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Comment on José Johnston and Shyon Baumann/2. The Foodie's Dilemma: Snobbery No More

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Comment on Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann/2

The Foodie's Dilemma: Snobbery No More

by Michaela DeSoucey, Daphne Demetry *and* Gary Alan Fine

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Key markers of emerging communities are the existence of shared language, values, and politics. Food communities prove no exception. Everyone eats, but what foodstuffs we as consumers choose to eat, where we purchase that food, how we prepare it, and with whom we share meals, are shaped by our economic, cultural, and political desires. In recent years, the classificatory term “*foodie*” has exploded in popular food culture, and is engagingly explored in Josée Johnston and Shyon Baumann’s article, “Tension in the Kitchen: Explicit and Implicit Politics in the Gourmet Foodscape,” which furthers their sociological exploration of the stomach and mind of the contemporary food aficionado [Johnston and Baumann 2006; Johnston and Baumann 2007; Johnston 2008].

Through their essay, Johnston and Baumann parse several dimensions of the species “*foodie*,” a term coined twenty-five years ago by Ann Barr and Paul Levy [1984], tracing its development from the 1960s counterculture to the rise of global omniculture and current complexities of ethical eating. Foodies demand to know where food comes from and what “sacrifices” the environment was forced to make as a result of its production and distribution. For example, foodies are – as presented by Johnston and Baumann – more likely to purchase food labeled humanely-raised, sustainable, non-endangered, and organically grown. “Vote with your fork,” foodies declare, even when their measures of virtue are vague at best. Foodies are moral entrepreneurs in this regard, creating strategic frames around their ideological and consumption preferences. They want to imagine their food as being conscientiously

reflective of themselves. Food, to the foodie, is political in that it frames social problems in ways that the types of production and consumption they support can redress.

But wait, “foodie”? One’s choice of language is never wholly innocent, even when it is easy and borrowed. Language can be a sharp reputational tool, and foodie – as opposed to gourmet – does precisely this. Foodie is a fraught term, as it encompasses people who self-identify and others who refer to the food-interested with admiration or disdain. It can be a fighting word. Yet, despite our skepticism of its use as an analytic construct, it is used widely.

We fret that Johnston and Baumann are buying into precisely the perspective that they propose to study by shifting language in the name of commonspeak, creating an imagined self-involved eater. They contrast the imagined cuisine of the contemporary foodie with an earlier aesthetic era of haute cuisine as the playground of the leisure class (a world of Pierre Bourdieu and of Thorstein Veblen), writing “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).” Sauce becomes sin; professionalism stuffiness. This “just-so story” explains that at one time people who cared about food were “snooty” and “snobby” gourmets, but now are politically engaged, socially responsible foodies. Not so fast. As a behavioral matter, what does “snooty” or “snobby” entail? Would we know this when we see it? What exactly are these data for reproaching the denizens of Le Pavillon and admiring the diners at Chez Panisse? Not much, it turns out.

To embrace the present’s view of the past, where boundary lines are differently drawn, is to play a risky game, exchanging one set of boundaries and cultural monitors for another. Imagined mid-century gourmets might suggest (not unreasonably) that a client’s lack of formal attire suggests a lack of respect for the efforts of the culinary artist. Put another way, one still needs capital to participate in the gastronomic game, but the coin of the realm has changed. Johnston and Baumann’s straw man is overstated, in that the old restaurant-temples of haute-bourgeois cuisine, for the most part, no longer exist. Restaurants like Le Pavillon in New York and Le Français in Chicago are shuttered, and perhaps not to our credit. The casual rules of twenty-first century restaurants – from the gastropubs that glorify previously discarded parts of meat to restaurants housed in former warehouse districts – have shifted the style but not the price point or the exclusion that comes with the embrace of aesthetic eating. As Johnston and Baumann rightly point out, foodies’ commitments do require pledges of time, energy, and money. Contemporary foodie discourse eschews overt snobbery, but it is, in many ways, a reformulation of similar principles.

Johnston and Baumann also argue that dimensions of contemporary foodie-ism feed back to more general aesthetic concerns, rather than support for the politics of

inequality, and the hidden pains of social class. Foodies, after all, see the conditions of their own gustatory liberation as the conditions of the liberation of all. They inform us, “Our research shows unequivocally that the dominant trend in foodie discourse is to subordinate political goals to aesthetic goals.” But whose politics, whose aesthetics, and whose goals? Aside from concerns evoked by the Fair Trade movement for ingredients such as chocolate and coffee, Johnston and Baumann find that, in foodie discourse, relatively little attention is paid to issues like labor rights, food sovereignty, hunger, and social justice – issues at the heart of international food activism (see, for example, the work of Vandana Shiva). Raising these issues might alter the type of foods that are available for consumption, an unacceptable outcome for lovers of mangosteens, wild-caught char, and veal kidneys.

The other trend we see the foodie responding to – not explicated by Johnston and Baumann – is not the upscale, white tablecloth restaurant, but decades of domestic food rules that glorified convenience, quantity, and processing. Today, we can be our own Alice Waters, our own Jamie Oliver. In the *New York Times* “Well” section in March 2009, Michael Pollan, author of the gastronomic manifestos *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* [Pollan 2006] and *In Defense of Food* [Pollan 2008], called for readers’ “help gathering some rules for eating well,” perhaps “something passed down by your parents or grandparents.” The comments section of this post garnered more than 2500 responses, from “never eat sushi from a convenience store” to “the masses are asses.” But his pastoral vision was challenged, at least within academic quarters.

Members of the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS) – a well-fed group that includes academics, food writers, cooks, and members of the lay public who often use the term on their listserv, sometimes with ironic detachment and sometimes with an embrace – put their own twist on the politically-sensitive direction that Pollan (who is quoted as telling people to “eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.”) desired. These food-aficionados listed the rules they were taught, starting with a comment from Warren Belasco, author of *Appetite for Change* [Belasco 2007] and *Food: The Key Concepts* [Belasco 2008]: “Food rule from my parents: eat nothing green or fresh.” Granted, these claims seem more sarcastic than substantive, but they expose the arguments that tight-knit communities swallow without choking. Numerous others followed his lead for the next several days: “Eat what you can. Then finish it,” “Cigarettes and martinis are the best first course,” and the ever-popular “Eat everything on your plate, children are starving in India/Ethiopia/China/Korea/etc.” These are not exactly what Pollan has in mind, but to us, they are indicative of the Proustian “*À la recherche du temps perdu*” choices that shape food politics, especially at home. Somehow, despite these anti-culinary mantras, people overcame their past to become the kind of people that they feel that they ought to be today.

Johnston and Baumann provide a service (and not a stuffy one at that) by revealing the fevered imaginings of the foodie. While these imaginings are situated within a sort of upscale pop journalism (the world of *Gourmet* in the green age of Ruth Reichl), the reality that audiences hunger for this sort of thing, suggests that there is tension in the kitchen, struggle in the shops, and trouble in the trattoria. But in fields in which the outcome is seen to matter – and food is one – such there will forever be. Bon appétit!

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The Foodie's Dilemma: Snobbery No More

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: foodways, culture, consumption, class, consumer identity.

Michaela DeSoucey is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. Her work uses food as a lens to examine markets as moral and cultural projects. Her dissertation, *Gullet Politics*, explores the cultural and political controversies surrounding *foie gras* in the United States and France and develops a model of movement-market-state systems as they work to shape the ecology of social problem construction and moral claimsmaking. She is a recent co-author of “Forage for Thought: Mobilizing Codes in the Movement for Grass-fed Meat and Dairy Products,” published in the September 2008 issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly*.

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