Food and its discourses were long neglected by the humanities, since food was considered something necessary, biological, non-negotiable. Moreover, food belonged to the domestic sphere – for decades a blind spot for scholarly interest – and was dismissed as a subject a bit too feminine, too mundane, and insufficiently political, a humdrum quotidian activity. But recent scholarship has cautiously – and lately more self-confidently – recognized the importance of food in making subjectivities and developing resistance to dominant discourses. In light of this new theoretical background, kitchens and dining tables need to be understood as prominent sites in the production of subjects through processes that are guided, reflected, and contested by a number of discourses ranging across cookbooks, literary and popular fiction, TV cooking shows, diet blogs, restaurant reviews, poetry, and still life paintings. Studying these genres reveals the centrality of food to the construction of identity.

From a physiological point of view, there is little difference between eating corn, caviar, or cockroaches; all three are potential suppliers of protein and calories. The differences between the edible and the inedible, the prestigious and the profane, and even the desirable and the disgusting are constructed by culturally contingent discourses. If eating were only about nutrition, we could have ourselves "fed and watered," as the philosopher Elizabeth Telfer ironically proposes, intravenously, while asleep (1). This would save us time and trouble and would probably be healthier, too. But as philosopher Deane Curtin states, "Food consumption habits are not simply tied to biological needs but serve to mark boundaries between social classes,
geographical regions, nations, cultures, genders, life-cycle stages, religions and occupations, to
distinguish rituals, traditions, festivals, seasons, and times of day. Food structures what counts as a person in our culture" (4). In the diverse ethnic and regional communities of the United States, Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell have shown, foodways have contributed to the performance of group identity, defining membership through inclusion and exclusion. As Elspeth Probyn puts it, “We consume and ingest our identities” (17).

In spring 2008, 26 undergraduates, mostly juniors from American University’s different colleges and schools, developed their own research projects for the seminar Food, Identity and Politics. They analyzed how power relations and subjectivities are established in diet programs, food advertisements, culinary autobiographies, movies, and cooking shows. Their work showed how important and ubiquitous food discourses are in everyday life and culture and how they shape notions of individuality, race, authenticity, foreignness, nation, sexuality and gender. Food and Culture presents four of these projects, chosen by the students on the basis of their originality, quality, and topic.

Jasmine Samuel’s “New Ethnicities: Caribbean Cuisine and Identity” explores the way the diverse cuisines of the Caribbean have come to be represented as one homogenous regional cuisine in restaurants of the D.C. area, a process that reflects the paradox of consumers who seek an experience of authenticity and exoticism without risking complete separation from the security of the familiar.

In “Taking a Big Bite Out of the Food Network,” Andrew Corcoran explores the growing number of cooking shows hosted by male chefs, analyzing the different strategies these shows use to stabilize rather than destabilize traditional notions of gender.

Cuisines and food discourses not only mark ethnic and gendered but also sexual identities, argues Gus Zimmerman in his “The Queer Dish: Gay Cookbooks after Stonewall.” Focusing on
cookbooks that address a male homosexual audience, he explores how the traditionally
heteronormative genre of the cookbook is undermined by “queer dishes” aimed at supporting a
positive view of gay creativity and community through preparing and hosting meals.

Cassie Passinault argues in “You Know You’re a Redneck if… Road Kill is Not a Joke”
that beneath the humorous presentation of cookbooks on road kill cuisine lies the serious aim of
rehabilitating “redneck” culture as a legitimate part of America’s heritage.

While these four articles represent the diverse interests and original thought of the
students in the seminar, they are only a small taste of the hard work and commitment students
brought to this subject.

Works Cited

Brown, Linda Keller, and Kay Mussell, eds. Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States:

Curtin, Deane W. "Food/Body/Person." Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Tranformative Philosophies
