the first of April and it came to mind that this could be a joke, this debate.”

In the same vein of April Fool’s Day in the United States, Italy celebrates *pesce d’aprile* (April Fish) in which paper fishes are fixated onto the backs of unsuspecting individuals as a practical joke. “And even more,” Buonanno continued, “yesterday, when I heard that the President of the Chamber made certain statements in defense of illegal aliens [who are not treated as well as] those who go to five-star hotels—we are not thinking of our pensioners who eat anchovies, we are not thinking of our pensioners who, to get by, eat sardines.” At this point he bent down to retrieve an actual seabass. With a firm grip on its tail, he waved the fish back and forth, declaring it the *spigola di aprile* (April seabass), like those “served to the President of the Chamber.”

Buonanno was known for his eccentric protests in parliament, but with this *spigola di aprile*, he was getting at something deeper than a practical joke. He evoked the image of “pensioners,” hard-working Italian citizens who have gone into retirement, been forgotten by the government and, in turn, are left picking at canned fish. He contrasted this heart-tugging image with the fat fish held in hand, the expensive sea bass that supposedly decorates the plate of Laura Boldrini, the President of the Chamber of dependent south. After nearly fading into obscurity in the 2013 elections, it has bounced back stronger than ever, advocating for tighter borders and withdrawal from the European Union.

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3 My translation and transcription. “E ancora di più ieri, quando sentito la presidente della camera fare certe affermazione in difesa dei clandestini rispetto a chi va in i alberghi cinque stelle, allora noi non pensiamo ai nostri pensionanti che magari mangiano acciughe, noi non pensiamo ai nostri pensionanti che magari per andare in avanti mangiano sardine.” Ibid.

4 My translation and transcription. “…questo serve a presidente della camera.” Ibid.
Deputies. He could have said “Boldrini cares about immigrants more than Italians,” or “Boldrini lives in a different reality and ignores the Italians who most need governmental help.” He could have used those words, but instead, he chose to say it with food. Food is more immediate than abstract notions of wealth disparities, it appeals directly to emotion and the physical sensation of hunger. It evokes the knowledge of supermarket prices and the cost disparity between a seabass and sardines or anchovies. It implies that Boldrini can afford to romanticize illegal immigrants, but she is doing so at the expense of deserving Italians. Surely, Buonanno emphasized with his fish, this must be a joke.

It was not a joke and Buonanno’s sea bass got him expelled from the chamber, but his pesce performance was not the only time Italian politicians have used food as a means of protest. Less than a month after Buonanno’s spigola di aprile, then Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and Cesare Prandelli, coach of the Italian national soccer team, staged their own alimentary protest. Surrounded by reporters and flashing cameras in the courtyard of Palazzo Chigi, the official residence of the Italian Prime minister. With a bright smile, Renzi held up a banana and proclaimed, “Facciamo uno foto come Dani Alves” (let’s take a photo like Dani Alves). Both he and Prandelli then broke off and ate pieces of banana as shutters clicked and cameras flashed. Perfect, Prandelli gestured with his hand after swallowing his bite. The photos were everywhere—one news source even compiled a gallery of 32 nearly identical photos of this short demonstration. The banana has

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5 Vista Agenzia Televisiva Nazionale, “Renzi e Prandelli come Dani Alves, mangiano una banana contro il razzismo,” video, 19 seconds, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INFQCa0VALE.
gained particular prominence in recent years as a favorite weapon of racist fans in global soccer, who launch them at black players as a way of declaring them monkeys. With this banana, Renzi was showing his support for an anti-racism campaign stemming from an incident that occurred a few days earlier.

During a home game between Spanish soccer teams Barcelona and Villarreal, someone in the crowd threw a banana at Dani Alves, a Brazilian playing for Barcelona. In response to the racist gesture—in itself a message communicated through food—Alves picked up the banana that landed at his feet and took a big bite before continuing on with his corner kick. By eating the banana, Alves physically masticated and consumed the insult of his abusers. With his action, he transferred ownership of the symbol from racists to those protesting racism. He sent a clear message: racism will not win. Following the game, one of Alves’s teammates, Neymar, posted a selfie with his son, each holding bananas (one real, one plush). The accompanying hashtag was “#somostodosmacacos,” or “we are all monkeys.” Latching on to Neymar’s hashtag, fellow soccer players and fans alike shared their own tribute photos in support of Alves and against the use of bananas to communicate racist messages. Even though Prime Minister Renzi did not come up with the idea of the photo, his decision to recreate it as the head of a country that views calcio through a quasi-religious lens was notable.

While this event took place in Spain, it resonated within Italy. The year before, in 2013, the prevalence of racism in soccer—in a global context as well as within Italy in particular—was brought to the forefront of Italian media. During a friendly match between AC Milan—the soccer team owned by former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi—and Pro Patria, Kevin-Prince Boateng, a German national of Ghanaian decent, was inundated with racial slurs from the crowd. In response, the fed up Boateng punted the ball into the stands, ripped off his jersey and walked off the field mid-game. The remaining players,

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7 CNN, “See Soccer Star’s Reaction to Tossed Banana,” video, 2:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFi9-1p1LWI.
9 It was later reported that this was a planned stunt to further an anti-racism campaign, but planned or not, the action successfully utilized food as a means of communication. Fernando Kallás, “Neymar Planned Alves’ Banana Eating Anti-Racist Protest,” AS (Spain), April 29, 2014, http://as.com/diarioas/2014/04/29/english/1398770114_882297.html.
10 “Soccer” in Italian.
coaches, and club officials of AC Milan followed and did not return to finish the game. European anti-racism groups, like FARE (Football Against Racism in Europe), praised Boateng for refusing to accept racism and drawing attention to the issue, yet; despite these few verbal recognitions, there was no widespread display of solidarity like the social media storm following Alves’s banana incident. It is easy to see why one incident garnered more support than the other. The banana gave Alves’s supporters a replicable image, the cheap price and easy accessibility of the fruit doubtlessly playing a role in the popularity of the campaign. More so than the user-friendliness of the photo concept, in many countries—including, but not limited to Brazil, Spain, and Italy—the banana has a long history of racist associations. Italy’s Observatory on Racism and Anti-Racism in Football estimated 662 incidents of white Italians throwing bananas at black athletes from 2000-2014. “We are all monkeys” gave individuals a small chance to reclaim the fruit, to reverse its discriminatory message.

This racist symbol is not confined to the context of soccer. In Italy, bananas have been used to communicate a racist insult within a purely political realm as well. While Renzi ate a banana to protest racism, at least one Italian politician has been on the receiving end of that racist message. In 2013, Cécile Kyenge, a naturalized Italian citizen originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo, was appointed Minister of Integration in the cabinet of Prime Minister Enrico Letta and the abuses she faced were unparalleled. Roberto Calderoli, senator and secretary of the Lega Nord once said, “I love animals. Bears and wolves, as everyone knows—but when I see the pictures of Kyenge I cannot but think of, even if I’m not saying she is one, the features of an orangutan.” Later adding that Kyenge could better serve as minister in her “native country,” notwithstanding her Italian citizenship and residency of thirty years. Calderoli’s comments were condemned, but he suffered no reparatory consequences. This example barely skims the surface of the graphic insults hurled at Kyenge, and while her abuse did not go unnoticed in

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Europe, there was one incident that gained noticeably stronger attention. At a political rally for the Partito Democratico (PD), someone in the crowd launched two bananas at the stage where Kyenge was speaking. The moderator immediately condemned the “stupid gesture.” Kyenge responded simply, “With people dying of hunger and the crisis of food waste, this is sad.” She later appeared on the political talk show Annuono where she discussed this incident among others. Kyenge then gifted a banana to the host, Giulia Innocenzi, asking, “It isn’t racist, right?” Innocenzi chuckled and peeled the banana while Kyenge added, “And one for Salvini,” handing an additional banana to Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega Nord.

These events with Kyenge and Renzi display how a banana can be used to communicate opposite messages. When Renzi bit in to his banana, smiling for the cameras, he was declaring that he opposes racism. He was refusing to leave power in the hands of those imbuing the fruit with a message of you don’t being here or you are not human. Similarly, when Kyenge gifted a banana to Innocenzi, she was likewise refusing to acknowledge the racist message her attacker tried to inject in it. Adding to the power of her protest, when she presented a banana to Salvini, he had little choice but to eat it. She was publically and cleverly telling him—and the Italian public watching from their living rooms—that she does not tolerate the xenophobic, anti-immigrant rhetoric coming from the Lega Nord and specifically from the mouth of Salvini. She very poetically forced Salvini to eat his words.

Perhaps inspired by the “#somostodosmacacos” campaign, Renzi used food once again about three months later to send a similar denouncement of wielding food as an insult. For the cover of their

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14 A social-democratic party and one of the largest political parties in Italy.
17 Matteo Salvini is known for his racist comments within Italy and outside of Italy he is often referred to as “Italy’s most racist politician.” Barbie Latza Nadeau, “Italy’s Most Racist Politician Comes to Philly to Help Donald Trump,” The Daily Beast, April 26, 2016, http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/04/26/italy-s-most-racist-politician-comes-to-philly-to-help-donald-trump.html.
August 30-September 5 edition, *The Economist* depicted Renzi, French President Francois Hollande, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and President of the European Central Bank Mario Draghi sinking on a boat made from a twenty-euro bill. While Hollande stares stoically forward, Merkel stands by his side and Draghi attempts to empty the water from the back of the boat, a bored expression on his face. Renzi stands alone in the middle, looking equal parts scared and confused, holding an ice cream cone like a nervous child. Politicians are often photographed enjoying an ice cream outdoors, but for Renzi, the depiction carries additional weight. As Italy’s youngest leader ever, Renzi had already been fighting the characterization of an unprepared leader with a sophomoric sense of entitlement, bending under the power of older, more experienced European leaders. *The Economist* broadcasted that depiction on the cover of a major U.K. publication—Renzi is neither steering Europe nor attempting to save it, he is merely along for the ride, standing in the shadow of two parental figures, pacified with an ice cream cone.

Instead of verbally commenting on the cover, Renzi put on a show. He asked Grom, an internationally-established artisanal gelato shop, to help out with his plan. On August 31st, a Grom gelataio rode his cart into the courtyard of Palazzo Chigi. Once the cart was in place, Renzi ambled out into the courtyard with a big smile, offering the gathered journalists a taste of “gelato vero” (real gelato). He was then handed a cone with his favorite flavors—cream and lemon—which he held out to the

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clicking cameras. “I gladly offer this gelato to our friends at The Economist,” he began, “True Italian gelato is artisanal gelato, not store bought.”\textsuperscript{19} Earlier that day he had responded to a tweet asking about the flavor of his Economist gelato. He wrote back, “I saw in the photo that [the gelato] is store bought. Which is good, for goodness sake. But I prefer artisanal gelato: cream and lemon thank you.”\textsuperscript{20} Renzi decided to ignore the childish characterization associated with him holding the ice cream and to, rather than fight the depiction, stand up for the integrity of Italian gelato. It was a move local vendors applauded, “because the important thing was that the prime minister publicized traditional gelato.”\textsuperscript{21} To those outside of il Bel Paese (and perhaps also to some inside), Italy is a land of pizza, pasta, wine, and gelato. Italian cuisine has so much more than that to offer, but if Italy is going to be known for those four things, Renzi wants the world to at least imagine the authentic version. He refused to be belittled by an adored product of Italian culture. Just like Alves publically ate his insult, so too did Renzi.


\textsuperscript{21} My translation. “…perché l’importante era che il premier facesse pubblicità al gelato tradizionale.” It is also of interest to note that while local gelato vendors praised the action, the specific details did cause some controversy. Renzi had to later clarify on twitter that he paid for the bill himself and did not use government money. Tommaso Labate, “Renzi e il gelato, dopo le polemiche la difesa su twitter: ‘Il conto lo pago io,’” Corriere della Sera (Milan, Italy), August 31, 2014, http://www.corriere.it/politica/14_agosto_31/renzi-gelato-le-polemiche-difesa-twitteril-conto-pago-io-89be1ce6-30e1-11e4-9629-425a3e33b602.shtml.
In both the banana and gelato examples, Renzi used food as a way of protesting others’ utilization of food as an insult, but there are times in which Italian politicians embody the other side of the exchange—when they seem more similar to the person who threw the banana than Alves biting into it. In 2008, as the president of the senate read off the results of the vote of confidence for Prime Minister Romano Prodi—156 in favor, 161 against—the senate erupted into chaos. The center-left government under Prime Minister Romano Prodi had effectively fallen. Conservative Senator Nino Strano\textsuperscript{22} cheered, spraying his vicinity with spumante, a type of sparkling wine, before unwrapping a few slices of mortadella and smugly shoving them into his mouth.\textsuperscript{23} The spumante must have made a mess, but it was only the mortadella that drew criticism for being rude and vulgar.

There is clearly some cultural context missing here. Mortadella is a type of Bolognese cured pork—bastardized as boloney in the United States— but \textit{Il Mortadella} is the nickname of the fallen prime minister, Romano Prodi. In eating the mortadella in the senate, Strano was not simply having a celebratory snack; he was aggressively destroying and symbolically eating Prodi. It is unclear exactly when this name caught on, but it is commonly attributed to the fact that Prodi himself comes from Bologna, the home of mortadella.\textsuperscript{24} Prodi has often been depicted as an oblong mortadella with glasses in political cartoons (as shown in Figure 30), but according to him, the nickname is a point of pride rather

\textsuperscript{22} Strano was a member of AN (Alleanza Nazionale), a conservative, nationalistic political party founded in 1994. The party dissolved in 2009 and Strano was not officially affiliated with another party until Futuro e Libertà per l'Italia, more centrist than AN but still right-leaning, was founded in February of 2011.
\textsuperscript{24} Prodi is additionally known as “Il Professore,” which is also in reference to his hometown of Bologna. The University of Bologna, founded in 1088, is the oldest university in continuous operation in the world.
than ridicule. “It is a nickname that they gave to me and it makes me proud,” Prodi began at the Festival of Mortadella in Bologna in 2013, further explaining, “From food of the proletariat, Mortadella was refined. It is a little bit like Italy’s journey, mortadella. And I hope to have followed the same course.”

Bologna, the capital of the Emilia-Romagna region, is often referred to as “La Grossa,” or “The Fat,” because it is world-renowned for its rich food and culture of eating well. Prodi is proud of that facet of his city and pleased to be associated with it.

Indeed, mortadella has a long history in Bologna and played a significant role in setting the precedent of safeguarding regional food specialties within Italy. In 1661, the cardinal-legate of Bologna, appointed by the Pope to lead Bologna, issued a proclamation condemning those “who show so little love for the public good that they arrogate themselves the right to make mortadelle containing some beef,” since true Bolognese mortadella was made solely with pork—a complaint reminiscent of the Germans’ desire to protect “genuine frankfurters” from the American adulteration.

It was the first known law established to protect a local specialty. Like with the pork chop in the previous chapter, “the political

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26 This nickname is a shortened version of the longer “La Dotta, La Grossa, e la Rossa,” (The Learned, The Fat, and the Red) referring firstly to the University of Bologna—the oldest continually functioning University in the world, and lastly to the city’s reputation as the radical center of Italian communism (plus the city is physically red thanks to the proliferation of terracotta roofs).

power of the city’s Guild of Sausage-Makers is not hard to detect behind the cardinal’s proclamation.”

Today Italy boasts the most foods with one of the three EU quality-food protection labels, with 269 (77 of which come from Emilia-Romagna). These labels are separate from the Italian-specific certifications, Indicazione Geografica Protetta (IGP—Indication of Geographic Protection) and Denominazione d’Origine Protetta (DOP—Protected Designation of Origin), designed to protect the quality of regional specialties by designating the specifics of production that allow a product to be called “mortadella” or “mozzarella.” So when Nino Strano ate mortadella on the senate floor, he was not just insulting Prodi, but he was also disrespected a venerated Italian product. Remorseful of his actions (or of the negative press following his actions), Strano apologized to the senate and wrote a personal letter to Prodi.

Interestingly, when Silvio Berlusconi succeeded Prodi as prime minister (for the fourth time), he too had a mortadella moment—although this time it was used to communicate a different message: pork is safe to eat. On April 30, 2009, Berlusconi addressed the audience at a Coldiretti conference. At the conclusion of his speech, he held up a cube of mortadella before eating it and proceeding carry a tray to the nearest reporters and attendees. “I’m sorry that I was not able to bring le veline,” he joked, referencing

Figure 32: Silvio Berlusconi holds up a cube of mortadella (left) before offering a tray of it to the crowd (right). | Photos credited to Julie News (left) and La Repubblica (left).

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28 Ibid.
30 Representing the interest of Italian farmers, Coldiretti is the largest professional agricultural organization in Europe.
the dancing showgirls who bring a piece of paper to the male hosts at the beginning of every episode of *
Striscia la notizia*—implying that females should be the ones serving food.

Sexist joke aside, Berlusconi was trying to counteract the fear of pork products bubbling up in the Italian consciousness. Originating in Mexico, the H1N1 “Swine Flu” pandemic of 2009-10 caused widespread panic despite causing no more deaths than the regular flu season.

The virus was spread from person to person and could not be contracted by eating pork products regardless of the health of the pig. It was not until June, two months later, that the World Health Organization would declare the H1N1 virus a pandemic, but at the time of Berlusconi’s mortadella celebration, people were already nervous. As one journalist explains, “In times of fear of swine flu, however, there are already many people who look at salami with fear, as if a mouthful of mortadella, or salami, or prosciutto, would be enough to contract the dangerous virus.”

By eating mortadella so ceremoniously at a gathering of the most significant agricultural organization in Europe, Berlusconi was making a declaration of cultural and economic significance in defense of Italian pork. As previously discussed, mortadella has a rich history within Italy, but Berlusconi’s had “the whole hog” to choose from, so to speak. Prosciutto, soppressata, capicola, cacciatorc, or my personal favorite, finocchiona are all important Italian pork products—any one of them could have communicated this message. Yet Berlusconi chose mortadella and it was not mere coincidence. Not only is mortadella well-known to Italians, but it also has an international reach similar—if not surpassing—that of prosciutto. What mortadella definitely has over prosciutto, though, is price.

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34 My translation. “In tempi di paura per l’influenza suina, però, sono già molte le persone che guardano ai salumi con paura, come se bastasse un boccone di mortadella, o di salame, o di prosciutto, per essere contagiati dal pericoloso virus.” Falco, “Berlusconi.”
Mortadella is not a posh choice, it is familiar and accessible. Therefore, Berlusconi’s declaration of the safety of pork was not only received by the average Italian, but it was also amplified outside of the peninsula, curbing any economic losses due to avoidance of pork before the effects of swine flu-induced anxiety could hit a peak.

This mortadella message was likely modeled off an earlier incident involving fear of a different barnyard animal. In 2008, eighty herds of buffalo were quarantined in the Naples region after suspicion of contamination. Routine testing found dangerous levels of dioxins, a byproduct of chemical manufacturing, in their milk—the integral ingredient in the prized *mozzarella di bufala*.\(^{35}\) Fingers were pointed at the Comorra, the mafia of Campagna, for their illegal business of dumping industrial waste from northern Italy in the southern countryside, allowing toxins to enter the water supply and leach into grazing pastures.\(^{36}\) Japan and South Korea immediately suspended all imports of Italian mozzarella.\(^{37}\) A week into the crisis, mozzarella sales had already fallen by as much as 50%.\(^{38}\) Officials emphasized that *mozzarella di bufala* was perfectly safe to eat while local producers took out full page ads defending DOP mozzarella, underlining that their stringent controls prevented any tainted milk from being made into cheese.\(^{39}\) On March 26\(^{th}\), the European Union threatened a Europe-wide ban on mozzarella if Italy did not produce more information about the crisis.\(^{40}\) The next day, during a televised demonstration, Minister of

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\(^{36}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.

Agricultural Policies Paolo De Castro—alongside Andrea Cozzolino, the regional agricultural commissioner, and Carlo Cannella, the president of the INRAN—ate a large mouthful of mozzarella di bufala. “Mozzarella di bufala from Campagna is an excellent product to consume with the utmost tranquility,” De Castro declared both verbally and through the action of eating. Still, Italy succumbed to the pressure of the EU the following day, issuing a recall despite also announcing they had already destroyed the milk from effected farms. Appeased, the EU dropped their embargo threat. DOP mozzarella di bufala is not only a revered cultural product, it is also an important industry. Employing 20,000 people, it produces €300 million in annual product. Thus, De Castro could not afford to give up after words proved insufficient in convincing the public that there was no danger the mozzarella. So, in a more extreme attempt to cull the swelling anxiety, he ate the supposed poison himself.

While this chapter focuses on Italy, it is difficult to discuss the political act of consuming an allegedly toxic product without taking a brief departure from Italy to discuss a similar, and more infamous occurrence in England. On May 16, 1990, then Agricultural Minister John Gummer conjured up a publicity stunt to fight the growing suspicion that bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)—commonly

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41 Istituto Nazionale di Ricerca gli Alimenti e la Nutrizione (National Institute of Alimentary Research and Nutrition)
referred to as “Mad Cow disease”—could also infect humans. Dragging his unwitting four-year-old daughter into his plan, both him and Cordelia were photographed chowing down on burgers. Of course, unlike with Berlusconi’s mortadella or De Castro’s mozzarella, neither of which were actually dangerous to consume, Gummer was wrong about BSE. The link between BSE and Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease in humans would be proven six years later. Like, Berlusconi and De Castro, Gummer was likewise worried about the economic implications of the rising beef crisis in his country. He was so worried, in fact, that he took the photo (Figure 33) to declare a lack of danger before he knew that for a fact. Even worse, he took advantage of his young daughter to further convince the public of his uninformed message of there is nothing wrong with British beef.

There was such a backlash to this photo that it was eventually claimed that the “photographs were staged and the hamburger had actually been bitten into by a civil servant.” This was an odd excuse, especially since it was not really a question of who actually consumed the burger so much as what Gummer was saying by appearing to have eaten it (that is without even commenting on how the sacrificial nature of a “civil servant” biting into the burger further proves that the government did not believe in the safety of British beef while simultaneously trying to convince the public of it). Just last year in 2016, while discussing Prime Minster Theresa May’s Brexit promises, journalist Gabby Hinsliff wrote,

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“Poor Cordelia Gummer. It’s a quarter of a century now since her politician father, John, publicly fed her a burger to quash public fears over mad cow disease—and she is for ever [sic] fixed in our minds as a tiny girl in an Alice band, symbolic of everything people most distrust about politicians,”

displaying how Gummer’s twenty-five-year-old photo remains relevant today.

Despite occurring in a different country, this British example is not unrelated. Hinsliff calls Gummer’s Mad Cow Disease burger “symbolic of everything people most distrust about politicians,” which is a very strong and fascinating statement. Politicians are armed with words, rhetoric. They know how to make promises and twist the truth to embellish their platforms. Politicians have a certain ethos, but as a figure, “the politician” is not inherently trustworthy. An educated listener knows not to take a politician’s words at face value, not to accept the truthfulness of their words just because they hold a position of prestige. As the maxim goes, “actions speak louder than words.” We are told to judge politicians not by what they say, but by what they do. This is not to discount the power of persuasion and the importance of language, but to display how there is a force more convincing and potent about speaking through an action. In every one of the last three cases—Berlusconi’s mortadella, De Castro’s mozzarella, and Gummer’s beef burger—the politicians first attempted to use words to convince the public that the food in question posed no real health threat. Those assurances were not enough to soothe the anxiety. At the very least, politicians are expected to value their own lives. It is therefore logical to assume that they would not poison themselves for the sake of convincing the public of doing the same. So, when they chose to publically consume the allegedly dangerous products, their messages were received with more confidence. Gummer broke that trust, and in doing so, he created an infamous symbol of the untrustworthiness of politicians and added a level of skepticism to the action of consumption to prove a food’s safety.

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These few examples of Italian politicians loudly and publically emphasizing a message through food is by no means a complete list, nor are they exhaustive of all the ways food is used to communicate in Italy. For example, Florentine bread is made without salt, described as “senza sale” (without salt) within the city limits and often “Sciocco” (foolish) elsewhere, revealing food prejudices and preferences in just this small terminology difference. Food is also used to described groups of people, like how those from Naples called Mangiamaccheroni (macaroni eaters). Food abounds in sayings and proverbs, for instance: *che pizza!* (what pizza) expresses annoyance or boredom. The list goes on. Like in the United States, food in Italy holds intense communicative powers that manifests in a way particular to its cultural context. Italians have passionate pride in their cuisine, but they are just as likely to argue “Italian food is the best” as “there is no such thing as Italian food.” The cuisine of one region—or even one city—is often pitted against that of another, rivalries between cities affecting the way citizens from one area describe the food of another. Additionally, local products are protected with government-regulated demarcations of origin to prevent inferior knockoff products. Through this incessant uplifting and protecting of Italian edible products and cuisine, food holds a position much more central than it does in countries like the United States. Consequentially, food is too conspicuous for Italian politicians to wield subversively. In the second century A.D., Roman poet Juvenal disdainfully accused his fellow citizens of falling for the shallow distraction of “*panem et circenses,***” or the “bread and circuses” provided by the government to appease the masses. Ironically, in modern Italy, it would appear bread has become the circus itself.
Conclusion: Full Mouths and Empty Promises

Claude Levi-Strauss has been famously paraphrased as declaring, “Food is good to eat, but it is good to think too.” This idea revolutionized the way food was discussed. Food was not just something to eat, it was also something worthy of study, of contemplation. I argue that even that descriptor does food an injustice. Food is not just good to eat and think, it is good to show, to use, and to manipulate. Humans are beholden to food, and moreover, we are obliged to consume a variety of foods to achieve full, nutrient requirements. We are not creatures with specialized diets, and because of that, we are both allowed and forced to make choices. Through choice and physical consumption, food becomes an extension of identity. It is an identity we grab and ingest; a way of transliterating a mental and emotional state to a physical product. Food is connected to points in time, both historically and within the confines of our own memories, our personal narratives. One does not have to be a chef or a farmer to have an intimate relationship with food—every human that eats, longs to eat, or refuses to eat, has a profoundly complicated, primal connection to food.

As exemplified by the intense reactions to political food gaffes in Chapter Two, people react defensively to what are felt as perversions to their personal or societal values. People are offended when someone refuses the food that they prepared, or when people who aspire to represent them communicate their lack of knowledge—or lack of concern for—the most necessary part of their identity: the food they eat and how they eat it. Food forges families and communities, it creates an “us,” an “inside,” a “familiar.” It creates a way of understanding oneself in relation to the surrounding individuals. It is a means of declaring one’s personal identities and interacting with values on a physical plane. You are what you eat, because the food that one eats was either chosen or placed there (or not) by a plethora of factors that impact one’s life and subsequently shape one’s worldview. Race, religion, socio-economic status, gender, ethnic background—these factors, along with so many others, affect the way we eat, in turn, inject the foods we eat meaning arising from those contexts. The particulars are different, but food universally affects us all.
American politicians understand this intense emotional connection to food, yet they do not reveal it. Revealing this knowledge would be to deprive themselves the ability to manipulate it to communicate messages and be perceived has being someone or possession qualities that they want to appear to have. As Chapters Three and Four broke down, foods are imbued with mythologies that draw from their particular historical contexts. These mythologies are powerful as long as they stay obscured. The person manipulating the mythologies is the one who sees it, utilizes it, and therefore defines it through intention. If an individual on the receiving end of a mythological communication recognizes the interaction, the power is transferred from the sender to the receiver and the myth shatters. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is not the case in an Italian context. The Italian government is transparent about their desire to protect and exalt Italian food products and cuisine, and therefore; Italian politicians wield food to communicate a bold message, to appeal directly to emotion and physical sensations of hunger and taste. Italian politicians are held accountable for food and farming issues, so in turn, they are able to appeal to the power of food in explicit ways.

The existence of an American cuisine is debated, and even if one believes American does, in fact, have its own cuisine, there is no denying that it manifests differently than it does in other countries. Cuisines create cultural pride, but more importantly, they emphasize and continually reiterate the importance of food. If America does have a cuisine, it is not central to the foodscape in the same way that it is in France or Italy, for instance. Americans care deeply about food; they just do not think that they do. They do not realize how much they care until their values are inverted in front of them. Yet despite this, food is being used as a communicative tool all around: politicians along the campaign trail, references in literature, imagery in advertising, Instagram posts, art pieces, particular diets—the list rattles on. Food is integral to human identity and the way we view the world.

The communicative and self-expressive powers of food in the United States is undeniable. That fact and the comparison to Italy begs the question: why does the American public allow politicians to utilize the power of food without holding them accountable for major food issues? Despite the prevalence of media interest in their food habits and campaign snacks, U.S. presidential candidates are rarely
compelled to include food or farming issues on their official platforms. In fact, in the 2016 election cycle, *The Huffington Post* reached out to all of the Democratic and Republican campaigns to find out their positions on relevant food and farming issues like the funding of nutrition assistance programs like SNAP and WIC, healthy school lunches, biodiversity in agriculture and subsidies for farmers.¹ The nonprofit organization FoodTank posed their own food policy questions to the presidential candidate, likewise receiving a loud silence.² There are many issues with the contemporary American food system, but change will be tedious if Americans remain unable to recognize the abundance of roles food plays every day in each of our lives. So next time you see politicians posing with a pork chop or tamale, take pause. Ask yourself, “What are they saying through mouths full of food?” Chances are, you received their alimentary messages without realizing it.

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