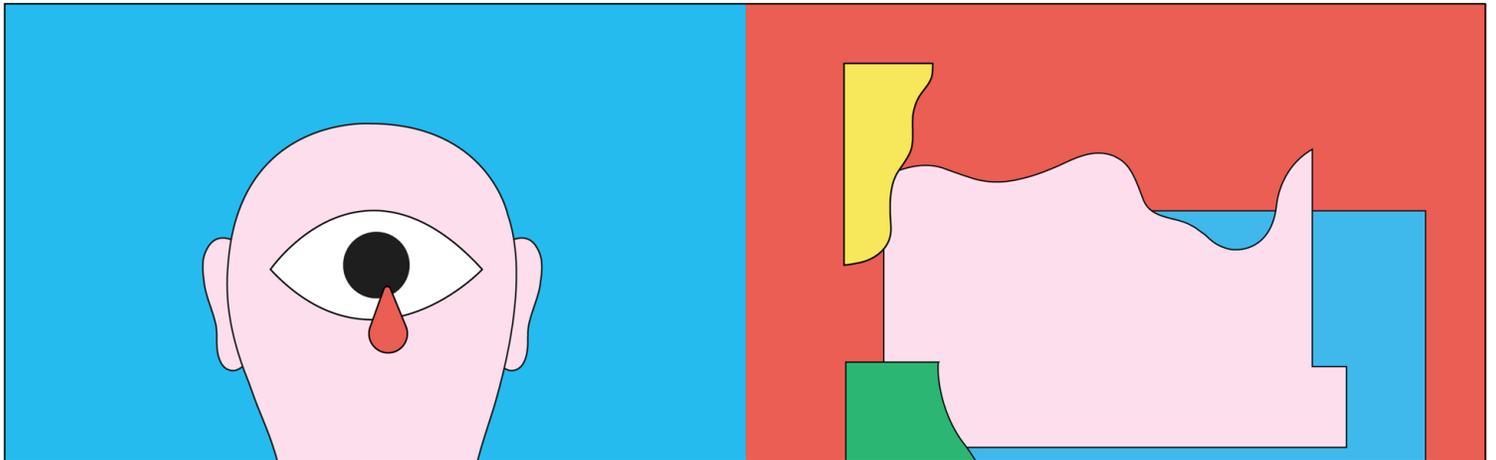


# LUCKY PEACH



ESSAYS

## Food in the College Classroom

Teaching about food and gender at Yale University.

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*This is a condensed and edited version of a talk given at MAD Yale by Maria Trumpler, a senior lecturer in women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Yale and the director of the Office of LGBTQ Resources, about the relationship between women, food, and academics. For more from MAD, check out the [MAD Feed](http://www.madfeed.co/) (<http://www.madfeed.co/>).*

**I**’ve been teaching a course for ten years now at Yale called Women, Food, and Culture. When I first proposed teaching a course on food, particularly in the women’s studies program, I got a lot of resistance. Academic women of my generation are part of a pioneering generation in academia. A lot of us felt we had to *not* do traditional feminine things to get here. I decided I wasn’t going to learn how to cook. My wife decided she wasn’t going to learn how to type. If we couldn’t cook and we couldn’t type, we couldn’t be secretaries and housewives.

When they were founded in the 1970s and 1980s, women’s and gender studies courses looked at things like women’s access to high-powered careers, women’s right to control their bodies. Nowadays, female students who get into Yale often have not met any visible discrimination. They think, *Oh, of course I’m going to get equal pay. Of course I’m going to have control over my body.* They’re not really interested in a course on those things, but they *are* often interested in food.

Nineteen-seventies American feminism focused on two fronts—one that was successful, and one that was less successful. The successful front is that women wanted to enter more parts of the workforce. They wanted to become lawyers, CEOs, doctors, and they largely succeeded in breaking barriers, gaining access to law schools, gaining access to medical schools, and having these careers.

The other goal was for household work to be divided equally in heterosexual couples between the husband and the wife. There was much less success there. Men do somewhat more than they used to, but it’s nowhere near equal.

Part of the reason for that is that people saw the work outside the home as valuable, and said, “We want to share, we want to have some.” Nobody saw the work *in* the home, which includes food preparation, as valuable. Until we really start to value the work in the home, then we’re not going to fully achieve our feminist goals elsewhere.

A recent study looked at data that was collected in a big national survey that asked all kinds of questions of a lot of people, nominally around health. These researchers looked at how many hours of the week both men and women spent on housework and how frequently they had sex. It turns out that for both men and women, the more hours they spend on cleaning, cooking, mowing the lawn, the more often they have sex. I think that if it’s really clear you value

your domestic life, you're saying, *I value this home, I value this marriage, I value this family*, and that's going to create intimacy.

Another "natural experiment" I'm particularly fond of looks at same-sex couples. How do two men manage to run a household? How do two women manage to run a household? When you don't have gendered roles guiding you, sociologists find that there's a lot more negotiation, because you have to say, "Which things do you like doing?" People don't say, "This is the wife's chore; this is the husband's chore."

Taking a longer historical view, I think about the transition from forager-hunters to agriculture and the effect that had on women. An anthropologist interviewed a member of the !Kung San tribe, one of the last groups of forager-hunters thought to be relatively untouched. In forager-hunter societies, women provided the majority of the regular food. There was very little property because they picked up and moved so often, so paternity wasn't such an important thing. Women could be fairly free sexually because they weren't dependent on a man; they were the ones providing the economic supply of food, so they could divorce men, refuse to marry men, have affairs.

But what happens when you have settled agriculture? All of a sudden in Mesopotamia, the men and slaves are in charge of agriculture. When the women were the forager-hunters, they were the ones who got to decide when to pick up and move, because they were the ones who knew, *Gee, all the plums are gone here, but the plums are going to be perfect up in that mountain*. With settled agriculture, women are constrained to the home. And all of a sudden you see tons of laws controlling how you keep your fields, how you store your grain, and what happens to your women. I think that's not coincidence—the control of women's sexuality occurring at the same time settled agriculture moved the food supply into the realm of men. When women had a large role in supplying the food for the group, they also had a lot more freedom socially and sexually, and probably had higher status.

Bringing this all together—history and sociology and daily life—it becomes important to think about the link between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. I get a sense among students that there's a hunger for practical knowledge. I think this is what the Yale Sustainable Food Project has capitalized on so much. There are students who say, "I like to cook." But if you really unpack it, what does that mean? They like the sensory experience of interacting with materials. They like transforming those materials into food.

They like making food for their friends or their family; that's a joyful thing that maybe used to happen every day when they lived at home and is really hard to do in Yale's residence halls.

Today, Yale spends so much money having fifteen different dining halls because the idea is that intellectual and personal exchanges happen in the dining halls, and that there's something magical about the conversations students have when they sit down together and talk about their studies and themselves and their families and world politics. I won't say that that doesn't happen, but on the other hand it also creates this idea that your important asset is your mind. You should be reading, you should be writing, you should be studying. If you were to shop and cook, it would take away from what's really valuable.

There are students who move off campus as soon as they can, to cook for themselves but also to eat what they want when they want. It's tons cheaper to cook for yourself than to have these all-you-can-eat dining halls. But I think it's really more of a sense of personal connection that people are really hungry for, cooking for each other.

At a certain point I got very frustrated with the Ivy League and took time off and became a cheesemaker in Vermont. I will confess that I'm back—I learned the hard way about the economics of start-up agricultural businesses. But there was such pleasure in actually *making* something, in working hard and having twelve wheels of cheese at the end of every day, in going to the farmers' market and selling the cheese. My product at Yale is students who perhaps are more enlightened, more educated, can write a little better—but I never really know which are my good wheels of cheese. To take cooking and food seriously as something that can be studied academically, as something that you can interview people in your family about, as something that has to do with gender and society and politics is really crucial.

**ACADEMICS, COOKING, GENDER, MAD YALE**

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