



12-1-2010

# Domestic Politics Food Within The Family

Louis Frank  
*University of Pennsylvania*

---

## Domestic Politics Food Within The Family

## Domestic Politics *Food Within The Family*

Louis Frank

### Introduction

Food has always played an important and complex role in my life. As the child of two culturally and ideologically dissonant parents, I considered food to serve as more than just sustenance. Meals and snacks alike were often laced with the cultural tension that my parents themselves were negotiating. I paid no attention to my parents' roots, choosing to remove myself from any discussion of religion, nationality, or class. As a child with no strong foundation on which to construct an identity, I turned to food. I developed certain associations—some bad, some good—with certain foods, but never stopped to consider the cultural, emotional, and domestic implications of my actions in forming a food-based identity, and the ways in which my parents tried to convey their own cultural history and values through the food that they served me. Was my mother trying to bring me closer to her own mother when she prepared Grandma's special dish? On the nights that my father cooked instead of my mother, was he trying to tell me something about his identity and cultural origins?

In researching and writing this essay, I hoped to learn about those things that I had so often overlooked in my youth, and try and reconcile the ways in which food can link a family through generations—and just as easily tear it apart. I will be evaluating and discussing the processes by which culture and identity are transmitted across generations through food within both the nuclear and extended family.

### Methods

In order to obtain a complete illustration of food habits across generations, I interviewed five family members from one family and four from another: a grandmother, a mother, a father, and two children. Both families resembled my own: in the first, MA (age sixty), a Jewish man of Russo-Polish descent from Great Neck, Long Island, New York married EA (age fifty-one), a New England WASP born and raised in Brookline, Massachusetts, and daughter of AB, a Caucasian woman originally from New Orleans. MA and EA have four children, two of whom I interviewed, CA (male) and JA (female), ages twenty-three and twenty-seven, respectively.

The other family embodied the same cultural intersection that I wanted to explore: BT (age fifty), an Italian-American from New Jersey, married CT (age forty-eight), an Irish-American from Virginia. They have three children, two of whom I interviewed, GT (female) and MT (male), ages twenty-one and twenty-three, respectively. I also interviewed BT's mother, HT, an Italian-American from New Jersey.

### Food as Transmitting Culture across Generations

William Frank Mitchell says that food has an innate ability to “prompt emotional conversations about identity, health, [and] spirituality...” (Mitchell 2009 2) Indeed, one's ties to food, especially culturally significant food, can be quite strong. MA echoed this sentiment as he reminisced fondly about the traditional Jewish food that he ate during his childhood. “My strongest memories are those of the Shabbat dinners that we had every Friday night,” he said. “I would come home from school every afternoon to the smell of my mother's brisket and challah cooking in the oven...The dinners were lavish and delicious...Mom pulled out all the stops for Shabbat.” The Friday dinners were a mere prelude, however, to the Sunday brunch: “Bagels, lox, capers, onions, and a variety of cream cheese schmears...Every weekend was a chubby adolescent Jewish boy's dream.”

Although MA was raised to appreciate the finest traditional Jewish cuisine, his disillusionment with religion

at large led him to question his faith, and ultimately search elsewhere for a spouse. Enter EA, a beautiful WASP, raised on the majestic Charles River and weaned on stories of Groton and Harvard's “old days”—a far cry from MA's humble Jewish roots. “When I met EA, I was pretty much finished *practicing* Judaism, but I still very much identified with the idea of ‘being Jewish’...I thought that we'd be able to balance our two different cultures, but it was always a struggle.”

As MA and EA settled down in New Hampshire and began to raise a family, the presence of children only served to exacerbate the cultural tension between them. EA's mother, AB, was a world-class chef, renowned along the East Coast for her culinary expertise and deep-South Cajun flair. EA hoped to impart onto her children the same love for Cajun cuisine that her mother had taught her, while MA struggled to maintain his already tenuous connection with his Jewish roots. “MA was constantly working, so I did most of the cooking,” said EA. “I cooked things for the kids that my mother had made me when I was a child: skillet cornbread, gumbo, jambalaya... These were some of my mother's and my favorites when I was growing up.” As EA continued to indoctrinate the children with her Cajun cuisine, MA could only watch idly, as he was relegated to the role of breadwinner, not bread-baker. “She was completely oblivious to the fact that I wanted the kids to have at least some sort of traditional Jewish experience...so that they could identify at least a little with their father's roots,” said MA. Marjorie DeVault suggests that “paid employment brings power and influence within the family.” (DeVault, 2008, p. 243) However, it seemed that within the family, EA held most of the cultural power, as the importance of food and her constant presence in the kitchen afforded her most of the power in transmitting her own culture.

Dr. Kyung Rhee emphasizes the importance of parenting style in the food habits of children: “Parents play an important role in the growth, development, and socialization of children...parents influence the development of eating and activity behaviors through the use of specific feeding techniques...” (Rhee 2008, 13) MA retired soon after CA, the youngest child, was born, and he began to use his young son as a way to transmit the Jewish cultural identity that had been repressed for so long, and influence CA's cultural development, as Rhee suggests. “I saw it as an opportunity for at least one of my children to understand and appreciate my culture,” he said. As EA went back to work, MA stayed home with CA, feeding him the same kinds of food on which he was raised. His son appreciated the attention and the meals. “I loved eating with my dad when I was little,” said CA. “Those are the best memories that I have of my childhood...In second grade I used to tell kids that lox was my favorite food, and they asked me why I would eat a security device.”

As CA grew, he became the only one of EA and MA's children to identify with his Jewish heritage. “I started to seek out as much information as I could about the religion and the culture...In high school I joined the Jewish society, even though I wasn't even close to practicing.” Today, CA possesses a certain sense of Jewish pride that is shared by none of his siblings. “My brother and sisters call me ‘Dad's Social Experiment.’ I guess it worked.” Indeed, MA's efforts to socialize CA into the Jewish identity that he had been forced to repress was quite successful; and it all began with the simple act of serving him traditional Jewish food.

CT and BT's experience proved to be quite different from that of MA and EA. The two met at Radford University in Virginia, where BT was one year ahead of CT. As soon as she met him, CT was enamored with BT. “There was something about him...His charm, the way he talked, the way he handled himself...I'd never met anyone like him before,” she said. Growing up sheltered in a humble rural section of Virginia, someone like BT was a cultural anomaly. When she met BT's mother, HT, soon thereafter, she experienced quite a culture shock.

HT embodied the Italian love affair with food. “I lived for the kitchen...A lot of women that I hung around with at the time were resentful of their role in the house. I relished mine. Cooking was my greatest passion,” HT said. CT had never seen anything like it. “The things she was doing in there, the food she was

cooking...I was in awe. The odor alone was intoxicating...The food [long pause], there was nothing like it," she said of her first encounter with HT. CT was more accustomed to the goings-on around her own home: a mother who was wont to whip together quick, simple meals and voice her disdain for the amount of effort that cooking required. "My mother hated cooking. *Hated* it...I think she groaned the entire time that she was in the kitchen."

Seeing HT in action—and the way that BT reacted to her cooking—inspired CT. "I wanted it all... The big busy kitchen; the aromas; the reactions from those who were eating...Everyone adored HT." CT's final sentiment is telling: growing up in a home with a hostile mother and near-absentee father, there was one thing that CT's life to that point lacked: love. As Joseph Burrigge and Margo Barker observe, "The construction of food [is] a tool for pursuing the happiness of others, and ultimately their love." (Burrigge and Barker 2009, 147) For HT, food was the key that gave her access to the hearts of her family and those around her. CT wanted the same for herself.

So began CT's transformation from unassuming country bumpkin to grand Italian matriarch. Soon after she and BT married, she spent nearly all of her time refining her skills in the kitchen. "I wanted my children to tell their friends that I was the best cook in the world. I wanted my children's friends to tell their parents that I was the best cook in the world. I was driven." CT abandoned her roots, assumed a new cultural identity—adopting Italian cuisine and the Italian culture—and she followed it vigorously. All in the name of family and food.

*Comfort Foods across Generations*

In his study of the Kalymnian islanders of Greece, David Sutton speaks extensively on the role that food plays in linking us to the past. When a transplanted Kalymnian native tastes cheese that is indigenous to his home, he is brought back, and the food serves as a comfort, easing the pain and longing for his homeland. The same principle can be applied to comfort foods across generations within families: the consumption of a familiar food from one's childhood can trigger positive memories and associations.

As I discussed earlier, MA spoke fondly of the food that his mother prepared for him in his youth. He especially remembered the foods that she made him as a pick-me-up. "Whenever I felt down, my mother would comfort me with food," he said. "Homemade blintzes were her specialty, and she saved them for when I really needed them. Sometimes I would feign depression so that she made them." Not surprisingly, MA passed this tradition onto his youngest child, CA, with only a slight variation.

"Dad couldn't make them from scratch, the way he described my grandmother always doing it," CA said. "He'd go out and buy them frozen and heat them up for me. Regardless, they were pretty amazing." These days, CA still enjoys comforting himself with a blintz. "It's kind of silly, sticking to a tradition so strictly, but it reminds me of my childhood...of the times I spent with my father." Michael Owen Jones says, "A certain type of food may symbolize care, concern, and contentment." (Jones 1988, 236) Here we see this notion put into action, as both father and son were reminded of paternal nurturing by the consumption of a certain food.

CA is not the only one of MA and EA's children that inherited a comfort food. When the kids were young, every Friday was pizza night. The children spent most of the school week looking forward to, as JA described it, "Nine-year-old nirvana." This was no ordinary pizza: EA spent the day making the entire dish from scratch, a labor-intensive process that she learned from observing and eventually practicing with her mother. "When I was younger, I told myself that one day I would make pizza that was better than my mom's," she said. "Ask my kids...I think they'll tell you that I succeeded." Indeed, said JA of the weekly event, "It would be the understatement of the century to say that pizza night was important to us [the kids]...We lived for pizza night." She recalled one night in particular, when EA got tied up on the phone and lost track of time (Using a timer was an insult to the craft; AB never used a timer, and never overcooked a pie. "My mother taught me that pizza should be *felt*. I

thought she was crazy, but I began to understand the method behind her madness as I aged," said EA). The pies were ruined, pizza night was compromised, and the family spent the rest of the night mourning the loss of the beloved delicacy. "I remember that night vividly. I'll never forget it," JA said.

Fortunately, pizza night survived the hiccup, and continues to thrive today, as every Friday night in JA's home is pizza night—with a twist. "I try to eat healthy," she said. "Eating pizza made with white flour and full-fat cheese every week? That's a death wish." JA has crafted a more health-conscious pizza night for her and her husband. "I use whole wheat flour and part-skim mozzarella... Sometimes I'll use semolina flour if I really want to indulge, but that's if I'm feeling really crazy." Although she has made slight alterations for health considerations, JA has kept alive the ritual that began with her maternal grandmother. Says Theodore Humphrey, "Ritual sustains tradition because we human beings create meaning and significance through ritualizing our activities and calling forth deeper responses to our celebrations of life's events." (Humphrey 1988, 21) JA and EA's continued practice of the pizza night ritual in their respective adult lives has helped them to connect to that same emotional meaning that they felt as giddy children, anxiously awaiting the arrival of the ever elusive pizza night.

I observed the same practice of ritual, tradition, and memory in BT and CT's family. Of all of HT's cooking feats, BT seemed to remember one dish most enthusiastically. "Vodka penne," he said forcefully. "Nothing in the entire world tasted as good as my mother's vodka penne (apologies to my wife; I think she'd understand)." Indeed, HT's vodka penne was a staple of the household growing up, and was a huge hit at potlucks and dinner parties alike. HT had one choice when it came time to pass on the recipe: with no biological daughters, CT was appointed the next to hold the mantle. She has not disappointed.

For nearly twenty years, CT has been refining and re-refining her vodka penne, much to BT's delight. "Every time she makes it, it gets better. I don't know if it will ever be able to touch my mother's, but CT is as close as anyone will ever come...It's different, in a good way." Their children have also come to cherish the dish. Said MT, "When I'm at school, I get a craving for it probably at least once a week...Eating in the dining hall after eating my mom's cooking is one of the hardest things I've had to do." (Admittedly, MT has lived a charmed life.) His younger sister GT agrees wholeheartedly, "Every year for my birthday I ask my mom to make vodka penne..."



*Kali in the Market*

Collin Schenk ('11)

I think she'd understand." Indeed, HT's vodka penne was a staple of the household growing up, and was a huge hit at potlucks and dinner parties alike. HT had one choice when it came time to pass on the recipe: with no biological daughters, CT was appointed the next to hold the mantle. She has not disappointed.

For nearly twenty years, CT has been refining and re-refining her vodka penne, much to BT's delight. "Every time she makes it, it gets better. I don't know if it will ever be able to touch my mother's, but CT is as close as anyone will ever come...It's different, in a good way." Their children have also come to cherish the dish. Said MT, "When I'm at school, I get a craving for it probably at least once a week...Eating in the dining hall after eating my mom's cooking is one of the hardest things I've had to do." (Admittedly, MT has lived a charmed life.) His younger sister GT agrees wholeheartedly, "Every year for my birthday I ask my mom to make vodka penne..."

Well, I guess I ask her to make it every night that I'm at home." As far as traditions go, this one shows no signs of slowing down. "Eventually I'll pass it onto GT," said CT. "Hopefully her kids enjoy it as much as mine do."

#### *Food as a Form of Rebellion & Community*

Paul Fieldhouse says, "The act of eating together indicates some degree of compatibility or acceptance... The tension between hospitality and power is also evident." (Humphrey 1988, 67) We can observe Fieldhouse's idea within the nuclear family: the giver of the food (the parents) possesses the power over the recipient. However, the nuclear family is also unique, in the sense that there is a constant power struggle between parents and their children, particularly during adolescence. Within this struggle, food can be employed as a means of gaining power.

JA's relationship with her parents began to wane around her sixteenth birthday. "What I was going through at the time wasn't unique to my situation. It happens to everyone," she said. "You get older, you resent your parents...I was constantly looking for ways to show them that I was a mature, independent adult." JA found an outlet for this desire at the dinner table. "At that point in my life, I was really getting tired of the whole sit-down dinner act, and I had no interest in eating the unhealthy food that my mom was making every night." JA subtly found a way to act out: as her mother cooked dinner, JA would enter the kitchen and prepare her own healthy alternative (The standard: two pieces of whole wheat toast, topped with fat-free cottage cheese and olive tapenade). At dinnertime, she was neither seen nor heard, reading quietly in her room. This act of defiance had emotional implications that reverberated through the entire household. "It hurt my feelings," said EA. "I understand that kids that age are going to act out and get resentful, but food was so important to us as a family."

If the act of eating with others is a form of compatibility and acceptance, as Fieldhouse suggests, then JA's actions spoke volumes about her attitude: refusing to eat with the family was a symbolic act of rejection and independence, as E.N. Anderson says, "Food is used in every society...to communicate messages." (Anderson 2001, 6) The fact that EA infused the meals that she prepared with a great deal of cultural pride lent even more significance to JA's actions. "When I cooked, I was always trying to channel my [deceased] mother," said EA. "The act of cooking was one of the strongest memories that I had of her." In this way, JA's rejection of her mother's food was, by extension, a rejection of her roots.

Likewise, it seemed that food was symbolic of the troubled mother-daughter relationship that existed between the two parties. Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr suggest, "Food occupies a significant place in the relationships between women and their children...and tells us a great deal about age relations within the family... it falls to women to ensure that mealtimes are a happy occasion." (Charles and Kerr, 1988, 85) Indeed, food represented the tension between EA and JA, and EA's refusal to accommodate her daughter's request signified—on some level—a failure in the act of mothering.

BT and CT had no such problem with their children. Dinner time at their house was almost always an event that the kids relished with gusto. "I've always loved spending time with my family, and dinners are my favorite," said GT. "It'd be the only time where everyone came together at once...plus it didn't hurt that my mom's cooking was amazing." CT adopted the Italian practice of turning dinner into a grandiose affair, inviting friends and family members into the house as often as possible. "This was something I picked up from HT," she said. "She was always entertaining people...Growing up in a tiny house with no true dining room, I wanted that." Humphrey says, "Food-centered events create a viable, recognizable community." (Humphrey 1988, 53) Indeed, for CT, dinners became a means of creating this community, both within the family and the immediate neighborhood. "Mom's meals definitely brought us all closer together [as a family]," said MT. "I never missed a dinner at home, especially on the weekends...If people invited me to come out with them, I'd tell them to give me a call after dinner." Says Kyung Rhee, "Positive family interactions and order in the household may create an atmosphere that allows for greater acceptance by children of particular parent behaviors." (Rhee 2008, 27) CT's emphasis on the positive dinner ritual, coupled with the joy that her children derived from her food, allowed her and BT to avoid the traditional teenage angst and resentment that befell so many parents.

#### *Food and Responsibility: Feeding a Child*

All parents whom I interviewed said that they felt some obligation to feed his or her children responsibly and healthfully. These plans were scrapped rather quickly, however, as it became apparent to each of them that feeding their children foods that held emotional significance for them was more important. "I wanted CA to be a healthy boy, but honestly, my desire for him to enjoy the same foods as me was much stronger," said MA. As a result, CA spent most of his youth battling weight issues, just as MA had in his childhood. Regardless, MA had no regrets. "To see one of my children enjoy the same things that I did as a child, to see him identify with my roots...That's much more important to me than him being skinny."

HT and CT echoed MA's sentiments. "I fed BT pretty unhealthy food as a child," said HT. Likewise, CT gave little thought to the nutritional value of the lavish meals that she prepared for her children. "GT and MT love me...A big reason for that is the fact that I cooked them such good food as children," she said. It seems that for the baby boomer generation, a child's affection trumps health consciousness.

JA, a prospective mother, saw the situation differently. "I appreciate what my parents did for me, but the fact that they fed me such unhealthy food for so long really led to me resenting them," she said. JA spent most of her childhood battling weight issues, much like her brother, and blamed her mother's food for her plight. "I'm going to feed my kids good, wholesome food...Just because it's good for you doesn't mean it tastes bad...I want them to grow up to be healthy and happy." Perhaps we can point to the generational differences in nutritional education as the root of JA's attitude. "The things that we know now about nutrition...I had no idea when I was feeding my kids fifty years ago," said HT. Indeed, it seems that for prospective parents today, nutrition has taken on a larger role in feeding the family than it has in the past. Only time will tell whether or not JA's plans falter in the same way that those of her predecessors did.

#### *Conclusion*

We have seen the ways in which food can play a significant role in the process of family development and identity formation. For MA and EA, it became a remnant of the past, a means of holding onto fond memories and transmitting those memories to their children (and, ultimately, grandchildren). MA's Jewish roots, however tenuous, were always able to survive through the food that he ate, and he passed these ideals onto his son. EA was able to channel her mother through the process of feeding her own children.

For CT, food embodied an opportunity for a cultural reinvention: it was the catalyst in her transformation



*A Fruit Shop in Sienna*

Jennifer McAuley (13)



from her rural past to her cosmopolitan present. As she took on a new identity, she simultaneously transmitted her new cultural practices to her children, repressing her past, for better or for worse.

For the children, food was a means of consent (or dissent) with their parents' cultural practices and ideals. CA's love of traditional Jewish meals reinforced his deep bond with his father. His sister JA's health consciousness created a nearly irreconcilable rift between her and her parents, and inspired her to pursue alternate means of transmitting the cultural identity that her mother imparted onto her. MT and GT's fondness for their mother's cooking led them to grow closer to both of their parents, and created a tightly knit nuclear family.

The food each family eats speaks volumes about the ways in which that family views itself. Each bite is packed with cultural, emotional, and domestic implications. By looking beneath the surface, I was able to uncover these implications and their roots.

*Works Cited*

Anderson, E.N. (2001) *Everyone eats: understanding food and culture*. New York, NY: NYU Press.  
 Barker, M. & Burrige, J. (2009). Food as a medium for emotional management of the family: Avoiding complaint and producing love. In P. Jackson (Ed.) *Changing families, changing food* (pp. 146-164). Sheffield, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.  
 Charles, N. & Kerr, M. (1988). *Women, food, and families*. New York, NY: Manchester University Press.  
 DeVault, M. (2008) Conflict and deference. In C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik (Ed.) *Food and culture: A reader* (pp. 240-258). New York, NY: Routledge.  
 Humphrey, L. (1988). "Soup night": Community creation through foodways. In T. & L. Humphrey (Eds.), *We gather together: Food and festival in American life* (pp. 53-68). Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.  
 Humphrey, T. (1988). A family celebrates a birthday: Of life and cakes. In T. & L. Humphrey (Eds.), *We gather together: Food and festival in American life* (pp. 19-26). Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.  
 Jones, M.O. (1988). Discovering the symbolism of food customs and events. In T. & L. Humphrey (Eds.), *We gather together: Food and festival in American life* (pp. 235-245). Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.  
 Mitchell, W.F. (2009). *African American food culture*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.  
 Rhee, K. (2008). Childhood overweight and the relationship between parent behaviors, parenting style, and family functioning. In A. Jordan (Ed.) *The annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 615 (1), 12-37.  
 Sutton, D. (2001). *Remembrance of repasts: An anthropology of food and memory*. Oxford: Berg.



Roman Baths at Bath  
Jennifer McAuley ('13)



Brotherhood



A Weaving Woman

Katie Rubin ('12)

"I was on a project team in Makuleke South Africa in 2008. The goal of the project was to collect ethnographic information in order to establish a cultural museum in the village and thus stimulate the local economy and increase exposure to the wider world in a time of political threat."

RIP Biggie  
George Karandinos ('10)

Taken in North Philadelphia as part of a continuing ethnographic project under the supervision of Philippe Bourgois examining urban poverty, the drug trade and violence.

