Name

Professor

Class

Month Day, Year

Of Meat and Beer: Redrafting Gender Lines and Food Culture

An old axiom says “you are what you eat.” In the United States, the relative abundance of food has allowed Americans the luxury of choosing what to consume on a daily basis. Despite the wide variety of dishes readily available for the dinner plate, gender politics have played a significant role in dietary selections. However, as cultural and social norms change, food itself becomes an expression of fluctuating gender dynamics. In recent years, women have increasingly “encroached” on male-dominated foods, such as meats and beer. Women have not only consumed meat and beer in increasing numbers, they have also entered the male-dominated industries, challenging the “old boy networks” in the way food is prepared and marketed. This shift in eating habits reflects a larger empowerment of women in the United States.

Men have traditionally perceived meats as a “manly food,” perhaps drawing from their traditional gender role as hunters (Wansink 94-101). The protein from meat contributes to building muscle mass and the stamina needed for tracking and killing game. Technological progress and the easy accessibility of food in the United States have negated the need for men to hunt game in order to provide for the family meal. Nevertheless, a psychological perception of the man-hunter persists, leading men to associate red meats, and the over-eating of meats, as a sign of their masculinity and virility. According to one study, mass media perpetuates this stereotype: male characters on television are “smoke more, drink more, and are more overweight [than women], yet they are much less likely to be diagnosed with illnesses,” suggesting men can

indulge in a care-free lifestyle while avoiding health costs (Wardle, Haase, Steptoe, Nillapun, and Jonwutiwes 107-108).

Television and other mass media also present women as usually slim and attractive, far from the male representation of a carnivorous, ill-tempered caveman. However, because of the strict societal standard regarding women's appearances, they lack the freedom to consume, lest their overindulgence leads to unwanted pounds. In order to live up to an idealized body type, women are more likely to observe dietary measures, avoid fatty or high calorie foods, and subscribe to weight-loss programs (Wardle, Haase, Steptoe, Nillapun, and Jonwutiwes 107-108). Meat, with its proteins that build body mass, also falls off women's dietary regiments. Natalie L. Caine-Bish observes that this gender-centered food segregation did not solely affect adults: in her study of children's preferred eating choices, "boys are more like to expand their animal-product-related foods more than girls" as they grow older (28-29).

While hard alcohol and red meats may have helped construct red-blooded American he-men, women have made headway into these foods. Alcoholic spirits have long comprised a staple in masculine culture: from working men's taverns to elite clubs, hard liquor has circulated freely among American men regardless of class or ethnicity. For the modern breweries seeking to expand, women comprise an untapped market. *The Atlantic* points out the current trend in organic foods, locally-grown produce, and the boutique-style brands emphasizing customized flavors and meals, have made beer appealing to women who, in general, are more concerned about "good foods" (Baugher). By channeling "feminine" approaches to food—the nutritional value, crafting special flavors to enhance the dinner meal—women have domesticated beer from men.

Indeed, women brewers see their entrance into the industry as more than a livelihood. Emily Engdahl, the owner of one local brewery, explained that her business venture spoke to a larger issue feminism concerning women in the work place: “We belong here. We can’t let people make you feel a certain way” (Baugher). While some men may laugh off the notion of women brewers as an oxymoron, women entrepreneurs shrewdly play off this stereotype. Beer ads have long stigmatized women as sex objects for the male consumer: one owner notes that while these ads demean women, they also link female sexuality to the product: a salesperson in a skirt can sell beer more effectively than a man in suit (Baugher).

As shifts in gender roles influence Americans’ eating habits, the western valorization of science and medicine has also mirrored those trends as a sign of progress. The increasing number of female brewers and drinkers might encounter resistance among the male-dominated industry and consumer groups, but researchers have lent an objective air to affirm the cultural trends. Previous studies have implied that dark chocolates have medicinal properties in anti-oxidants and reducing blood pressure; for women who have traditionally claimed chocolate under the feminine sweet tooth, the veneer of “science” merely reinforced chocolate’s label as a “chick food” (Wansick). While no one argues that heavy drinking is healthy, some recent tests have suggested women may benefit from moderate alcohol consumption. For instance, one study has observed women who drink moderately may risk the risk of rheumatoid arthritis (Lu, Solomon, Costenbader, and Karlson). Science, heralded as a bias-free methodology, validates the presence of women in the long-held male domain.

Another study suggested the consumption of red meat did not contribute to coronary heart disease, but could lead to higher blood pressure in men (Wagemakers, Prynne, Stephen, and Wadsworth). The study did note women and men increased their waistlines from the heavy

consumption of meat—detrimental to the American emphasis on slim women—but that red meat generated more harmful effects on men than women dealt a blow to red meat as a "manly food." As with the brewery industry, American culture had generally regarded butchers as a masculine occupation, if only because of the strength needed to haul a large animal carcass and cut through bones. The cattle industry in particular has crafted a romantic image of the rancher as a burly cowboy who maneuvers his herd through the West.

According to National Public Radio, however, women butchers and, with them, red meat-eating women, are increasing in number. Like the boutique brewery, the demand in organic/locally grown foods has attracted women into the marketplace. The proliferation of "Girl's Meat Camps"—the spelling references the feminist movements rejection of "girl" as weak and subservient—have "opened up this avenue for not just the raising of meat," one butcher explains, "but the selling, the marketing, the distributions" (Inge). As with beer, women butchers have met resistance and ridicule from the industry and consumers, but women see themselves as acquiring a skill set, one that demands physical endurance as well as an aesthetic sense in cutting and preparing an attractive slice of beef.

That women generate controversy when they enter the male-dominated culinary fields demonstrates the cultural meanings of food. Women had long wielded blades against food: no one would claim a woman cutting vegetables encroaches on her husband's contribution to the dinner table. The connections between women and plants have long roots: they performed as the "gatherer" component in primitive "hunter-gatherer" societies, where they took care of the children and the home, and seldom strayed from a domesticated setting. From a mythological perspective, the earth often assumed the characteristics of a female (the "Mother Earth") and goddesses ruled over plant life, such as the Greek goddess Demeter. This close association

between femininity and plants has remained in American gender roles: when children age, more girls than boys lean toward vegetables (Caine-Bish). Indeed, as Wansick points out, the stereotype of the carnivorous alpha male relegates women to an inferior social position. This hierarchy is presented in the final food preparations: while wives also chop meat when prepping the actual meals, they do so only after the menfolk/butchers have completed the "heavy work" in killing, dividing, and packaging the animals. As historian Jessamyn Neuhaus points out, cookbooks such as *250 Ways to Prepare Meat* confirms the old adage that "the way to man's heart is through his stomach" (92). places women in the inferior position to their husbands: preparing a meat-laden feast not only renders them as subservient caregivers, but is key to winning male approval and affection.

Women encounter resistance when attempting to transgress food culture. Conversely, men who become vegetarians are also stigmatized as effeminate; the lack of red-meat has made red-blooded American anemic. One recent study has scientifically confirmed the stereotype: according to researchers at Loma Linda University Medical School, male vegetarians have a much lower sperm count. Replacing meat with soy products contributed to the decrease in sperm: the team hypothesizes that soy products contain phyto-oestrogens, "which have similar properties to the female hormone oestrogen" (Knapton). In other words, a vegetarian diet endows a man with female hormones and, by connotation, womanly behavior. This confluence of gender and medical evidence contributes to the prevailing stereotypes in food culture.

Indeed, these gender roles continue to manifest themselves in daily life. The allure of a carnivorous man connotes virility and strength among women. Several recent reports have noted women prefer "real men" who eat meat and they eschew male vegetarians as passive and, by connotation, sexually inept. Conversely, men prefer to date women who are vegetarians for the

same reasons (Macrae; Murray). These articles do not detail the reasons explaining the links between dating patterns and eating habits—they come from the popular press rather than academic journals—they do play upon the already-accepted cultural tropes of gendered food.

Dietary experts agree that a balance of the four major food groups is essential to a healthy life. Unfortunately, the long-standing cultural legacy of certain foods has become an obstacle to maintaining a proper diet. Of the four categories, meat (and to a lesser degree, vegetables) contain social markers that influence the ways people choose what they want to eat. Parents and nutrition experts wanting boys to consume more vegetables do not often consider the social significance of meat and vegetables and their son's gender; spinach may give Popeye muscles, but as Knapton points out, vegetarians' low sperm count makes them sissies.

Conversely, opening door for women to operate breweries, work as butchers, and consume what they produce may give a sense of empowerment, but their "masculinization" makes them second rate in terms of potential mates. Indeed, the articles laud the expanding range of women's choices for careers and meals, but they do not point out the potential backlash as the increased calorie count from meat and alcohol may prove detrimental to women's bodies. Aside from potential health issues, potential weight gain conflicts with other social norms, especially American standards of beauty and femininity: men may drink booze with abandon, ladies do not.

Nevertheless, as women brewers and male vegans know, the gender politics of food culture are not set in stone. The complicated web of culture and science is consistently in change; as one changes, the other responds. The current crisis over obesity and the growing "whole foods" markets demonstrate that Americans are increasingly health conscious, and their concerns will impact the selections they place on the dinner table.

Works Cited

Baugher, Krystal. “Women and Beer: A 4,500-Year History is Coming Full Circle.” *Atlantic*. N.p. 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 6 June 2015. <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/11/women-and-beer-a-4-500-year-history-is-coming-full-circle/281338/>

Caine-Bish, Natalie L. “Children’s Gender Impacts Food Preferences.” *Pediatrics for Parents* 26.5 (2010): 28-29. Print.

Inge, Leoneda. “Female Butchers are Slicing through the Meat World’s Glass Ceiling.” *NPR*. N.p. 7 Dec. 2014. Web. 7 June 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/12/07/366642071/women-butchers-are-slicing-through-the-meat-worlds-glass-ceiling >

Knapton, Sarah. “Vegetarians Have Much Lowe Sperm Counts.” *Telegraph*. N.p. 20 Oct. 2014. Web. 6 June 2015. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/active/mens-health/11172519/Vegetarians-have-much-lower-sperm-counts.html>

Lu, Bing, Daniel H. Solomon, Karen H. Costenbader, and Elizabeth W. Karlson. “Alcohol Consumption and Risk of Incident Rheumatoid Arthritis in Women: A Prospective Study.” *Arthritis & Rheumatology* 66.8 (2014): 1998-2005. Print.

Macrae, Fiona. “Real Men Must Eat Meat, Say Women as They Turn Their Noses Up at Vegetarians.” *Daily Mail*. N.p. 1 Feb. 2011. Web. 6 June 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1352393/Real-men-eat-meat-say-women-turn-noses-vegetarians.html>

Murray, Rheana. “Men Prefer to Date Vegetarians, but Women Pick Meat-Eaters: Research.” *NY Daily News*. N.p. 25 Feb. 2014. Web. 6 June 2015. <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-

style/men-prefer-date-vegetarians-research-article-1.1701145>

Neuhaus, Jessamyn. “Is Meatloaf for Men? Gender and Meatloaf Recipes.” *Cooking Lessons: the Politics of Gender and Food*. Ed. Sherrie A. Inness. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001. 87-110. Print.

Wagemakers, JJMF, CJ Prynne, AM Stephen, and MEJ Wadsworth. “Consumption of Red or Processed Meat does not Predict Risk Factors for Coronary Heart Disease; Results from a Cohort of British Adults in 1989 and 1999.” *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 63 (2009): 303-311. Print.

Wansick, Brian. *Mindless Eating: Why We Eat More Than We Think*. New York: Bantam, 2007. Print.

Wardle, Jane, Anne M. Haase, Andrew Steptoe, Maream Nillapun, and Kiriboon Jonwutiwes. “Gender Differences in Food Choice: The Contribution of Health Beliefs and Dieting.” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 27.2 (2004): 107-116. Print.