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Tension in the Kitchen

Explicit and Implicit Politics in the Gourmet Foodscape

by Josée Johnston *and* Shyon Baumann

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It has become commonplace to characterize eating as a political act. This might seem obvious, but understanding food as political raises difficult questions: What does it mean to eat politically, and more broadly, what is the role of politics in contemporary American culinary discourse? These questions are more challenging than they might initially appear, particularly since eating cannot be readily equated with classical political acts, like voting. A sandwich doesn't display its party affiliation, although it may send out important messages about the eater's commitments to sustainability, animal welfare, or local food processors. Eating engenders a complex politics with ambiguous boundaries, contradictory moral claims, and a slippery relationship to class inequality. This article seeks to investigate the implicit and explicit dimensions of politics in foodie discourse by exploring the various ways political goals are both articulated and submerged.

Before proceeding, it is worth clarifying some of our terminology. Today the highbrow snobbery of the gourmet era of white tablecloths is commonly seen as outdated, and a new category of food-lover – the foodie – has emerged. We understand foodies are people with a serious interest in eating and learning about food, but who are not food professionals. Foodies pursue their hobby in their kitchens, but also in the public realm through restaurants, farmer's markets, as well as a media landscape populated with food sources ranging from televised celebrity chef throw-downs to highly personal food blogs to a multitude of food-related bestsellers. Some food enthusiasts reject the term "foodie" as faddish and/or insulting, but we use the

term “foodie” deliberately as a classificatory tool, rather than a personal slur. For us, the foodie era refers to a culinary moment characterized by a repudiation of overt snobbery reliant on highbrow status distinctions (e.g., stuffy service and generously sauced French food), and a selective embrace of foods outside the haute cuisine canon. Participants in foodie culture are cultural omnivores. They are open to food from a range of lowbrow and highbrow sources – truck-stop chile and foie gras – even though logics of exclusion and status distinction are clearly still in operation, since not everything is taken up as a high status food [Johnston and Baumann 2007]. The foodie era has a significant strand of populism, even though there are still criteria for determining what “quality” food is, as well as serious cultural and economic restrictions for accessing and appreciating “quality” food.

Rather than lumping all food’s political implications together, in this article our objective is to parse out its explicit and implicit dimensions. By explicit food politics, we refer to the overt usage of food choices to address social problems associated with the industrial food system. Explicit food politics are typically invoked to address issues like sustainability (e.g., “eat local” or “eat seasonally”), social justice (e.g., “drink fair-trade”), as well as animal welfare (e.g., “don’t eat factory-farmed meats”). While these new forms of explicit politics are relatively well-documented, the implicit dimensions of food politics are less obvious. Our understanding of implicit food politics draws from the sociological insight that everyday life choices, like eating, have implications for the social distribution of power. Our focus in this paper is on the implicit dimensions of social class, leaving other important dimensions of inequality for future research. As argued by Bourdieu [1984], a society’s mode of eating is deeply implicated in maintaining and reproducing class divisions of power and wealth. Our understanding of implicit politics draws from structuralist understandings of culture and class inequality, but takes up the post-structuralist insight that power is not simply exercised upon people, but operates *through* people, particularly as it is articulated through discourse.

Moving forward from these conceptualizations, in this paper we will argue that contemporary foodie discourse brings together the political concerns of the 1960s counter-cuisine together with the aesthetic concerns of gourmets. Within this discourse, explicit political commitments are oriented toward realizing progressive goals regarding the environment and animal welfare, leaving other political dimensions – like labour rights – largely ignored. While explicit political commitments are important, we argue that there are implicit political implications of food culture that are important to explore. At this implicit level, the politics of social inequality remain largely unarticulated, despite the role that food choices and preferences have historically played in generating status distinctions [Bourdieu 1984; Goody 1982]. To make

this argument, we draw on an analysis of American food journalism as well as 30 in-depth interviews with foodies.

The article will proceed as follows. First, we establish the context of current food politics by describing the evolution of food politics in North America from the classical gourmet era, to the counter-cultural “countercuisine” of the 1960s and 1970s, to the current era of “foodies.” Over this period, food politics evolved in terms of the nature of the ethical and moral concerns, and in terms of who was engaged in food politics. In the second section, we explore the explicitly political aspects of the foodscape to understand how foodies balance aesthetic and political concerns that sometimes conflict, and how they resolve those conflicts through prioritizing various concerns. In the third and final section of the paper we explore the implicitly political aspects of the foodscape, those aspects related to the politics of class inequality. These implicit aspects of foodie culture are frequently overlooked, given the focus on the more overt political projects of foodies. We argue that foodie culture is implicitly and significantly political because of its connections to economic and cultural capital. At the same time, foodie discourse often seems to exist in a material vacuum that does not acknowledge the cultural and economic capital required to participate.

Gourmets, hippies, and foodies: A brief narrative of political food

Contemporary foodies share with traditional gourmets a prioritizing of food as an aesthetic and sensual concern. A primary concern is that food must be delicious. However, as we will discuss below, foodie discourse also recognizes the political dimensions of food production and consumption. Good food is frequently constructed to meet both aesthetic and moral criteria, and is frequently understood as both politically palatable and delicious. The bridging of aesthetic with political concerns alters the dynamics of culinary discourse, impacting how food is evaluated. In this section, we explore the origins of the overlap between moral and aesthetic evaluation in the contemporary foodscape. To understand the significance of contemporary food politics, it is useful to go back in time, at least briefly, and see how political food and gourmet food occupied two relatively different and distinct realms in the post-war period, and how these concerns came together in contemporary foodie discourse.¹

¹ This is not to say that there have not been individuals that move between the countercuisine and gourmet worlds – individuals who were both interested in food politics and interacted with food gourmets. The most notable is Ruth Reichl, who in her memoirs recounts her journey from the Berkeley counterculture to the esteemed position of food editor at the *New York Times* (and who is currently the editor of *Gourmet* magazine) [Reichl 1999; Reichl 2001]. Our point here is not that individuals did not possess multiple concerns about food, but that at an institutional level in the

The realm of America's gourmet culture has historically been dominated by a search for delicious food, rather than politically correct fare. Of course, delicious food was not just any food. While exceptions prevail, the general historical trend involved an equation between high status food and haute French cuisine, as well as a relatively clear divide between highbrow and lowbrow food [Kuh 2001; Kamp 2006]. The search for high-status delicious food meant that political concerns were quite marginal, if not absent altogether, from gourmet magazines. In the 1950s, 1960s, and even up until the 1980s, gourmet magazines were dominated by the pursuit of good taste and good tasting food. In these magazines, we find articles profiling exclusive restaurants, travel writing featuring exotic foods and recipes for hosting a fabulous dinner party. The quintessential exemplar of high status, French-oriented gourmet culture is the socialite, gastronome, and unapologetic snob, Lucius Beebe. From the 1930s up until the 1960s, Beebe regaled readers with tales of epicurean excess involving exotic game, caviar and expensive wine. Beebe described New York's high-end French restaurant, *Le Pavillon*, as "flourishing in a midst of mink and monocles, gilt and mirrors reminiscent of the best Paris restaurants" [as in Kuh 2001, 31]. Notions of the "good life" for classical American gourmets drew heavily from French culinary standards, but these French status symbols were gradually popularized to the North American middle class through public personalities like Julie Child. Child's television show and bestselling book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* [Child 1961], explicitly aimed to take French food off its cultural pedestal, and teach French cooking techniques to servantless American housewives.

While gourmets spent the 1960s learning how to cook French classics like *boeuf bourguignon* and *sole à la normande*, the food politicians that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s were famous for their brown rice and healthy (if heavy) breads.² Belasco documented the emerging food politics of the 1960s and 1970s, dubbing them the "countercuisine" – a group that was heavily invested in exploring the political implications of food choices [Belasco 1989]. The countercuisine was not a unified, monolithic movement, but operated from multiple vantage points such as food co-ops, the peace movement, and "back to the land" lifestyles. A common thread that united diverse culinary interests was a focus on unearthing the political implications

post-war period, political and gourmet concerns occupied relatively distinct realms – on the one hand, the youth-based countercuisine which drew from the emerging environmental movement and peace movements, and on the other hand, the older world of *Gourmet* magazine, fine dining establishments, and culinary personalities like Lucius Beebe.

² Gourmet culture continued to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s, of course. Gourmet culture was not a static, monolithic pursuit of French food but became more omnivorous in its preferences [see Johnston and Baumann 2007]. Food politics emerged alongside American gourmet culture, operating on a simultaneous but separate track that would eventually merge with contemporary foodie-ism.

of food choices. White bread was decried as a symbol for an industrial era of soulless convenience foods, while “brown rice became the icon of antimodernity,” and a mechanism for standing (and eating) in solidarity with the world’s oppressed peoples [*ibidem*, 27, 49]. A key culinary principle of the counter-cuisine was improvisation, and this included adopting dishes and ingredients from other cultures, often without particular concern for incongruities or “authenticity” – as in the case of “bologna knish enchilada or Irish-Jewish stew” [*ibidem*, 44]. A thoughtful process of food preparation was deemed more important than the taste of the results [*ibidem*, 46]. For example, a column on “Bread Bakin’,” by columnist “mother bird” advised readers to “not be discouraged by a few bricks, or even a lot of bricks – they’re all building blocks” [*ibidem*, 46]. Another central tenet of the counter-cuisine’s political food was vegetarianism. The wastefulness of a meat-based lifestyle was widely publicized through Lappé’s best-selling treatise, *Diet for a Small Planet* [Lappé 1971]. Countercultural hippies prioritized “moral” food choices, like vegetarianism, over gourmet decadence. Exemplifying this trait, Lappé’s book included recipes such as “scrambled tofu,” a “thinking person’s cheesecake” made with cottage cheese and egg whites, “Betty the Peacenik gingerbread,” “soybean pie,” and “Hearty Tomato Soup (like Campell’s never dreamed of).”

While the realms of gourmets and the counter-cuisine were relatively distinct in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, this divide gradually diminished as ideals of the countercuisine were incorporated into the mainstream food system [Belasco 1989], and gourmet culture itself came to take on new concerns and adopt new, more diverse ways of eating. For example, the widely read *New York Times* food columnist, Craig Claiborne, expanded his writing beyond the world of upscale French-related cuisine, and wrote profiles of cheap ethnic eateries. Perhaps most emblematic of this blurring was the emergence of Alice Waters and her Berkeley restaurant, *Chez Panisse*, as a culinary icon. Waters was one of many bohemian businesses that emerged out of the Berkeley counterculture [*ibidem*, 94]. While much can be written about Alice Waters, and *Chez Panisse* itself had many different chefs with different styles of cooking, what is key to our argument here is how Waters’s spectacular success reflects the convergence of the concerns of gourmets and the counter-cuisine. More specifically, *Chez Panisse* incorporated an appreciation of French gastronomy (the classical concern of American gourmets) with the countercuisine’s emphasis on food prepared with care and concern. The influence of the French on *Chez Panisse* was strongly evident – both in Waters’s acknowledgement of the important influence of time she spent in France, as well as in the food itself. *Chez Panisse*’s opening night menu was classically French, and included *pâté en croûte* and a classically prepared, *canard aux olives*, made with a bevy of French sauce essentials like *fond brun* and *demi-glace* [McNamee 2007: 2-3].

Of course, *Chez Panisse* was (and is) no simple French restaurant. As the restaurant moved from a local hot-spot to a national culinary icon, Waters worked to pioneer a style of New American cooking focused on fresh, local, seasonal ingredients sourced through close relationships with local farmers. In the words of Waters's biographer, Thomas McNamee:

[Water's] conception of a moral community based on good food and goodwill has helped to spawn a new generation of artisans and farmers. Like her, they are committed to stewardship of the land and waters. They settle for nothing less than the highest quality in what they produce. They see themselves as an increasingly potent force in American culture and politics. Under the leadership that Alice has reluctantly and somewhat awkwardly assumed, this new community has seen its ideals and methods spread across the country. [*ibidem*, 6-7].

While some might find this depiction of Waters's culinary leadership exaggerated, the quotation and its invocation of "moral community" neatly encapsulates the ethos expressed through the contemporary foodie era – an era where the political credentials of one's dinner can matter just as much as classical gourmet concerns like taste and authenticity. Put very simply, foodie discourse engages with deliciousness and food politics. Tellingly, an introduction to *Best Food Writing* 2008 begins with the following words: "Food ought to be the simplest thing in the world. Since when did it become so politicized?" [Hughes 2008: ix]. The same collection leads off with six essays on food politics under the heading, "Food Fights," but significantly, also includes pieces discussing culinary techniques and gourmet ingredients. Today, many foodies not only understand what an authentic ceviche is, but they also worry about whether the seafood that made up their ceviche is from a sustainable source. Taking over Julia Child's role as a populist gourmet educator, *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman is known for his role popularizing no-knead home-made breads and accessible gourmet meals, but his voice also weighs in on political food issues like the virtues of local versus organic foods, and how eating less meat can stop global warming [Bittman 2007: 2; 2009]. On the Gourmet.com website, foodies can learn how to cook delicious dishes with celery root, at the same time they read about the paucity of agricultural initiatives in Obama's financial stimulus package, or learn how they can enjoy yoghurt without the guilt of plastic packaging. As further testimony to the blending of gourmet food with politics, Alice Waters wrote an open letter to the newly elected president, Barack Obama, urging him to hire a White House chef "with integrity and devotion to the ideals of environmentalism, health, and conservation," and by doing so "send a powerful message to our country: that food choices matter" [Waters 2009]. While describing herself as somebody with credentials based in a "grassroots food revolution," she offered her assistance to the Obama's as part of a

“Kitchen Cabinet” that would also include the high-status foodie credentials of Ruth Reichl (editor of *Gourmet*), and acclaimed New York city restaurateur Danny Meyer (the man behind Manhattan hotspots like Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Café).

Alice Waters’s letter to Obama speaks powerfully to the politicized reality of the contemporary foodscape. In sum, foodie discourse combines political issues with a continued interest in classical gourmet concerns. This means that relative to earlier eras, the contemporary evaluative schema for food is even more complex, and the criteria that are upheld as important frequently involve an intricate intermingling of aesthetic and political concerns. Two important caveats are in order. First, this is not a simple additive process – foodie discourse does not simply “add” the politics of the countercuisine to gourmet concerns. Foodies take up political and gourmet concerns in ways that are new, thereby creating a new, hybrid culinary discourse and adjudication standards. For instance, foodies frequently distinguish themselves from the 1960s and 1970s countercuisine, which is commonly depicted as moralistic, druggy and tasteless. A feature on brown rice in *Saveur* makes clear that the rice they profile is not the bland, virtuous brown rice that emerged from the “torpor of hippie-era cooking” [Saveur May 2008: 75]. In an article about Obama’s White House chef, culinary journalist Christy Harrison lauds Alice Waters and the sustainable food movement (lead by “outspoken, committed chefs”) for making clear that delicious, sustainable food “doesn’t just mean granola and tofu” [Harrison 2009].

A second caveat: foodie discourse has a critical political component, but it is not necessarily or uniformly political. As with any discourse, elements of foodie discourse are selectively taken up and modified by foodies, and food politics is no exception. This means that not all foodies are interested in the politics of their plates, and some deliberately reject any suggestion that they should ponder the living conditions of industrial chicken, or feel shameful about the food miles of imported raspberries. Our point here is not that all foodies are food politicians, but that foodie *discourse* has taken up issues of food politics alongside traditional epicurean concerns like taste. While a significant portion of foodie discourse remains avowedly apolitical, focusing exclusively on aesthetic concerns, politics is a relatively new and significant stream. Chefs, authors, and other culinary personalities can position themselves not simply as experts on aesthetic matters (e.g., the proper way of cooking venison), but as public intellectuals speaking out on topics like sustainability and public health. Obama’s decision to hire Chicago chef Sam Kass³ to work in the White House was

³ The website of Sam Kass’ private chef firm, Inevitable Table, has the bold statement: “We know we can improve our health, our families, and our communities by providing clean, simple, quality food.” See <http://www.inevitabletable.com>.

newsworthy not because of his cooking techniques (which are probably decent), but because Kass has a stated political commitment to sourcing healthy, local food [Burros 2009].

The merging of the aesthetic and political concerns evident in the contemporary foodscape is of particular interest to us because of the consequent tensions it produces. Although aesthetic and political concerns are sometimes harmonious, they are also frequently in conflict. Harmony can be found in the example of the wild-caught salmon; it has a texture and flavor that many foodies find aesthetically superior to conventionally farmed Atlantic salmon, and it achieves the political goal of avoiding the environmental risks associated with salmon farming. At the same time wild salmon is considered an ethically and aesthetically superior product, the price of wild salmon is frequently three times that of farmed salmon, raising questions about which socioeconomic classes can afford to eat ethical food. Wild salmon's eco-credentials are also open to discussion, since its high price reflects the dwindling fish stocks and uncertain sustainability of wild salmon fisheries. The case of wild salmon speaks to the difficulty of balancing aesthetic and political concerns in foodie discourse. Given the complexity and contradictions within foodie discourse, we believe it is important to investigate which concerns are highlighted in the contemporary foodscape, and how boundaries are drawn around "good" or "worthy" food. Which explicit political goals are prioritized when these distinctions are made, and which tend to recede into the political background? And how do these distinctions serve implicit political ends, particularly when it comes to social inequality? How do food choices that maximize political and aesthetic preferences simultaneously maintain status distinctions? To address these questions, and shed light on the explicit and implicit politics of foodies, in the next section of this paper we will investigate which elements of food politics are taken up within foodie discourse, and which are relatively neglected.

Explicit Politics: Balancing the Political and the Aesthetic

In the years when we systematically investigated food journalism (2004-2008), the place of politics in foodie discourse evolved significantly. Although explicit political concerns had been raised for many years, if not decades, it was during this period that these concerns gained tremendous visibility. The "politics of the plate" were in the public eye, well-symbolized by the media attention and impressive sales figures for Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. When we conducted our interviews in 2008, all our interviewees showed an awareness of explicit political dimensions of food practices, even if not all of them expressed a willingness to prioritize

these political concerns in their eating habits, a topic that will be further discussed below.

This growth in attention to the political dimension of food practices begs the question of just how politicized foodie discourse is today. While elite food practices are certainly more overtly politicized than ever before, an analysis of foodie discourse is required to be able to specify which specific political concerns come to the fore in foodie discourse, as well as the place of explicit politics relative to other concerns.

In this section, we describe how foodie discourse is explicitly politicized based on our reading of gourmet food journalism and on our interview data. Our analysis of gourmet food journalism in this paper is based on a close and systematic reading of 2008 January through June issues of *Gourmet*, *Bon Appétit*, and *Saveur*, and on the food and dining columns in the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* over the same period. Because this data collection occurred at the end of a longer research project on foodie discourse, we had already developed major categories of the political dimensions of the discourse [see Johnston and Baumann, forthcoming]. Our goal here was to catalogue all instances of explicit politics in these sources. We gained further insight into the explicitly political nature of foodie discourse, and also corroborated our findings from food journalism, through 30 in-depth interviews with foodies (see Johnston and Baumann, forthcoming, for methodological details regarding the interviewing).

Through our readings and interviews we were able to characterize the explicit political concerns that arose into three broad categories: environmental (often labeled “eco-”), community building, and animal welfare. Our reading of our sources is that these explicit political concerns receive very different treatments in foodie discourse insofar as they receive different emphases. Environmental concerns are the most frequently included in foodie discourse, followed by community building, and then animal welfare. We offer an explanation for this ordering which turns on the ability of each political concern to coincide with foodies’ aesthetic values and with their other priorities, such as health concerns. Foodie discourse most strongly highlights the ability for “good” food to meet environmental goals, pays the least attention to the coincidence between “good” food and meeting animal rights goals, and describes an intermediate overlap between “good” food and community building goals. Relatively little attention is paid to issues of labor rights, food security, food sovereignty and social justice – concerns that animate a great deal of food activism nationally and globally [e.g., CFSC 2008; Nyeleni Declaration 2007].

In order to fully address our guiding question in this section about the place of explicit politics in foodie discourse, we must do more than describe the relative prioritization of political goals in foodie discourse. We must also describe where the

political dimension of foodie discourse overall is situated relative to the discourse's other main dimension, the aesthetic dimension. On this point, our reading suggests that, despite great changes in recent years, the explicitly political dimension of foodie discourse is frequently subordinated to the aesthetic dimension. That is to say, the evaluation of food relies more heavily on aesthetics than it does on explicit politics.

To be sure, explicit political concerns have entered foodie discourse in recent years and now play an important role in the evaluation of food. However, the place of explicit politics in foodie discourse rises and falls depending on the political issue. Explicitly political considerations are dominated by aesthetic considerations in both the sense that aesthetics are more often considered when evaluating food, and the sense that "good" food can be aesthetically successful but fail to meet political standards, but the reverse is not true. Politically "correct" food with unexceptional, or bad, taste is not valued, and is instead associated with the bland "granola and tofu" cuisine of the 1960s and 1970s countercuisine.

Environmental Politics in Foodie Discourse

Environmentalism is, of course, centuries old in the sense that there have long been groups and individuals who have pushed society to prioritize care for the natural environment. The link between food production and consumption practices and environmental consequences has always existed, but it has only been in recent decades that this link has been highlighted in the mainstream media as a social problem. And it has been only in recent years that gourmet food journalism has incorporated this explicit political concern into foodie discourse. While the 2004 sources we studied contained only occasional passing references to environmental consequences, by 2008 gourmet food journalism regularly included references to environmental concerns, and ways to address these concerns through food choices like eating locally.

At the most general level, environmental politics are encapsulated in a focus on purchasing "eco" products or being "eco-friendly." These terms are frequently used throughout foodie discourse, and generally carry a positive connotation. Although environmental concerns arise with respect to a wide range of food issues, we most frequently see them appear in relation to food being local, seasonal, organic and/or sustainable.

The focus in contemporary foodie discourse on local and seasonal food has created buzzwords out of these terms. There is probably no more important determinant of food's quality than the use of local and seasonal ingredients. Although foodie discourse identifies great aesthetic benefits associated with local and seasonal

ingredients – i.e., they tend to be the most fresh and flavorful – the focus on local and seasonal foods is also justified in political terms. The specific environmental benefit relates to the concept of food miles. Food that is local and seasonal requires shorter transportation than food that is imported from out of region. Less transportation results in fewer greenhouse gas emissions. Although there is debate about the environmental and political implications of prioritizing (and fetishizing) local market solutions [Dupuis and Goodman 2005; Eaton 2008; Andrée 2006; Born and Purcell 2006], foodie discourse has generally adopted this idea as conventional wisdom.

And so, among explicitly political comments in foodie discourse, we most often see references such as the following from an article on vegetables: “We all know that eating in-season, locally grown produce is best – it’s beneficial for the environment, for our health, and for the flavor of the dishes we prepare” [*Bon Appétit*, February 2008: 105]. Another example comes from a review of an Oregon restaurant named Tilth: “Maria Hines, Tilth’s owner and chef, pays more than lip service to the adjectives local and seasonal, and she has created a restaurant that’s very much of its moment, not only in its attention to food miles but also in its menu structure” [*New York Times*, February 27, 2008: F4]. A concern for “food miles” was echoed in our interviews, where, again, a concern for the environment was frequently cited as a criterion for identifying worthy food. One interviewee even re-defined “organic” to include concerns about food miles, stating, “part of the definition of organic to me is local, you know. So what difference does it make that they didn’t use any pesticides growing it on the other side of the world. I’ve since made up for that ten-fold with all the petroleum it took to get it to this side of the world!” To be sure, in addition to a concern for minimizing food miles, local and seasonal foods were preferred for a range of reasons (e.g., taste) that had nothing to do with the environment. In this sense, the political dimensions of food do not have discreet boundaries and are blurred with other dimensions, such as health consequences and aesthetic criteria.

Just as with eating locally and seasonally, eating foods that are certified organic, or are thought to be natural and “sustainable,” is now a prominent idea within foodie discourse. And just as a focus on local and seasonal food can be justified for both aesthetic and political reasons, so can a focus on organic and sustainably-produced food. In foodie discourse, the sometimes interchangeable use of “organic” and “sustainable” refers to an often-nebulous set of practices regarding food production (reflecting to some extent, the debate over when farming and fishing can legitimately be called organic or sustainable). Predominantly, these terms arise in food journalism and in the interviews to refer to food production that avoids harm to the environment from the use of toxic or otherwise poisonous chemicals (e.g., pesticides and fertiliz-

ers) or through farming practices that degrade the integrity and quality of soil and water. These terms also refer to food production that supports the enduring survival of natural (not genetically modified) plant and animal species.

Take the following example from a *San Francisco Chronicle* article called “Sustainable ways to enjoy quick and easy meals,” where fish is recommended by species:

[At] the annual Cooking for Solutions conference in Monterey a couple weeks ago (...) the discussions tried to focus on finding solutions among scientists, food producers, farmers, winemakers and chefs. ... One major solution, of course, is to be an informed consumer. If you’re yearning for fresh tuna, albacore and yellowfin tuna can be good alternatives as long as the fish are troll- or pole-caught” [*San Francisco Chronicle*, May 28 2008: F.6].

Likewise, the environmental benefits of growing rice organically are highlighted in the following quote from an article in *Saveur*: “Arrayed on a display table were single-serving cups of the Massa farm’s organically grown, medium-grain Calrose brown rice, seasoned with toasted sage, black currants, and olive oil (...) Nearly 90 percent of the native wetlands of California’s Central Valley having been taken over by large-scale agriculture and development over the past century and a half, ecologically sustainable farms like the Massas’ have become a bulwark against further environmental degradation” [*Saveur* May 2008: 68, 75].

Most of our interviewees were well-versed in the benefits of organic and sustainable food production, even if many these topics were not prioritized in their food choices. But for those who took an explicitly political stance, they incorporated considerations of the organic and sustainable production of food into their determinations of good food in explicitly – though not exclusively – environmental terms. When asked to explain her preference for organic food, one interviewee replied, “Because I feel very strongly both for the health and well being of the earth as well as my family, that I don’t want to be putting pesticides into the ground, and the run-off into the water table.” Another interviewee who reported buying primarily organic food offered this explanation for why he did so: “... I always had some concern about, I think primarily my initial reason to buy organic food was concerns about various pesticides and so forth, and that sort of grew into a broader understanding of the effects of, of conventional agriculture on the land and so forth, and whether it’s sustainable.” Clearly, these food preferences for organic and sustainably-produced food have an explicitly environmental dimension.

These environmental concerns dovetail neatly with foodies’ aesthetic and health priorities. Local and seasonal foods are touted as more flavorful, fresher, more delicious, and as retaining more of their healthful nutrients. Organic and sustainably produced foods are characterized in the same terms, as better tasting and better for

one's health. It is therefore not surprising to see these characteristics come to the fore among foodies' explicit political concerns.

Community Building

The second-most salient explicitly political goal that emerges in foodie discourse is that of building community. There is a wealth of writing about the potential for the food system to influence the development of community ties, both social and economic [e.g. Ostrom 2007; Lyson 2000; Hoffman 2007]. This writing has apparently reached a broad audience as the community building aspect of food production and consumption is an important concern for foodies.

Community building is most often invoked as an outcome of buying local and seasonal food. In addition to the environmental benefits of being a locavore, foodie discourse highlights benefits such as supporting local farmers, fuelling local economies, and building social relationships at venues like farmer's markets. Within food journalism, the community benefits of local and seasonal food are expressed in statements like the following: "Fresh, local, seasonal. Everybody's doing it, most of us by shopping at farmers' markets (...) But there's an even better way to eat locally and seasonally, all the while *supporting farmers and your local economy*, and taking advantage of the abundance of each season: by subscribing to a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) program" [*Bon Appétit*, April 2008: 113, emphasis ours].

Many of our interviewees labeled themselves "locavores," and their justifications for focusing on local food occasionally went beyond environmental concerns to carry sophisticated critiques of industrial agriculture and a concomitant valorization of community farming, farmers' markets, and face-to-face relationships. One interviewee explained her preference for local over organic food because of her desire to support small-scale farmers instead of industrial organic growers, and framed shopping at her local food coop as positive since "they'll have a relationship with the farmers. They know who they are, they've been to their farms." Another interviewee, a self-described "locavore," described her shopping practices as closely tied to projects of community building: "I try to find foods that are grown locally (...) it's really about trying to, you know, support local growers and such and so that's why most of my shopping is done at the farmers' market and the co-op. And I know these people, I have dinner with them all the time. So I want to support them because they support me." These quotations make clear that one element of community building in foodie discourse involves maintaining and enhancing the vibrancy of social relationships within a local region. In this community ideal, face-to-face familiarity and an ethic of

care concerning food production are thought to flourish, and are juxtaposed against the anonymous relationships of industrial agriculture. In comparing her decision to buy through a community supported agriculture project versus Whole Foods Market, one interviewee commented on both the environmental and community benefits of local eating: “it takes less petroleum to get [the food] here, and it’s a community thing, you know, you’re making an investment, you know where your food is from, you know? I get regular invitations to go up there and meet [the farmer], they have open houses, you can choose your level of involvement. But if I go to Whole Foods and I buy an organic, quote unquote, apple from Australia, you know, that’s very abstract.”

The politics of community building in foodie discourse involves building relationships between consumers and farmers, but this does not mean that they are universally inclusive. We frequently read in food journalism about the need to support the livelihood of farmers, ranchers, and fishermen, but in contrast, labor issues dealing with the pay and working conditions of employees are almost never raised. In our interviews with foodies, the working conditions of laborers in the food industry, restaurant sector, or agriculture were also virtually absent. The valuation of foods’ local provenance rests on the idea that supporting local producers builds community, yet the community-building aspects of labor justice and social equality do not seem fundamental to this understanding of community building. Instead, entrepreneurial ideals of individual farmers, ranchers, and fishermen owing their own local businesses is the dominant motif for understanding and valorizing communities of closely knit food producers and consumers.

Although further research should investigate why labor justice issues fail to resonate in foodie discourse, we note here that the connection between this particular political goal and foodies’ aesthetic and health concerns is less immediate. The political goal of building community, while not as salient as environmental goals, is achieved through the same channel of prioritizing local and seasonal food. As such, there is the same coincidence of political goals with aesthetic and health objectives, and we argue that this correspondence facilitates the strength of this explicitly political concern in foodie discourse.

Animal Welfare

The third-most prominent explicitly political aspect of foodie discourse concerns the rights of animals. As with the environment and community politics, the animal rights movement has a long history and a broad base that obviously extends

beyond contemporary foodie discourse. At the same time, the conflict between animal rights and farming animals for food and dairy products is particularly acute, for the obvious reason that people eat animals and animal products. As such, foodie discourse is one place where we might expect to see a great deal of discussion of the politics of animal rights.

We find that explicit discussion of animal welfare is moderately present in foodie discourse, relative to other explicitly political concerns. The particular issues that arise around animal welfare are not the classic concerns of the countercuisine's vegetarianism – not to eat meat – but mainly concern the conditions under which farm animals are raised before they are slaughtered for human consumption. Take the following example from an article on the perspective of some leading chefs about this issue: “How far will chefs go to display their empathy and respect for the animals they cook? All the way, it seems, to the barnyard and the slaughterhouse. Leading chefs like Mr. [Jamie] Oliver, Dan Barber and David Burke seem to be wallowing in – and advertising – a new intimacy with the animals they cook. Not long ago, chefs got credit simply for knowing the breed of the pigs or chickens they served. Now, it seems, intimacy with the animals during their life – and preferably, their death – is required. Many chefs believe absolutely that meat from happy, healthy animals tastes better” [*New York Times*, January 16, 2008: F1].

Animal welfare was also a recurring theme in our interviews, although only a handful of our interviewees were vegetarians. In the following example, we see how the example of chickens explicitly politicizes a discussion of good food: “I feel the same way about all of farm raised, for example, chickens. If you look at the conditions in which the mass-produced chickens are raised and the kind of stuff they're fed. So I actually try to buy stuff like chickens from small farmers at farmers' markets, who just have free-range chickens that are pecking around their yard. And up in Washington I also have a little cabin that's out in a very rural area so I can get eggs that have just been laid, not fed any sort of weird chemicals, and where the chickens are just scratching around in the yard. I'm not a vegetarian, at all, certainly am an omnivore, but I do have some concerns about how animals are treated in the food production process.” This example also shows how a concern for animal rights – specifically, a preference for more humane and often non-industrial practices – coincides nicely with health and aesthetic concerns. When the topic of animal welfare arises and the living conditions and feeding of animals are critiqued, there is almost always an accompanying praising of the superior taste and healthfulness of food that is produced with respect for animal rights.

The above interview example also raises a related point about animal rights. Vegetarianism is practiced for many different reasons, but one major reason that many

people practice vegetarianism is the explicitly political belief that humans should not kill animals for food. Although this idea did appear twice within our interviews, it has virtually no traction within the larger foodie discourse. Flexitarians – meaning “vegetarians who aren’t that strict and meat-eaters who are striving for a more health-conscious, planet-friendly diet” [Bittman 2007: ix] – overshadow vegetarians within foodie discourse. Flexitarianism allows foodies to eat meat and still have the moral high ground by avoiding industrially-raised livestock. Although our study is not designed to investigate the reasons why foodie discourse does not prioritize the meat-avoidance of vegetarianism, we note that there is no aesthetic pay-off for not eating meat; the flavors and culinary possibilities of meat are prized by many foodies. Whereas naturally-raised heritage-breed pigs have texture and flavor that are preferable to industrially-raised pork for foodies, meat substitutes are not typically discussed as aesthetically appealing alternatives.

Explicit Politics in Context

To this point we have examined the relative place of different explicit political agendas within foodie discourse. We find that environmental goals are more salient than community building goals, with animal rights goals less salient still. There are, of course, many other political goals that can be addressed through food production and consumption practices that do not enter into the discourse, or are only of very minor concern. Labor justice goals appear to be one such political issue, but other issues relevant to food activists are also virtually absent such as food security and hunger for low-income consumers, as well as food sovereignty for developing countries currently locked into cash-crop production to meet the needs of consumers in the Global North.

In addition to the relative presence (or absence) of various political goals in foodie discourse, we must also consider where political considerations stand relative to the other main consideration in discussions of good food, namely aesthetic values. Our research shows unequivocally that the dominant trend in foodie discourse is to subordinate political goals to aesthetic goals. There will, of course, be some people who put ethical eating above all else. But our data demonstrate that the contemporary American culinary field is characterized by a discourse that frames aesthetic motives as paramount. Political goals are free to enter into the discourse, but they are recognized as legitimate mostly to the extent that they are in harmony, rather than conflict, with aesthetic goals. Consider the following two illustrative examples:

“Line-caught, grass-fed, cage-free; buy local, choose sustainable, go for organic when you can – these words and phrases have become a mantra for many of us by now. The reasoning is simple: It’s good for you (research shows that organic produce really does have more nutrients), it’s good for the local economy (who would you rather support, a farmer you know or a nameless conglomerate?), and it’s good for the environment (generally, the less distance food has to travel to get to your plate, the better). But perhaps the most important reason? Food produced this way and cooked with care simply tastes better” [Bon Appétit, February 2008: 88, emphasis ours].

“Like many causes celebres of the Gourmet Revolution, butter that’s this good is the pie in the eye of industrial food. And, to be sure, it’s nice to be able to summon moral authority – look, no chemicals! no multinational corporate marketing! – to rationalize our indulgences, but that’s not really necessary. For me, eating butter – whether an unapologetically rich *beurre blanc* napping sautéed spring vegetables, in a creamy, parmesan-spiked risotto, or on a slice of crusty bread – is its own reward. We’re lucky to be living in an age when good, handmade butters are popping up all around us, with their soft, mellow innocence and pure, honest character, like rabbits in the spring” [Saveur, March 2008: 50, emphasis ours].

When it comes to foodie discourse, politics are a new feature in the discursive landscape, but they take a definitive back seat to aesthetic matters of taste.

Implicit Politics: Foodies and Inequality

There is a growing public awareness of the explicitly political elements of foodie discourse. Many newspapers and magazines comment on locavorism, or the expansion of organic products on store shelves. Through our study of this discourse, we also identify implicitly political elements, focusing specifically on class politics.⁴ By implicit politics we refer to the socio-political implications of everyday food choices and food culture – a phenomenon with established sociological relevance. They are implicit because the actors are not consciously aware of them (they are not consciously articulated political goals) and they are political because they are implicated in power relations.

We argue that foodie discourse is implicitly political when it frames a realm of cultural consumption as essentially classless when, in fact, food practices are highly stratified by socio-economics. Our analysis of foodie discourse identifies several

⁴ We acknowledge that there are other implicit political dimensions to foodie discourse, most notably the power dynamics of race and gender. These important dimensions deserve further research, and are beyond the scope of our analysis here.

rhetorical practices that have the effect of minimizing class differences in food preferences and choices. This minimization is significant because contemporary mores preclude overt snobbery [see, e.g., Peterson 2005; Warde 2008]. The “classlessness” of the foodscape, however, exists in rhetoric only, as participation in gourmet food culture demands high levels of economic and cultural capital. In what follows we present an overview of rhetorical practices in food writing that frame food as classless. Our analysis draws primarily from food writing, but also includes some supplementary examples from our interviews. Food journalism covers a wide spectrum of food production and consumption scenes, both within the United States and globally, and focuses on the contexts of food production and consumption (rather than simply on the food). Because of this focus, food journalism is rife with references to the socio-economic conditions of the people and places associated with food. Foodie discourse, of course, cannot be held accountable for providing an analysis of class inequality. It can, however, be read according to how these issues are treated when they do arise. We identify three frames that operate ideologically to obscure the stratification of the gourmet foodscape: 1) romanticization of poverty; 2) equality of inequality; 3) ordinariness of privilege.

Romanticization of Poverty

One condition of many of the people and places covered in food journalism is poverty. Even though the classical gourmet era dealt extensively with restaurants awash in “monocles and minks,” the food of poor people or poor regions is given due attention in foodie discourse. Food writers travel to the less affluent areas of the U.S., both rural and urban, as well as to poor countries and regions around the globe. In our reading of food journalism, we find that a dominant tendency is for food writers to idealize and romanticize poverty. By this we mean that food journalists tend to take readers into environments of squalor and despair and write enthusiastically about them in a way that consistently ignores any negative or harmful aspects of poverty. The enthusiasm concerns the seeming advantages of impoverished environments, creating the idea of the deliciousness of poverty without acknowledging the less enviable aspects of economic deprivation (e.g., health inequalities, mental stress, poor education opportunities). In this vein we read about a “dumpy” place that serves great pie, and a restaurant that looks like “a homeless shelter” but serves the best Chinese food in town [*San Francisco Chronicle*, 6 Feb. 2008: F.7]. The subtext of these descriptors is that food should be valorized because of, rather than in spite of, the impoverished conditions in which it is produced and consumed.

Time and time again, travel articles describe impoverished people and locales as producing food that is all-the-more-delicious for its connection to poverty. A particularly salient example can be found in an article describing the author's quest to find the hottest pepper in the world – the raja pepper grown in northeastern India. The article includes a picture of a farmer's family sitting on the dirt floor of their home and paints a glowing portrayal of rural life: “[m]eats and chiles cure in smoke-blackened huts” in a place “where life has changed little since ancestral times” [*Gourmet*, August 2008: 56]. The impoverished conditions of the region are brought to the fore in this travel writing – it is mentioned that the pepper harvest will provide the farmer with \$400-\$750 for the entire year – but the people are uncomplicatedly presented as content people, proud of the pepper they grow and cook with. There is no effort to provide the reader with the farmers' perspective on their income, nor to provide a description of how the pepper harvest may contribute to or relate to rural impoverishment. Instead, we learn only that this most amazing pepper is to be found amongst extreme poverty. Similarly, one of our interviewees made clear that what made food authentic (read: desirable) in her mind was the isolation of rural peoples from global trade flows, a fact which she juxtaposes against her own ability to easily access goods from around the world. In her words: “the way I cook, I can go and I can get ingredients from all over the world. I can make Tibetan food if I want. But in this little, Corona, this little village that I lived in outside of Lugano (...) they didn't have those goods. So they cooked with what it was that they had on hand. And that makes it authentic and it also makes it incredibly good.”

We argue that the tendency within foodie discourse to romanticize poverty and rural isolation is implicitly political because it is part of an overall tendency to discount the serious issue of social inequality and differential access to resources in the global economy. This discounting contributes to an understanding of food practices as primarily a matter of aesthetics. In doing so, foodie discourse contributes to the ability of food to reinforce the social chasm between rich and poor, but without raising awareness of the elite nature of gourmet food practices, like gourmet travel adventures. By providing little or no details on the less delicious components of the lives of the poor, both within the United States and throughout the developing world, poverty is presented apart from its harsh political, economic, or social realities. Through romanticizing poverty, its oppressive qualities are elided in favor of an unproblematic sense of classlessness.

The Equality of Inequality

While romanticizing poverty turns a negative trait into a positive attribute, this second frame asserts that poverty and wealth are cultural equals, close together rather than far apart. To accomplish this, gourmet food writing frequently employs legitimizing contrasts that situate social and cultural elites alongside marginalized sub-cultures, ethnicities and working class peoples. While this strategy undoubtedly reflects a social distaste for overt social snobbery and acceptance of certain democratic principles, this is not simply a case of culinary democratization where all food cultures are rendered equal [see Johnston and Baumann 2007]. Instead, we contend that legitimizing contrasts work to render references to wealth and poverty more palatable by pairing them semiotically. We contend that this represents a kind of faux populism suggesting a democratic connection across classes, while minimizing the existence of socio-economic inequality (See Frank 2000).⁵

The ‘equality of inequality’ frame implies that diverse class constituencies are essentially similar, and underplays the vast economic distances that separate the food realms of the wealthy and the poor. For example, in a profile of street food in India, one of the characters jokes that the sweet milk foam produced by the nameless “daulat ki chaat man” is “the inspiration for Ferran Adrià,” the renowned molecular gastronomy chef behind El Bullí in Spain (a pilgrimage destination for foodies around the world) [*Food and Wine*, July 2006: 122]. In other instances, the rich and poor are said to share an affinity for one prized ingredient, such as White Lily All Purpose Flour, which is a staple in “biscuit dives and high-end Southern restaurants like Watershed in Atlanta and Blackberry Farm outside Knoxville” [*New York Times*, 18 Jun 2008: F.1].

Other examples of legitimizing contrasts are frequently found in the description of expensive restaurants. To effectively distance themselves from the stereotype of the snob who is stuck in the antiquated separation of highbrow from lowbrow culture, gourmet food writers are eager to explain expensive restaurants as freed from the arbitrarily rule-bound norms of a snobbish culinary past. To do this they juxtapose the elite status of the restaurant with the casual behavior expected of staff and diners. By characterizing these restaurants as relaxed about status hierarchies, the elite associations presented in this high-end culinary field are underplayed, and legit-

⁵ We use the term “faux populism” to make a distinction from populist traditions and histories which employed rhetoric *and* policies that served the interests of middle and low-income people. At the same time, we recognize the conceptual ambiguity around the term populism, and understand that many use the term “populist” to refer to politicians who have employed rhetoric to suggest inclusion with “the people” while introducing policies that exacerbated income inequality (e.g., Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher).

imized as suitable for a democratic age. In an article profiling a New York restaurant described as “rustically urbane,” the author lists an array of “farmhouse allusions” that come together in “an ode to the seasons and the simple life, built, paradoxically, around elaborate decor and dishes that take nature’s bounty and tweak it a bunch” [*New York Times*, 2 Jan 2008: F.7]. Foodies’ penchant for upscale casual restaurants was strongly echoed among our respondents. One interviewee stated: “I tend not to like really snooty places. Danny Meyer [e.g., New York’s Union Square Café and Gramercy Tavern], his places are fairly high end restaurants but the vibe of them is much more casual.”

The “casualization” of restaurants, especially many expensive restaurants, in the U.S. is a phenomenon that has various long-term causes and is related to the marketing of these businesses, as well as a broader shift in society away from formality in many social arenas. Notably, reviewers are often quick to point out that the shift to a more relaxed atmosphere need not signal diminished culinary expertise. For example, one article describes a “relaxed but chic” New York restaurant that “opened the door for what became a ‘downtown’ style, with no neckties, jackets or formality,” yet, importantly, “did not take a casual approach to its food, wine or service” [*New York Times*, 4 Jun 2008: F.5]. A time-honored New York hangout is described in the following way: “Nestled among meatpacking plants and hard-core gay bars, Florent was an anomalously egalitarian enclave beloved in equal measure by celebrities on the A list and hedonists on the edge.” The article is peppered with celebrity references, including Calvin Klein recalling some favorite memories of dining alongside “real downtown character types,” as well as the owner’s humorous anecdotes about serving the likes of Johnny Depp and Keanu Reeves. Despite the immense star status of its patrons, Florent is applauded for its “proudly grungy looks” and a menu of “Continental-ized diner food with just enough French bistro chic thrown in” [*New York Times*, 21 May 2008: F.1]. By juxtaposing high and low status, both wealth and poverty become unproblematic and the scene is set as essentially classless.

Within this frame of supposed equality in the face of class inequality, we observed a variant of the “equality of inequality” frame – the use of kitsch, which is employed to add a tone of ironic detachment allowing cultural elites to appreciate low brow cultural forms, while legitimizing the economic and cultural distance between social classes. While definitions of kitsch abound, Seabrook [2001: 20] usefully summarizes the kitsch ethic as being “hierarchically nonhierarchical – of bringing highbrow connoisseurship to lowbrow pleasures, and thereby preserving the old High-Low structure of culture as status, though it was necessary to wittily invert it.” Inherent in the notion of kitsch is a blurring of boundaries between highbrow and

lowbrow. Significantly, the blurring is temporary and fully controlled by those in the more privileged cultural and economic position. In fact, kitsch serves as a method for displaying mastery over the rules of the game of cultural hierarchy. Through kitsch, the obvious tension between highbrow and lowbrow is resolved, and socio-economic and cultural inequality is both legitimized and obscured. Applying the kitsch ethic, mass-produced low-brow culinary forms are consistently framed as enjoyable foods, but with a sense of ironic play and improvisation that simultaneously appropriates and mocks the culinary form being eaten. Such playful mocking is evident, for instance, in the praise of a “deep-fried rabbit appetizer that owes less to the grand commanders of haute cuisine than to Colonel Sanders” [*New York Times*, 2 Apr 2008: F.7]. The use of kitsch foods works discursively to juxtapose foods with low status associations alongside actual gourmet food, thereby presenting culturally unequal foods as ostensibly equal, and constructing an image of foodies as democratic. We take this willingness to be able to reference both high and low culture, and the juxtaposition of these different food genres, as essential to contemporary foodie culture. As one interviewee stated:

(...) we don't go out very much, but when we go out, we'll spend four hundred dollars on a meal. I mean, we'll spend a massive amount of money, but there are very few restaurants I will go to in Boston (...) Although, you know, I can take great joy in having a hot dog at this really cool hot dog place. I don't eat hot dogs but once a year, but to have a really good hot dog with lots of, sort of, homemade fixings, pickles and relishes.

As with the romanticization of poverty, a competing frame of wealth as obviously superior to poverty never explicitly appeared in our sample. One could argue that because snobbery is socially unacceptable, such a frame is unlikely to appear. However, we would respond that an acknowledgment of the privileges of wealth does not constitute snobbery, but represents a realistic description of the benefits of possessing ample amounts of economic capital and cultural capital in capitalist societies. Interestingly, while acknowledgement of this did not appear in the food journalism we examined, it was occasionally present in the foodie responses. In the words of one respondent:

(...) there was a conspicuous consumption part of food culture that that I felt was getting quite ridiculous with tasting menus that cost, you know, two hundred and fifty dollars, that sort of thing. And I find those things tempting, by the way, but it, there's just a certain, um, you know, I don't know. I think that those things can get a bit gross.

Ordinariness of Privilege

The third frame we found in gourmet food writing downplays wealth and elitism, presenting it as both common and ordinary. Privilege is frequently presented in terms that suggest it is interesting, yet ultimately inconsequential to the pursuit of good quality food. In contrast, we never encountered a competing frame presenting wealth as remarkable for its benefits or relative rarity. Instead, we found privilege was acknowledged through “off-hand” and indirect references, creating the impression that although economic privilege exists, it is of minor importance and is commonplace.

Creating the impression that wealth is ubiquitous occurs through references to the high social status of food producers and consumers. Food is commonly connected to “socialites,” families with fortunes, royalty or descendants of former royalty, Hollywood celebrities, or people presented as high-status professionals such as prominent surgeons, politicians, or financiers. A good example of elite status as ostensibly incidental comes in a story in which a food company executive’s dedication to organics is described without any overt reference to economic capital. Instead, the reader learns of his wealth in more indirect details, such as the detail that he “has all his shirts tailored” with organic linens (since as he says, “when you buy from a chain (...) there’s always a compromise”) [*Gourmet*, August 2008 : 61]. These stories are ostensibly about the food produced and consumed by these people, and their elite status is framed as trifling, yet significantly, these details of the “good life” they enjoy are included. This contextualization of good food as the concern of wealthy and sophisticated people is a common theme within gourmet food writing, but their wealth is framed as incidental rather than integral to their taste culture [Gans 1999].

Another way that wealth is frequently framed as ordinary is through off-handed references to locations where wealthy people live or summer such as Aspen, Nantucket, The Hamptons, the Côte d’Azur, or the island of Capri. One article describes a life that spanned the “estate in Provence and his apartment in Paris,” where “meals were gorgeous, profligate rituals that ate up most of the day” [*New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2008: F.1]. Yet another way of normalizing wealth is through casual references to high cost culinary items that only wealthy people can afford, such as a \$2500 espresso maker (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 21 May 2008, F.4). In those cases where financial limitations are briefly acknowledged, they are often dismissed in lieu of a dedication to good taste. Responding to questions about the impact of the economic recession on his business, one restaurateur replies: “I’m certainly not the kind who would look at the Dow. Does a writer write or not write a book based on the economic

climate? Does a songwriter write songs that way?” [*New York Times*, 20 Feb. 2008: F.1] These questions imply that good food is in the realm of artistry, and such things must not be tainted by the pressures of one’s pocketbook.

In gourmet food writing, great wealth and elite status appear frequently, yet they are consistently downplayed, so that the overall message is that they are ordinary and trivial. This third frame works in concert with the others to present not just wealth but class inequality in the same way – entirely unproblematic.

Conclusion

Our goal in this article is to describe the place of politics in foodie discourse in the United States. In doing so, we find a crucial division between explicit politics and implicit politics within the discourse. Among the explicitly political elements of foodie discourse, environmental protection goals are more salient than those of labor justice or food security. We suggest that this situation may arise because some political goals harmonize more readily with the aesthetic preferences of foodies.

The implicit politics of foodie discourse bring us back to familiar analytic territory in the sociology of culture. The relationship between aesthetic preferences and class politics is a sociological mainstay [e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Weber 1978]. Cultural explanations for inequality, as a supplement to structuralist explanations, have come to the fore in recent decades. Various studies have demonstrated how cultural capital plays a role in structuring life choices and access to resource-rich networks [DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Fernández-Kelly 2008; Kane 2004; Kaufman and Gabler 2004]. Yet more specific to our study, others have demonstrated the role of food preferences or knowledge as cultural capital [Erickson 1996; Warde, Cheng, Olsen, and Southerton 2007; Warde and Martens 2000].

We argue that foodie discourse is implicitly political not simply because food knowledge and preferences can serve as a form of cultural capital. Instead, we argue that foodie discourse is implicitly political because of the covert nature of its role in distinction. This is not to diminish the significance of explicit politics; foodie discourse is characterized by greater political awareness of certain issues, particularly the environmental implications of American’s food sources, leaving class-based issues like poverty and food security, relatively unarticulated. Contemporary norms, especially among more educated and wealthier people, valorize tolerance and openness with respect to ethnicity, lifestyles, and many other social categories – “a rhetoric of openness” [Ollivier 2008] – and foodie discourse is in step with these norms.

Foodie discourse avoids overt snobbery.⁶ However, foodie discourse, as a construction of cultural elites for advantaged segments of society, is largely silent about the important ways in which class inequality affects people's food preferences and practices. Further still, foodie discourse goes so far as to minimize the importance of class inequality when such issues arise. The result is that foodies operate in a discursive realm that primarily frames their food knowledge and preferences in class-neutral terms. At the same time, food practices are highly classed, and eating in a way that provides distinction requires high levels of cultural and economic capital. It is this discrepancy between a framing of food as classless and the actual class linkages with food that cause us to identify foodie discourse as involved in class politics.

At a societal level, wealth inequality in the United States is high and growing [Morgan and Cha 2007]. There are complex structural reasons for this phenomenon. However, we argue that discourses such as the foodie discourse we study are implicated in this trend. We see foodie discourse as representative of a large body of discourses surrounding cultural consumption that feature the same obfuscation of real class differences in lieu of a classless narrative of cultural realms that celebrate diversity and openness. This celebration of diversity and openness is very real, in that it represents one quality that is valued and prioritized. However, the classless nature of cultural consumption discourses are likely related to the tendency in the United States to eschew discussions of class and low levels of class awareness generally. This classlessness must be seen to hinder opportunities for addressing the recent growth in inequality.

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⁶ See Johnston and Baumann [2007] for a full discussion of the democratic ethos that foodie discourse embodies.

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Tension in the Kitchen

Explicit and Implicit Politics in the Gourmet Foodscape

Abstract: What does it mean to engage with “food politics”? This article seeks to investigate the implicit and explicit dimensions of food politics by exploring the various ways political goals are both articulated and submerged. Our focus is on foodie discourse, which we argue combines classical gourmet concerns with the progressive impulses of the 1960s and 1970s countercuisine. Within this discourse, explicit political commitments focus on progressive goals regarding the environment and animal welfare, giving less attention to other political dimensions – like labour rights and food security. While explicit political commitments are important, we argue that the implicit political implications of foodie culture are also important to explore. At this implicit level, the politics of social inequality remain largely unarticulated, despite the role that food choices and preferences have historically played in generating status distinctions, and despite the growing disparity between rich and poor in the United States. To make our argument, we draw on an analysis of American food journalism as well as in-depth interviews with foodies.

Keywords: foodie, omnivore, food politics, inequality.

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