

Make America's (Foodways) Great Again: Nostalgia, Early Twentieth-Century Dietary Critiques, and the Specter of Obesity in Contemporary Food Commentary

Abstract: Using Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" slogan from last year's U.S. presidential campaign as a framing device, this article considers how nostalgia in food commentary is a critique of present circumstances that also elides unsavory realities of the past. Noting that contemporary food nostalgia for past foodways is ironic given that food commentators of the past also pined for erstwhile foodways, this article examines how early twentieth-century dietary critiques projected anxieties about modernity in their disapprovals of

the decline of home cooking and the rising consumption of items like white bread and sugar. While such critiques have much in common with contemporary food nostalgia, this article points to a unique preoccupation of the more recent dietary critiques—the obesity epidemic.

Keywords: nostalgia, obesity, cooking, bread, sugar, soda

"MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN." That was Donald Trump's (in)famous political slogan in last year's U.S. presidential campaign. As much as Trump's detractors would rather forget the catchphrase and his election altogether, the controversial businessman and reality television personality-turned-president's rhetorical appeal to nostalgia can help illuminate expressions of nostalgia in other, more benign facets of life. Americans are nostalgic about everything—from music to fashion to films, even to forms of communication. As no surprise to readers of this journal, nostalgia also appears in cookbooks, and in essays and monographs related to food.

Since the late 1960s and 1970s, activists such as Wendell Berry and Alice Waters, the counterculture, and countless cookbook authors have advocated a return to simpler methods of food production (Jou 2017: 158). In more recent years, the prolific writer Michael Pollan has become the standard bearer of this movement. Pollan's bestselling *In Defense of Food* included the following advice to readers on what and how they should eat: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." And "don't eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food" (Pollan 2008: 1, 148; Pollan 2007). This straightforward, catchy dietary advice has become gospel to a

legion of mostly white, educated, affluent Americans with a penchant for organic and local foods hauled from farmers' markets, community supported agriculture shares, and upscale grocers like Whole Foods.

Nostalgia for the foodways of yesteryear is certainly not analogous to Trump's "Make American Great Again" slogan in terms of encoding a desire to return to a white, Christian, male-dominated America. If anything, today's food nostalgics seem more likely to be anti-corporatist political progressives—the type of people Trump's acolytes might deride as out-of-touch coastal elites or "hippies." The Trump catchphrase and food nostalgia do, however, share two notable features: They are both critiques of the present, and they both excavate pasts shorn of darker elements that would undercut claims to supremacy over the present.

The Trump slogan and food nostalgia are both examples of what Friedrich Nietzsche called "monumental history." This type of history, Nietzsche (1957: 17) explained, "is the cloak under which . . . hatred of present power and greatness masquerades as an extreme admiration of the past." The sociologist Chua Beng Huat (1995: 227) has made a similar observation in more measured terms, noting that nostalgia is

“an immanent critique of the present,” in which current conditions are understood to be “stressful” and “destabilising,” while the past is “comfortable” and “reassuring.”

In the case of Trump’s “Make America Great Again,” the phrase was, as progressive critics charged, a “dog whistle” to white voters anxious about what they perceived as the erosion of white, male, Christian hegemony in which it looked like the successor to the country’s first African American president might be a woman (Haney-López 2016; Covert 2016). As early as 2007, conservative Fox News personality and future Trump defender Bill O’Reilly was already lamenting that the *New York Times*, the exemplar of the “liberal media,” promoted “illegal” immigration to the United States in order to “break down the white, Christian, male power structure.”

Again, the critique embedded in contemporary food nostalgia is certainly of a different political stripe than that of O’Reilly and Trump. It is, however, also a grievance of present circumstances—of the industrial food system and of consumers’ remove from food production and sourcing.¹ And as food studies scholar Julie Guthman (2007, 2011) has observed, the current food nostalgia is also very much informed by an anxiety over the specter of Americans’ out-of-control appetites and widespread obesity—a point elaborated on toward the end of this essay.

The Trump slogan and food nostalgia also present sanitized versions of the past, in which bygone eras claim moral supremacy over the allegedly depraved present. But such efforts to elevate the past necessarily require what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (1991: 47) has called the “suppression of unruly histories”; Chua (1995: 238) has similarly observed that, “what is important [in nostalgia] is not the veracity of historical claims.” Indeed, skeptics of both Trump and food nostalgia have pointed to the ways in which fetishizations of the past are fantasies that conveniently elide darker realities.

Just as Trump’s critics reminded Americans that his campaign’s vaguely defined past was not exactly idyllic for people of color, women, and sexual minorities, critics of food nostalgia have also reminded us that past foodways were not so great. Sixteen years ago in this journal, food historian Rachel Laudan (2001) described how the food nostalgics she labeled “Culinary Luddites” seemed to have forgotten that preindustrial food was on the whole less affordable and less safe to eat, and that working women and men spent a greater proportion of their lives toiling in food preparation and agricultural labor, respectively. In short, just as America was never really great for all, Laudan declared that “the sunlit past of the Culinary Luddites never existed” (ibid., 42).

To challenge the existence of the foodways nirvana imagined by food nostalgics is not to insinuate sinister motivations on their part. Pollan et al. are well intentioned and earnest in their calls for Americans to eschew industrially processed foods.² Rather, this essay uses the example of early twentieth-century American dietary critiques to draw attention to a curious irony in contemporary food nostalgia, and to suggest that there is a cycle of romanticizing what previous generations ate. This is not to say, however, that food nostalgics are simply imagining changes to the American diet or that the different iterations of romanticization serve precisely the same purposes across time.

“Isn’t It Ironic . . . Don’t You Think?”

The irony of contemporary food nostalgia idealizing the diets of Americans’ great-great-grandmothers is that, in the early twentieth-century United States, a contingent of nutrition commentators made up of home economists, physicians, and scientists advocated that Americans return to the diets of their forebears and consume wholesome and “natural” food. Their dietary advice, in other words, read much like Pollan’s today. So while Pollan advises contemporary readers not to “eat anything your great-great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food,” nutrition writers of great-great-grandmother’s time were recommending that *she* look to the past and eat “real” food.

There are, of course, real differences between contemporary American diets and those of roughly a century ago. Early twentieth-century Americans consumed fewer processed foods, had fewer take-out meals, and their local grocers did not entice them with displays of ready-to-eat rotisserie chickens near the supermarket checkout. McDonald’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and the familiar fast food chains did not exist. (The hamburger chain White Castle, however, had been around since 1921.) Nevertheless, revisiting dusted-off dietary critiques reveals that many Americans of “great-great-grandmother’s generation” were not, in fact, nourished exclusively by wholesome, home-cooked meals.

With this in mind, this essay examines how early twentieth-century nutrition commentators protested what they saw as the incursion of modern life into the American diet, as they urged Americans to reinstate home-cooked meals while curbing consumption of items like white bread and sugar. Before discussing these critiques, it is worth considering that American foodways during “great-great-grandmother’s time” did in fact see major changes in food production and consumption, as the United States shifted from a relatively small-scale, more local agricultural economy to a vast, national industrial economy (Levenstein 1988: 210; Veit 2013: 3).³

“For the Times They Are A-Changin’”

Both agricultural and industrial food production grew dramatically, starting in the second half of the nineteenth century. Per capita grain production was 32.5 bushels in 1865; it rose to 52.5 bushels per person in 1885 (Atkinson 1886: 238). As historian Donna Gabaccia (1998: 55) points out, food became “the leading manufacturing sector of the nineteenth century—expanding fifteenfold from 1859 to 1899”; general manufacturing, in contrast, rose a comparatively modest sixfold. In 1900, the food processing sector had come to represent one-fifth of all American manufacturing activity (Levenstein 1988: 37). By the 1920s, food manufacturing behemoths such as General Foods and Standard Brands also produced, processed, marketed, and distributed heretofore unseen quantities of food nationwide (ibid., 56). This growth in corporate food manufacturing was facilitated by an increasingly centralized industrial organization amenable to food conglomerates, pasteurization, and refrigerated appliances to help ensure longer reprieves from food spoilage, by railroads to transport food, and by even the proliferation of national radio programming to advertise manufactured goods (Levenstein 1988; Cronon 1991; Marchand 1985).

These developments in food manufacturing meant that urban, middle-class Americans had a greater variety of foods from which to choose. In their neighborhood grocery stores, consumers could now find such items as nonperishable canned goods, out-of-season produce harvested thousands of miles away, beef from Midwestern stockyards, and a variety of packaged foods previously sold only in bulk (Williams 1985: 140; Shapiro 2001: 182; Cronon 1991; Petrick 2007).

Canned goods were first widely consumed during the Civil War when soldiers were fed rations of condensed milk, as well as canned fruits and vegetables (Schlesinger 1964: 228). After the war, popular demand for canned items grew dramatically. In 1860, manufacturers produced 5 million canned foods; in 1870 that number rose to 30 million (ibid.). By the 1920s, canned goods had democratized to the point where one University of Rochester physiologist lamented in a 1921 American Home Economics Association speech that poor people “live out of cans and sacks” (Ackerman 2005: 89).

Meanwhile, fruits and vegetables became more plentiful, nonperishable, and increasingly available year-round. Agricultural scientists developed insecticides and disease-resistant varieties of crops, and manufacturers employed new methods of dehydration and refrigeration that enabled foods to travel farther distances and for extended periods of time. Such mechanisms for cultivating and transporting fruits and vegetables meant that by 1923, farm families in Kansas, Kentucky, Ohio, and Missouri were consuming a yearly average of 100 pounds

of lemons, oranges, grapefruit, and bananas—fruits rarely found in those parts of the country in earlier times (Cummings 1970: 146).⁴

For those consumers who lived far from farms, fresh meat, eggs, and milk that had traveled thousands of miles via refrigerated railroad cars could now be everyday items. And among middle-class families, these items were not prohibitively expensive because refrigerator cars and the tracks on which they traveled had multiplied between the 1860s and 1880s, thereby reducing the cost of transporting food and other commodities by rail (McIntosh 1995: 89; Atkinson 1886: 239).⁵

The period from the 1870s to the 1920s also witnessed astonishing population growth, especially in cities. Of the 63 million Americans counted in 1890, only 30 percent resided in cities. By 1920, the country counted 106 million inhabitants, half of whom were urban dwellers. That year, for the first time in U.S. history, urban Americans made up the majority of the country’s total population (Boyer 1978: 189). Meanwhile, the number of American cities with populations of at least 100,000 rose from 14 to 93 between 1870 and 1930 (Clarke 2007: 2).

Immigration contributed significantly to this urbanization. More than 11 million people, mostly from southern and eastern Europe, immigrated to the United States between 1870 to 1900, causing cities to expand by leaps and bounds. New York City gained 2.2 million new inhabitants between 1900 and 1920, while Chicago’s population soared by 1 million (Boyer 1978: 123). New York, Chicago, and the nation’s other ten most populated urban centers had become cities of immigrants, as foreign-born and first-generation Americans made up 60 percent of the total population of the twelve largest U.S. cities in 1900 (ibid., 189).

Early Twentieth-Century Dietary Critiques

Early twentieth-century nutrition commentators were not wholly opposed to the growth of cities or changes in food production per se, but their writings were suffused with commentaries about how “civilization” and the putative habits of modern life adversely affected American diets.⁶ Their dietary critiques implicated great-great-grandmother’s generation for some of the same habits her descendants would be upbraided for years later. Nutrition writers lamented that modern life had contributed to a state in which many Americans’ food choices were driven by convenience, custom, and immediate gratification. They also found the very idea of more food choices available to consumers worrisome, and questioned the integrity of industrially processed foods. As early as 1888, a physician declared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that

“the public is wronged by the avalanche of ‘food’ products on the market” (Wood 1888: 39).

Nutrition commentators were also critical of *how* Americans ate. A number of physicians and home economists of a century ago were troubled by what they perceived as the increasing obsolescence of the regular, sit-down family meal, especially among children. In the 1910s, Robert W. Hastings, the chief medical inspector of schools in Brookline, Massachusetts, offered typical expert instructions for imparting to one’s children the correct manner of eating: “Eat at regular times, at home, not on the street nor in public conveyances” (Hastings 1914: 7). Add to that the advice of Helen Knowlton, a New York state home economist, who told parents in 1916 that they should see to it that their children’s meals were not “hurriedly eaten,” as hasty ingestion might cause listlessness (Knowlton 1916). In New York City in the 1910s, social reformers advocated the establishment of a school lunch program in part because they thought it might militate against schoolchildren succumbing to the lures of cheap pushcarts and food stands near their schools (Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor 1896, 1913).

“Girls Just Want to Have Fun”

Concerns about children’s nutrition existed alongside anxieties about middle-class women’s putative neglect of domestic labor, especially cooking. In the 1920s—the decade when American women obtained the vote nationwide, and young women increasingly sought employment outside the home—nutrition commentators obliquely bemoaned what they believed to be the concomitant demise of women’s commitment to cooking and the integrity of family mealtimes. In a 1929 radio show, Shirley W. Wynne, a (male) physician and the New York Commissioner of Health, waxed nostalgic for a time when women spent a significant portion of the day preparing family repasts, and when mealtimes were supposed to be more central to family life. While idealizing his imagined past and finding fault with the present, Wynne reminisced that “in grandmother’s day, the kitchen was really a kitchen,” not something that had “degenerated into an unimportant room where meals were hurriedly put together at the last minute” (“Simple Low-Priced Food” 1929: 22).

Concerns about middle-class women’s commitment to domesticity coincided with the professionalization of home economics at the turn of the twentieth century. As suggested by the various names by which home economists designated their profession—“scientific housekeeping,” “house science,” “progressive housekeeping,” and “domestic science”—the enterprise was styled as a way to turn housekeeping into a rational,

efficient, and scientific endeavor (Shapiro 2001: 4–5). The profile of home economists rose during World War I, as the U.S. Food Administration enlisted them in its wartime rationing campaigns. Home economists conflated food conservation with patriotism, appealing to Americans to ration provisions such as meat, sugar, and wheat for the war effort (Veit 2013).

During peacetime, home economists promulgated their principles of efficient housekeeping to middle-class audiences at women’s clubs, colleges and universities, and in women’s magazines. They also reached rural housewives through agricultural extension work, and the urban poor and working classes through cooking classes sponsored by social reform organizations. Historians Harvey A. Levenstein and Carolyn M. Goldstein note that, starting around 1900, home economists were also becoming indispensable liaisons between the food industry and middle-class housewives (Levenstein 1988: 156; Goldstein 2012: 297). Food manufacturers and processors enlisted home economists to create recipes, provide cooking demonstrations, and promote their products; Goldstein emphasizes that food companies also relied on home economists for information about consumer preferences (*ibid.*).

In their industry, social reform, and agricultural extension work, home economists sought to counteract what they regarded as increasing inattention to, and even disdain for, housework (Shapiro 2001: 221). They urged women to renew their commitment to homemaking despite the reality that, as Levenstein (1988: 83) asserts, “freedom from the cares of the home *was* what middle-class women wanted.”⁷ Many middle-class women regarded homemaking as not only burdensome and tedious, but associated it with servitude and slavery, as historian Helen Zoe Veit (2013: 79) relates. Indeed, by the late nineteenth century, nearly one quarter of all nonfarm families had domestic help, so many well-to-do and even middle-class women had, in fact, been relieved of some cooking and other household chores (*ibid.*, 78–79). But by the 1920s, fewer household servants were living with the families that employed them, which meant fewer round-the-clock meals for those families that were affected by this trend.

The affluent and middle classes also fretted over “the servant problem” in which working-class and immigrant women increasingly opted for industrial wage work and marriage instead of domestic work during a time when the supply of domestic help was reduced by U.S. immigration policies curbing immigration from southern and eastern Europe (Biltekoff 2013: 27; Levenstein 1988: 97; Veit 2013: 81). Home economists beseeched middle-class women to respond to the servant shortage not by frantically searching for domestic help or accepting shortcuts in meal preparation and household chores,

but by performing housework themselves at the high standards of yesteryear (Biltekoff 2013: 27; Veit 2013: 81).

Home economists' promotion of domesticity might have also been responses to real and perceived changes regarding women's roles in society. As Levenstein (1988: 161) points out, the 1910s and 1920s saw increasing opportunities for middle-class women to work outside the home in the growing service industry and in office settings as clerical staff. Similarly, as historian Charlotte Biltekoff (2013: 64–65, 73, 75) notes, conscription of men during World War I, as well as the production needs of the war effort itself, resulted in an additional 2 million American women entering the civil and industrial work force during wartime.

Home economists and the various nutrition commentators of the period might have felt, as Biltekoff suggests, that long-standing gender divisions were “slipping away, leaving anxiety and chaos in its wake” (ibid., 64–65). One certainly gets this sense in lamentations on the changing rituals of food preparation and the increasing obsolescence of the home-cooked, “square meal” that presumably had been prepared by women. Writing in the medical journal *Medical Times* in 1921, Jacques W. Redway (1921: 33) charged that “the apartment houses in which home cooking is almost unknown have become the rule rather than the exception in many of the larger cities.”⁸ This home cooking, Redway observed, was being supplanted by the practice of dining out.

While Redway exaggerated the extent to which professionally prepared meals had overtaken the home-cooked variety, the rising popularity of dining out was not all in his curmudgeonly imagination. Even working-class, recent immigrants to the United States were eager to patronize restaurants and bars in America. The aptly named historian Hasia Diner (2001: 300) points out that the word for “eating out” had not even existed in Yiddish until 1903, when the *Jewish Daily Forward* coined it. The term *Oyessessen*, the New York-based Jewish American newspaper observed, “is spreading every day, especially in New York” (ibid.).

But while the *Jewish Daily Forward* seemed neutral in its reporting of the growing prevalence of eating out, middle-class nutrition commentators like Redway were alarmed by the trend. Americans were “plundered in purse” when they dined at fancy restaurants, and “tortured in soul” when they patronized “popular eating place[s],” Redway (1921: 33) hyperbolized. Buying ready-to-eat foods was not much better, according to Boston University medical school dean John P. Sutherland (1907: 335), who declared that he was “not in favor of the modern numerous ready-to-eat foods that need only a minute's cooking or the simple addition of water” (Sutherland 1907: 335). Eating out and reliance on prepared

foods were instances of how Americans had drifted from what Yale physiologist Russell H. Chittenden (1907: 279, 301) extolled as “the proverbially simple life of our forefathers” — a simple life that included “simplicity in the character of the dietary,” before “dietetic luxuries” had begun to appear.

“It's the End of the World As We Know It”

One “dietetic luxury” (though not expensive per se) that great-great-grandmother might have fed her family was ready-to-eat white bread. Store-bought white bread entered American homes in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, replacing home-baked bread or bread obtained from independent bakers. During this period, bread-making became more standardized and large scale, and tended toward the white variety that contemporary Americans might associate with the “Wonder Bread” brand.⁹ In the 1870s and 1880s, millers began to jettison millstones for steel rollers that removed the bran from grain more efficiently, yielding finer, whiter flour (Ackerman 2005: 307).¹⁰ Steel roller mill operations were also much more capital-intensive than millstones, with the result that small-scale millers were edged out by factory milling operations (ibid.). Consumers did not seem to mind, if they were aware of these manufacturing developments at all. They responded to the new flour with alacrity.

Nutrition writers nostalgic for “old-fashioned” ways of eating, however, were less enamored of white flour and the pillowy, uniform loaves and slices breadmakers created from it. To them, bread in its whole-wheat, homespun form meant “natural,” while its white-flour counterpart was processed and “industrial.” In expounding upon the superiority of whole-wheat over white bread, experts pointed to the nutritional advantages of the less processed variety. Boston University's Sutherland (1907: 334–35), for example, praised wheat bread as a “wonderful and salutary combination of elements,” and “one of the most effective agents toward overcoming the very common tendency of constipation and sluggishness of the bowels.” White flour, in contrast, was a “worthless substance” insidiously rendered into “ornamental, palate tempting and dyspepsia-inciting combinations” by industrial processes (ibid., 335). Revealing his skepticism of industrial food in the modern era, Sutherland asked rhetorically: “Has man really improved on Nature in this instance [of bread]?” “I am inclined to think not,” he answered (ibid.).

Sutherland was not the only medical authority to lament the waning popularity of whole grains in the American diet. By the 1910s and 1920s, medical journals routinely featured articles dismissing industrially milled grains as “artificial,” criticizing the ubiquity of these grains in the modern diet, and

advocating a return to earlier, “natural” diets.¹¹ New York pediatrician L. Emmett Holt (1922: 192–93) observed in a children’s nutrition guide that “the coarse black bread of the Middle Ages and of the European peasant of today is despised by our modern city dweller.” He noted ruefully that nutritionally deficient white flour and polished white rice were prized and reserved for human consumption, while the nutrient-rich, coarser parts of grain were snubbed and fed to livestock (*ibid.*, 192).

The discovery that milling grains into white flour stripped them of thiamine (vitamin B₁), the organic substance that prevented the neurological disorder beriberi, gave nutrition experts more ammunition in their case against white bread.¹² As early as the 1750s, the Scottish surgeon James Lind had connected the absence of citrus foods to scurvy, and since the 1880s the Japanese naval physician Kanehiro Takaki had linked beriberi to the consumption of polished rice rather than the unpolished variety. But it was not until 1912 that the Polish chemist Casimir Funk gave *vitamine* its name (*vita*, or Latin for “life,” and *amine*, a class of organic compounds then thought to exist in all vitamins), when he officially discovered the organic compound that would be called vitamin B₁ (thiamine).¹³ Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, chemists would identify a host of other vitamins and link them to previously inexplicable illnesses.

The notion that vitamins and minerals were essential to human development, health maintenance, and longevity would begin percolating down to mainstream America in the 1920s (Levenstein 1988: 160). And ironically, vitamins, themselves discoveries of the modern enterprise of nutrition science, came to be seen as casualties of modern life; food scientists discovered that milling processes and oxidation in long-term cold storage facilities, for instance, could deplete vitamins from items such as grains and fruit (Apple 1996: 7).

Advertisers, according to historian Rima D. Apple (1996: 6), “were well aware of the widespread concern that vitamin content might be compromised by the conditions of modern life.” An advertisement for one purveyor of vitamins called “Vitroetts” even suggested to consumers that “perhaps your diet is too modern” (*ibid.*). The antidote to this excessively modern diet was, of course, Vitroetts. Manufacturers of various food products from yeast to grape juice likewise hawked their products’ vitamin content (Biltekoff 2013: 47). The manufacturer of Fleishmann’s Yeast boasted that its product was “the richest known source of soluble vitamins” (*ibid.*).¹⁴

As for bread itself, synthesized versions of thiamine, riboflavin, and niacin had become available and inexpensive enough to be incorporated into flour without changing the taste or appearance of Americans’ preferred white bread (Ackerman

2005: 351–52). The availability of enriched flour and other fortified food products appeared to have quelled some nutrition writers’ doubts about the healthfulness of white bread.¹⁵

The case of white bread not only points to bread and food manufacturers’ responsiveness to nutrition authorities’ criticisms, but also to the ways in which expert opinion could be diverse and malleable in the face of food manufacturers’ lobbying. As historian Michael Ackerman notes, starting in the 1920s the milling and baking industries mobilized their forces to squelch criticisms of white bread when experts sounded their concerns about the product. The American Bakers Association instructed its members to rebut “whole wheat faddists and misguided enthusiasts” (*ibid.*, 329, 333). For companies like General Mills, this meant enlisting nutrition scientists and home economists to promote their products, as well as publishing studies demonstrating that white bread was more digestible, protein-rich, and cost-efficient than the whole-wheat variety (*ibid.*, 310; Goldstein 2012: 297, 178).

There were some indications that the efforts of milling and baking industries to influence expert opinion were at least partially effective. In 1928, industry representatives successfully petitioned the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to modify the dietary recommendations of the USDA Bureau of Home Economics (Ackerman 2005: 331). Prior to industry lobbying efforts, the Bureau of Home Economics advised parents to feed their children whole-grain bread for its thiamine content, which the USDA maintained was especially essential for growing bodies (*ibid.*). After industry pressure, the USDA amended this recommendation, advising parents in 1930 that both whole-wheat and white bread were healthy options, and affirming that “the necessary vitamins, and any necessary roughage” could be obtained from other food sources (*ibid.*, 333). The agency also “wholeheartedly pushed” for enriched flour and fortified bread because, as Apple (1996: 7) relates, the U.S. military had deemed many potential World War I conscripts “unfit” due to deficient nutrition, and the government was not about to let nutrition thin its military ranks. By the 1940s, numerous states even mandated that food manufacturers fortify foods with vitamins and minerals that had been depleted by food processing (*ibid.*, 151).

Throughout the 1930s, the American Medical Association (AMA) likewise began to endorse white bread as a good source of carbohydrates. Sounding like the USDA’s reformed Bureau of Home Economics, Morris Fishbein, the editor of the AMA’s *Journal of the American Medical Association* from 1924 to 1950, defended white bread against the taint of nutritional deficiency by pointing out that people did not have to derive all of their nutrients from a single food source (Ackerman 2005: 327).

The AMA had not always been so keen on white bread, fortification, or nutritional supplements, however. Apple (1996: 8) explains that the AMA had been among the vitamin industry's most vociferous opponents, with doctors from the organization even dismissing vitamins as a "gigantic fraud" in the 1920s. The AMA was concerned that American consumers would pop vitamin pills for dietary health, bypassing physician authority and management. Doctors advised patients that the key to nutrition was improved diet, not ersatz nutrition in the form of vitamin pills. Americans were told to "get [their] vitamins from the garden and orchard rather than the drug counter" (*ibid.*).

The USDA and AMA's eventual capitulation to the milling and baking industries notwithstanding, the case of white bread also illustrated how experts' objections to industrially processed, mass-produced food were not limited to nutritional concerns. Among those ambivalent about these new means of feeding Americans on a massive and national scale, there was a sense that small, local, self-sustaining agricultural communities were lost in modern ways of manufacturing, storing, and transporting foods. In 1923, the Johns Hopkins University nutrition expert Elmer Verner McCollum, for example, eulogized the localized, self-sustaining agriculture of a bygone era:

Steam transportation by rail or boat is less than a century old; before its advent every neighborhood tended to be agriculturally sufficient . . . There was a mill within a few miles of every household and a bag of grain was taken to be ground into flour or meal about once every two weeks . . . The keeping qualities of the flour were not a matter of importance because the supply was replenished so often (McCollum 1923: 234).

To McCollum and other proponents of producing and eating food as America's forebears had done, the decline of small-scale agricultural communities meant that Americans had become increasingly alienated from the production sites of the foods they consumed. They saw food becoming depersonalized. And once food was depersonalized, its quality and integrity were also in doubt. The solution, according to nutrition writers then (and now), was to return the foodways of the past.

On the issue of white bread, however, even McCollum ultimately became an ally of industry interests. In 1928, McCollum had charged that "the American public has been educated to like white bread and white flour by skillful advertising" (Levenstein 1988: 155). But as Levenstein relates, not long after that McCollum became a "nutritional consultant" and pitchman for General Mills's white flour. By the 1930s, General Mills's Betty Crocker brand would use McCollum's name in its advertisements on the "wholesomeness" and healthfulness of white flour and bread (*ibid.*). According to Levenstein, McCollum's about-face on refined grains stemmed from a

shift in funding for nutrition research. In earlier decades, nutrition researchers largely depended on the government to underwrite their work, but they increasingly looked to big business in the 1920s; the consolidation of firms made food manufacturers like General Mills larger and deeper-pocketed than they had ever been (*ibid.*, 156).

"Pour Some Sugar on Me"

Nutrition writers of the early twentieth century also voiced concerns about sugar, and especially children's consumption of the sweet item. Home economist Ruth Bennett White cited her experience of having observed three Native American girls undergo physical examinations. Two of the girls were "perfect specimens of health and fitness" (White 1932: 3). These girls had grown up on reservations eating traditional Native American fare. White recalled that the third girl was "much less vigorous," carrying a mouthful of cavities and possessing a dreadful posture (*ibid.*). Unlike her healthier counterparts, the third girl had been adopted by a relatively prosperous foster family that had fed her a modern diet and indulged her propensity to snack on candy between meals.¹⁶ The incursion of modern food habits into this girl's diet was responsible for her deteriorating physical condition, while the other two girls—"pre-modern," wholesome diet rewarded them with health and vitality, White concluded (*ibid.*).

That White singled out candy as a chief culprit in the alleged poor health of the adopted Native American girl might have been a response to the ascendancy of sugar in the American diet at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁷ Both sugar production and consumption rose dramatically starting in the second half of the nineteenth century. Domestic beet and cane sugar production became mechanized and more efficient in the 1870s; by 1906, the United States was producing over 300,000 pounds of sugar per year (Woloson 2002: 5). Much of this sugar found its way into confections, which were being manufactured on an unprecedented scale starting in the late nineteenth century.

As candy equipment companies began supplying both local confectioneries and national candy manufacturers, their machines, such as the candy-wrapping "Oliver Twister," facilitated the mass production of individually wrapped sweets (*ibid.*; Richardson 2002: 328). Individual candy producers also proliferated, leading to the founding of the National Confectioners' Association in 1884. During this period, the association's original 69 member companies began producing such candy classics as Jaw Breakers, Boston Baked Beans, Red Hots, the Atomic Fire Balls, Milk Duds, Jelly Bellies, and

Tootsie Rolls. They even invented the practice of candy-giving at Halloween in order to encourage sales of their products (Richardson 2002: 211).

Nutrition commentators were dismayed by these developments and the amount of sugar Americans ingested during this period. They cited varying attention-grabbing sugar consumption figures to underscore the extent of America's addiction to sweets.¹⁸ One expert estimated in 1905 that Americans consumed an average of 60 pounds of sugar a year, and per capita consumption of all types of natural sweetening agents, including maple, cane, and beet sugar, was 125 pounds per capita (Sutherland 1907: 332).¹⁹ In 1917, a contributor to the *New York Times* placed New Yorkers' sugar consumption at 104 pounds per person (Barry 1917: SM2).²⁰ Similarly, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* reported in 1918 that per capita sugar intake leapt "from one-fourth of a pound a year, perhaps, to one-fourth of a pound a day," in the last 150 years (Greeley 1918: 763).

The *New York Medical Journal* also described an upsurge in sugar consumption in 1920, noting that "the American people are now consuming annually eighty-five pounds [of sugar] per capita, an increase of sixty-seven pounds in forty years" (Lankford 1920: 848). Meanwhile, Johns Hopkins's McCollum (1923: 234) noted in an article in the journal *Hygeia* that sugar consumption had skyrocketed from 11 pounds per capita to 90 pounds in the last century. McCollum and other sugar alarmists identified candy as the reason behind these rising sugar consumption figures, complaining that what had been a rare treat in earlier periods had now become a near-staple of people's everyday diets. In 1918 and 1919, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* speculated that candy and soda amounted to 10 percent of college students' daily caloric intake, and that even adults "indulge[d] in candy as a pastime" ("Congenital Calories of the Candy Shop" 1918: 1410; "The Surprising Value of Dainties Eaten between Meals" 1919: 1616).

Sugar consumption also continued to climb in the 1920s and 1930s—a trend that both contemporaneous observers and present-day historians attribute to Prohibition ("The Surprising Value of Dainties Eaten between Meals" 1919: 1616; Petrick 2007: 193). According to these sources, some Americans coped with the alcohol ban by grabbing liberal handfuls of candy and guzzling sugar-laden fizzy drinks. Children and teenagers in cities, moreover, were increasingly earning wages and spending part of those wages on sweets, especially the hard candy variety (Woloson 2002: 40, 43). Regardless of the precise causes of the increasing ubiquity of candy, soft drinks, and assorted desserts in the American diet, nutrition and medical authorities were scandalized. As one physician and diet expert wrote in 1922: "We have had girth control, birth control, mirth control

and many other controls. Now don't you think it is about time for some one [*sic*] to agitate candy control?" (Peters 1922).

Contemporary Dietary Critiques

Fast forward nearly a century later, and contemporary food commentators are still vilifying sugar, as well as mass-produced white bread. And like their predecessors during great-great-grandmother's time, they also exhort Americans to bring back home cooking. Both sets of nutrition writers are also particularly critical of the foodways of America's poor, although those buying their books and reading their essays were, and are, likely to be more privileged consumers with the wherewithal, time, and preexisting inclination to spurn industrially processed foods. It should be pointed out, however, that today's food nostalgics are less likely to use the overtly classist language of their predecessors.²¹

The ethnic groups directly or indirectly targeted for nutrition "improvement" in the two periods also differ. The food commentators of a century ago tended to be most disapproving of the foodways of relatively recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in America's northeastern cities; this was a period when nativism and eugenics enjoyed considerable purchase among some elites and middle-class social reformers, scientists, and intellectuals.²² Meanwhile, today's dietary critiques by Pollan et al. are not explicitly directed at any particular ethnic group. But as scholars like April Michelle Herndon and Julie Guthman have pointed out, contemporary dietary critiques can still reinforce stigma against overweight Americans—a group that includes a disproportionate number of low-income Americans, African Americans, and Latinos (Herndon 2014; Guthman 2011: 64, 154–55, 192).²³

Just as the types of consumers implicated in nutrition commentary have evolved, the publication of the critiques serve somewhat distinct purposes. Early twentieth-century home economists, physicians, and physiologists commenting on Americans' diets did so during a time of self-conscious professionalization in their fields, and they touted their professions as "modern" even though they looked to the past in dispensing dietary advice (Goldstein 2012; Shapiro 2001; Starr 1982). Promulgating dietary expertise could bolster the authority and legitimacy conferred to their burgeoning professions—especially for home economists—and help to distinguish them from uncredentialed "quacks" or "faddists," who were also known to dispense dietary advice.²⁴

In the contemporary context, the voices of home economists seem to have receded, but physicians and scientific experts are still counted among today's prominent food and nutrition commentators; Harvard University's Walter Willett

and David Ludwig, University of California, San Francisco's Robert Lustig, and New York University's Marion Nestle spring to mind. But arguably, these contemporary experts' dietary critiques are not being deployed to build up the status of their professions, as their authority and legitimacy are more firmly established than those of their early twentieth-century predecessors.

This is not to say that those without scientific and medical credentials are irrelevant. Two of the most influential voices in the current conversation about American diets—Pollan and Gary Taubes—are, after all, journalists. Pollan's master's degree is in English.²⁵ And while Taubes does possess scientific credentials, his degrees are in applied physics and aerospace engineering.²⁶ Similarly, Waters, the Chez Panisse restaurateur and food activist, holds a degree in French cultural studies.²⁷

In the Name of Obesity

A comparison between the early twentieth century and the present also reveals that while there are concerns about malnutrition among American children in both periods, in the early twentieth century that concern was largely about children being underweight, while a century later that concern was about children becoming overweight and obese—consuming excess calories, but still failing to obtain adequate nutrients.²⁸ And indeed, obesity is also often front and center when contemporary food commentators promote home cooking, and discourage the consumption of industrially produced foods.

When today's commentators lament the demise of home cooking and Americans' reliance on convenience foods, fast food, and other prepared foods, they might note that home-cooked meals are antidotes to obesity. In 2011, for example, cookbook author and former *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman suggested that home-cooked meals could reduce the likelihood of children becoming obese; he reinforced this point in a 2013 article promoting Pollan's book, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, in which he quoted Pollan pronouncing, "it's the collapse of home cooking that led directly to the obesity epidemic" (Bittman 2011; Bittman 2013).²⁹ (Whether non-overweight children who consume home-cooked meals might also benefit from other socioeconomic advantages that may help account for their weight, is usually not fully interrogated in such earnest appeals to home cooking.)³⁰

Contemporary food commentators also share their early twentieth-century predecessors' fear of white bread and refined sugar, though their critique extends more broadly to other foods causing spikes in blood sugar. The journalist Taubes and researchers Ludwig, Lustig, and Willett are leading voices against

one or both of these items. Taubes, for example, has long criticized the decades-old low-fat orthodoxy of medical and nutrition authorities for contributing to Americans' overconsumption of foods that may have been low fat but high in refined carbohydrates and added sugars (Willett and Ludwig 2013; Lustig 2013; Taubes 2002, 2011).³¹

Since the early 1970s, the late physician Robert Atkins (1930–2003) had also challenged the wisdom of the low-fat, high-carbohydrate American diet while promoting his eponymous high-fat, low-carbohydrate regime, but most of Atkins's medical colleagues had been skeptical during his lifetime, at least publicly.³² Although most mainstream physicians would likely still object to the Atkins diet for being too restrictive on carbohydrates and too liberal in its allowance of saturated fats, it can be argued that Atkins has won a measure of vindication, albeit posthumously. A widely publicized 2014 study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that a low-carbohydrate, higher-fat diet was more effective for "weight loss and cardiovascular risk reduction" than a low-fat diet (Bazzano et al. 2014; O'Connor 2014).

Along with white bread, today's food commentators also warn that refined sugars can contribute to obesity and type 2 diabetes, as these sugars induce people to eat more, facilitate the storage of body fat, and can lead to insulin resistance. Concerns about links between obesity and sugary drinks in particular have prompted a growing number of U.S. cities, including Berkeley; Philadelphia; San Francisco; Oakland; Albany, California; and Boulder, Colorado to enact taxes on soda and sugar-sweetened beverages. (The tax in Philadelphia, however, was officially pitched as a way to raise revenue for universal pre-kindergarten and other public initiatives.)³³ As one might expect, many of today's leading food commentators have supported such measures (Abcarian 2014; Lustig 2015; Bittman 2016).³⁴

That today's food commentators are resurrecting dietary critiques redolent of those from a century ago by appealing to the updated rationale of combating obesity, suggests that they too are nostalgics unsettled by some aspect of the present. To return to the title of this essay, if many of the Americans who voted Trump into the White House last November were unreconciled to an increasingly culturally pluralistic and more inclusive America, it might be said that today's food commentators are unsettled over what they regard as Americans' increasingly out-of-control appetites and "obesogenic," or obesity-promoting, foodways. Again, this analogy is intended to illustrate a particular dimension of appeals to nostalgia; it in no way suggests any political affinity between the anxieties of Trump supporters and those of Pollan et al.

A second feature of nostalgia is, as noted at the outset of this essay, selective omission of darker elements of the past that might weaken its claim to superiority over the present. The past that the “Make America Great Again” contingent idealized in last year’s U.S. presidential campaign was not exactly “great” for nonwhites, women, and sexual minorities.³⁵ Likewise, the pre-obesity epidemic past to which today’s food nostalgics might wish to return also saw a lower life expectancy than what Americans enjoy today (even with the recent opioid epidemic taken into account).³⁶ And as dire as current foodways may be, no doubt that years from now, a new crop of food nostalgics will pine for what Americans ate back in 2017. In the meantime, the Americans against Trump’s presidency are already aching to return to . . . before 2017. ©

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LIST OF SONG LYRICS AND ATTRIBUTIONS

“Isn’t It Ironic . . . Don’t You Think?”

Title of song: “Ironic”

Written by: Alanis Morissette and Glen Ballard

Performed by: Alanis Morissette

Album title, record label, and year: Jagged Little Pill, Maverick Records, 1995

“For the Times They Are A-Changin’”

Title of song: The Times They Are A-Changin’

Written by: Bob Dylan

Performed by: Bob Dylan

Album title, record label, and year: The Times They Are A-Changin’, Columbia Records, 1964

“Girls Just Want to Have Fun”

Title of song: “Girls Just Want to Have Fun”

Written by: Robert Hazard

Performed by: Cyndi Lauper

Album, record label, and year (Lauper): She’s So Unusual, Portrait Records, 1983

“It’s the End of the World As We Know It”

Title of song: “It’s the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)”

Written by: Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and Michael Stipe

Performed by: R.E.M.

Album, record label, and year: Document, I.R.S. Records, 1987

“Pour Some Sugar on Me”

Title of song: “Pour Some Sugar on Me”

Written by: Steve Clark, Phil Collen, Joe Elliott, Robert John “Mutt” Lange, and Rick Savage

Performed by: Def Leppard

Album, record label, and year: Hysteria, Mercury Records, 1987

NOTES

1. For other examples, see Salatin 2011 and *Food, Inc.* 2009.
2. Nonetheless, critics of Pollan et al., such as Julie Guthman and B. R. Myers, also have a point when they observe that the diets Pollan et al. promote may be easier for those possessing class privilege to access. See Guthman 2011: 61, 87, 141, 152–53, 184; Guthman 2007; Myers 2011.
3. Harvey A. Levenstein and Helen Zoe Veit, respectively, have chronicled how the American diet was “radically transformed” during the period from roughly 1880 to 1930. See Levenstein 1988: 210; Veit 2013: 3. (Phrase in quotations from Levenstein.)
4. Historian Gabriella Petrick (2007: 64) similarly notes that Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consumed more fresh produce than earlier generations, “particularly green and yellow vegetables, tomatoes, citrus fruits, and bananas.”
5. By 1869, food could be transported via the Union Pacific (the first transcontinental railroad) from California to New York. The cost of transporting goods from Chicago to cities on the East Coast also dropped from an average of a little over 3 cents per ton per mile in 1865 to a rate of .68 cents in 1885. For more on refrigerator cars and the transport of dairy products, see Pirtle 1926.
6. As one medical journal article in 1918 characteristically observed: “As soon as people become ‘civilized’ . . . where new methods of transportation and preparation and storage of foods have changed the whole nature of things, then instinct no longer can be spoken of at all. Habit and taste take its place.” See Greeley 1918: 762–63.
7. Original emphasis.
8. Redway was perhaps better known as a geographer than a nutritionist, but that did not prevent him from issuing dietary advice.
9. The Taggart Baking Company of Indianapolis introduced Wonder Bread in 1921.
10. White flour was initially preferred because it kept better and longer than whole wheat flour. See McCollum 1923: 234.
11. One Wisconsin physician, for instance, wrote: “The Chinese have lived for thousands of years upon a *natural dietary* [original emphasis]. We have lived for hundreds of years upon an ever-changing one and one which is becoming an increasingly artificial one” (Greeley 1918: 763).
12. By the 1930s, scientists estimated that the typical American diet of the period contained only one-third of the thiamine content of American diets in the 1840s. See Jolliffe 1938: 46–66.
13. Although Funk is usually credited with discovering vitamin B₁, the Japanese chemist Umetaro Suzuki was the first to isolate the water-soluble micronutrients that Funk would later call *vitamine*.
14. Ibid.
15. Between the 1920s and 1940s, vitamins and minerals were added to many foods, including iodine in salt, vitamins A and D in margarine, vitamin D in milk, and vitamins B₁ and B₂, B₃, and iron

to flour. The French chemist Jean Baptiste Boussingault proposed the idea of adding iodine to salt as early as the 1830s.

16. Medical journals similarly warned of the degenerative effects of processed foods. One 1921 *American Journal of Public Health* article asserted that “the prevalence of rickets, of bad teeth, of defective growth and of low resistance to infective diseases is a high price to pay for our departure from nature’s rules.” See Ackerman 2005: 89.

17. While nutrition writers’ calls for the restriction of sugar consumption were undoubtedly buoyed by the Food Administration’s rationing campaigns during World War I, their anti-sugar stance predated the war and continued long after wartime rationing had ended.

18. Some nutrition writers appeared to have arrived at their sugar consumption statistics by referring to domestic sugar production figures and the quantity of sugar imported by the United States. It is possible that sugar consumption numbers were inflated for propaganda purposes, especially during World War I rationing of the product.

19. As the in-text citation indicates, the 1905 figures are from Sutherland 1907: 332. Historian of candy Wendy Woloson reports that sugar consumption in the United States was 41 pounds per capita in the 1870s, which was six times more than in the 1790s. By 1901, the average American consumed 68 pounds of sugar, according to Woloson. See Woloson 2002: 6.

20. Barry’s figures for New Yorkers are considerably higher than those of historian Hillel Schwartz, who relates that nationwide, Americans in 1917 consumed 85 pounds of sugar per capita, which still represented a tenfold increase from a century earlier. See Schwartz 1986: 258.

21. It is difficult to imagine that they would declare, as the chemist and nutrition expert Wilbur Olin Atwater (1844–1907) did, that “the destruction of the poor is their improvidence.” (The year of this quote is unknown, but it is most likely the mid-1890s, when Atwater published articles expressing such sentiments.) See W. O. Atwater, “The Inadequately Nourished,” undated paper, film 4, reel 8, Wilbur Olin Atwater Papers, 1872–1914 (“Additional Papers, 1869–1914”), Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (reproduced as microfilm from Wilbur Olin Atwater Papers, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut).

22. For more on immigrant foodways during this time, see Diner 2001 and Gabaccia 1998. For more on anti-immigrant sentiment during this period more broadly, see Higham 1963.

23. For rates of obesity among African American and Latina women, respectively, see Tavernise 2015.

24. For more on the medical profession’s attempts to marginalize “quacks,” see Boyle 2013. This is not to say that home economists, physicians, and scientists had a monopoly on books and essays about diet and nutrition. The businessman Horace Fletcher (1903), best known for advocating chewing food very thoroughly, published a number of books about nutrition, including *The A. B.–Z. of Our Own Nutrition*. Fletcher also established connections with scientists, including Yale physiologist and chemist Russell Chittenden, who published an essay (“Physiological Economy in Nutrition”) in Fletcher’s *A. B.–Z. of Our Own Nutrition*.

25. “About Michael Pollan,” Michael Pollan official website, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://michaelpollan.com/press-kit/>.

26. “Biography,” Gary Taubes official website, accessed October 20, 2016, <http://garytaubes.com/biography/>.

27. “Alice Waters,” *Biography.com*, accessed October 20, 2016, www.biography.com/people/alice-waters-21359967.

28. This contemporary alarm over obesity was largely absent from the radar in the early twentieth century. Although one could argue that the earlier period saw the incipient medicalization of obesity, there was not widespread panic over it at the time, and it was

certainly not a public health priority as it is today. For more on what might be characterized as the medicalization of obesity in the early twentieth century, as well as concerns about malnutrition at the time, see Jou 2009: “Controlling Consumption,” chap. 4 and 130–31. For more on the problem of malnutrition coexisting with obesity, see Dolnick 2010.

29. Bittman’s former *New York Times* colleague, the newspaper’s “Personal Health” columnist Jane E. Brody, also linked the decline of home-cooked and family meals with rising rates of obesity. See Brody 2013.

30. See Herndon 2014 and Guthman 2001 for related critiques on this point.

31. For a historical perspective on the low-fat orthodoxy, see La Berge 2008: 139–77.

32. For more on the Atkins diet in this journal, see Bentley 2004: 34–45.

33. See Sanger-Katz 2016.

34. Nestle has also been a consistent critic of the beverage industry’s political clout, and has written about it in *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

35. To be sure, Trump’s critics might argue that the marginalization of these groups was precisely why his supporters believed the past was “great.”

36. In 1980—a year many identify as the period when obesity rates began its 30-year ascent—life expectancy was 73.7 years; in 2014, it was 78.8 years. For life expectancy in 1980, see “Vital Statistics of the United States, 1980.” For life expectancy in 2014, see “Changes in Life Expectancy by Race and Hispanic Origin in the United States, 2013–2014.” The claim of food nostalgics who are also obesity epidemic warriors is, of course, that if obesity remains unchecked, life expectancy in the United States will decline. Regarding the reference to the opioid epidemic: Life expectancy among whites, at least, has already declined slightly between 2013 and 2014, a development attributed to a rise in deaths due to drug overdoses, liver disease, and suicide. See Tavernise 2016.

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