FROM TAVERN TALK TO PINTEREST PINS: THE HISTORY OF FOOD AND COMMUNITY IN AMERICA
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In America, food preparation has been historically a communal experience in which families exchanged information on food and cooking through spoken instruction or written cookbooks. In recent times, food information in America is most often distributed through online resources such as social media sites that have given individuals the ability to collect information about food more freely and easily than ever before. These new methods of social interaction have drastically affected the ways in which people learn about food. I argue that these social media sites are far less productive and innovative than their food-sharing ancestors. In analyzing the history of American foodways, I will demonstrate how social media sites have dramatically transformed many Americans’ relationship to food and community.

TAVERNS AND EARLY AMERICAN FOODWAYS

In order to analyze the impact of social media on foodways today, it is important to first analyze the history of American food consumption. This history begins with English settlers, who flocked to the Americas in search of greater freedoms than those provided in their homelands. Although eager to settle in America, many European colonizers did not embrace the unique foodways of the New World. Instead, settlers “responded to the abundance of the New World by doggedly recreating British cuisine,” explains food historian Mark McWilliams (365). American devotion to British foodways and drinking traditions continued well into the founding of the early Republic, as evidenced by the popularity of taverns in America, which had been a staple of British cities for decades.
As in Britain, taverns became a common feature in American daily life (Linnekin, “Tavern Talk”). Colonists often went to tavern bars to share drinks with members in their community and converse about an assortment of topics ranging from political debates to scandalous town gossip (Linnekin, “Tavern Talk” 599). Taverns served a particularly important purpose during and following the American Revolution, providing a space for settlers to hold informal meetings where they would discuss common grievances or potential plans of action relating to the Revolution (Linnekin, “Tavern Talk” 598). During these revolutionary years, taverns became hubs for social activism where colonists shared passionate conversations about the fate of the colonies and plotted ways to secure American freedoms from British rule. Taverns were also communal places where horseback travelers and visiting seamen shared the latest news and events from around the globe (Linnekin, “Tavern Talk” 601). Ultimately, taverns served as “political spaces where citizens could participate in civic life” and form important inter- and intra-colony connections (Brown 34).

COMMUNITY COOKBOOKS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Although taverns played an important role in spreading information to American settlers, soon after the turn of the eighteenth century, printed pamphlets and texts were major resources that inspired collective discussions about politics. Cookbooks were one of these texts, disseminating information about food and other subjects. Collections of handwritten “receipts,” known today as recipes, were printed into bound cookbooks that became “an integral part of the publishing business in America” after 1860 (Longone 8). Although the turmoil of the Civil War profoundly
decreased the demand for cookbooks and other printed materials, by the end of the war in 1865, cookbooks enjoyed a surge in popularity and production. At this time, “community cookbooks” displayed collections of personal recipes from members of small, regional communities. Many of these community cookbooks were sold to raise money for specific communities and/or particular philanthropic causes (Bower). In addition to displaying recipes, community cookbooks included personal anecdotes, poems, and illustrations written by community members that formed a rich historical snapshot of the communities that created them.

One of the first community recipe books was *A Political Cookbook* compiled by Maria J. Moss in 1864. This cookbook was sold at the Philadelphia Sanitary Fair of 1865 to raise funds for wounded Civil-War soldiers and their families (Cook 222). Although not necessarily a “community cookbook” since Moss penned it alone, this text marked the beginning of the community cookbook craze. By 1880, women’s groups across the country were regularly compiling local recipes and selling them in the form of cookbooks to fundraise for charities (Cook 222). Anne Bower, author of *Cooking up Stories*, asserts that the personal narratives accompanying many community cookbooks demonstrated the “talents of women writing in a variety of forms, finding the themes and language with which to convey the experience of living in subcultures” (34). A number of cookbooks also revealed authors’ feelings of discontent, many of whom were unsatisfied with performing expected housewife duties. It is no coincidence that women expressed dissatisfaction with gender roles within cookbooks at the same time that the women’s suffrage movement was gaining momentum in the U.S. In creating cookbooks, women developed new networks of support and new platforms with which to voice their opinions on women’s rights and roles in America (Longone 26).
The 1887 *Florence Cook Book* compiled by the Ladies of the Mission Circle in Florence, Massachusetts, is another community cookbook in which “the reader gains a stronger sense of community of women with different voices” (Bower 34). This sense of community is immediately apparent in this cookbook that lists the name of each contributor to the book in conjunction with their written recipe. *The Florence Cookbook* also includes quotations by each author, many of which are sassy, giving readers a real sense of the author’s personality and opinions. With these personal additions, it is likely that readers felt as if they could relate to the cookbook authors of the *Florence Cook Book*. Community cookbooks may have inspired such personal attachment from readers that they produced a concept known today as “para-social interaction”—a term first coined by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in the 1950s to describe when followers feel as if they “know” or have “met” an author or celebrity when they actually have not (217-218). Although this concept is often applied to movie-star fanatics in modern pop culture, I believe that “followers” of community cookbooks also experienced “para-social interaction” with cookbook authors. Upon reading the authors’ personal narratives within cookbooks, and engaging with the author’s recipes as part of a daily routine, it is likely that many women readers developed strong bonds with cookbook authors. This intense attachment between reader and author would have been in many ways productive in the late nineteenth century, helping to foster a sense of community and togetherness between middle- and upper-class women in America.
The relationship between food and community today has dramatically transformed since the days of tavern talks and community cookbooks. Many Americans now rely on cooking magazines, cooking websites, and food blogs to gain a food education. These online resources are unique products of the Web 2.0 phase, a term made famous by Darcy DiNucci in 1999 to distinguish the modern, interactive online experience from the simple World Wide Web computer network of the 1990s (DiNucci). Although the exact definition and starting point of the Web 2.0 phase is widely disputed, Signe Rousseau, media studies professor and author of “Food and Social Media,” summarizes that Web 2.0 is “characterized by linking information rather than machines, and linking users through that shared information” (Rousseau 2). Many theorists about Web 2.0 argue that the Internet provides greater possibilities for collaboration and social interaction than in the past.

These possibilities are evident in the community of followers inspired by the food magazine *Cooking Light*. *Cooking Light* is a popular magazine that has generated a loyal base of subscribers. Washington Post journalist Candy Sagon would agree, reporting in 2005 that *Cooking Light* inspired an “enthusiastic, community of readers through the message boards on the magazine’s website” (Sagon). Indeed, readers of *Cooking Light* post messages regularly on the magazine’s website and have formed communities offline known as “supper clubs” that are devoted to cooking and discussing the latest *Cooking Light* issue. The quick formation of such communities is made possible by the easy usability of the Internet, which connects readers across physical and geographic distances. The online world in this sense is truly a fluid space for
people all over the world to share information about food. Though reaching a more global audience than earlier community cookbooks, cooking magazines and websites have inspired a similar sense of community.

Food blogs have also fostered communities of food lovers. According to a statistic from 2007, the United States has a total of 50,000 food blogs (Sylva). This statistic has only increased. These sites are run by bloggers whose personal backgrounds, culinary training, and writing style add a unique element to each blog. The integration of personal narratives, pictures, and videos in food blogs resonate with earlier community cookbooks that included personal quotations and stories from the authors. Similar to these historical cookbooks, food blogs inspire “para-social interactions” that I suspect were similar to the relations cultivated between cookbook readers and authors in earlier time periods.

**Passive Engagement and Food “Slacktivism” on the Internet**

Although food blogs and websites may encourage a sense of community among readers and authors, these same sites can lead to “Slacktivism”—a term that combines the words “slacker” and “activism” to describe “the act of passively supporting causes [via social media sites] in order to tap into the satisfaction that accompanies philanthropy, without having to do any heavy-lifting (or heavy spending)” (Davis). I believe that many readers of websites and blogs relating to food engage in slacktivism since they are passively learning information about food from these sites without contributing original content to these spaces. To truly benefit from the knowledge provided by food blogs and websites, I assert that followers must sacrifice something
in order to fully engage with the blog. I thus agree with *New Yorker* journalist Malcolm Gladwell who argues that social media allows only for participation, not for sacrifice, an integral component of “real” activism (Gladwell).

Slacktivism is prevalent on Twitter and Facebook as well. These sites are characterized by a continuous “stream” of content pulled from a selection of online sources chosen by the user. This model of streaming information has inspired food bloggers to move away from the slow-paced blogs characterized by daily or weekly updates to a more rapid aggregate model that streams information about food much faster. Unfortunately, in quickening the distribution of food knowledge, I argue that the level of active user engagement on these sites has decreased. I believe that users on sites such as Pinterest, FoodPornDaily, and Foodgawker have become less interested in reading or contributing content about food on the Internet as they are more interested in looking at images of food. The decrease in user contributions to websites is evident in a recent 2012 study conducted by the Hartman Group that found 60% of online consumers claim to read social networking sites weekly compared to 47% who claim to contribute original content weekly (Beker).

The website Pinterest is a particularly interesting example. Pinterest is a photo-sharing, image collection website whose goal since its inception in 2010 has been “to connect everyone in the world through the 'things' they find interesting” (Pinterest.com). The website states, “With millions of new pins added every week, Pinterest is connecting people all over the world based on shared tastes and interests” (Pinterest.com). Pinterest fulfills this mission by allowing users to pull content from their personalized content streams and organize this content into folders known
as “boards” that they display on the user’s public homepage. While scrolling through a generic content stream on Pinterest, it is clear that the type of food knowledge being distributed on this website is primarily “food porn,” or stylized pictures of high calorie foods from outside food blogs. The food porn on Pinterest essentially serves as advertisements for external food blogs that Pinterest readers can scan without actively connecting to these external sites. Pinterest, in this way, encourages a passive community of readers who view images of food on Pinterest without actively pursuing information about the preparation, production, and makers of these foods and images.

**Feastly: A New Model of Internet Interaction**

A number of food websites, however, are resisting the passive formats of Pinterest and attempting to create a more active audience interested in food appreciation and participation. One such site is Feastly, “an online marketplace connecting passionate cooks with hungry eaters to offer homemade meals prepared and served in a cook’s home” (Feastly.com). Co-founder Danny Harris started Feastly after living in Spain and meeting a resident of Madrid who agreed to prepare an authentic Spanish meal for Harris and his wife since they had grown tired of eating “faux” Spanish food at touristy restaurants (Harris). After eating this meal, Harris wanted to find a way to give people in America the same opportunity to savor the simple comforts of a lovingly-prepared and “authentic” meal. Harris consequently founded Feastly, a website that organizes meals for parties of strangers.
Over a dozen Feastly meals have been organized in the past year. One happy “Feaster” praised the website, saying, “although the idea of eating a meal with people you don’t know at a stranger’s house may seem off-putting, what I experienced that evening was more akin to sharing the company of close family while enjoying one of the best home-cooked meals I’ve had in quite some time” (Pierre). Feastly, in this sense, is a website for active users who are eager to share their love of food with an understanding and appreciative community. Feastly users stand in contrast to many passive web readers who spend hours online looking at images of delicious dishes without ever attempting to cook, eat, or learn about the food. Such “spectators” prefer to savor and appreciate the rewards of consuming a meal without sacrificing the time, energy, and resources required to cook a meal. The cooks of the Feastly community, however, make these sacrifices to benefit others and share in the feelings of goodwill that come as a result of cooking for members of the community. In my perspective, Feastly is an inspiring social media model that inspires more active participation among web users interested in food.

**CONCLUSION**

In sum, the manner in which today’s consumers are creating, sharing, and engaging with food knowledge on the Internet is in some ways a great departure from historic American foodways. This shift is unfortunate, in my perspective, since the production and distribution of food in early America used to inspire more productive and interactive communities in the form of taverns and cookbooks. Although some social media sites such as Feastly inspire the spirit of earlier foodways, many modern technologies that have replaced traditional food resources have enabled more passive interactions with food. Food in the age of social media will continue to battle this
conflict, but I hope that Americans will continue to invent new ways to create the communal food experience with the aid of social media.
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Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


