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## ”Tension in the Kitchen”: A Response to the Comments. The Politics of Foodie Discourse: Idealized, Ironic, Materialist?

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## “Tension in the Kitchen”: A Response to the Comments

### The Politics of Foodie Discourse: Idealized, Ironic, Materialist?

by Josée Johnston *and* Shyon Baumann

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Perhaps the next best thing to sharing a lively meal with food scholars is partaking in an intellectual dialogue with food scholars on themes of culture, food and consumption. We are honored to have this space devoted to the sociological significance of food, and grateful for the thoughtful scholarly engagement with our ideas. There is abundant material in these comments to inspire future research and reflections. In this reply, we will begin by responding to some of the specific criticisms directed at our work, and then build off some of the points suggested as future directions for scholarship on food and culture. These points can be broken down into three themes or characteristics of foodie culture – as *idealized, ironic, and materialist*. In this short space we cannot do justice to the wide range of comments provided, but we hope to speak to some of the richness of the ideas, and continue the process of intellectual dialogue.

#### **An Idealized Foodie Strawman?**

One of the most serious charges, from DeSoucey *et al.*, is that our depiction of foodie culture creates a foodie “strawman,” reifying a group of “politically engaged, socially responsible foodies.” Going further, they charge that we use this foodie strawman to “reproach” the old-world “denizens of Le Pavillon” and “admire” “the diners at Chez Panisse.” A slightly different, but related, critique comes from

Davolio and Sassatelli, who suggest that we paint of picture of foodie politics that lacks specificity, and implies foodies have a kind of false-consciousness where they defend the environment one minute, and promote their class privilege the next.

To address these critiques, we make two points: one methodological, and the other normative. In terms of methodology, it is worth restating that ours is an analysis of foodie *discourse*, not a survey of foodie behavior. Studying foodie discourse allows us to review a range of texts to adumbrate a phenomenon that has been heretofore ethereal and episodically addressed by scholars. Critical discourse methodology is useful for examining how power relations are embedded in speech, written-works, and images, and as Nancy Fraser [1997, 152] suggests, helps us understand identity formation under conditions of inequality as well as processes of cultural hegemony and emancipatory social change. Our intention was not to put forward rules of foodie behavior (e.g., suggesting that foodies care about the environment, but have no regard for workers' rights). Instead, our goal was to shed light on the complexity of a discourse where food choices can simultaneously articulate one's politics and signal social status. Our study identifies significant elements of politicization in foodie culture, particularly around "eco" themes, and provides a context for understanding specific food preferences and ideological tendencies, like the demand for "cruelty free" food products. It seems important to emphasize that within a single discourse, contradictory ideologies co-exist and compete with each other [Ferree and Merrill 2000, 455]. Foodie discourse is no exception, and other work details the tension between ideologies of democracy and distinction [Johnston and Baumann 2007]. Ideological tension does not necessarily entail schizophrenia, nor does it necessarily suggest that foodies are victims of false-consciousness. Instead, we believe that this speaks to the multiple tensions that exist within the gourmet foodscape, and within the lifeworld of contemporary eaters and consumers more generally. Ideological purity in the realm of food politics is difficult, if not impossible to achieve. Local summer berries can taste sweeter and fulfill your requirements for a 100-mile diet, but are often sprayed with pesticides. Organic salad greens may be pesticide-free, but harvested using exploited labour. A trendy NYC bakery promotes healthy vegan cupcakes that don't harm you or your "animal friends," but also sells shotglasses filled with frosting (a purchase with dubious health benefits) [McKenna 2009, 46].

To be clear, we argue that contemporary foodie discourse is culturally omnivorous and can be juxtaposed against the univore snobbery of traditional gourmet culture. At the same time, it incorporates some of the political themes of the 1960s countercuisine into a new cultural hybrid. This does not mean that all foodies engage with or articulate the environmental or social politics of the discourse. Some foodies are avowedly apolitical, and critique the entry of political themes into foodie dis-

course. For example, following *Gourmet* magazine's March 2009 expose of exploited tomato farm workers in Florida, one subscriber wrote a scathing letter to the editor decrying the "political propaganda" of the story, and threatening to cancel her subscription [*Gourmet* May 2009, 12]. This letter of protest is significant, but so is the fact that *Gourmet* magazine ran a story detailing the social conditions of farm-workers; while labour issues are a theme that was absent from historic issues, and have been exceptionally rare in recent years, clearly, they are not altogether absent from foodie discourse. A methodological focus on discourse can account for such political variations by charting prominent discursive themes and omissions, without requiring behavioral uniformity, and acknowledging the simultaneous existence of competing ideologies and ideas.

At a normative level, we want to be clear that we do not think it is analytically or politically productive to vilify or glorify foodie discourse. Instead, we believe it is essential to detail the nuances of foodie discourse, with all of its possibilities and limitations. Put differently, comparing historic gourmets with today's foodies is not intended to venerate one and demonize the other. Instead, our point is to make a contrast between traditional gourmets' focus on French food as a culinary yardstick, and the contemporary foodie preoccupation with a multiplicity of different cuisines, recognizing that cultural exclusion continues to exist, and that not all foods or cuisines are legitimated as worthy. Furthermore, we think it is important to investigate how a discursive emphasis on inclusivity can work ideologically to mask the subtle ways that status hierarchies are reproduced and legitimated, obscuring the persistence of social inequality. Status and distinction are clearly part of foodie discourse; this is precisely the point of our argument about the implicit politics of foodie culture, which attempts to clarify the continued relevance of cultural capital and legitimacy in the status systems of gourmet food culture – an argument which is laid out in greater detail elsewhere [Johnston and Baumann 2007; Johnston and Baumann forth.].

### **Ironic Foodies?**

Given spatial restrictions, our original article was unable to fully communicate the depth and nuance of the foodie perspectives articulated in our interviews. David Inglis' excellent comments on irony sparked new insights for us, and also shed light on the subtle nuances of foodie culture, a culture that is forged from the uncertainty of everyday food choices laden with considerations of environmental and health risks, labour exploitation, and identity formation. In addition to all of these complex fac-

tors, Inglis suggests that irony can play an important role in the consumption element of foodie culture, serving to mediate the tension between hedonism and virtue. Sensing that tension, foodies may use laughter and ironic distance to position themselves apart from both their bourgeoisie impulses, and the lofty environmental and social ambitions of food choices.

Certainly, there were instances in our interview data where foodies eschewed the self-importance of the middle-class hobbyist, and indicated that they did not take themselves, or their hedonistic pursuits too seriously. Consider the following interview excerpt, where one of our respondents, a 38 year old journalist living in LA, muses about a meal at Chicago's *Alinea* – a molecular gastronomy restaurant praised by many foodies:

There's this restaurant in Chicago called *Alinea*, and it's modeled after the restaurant that I will definitely never go to in Spain, *El Bulli*. It's that kind of molecular gastronomy, kind of sciency, tricky [laughs], like exploding things and put your hands behind your back and close your eyes and, you know, and that was crazy. Like, foam and all this stuff and it was a million dollars and we went with friends who we were visiting there. And I would say that that was the most unusual meal that I've ever had, and like, lots of stunts, you know? And we did it with wine pairing so we were very drunk. And I would never do it again, just because I feel like, you know, it was great and the food was amazing but once is enough. You know?

Just as this foodie humorously rejected the pretense and expense of molecular gastronomy, numerous websites and food blogs specialize in ironic consumption, particularly in regards to guilty pleasures. For example, one food blogger critiqued her dining experience at the same Chicago restaurant, *Alinea*, precisely for taking itself too seriously, and then used humour to suggest a kind of reflexive distance from this foodie indulgence:

the final total, with tax and tip, came to \$575 USD. in other words, MORE than we spent on 3 nights at the hotel and MORE than our flights. i understand how redonkulous that is... don't think I don't realize what a bougie f\*\*ker i sound like. i know that's a ridiculous amount to spend on a meal.<sup>1</sup>

In both of these examples, foodies suggest that they possess a kind of class awareness about the frivolity and expense of culinary indulgences, even as they partake in them.

Ironic consumption is not restricted to expensive highbrow indulgences, but also plays a role when foodie discourse pays homage to lowbrow pleasures. On mul-

<sup>1</sup> <http://chinotto-is-my-nemesis.blogspot.com/2009/04/explosive-night-with-vapour-miranda.html>.

multiple foodie web sites and blogs we find recipes for culinary delights like Whoopie pies, Jello salads, home-made marshmallows or advice on late-night fast-food bingeing. On the blog Bakerella, readers can learn to create hello-kitty cake-pops using a bevy of colored icings, candy and cake-mix. A page on the “Slashfood” website lists the “5 weirdest things in my parents’ cupboards,” a collection which includes “midget” muffin cups and inedible silver cake decorations containing real silver.<sup>2</sup> While irony prevails in foodie discourse, we should not forget that ironic pleasures, like kitsch, can be seen as part of cultivating what Bourdieu [1984] understood as an “aesthetic disposition” towards cultural goods. Indulging in foodie pleasures with humor and irony is a way of maintaining pleasure, particularly when competing evidence suggests that foodie pleasures are unhealthy, unethical, or self-indulgent, and supports the injunction to always “have fun” (a directive which Bourdieu posited as essential to a distinct lifestyle) [*ibidem*, 367]. Irony can also serve as a way to flag the subject as knowledgeable of the foodie landscape – in particular, signaling knowledge that allows the eater to deliberately cross the boundaries of good taste to indulge in lowbrow food pleasures, and reflexively engage with the excesses of high-brown consumption. This is particularly relevant given that indirect, symbolic appropriation of cultural norms is the primary means of cultural stratification in the contemporary era [Lizardo 2008, 5].

While we agree with Inglis that ironic foodie consumption is an important element of foodie culture, particularly in regards to food’s pleasures and excesses, the ethical consumption dimension of foodie discourse seems relatively un-ironic and rather earnest – at least in the North American context that we are more familiar with. As Devolio and Sassatelli rightly observe, our article did not explore, or make explicit the connections between political eating and ethical consumption discourse, what Sassatelli [2006] terms “critical consumption.” As we understand it, particularly in the North American context, ethical consumption discourse typically promises to save the world, one-meal at a time, and its corporate manifestations frequently gloss over any contradictions with this new, citizen-consumer hybrid subject [Johnston 2008]. Celebrated food journalist Michael Pollan solemnly urges followers to “vote with your fork” [Morrow 2009]. *New York Times* columnist, Mark Bittman, advertises his latest book with the following headline: “Lose Weight! Save the Planet! Become a Lessmeatarian!”. Aside from the cheeky “lessmeatarian” moniker, the assurance of environmental change is relatively straightforward: “[j]oin the movement to make a

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.slashfood.com/photos/the-5-weirdest-things-in-my-parents-cupboards/>.

difference in your own health and the health of the planet. You (really) can slow global warming while losing weight, simply by changing the proportions of what you eat.”<sup>3</sup>

While we find little evidence of irony attached to foodie discourse's eco-social aspirations, we greatly appreciate Inglis' suggestion to examine the usage of irony, and believe it is important to systematically investigate this characteristic. In particular, it is important to investigate cross-national differences between British and North American foodie culture. Related to that point, Inglis is certainly correct that more work needs to be done on different national perspectives on food culture, and omnivorous food culture, more specifically – an important corrective to the Eurocentric tendencies that continue to plague the subfield of food scholarship, and sociology more generally.

### **Material Dimensions of Foodie Discourse?**

Another important direction for future research identified by David Inglis is the importance of future research that connects foodie discourse to material conditions. Of course, discourse does not float in a separate ontological realm above the material world, but fundamentally interacts and engages with political-economic and political-ecological structures. Social constructs shape empirical reality and are simultaneously constituted by that reality [Bourdieu 1990, 130]. We believe that the concept of the foodscape can help mediate these dimensions, and use the term to describe the cultural spaces of gourmet food. We understand the foodscape as a dynamic social construction that relates food to specific places, people and meanings. Just as a landscape painting has a mediated, indirect relationship to place, a foodscape may variously capture or obscure the ecological origins, social dimensions and political-economic implications of food production and consumption. The advantage of the term “foodscape” is two-fold: first, it recognizes that our understandings of food and the food system are mediated through social mores and cultural institutions like the mass media; second, it suggests the bi-directional interrelationships between culture, taste, material structures, and physical landscapes, or ecologies.

Of course, the dialectic between the symbolic and the material is never perfectly maintained, and we agree with Inglis that more attention should be paid to the material elements of foodie culture, particularly as national economies struggle with a global recession that renders the gourmet foodscape exceptionally complex and contradictory. On the one hand, the last decade has witnessed the phenomenal growth of niche markets for specialized foods, such as organics and local fare. In

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.markbittman.com/lose-weight-save-the-planet-become-a-lessmeatarian>.

North America, farmers' markets have expanded tremendously, and some areas find it hard to secure enough farmers to supply and staff market stalls. Organic foods are no longer restricted to specialty stores, but can be found at big-box outlets like Costco and WalMart. On the other hand, we can question to what extent foodie interests in ecologically sustainable and politically palatable foodstuffs are really reaching mainstream markets, creating a genuine democracy of taste and sustenance. Besides the question of elitism noted by Davolio and Sassatelli, questions can also be raised about the significance of corporate adaptation to social movement demands for a food system that is more sustainable and equitable. The corporate organic foodscape has not been immune to social movement critiques and challengers, and has incorporated themes of locally-scaled food production, humble origins, and a commitment to family farms and employees into its marketing and promotional material [Johnston, Biro, and MacKendrick 2009]. Market actors who scrupulously embrace the philosophy of local-eating often find it difficult to compete with larger corporations when those corporations commit to local food only episodically, or primarily in imagistic ways. For example, celebrated Toronto chef, Jamie Kennedy, known for his passionate embrace of local provenance, reported on the front page of Canada's national newspaper that his various restaurants were on the verge of bankruptcy: "I'm losing money because embracing the local food movement where costs are inherently higher, is challenging" [Verma 2009]. This case is suggestive rather than definitive, but it speaks to the importance of examining the materialist nuances of foodie culture, investigating what corporate forms emerge to take up foodie trends, and how foodie culture continues to adapt and evolve. In addition, foodie fashion cycles may operate to keep high-status foods ever out of reach, legitimating specialized, small-batch, artisanal products that demand a significant outlay of both economic and cultural capital.

An additional materialist element of foodie culture, a piece that we do not have the space to fully explore, is worth noting: the possibility that foodie culture has emerged, in part, as a reaction against culinary de-skilling and the rise of a heavily processed, industrialized foodscape. As DeSoucey *et al.* note, a key factor behind the emergence of foodies may be the "decades of domestic food rules that glorified convenience, quantity, and processing." This is clearly a key driver behind the expansion of the Slow Food Movement that Sassatelli and Davolio [2008] skillfully theorize. It is true that we do not address the empirical question of why foodies have emerged, but clearly there is an element of reaction against culinary de-skilling that has been central to the modern industrial food system. This question begs further research and investigation, although we offer, as a caveat, a caution against creating a problematic culinary nostalgia that romanticizes women's historical relationship with culinary skills [Hollows 2003, 189].

Finally, Devolio and Sassatelli point out that a consideration of the material dimensions of foodie culture could also illuminate the conditions under which the discourse is produced. They ask whether the specific political concerns we identify are a product of the institutional and market forces influencing the content of the high-end magazines and newspaper columns we analyze (in contrast to other middle-end sources). Undoubtedly, as cultural objects, the content of these sources is importantly influenced by these factors, and an investigation of this relationship would provide a richer understanding of foodie discourse. However, we would also argue that our focus on gourmet magazines and newspaper articles is appropriate for capturing the *dominant* political dimensions of American foodie discourse. Moreover, we have a difficult time even identifying middle-end American sources (we suspect that this is because American food culture is relatively "thin" compared to European food cultures). For this and other reasons, we focused exclusively on what we call foodie discourse, rather than on the more general food discourse. But that is not to say that the discourse we analyze is constrained to high-end foods and venues. It is precisely the omnivorous, broad-ranging nature of foodie discourse – haute cuisine one day, street food the next – that gives rise to the political tensions, especially the implicit tensions, we observe.

## Conclusion

As Ferguson and Zukin [1995] noted some time ago, food is a relatively neglected topic in the sociological canon. We are only at the beginning of this academic stream of inquiry, and we look forward to participating in and witnessing a more developed sociology of food – and to any in-person meetings in Italy that *Sociologica* would like to help put together!

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## **"Tension in the Kitchen": A Response to the Comments**

### The Politics of Foodie Discourse: Idealized, Ironic, Materialist?

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**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.

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*Keywords: foodie, omnivore, food politics, inequality.*

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