





# Gather 'Round the Table

## Writing on Food, Feasting on Words

JESS DECOURCY HINDS

**F**IRST, LET ME CONFESS: I'm far from a gourmet cook. I haven't cracked a cookbook in years. A box of macaroni with powdered cheese is my idea of a perfectly satisfying meal, and—even more shamefully—I still haven't gotten around to reading M.F.K. Fisher. So how did I end up teaching food writing to my college students? And how did I reach the conclusion that food writing should be a staple of creative writing curricula?

I teach first-year and advanced essay-writing at the City University of New York's Lehman College, in the Bronx. My decision to begin the semester with food writing was an impulsive one. In my classes the previous semester, my students had written descriptive essays about music, and brought their favorite CDs to play for the class. Music was a great ice-breaker; I think it made students feel more comfortable reading their essays aloud. And listening to the song the student had written about helped students critique each other's descriptions more astutely. So I wondered: what else can students bring in and share with each other? Food seemed like an obvious choice. Food, like music, triggers strong opinions and reactions from almost everyone. After my students read their essays aloud, I thought we'd sample their favorite foods to see if they described them thoroughly and accurately. On the blackboard, I would map out the same guide for critique I used for the music essays:

- 1) What do you notice about the student's essay?
- 2) What do you like about the essay?
- 3) What questions and suggestions do you have for the writer?

We devoted the first three weeks of the spring 2007 semester to students' food presentations. Most of my students that semester were Latino, but there were also a number of African-Americans and recent immigrants from countries such as Poland, Hungary, and Kosovo. Half of my students were traditional-aged college students; the others were working parents and grandparents anywhere between age twenty-five and sixty, so they brought rich life experience to the classroom, which I hoped food writing would help them explore. What did they find delicious—and why? I was curious to find out.

The majority of my students major in nursing, social work, speech pathology, or business, and they'll need to be good communicators in their jobs. I thought that reading their essays aloud would help them see the connections between writing well, speaking well, and reaching an audience. Some students are tentative new English speakers with limited grammar and vocabulary, while others are confident, articulate, native English speakers. I needed something to bring these students together, and thought food writing could do it. On my syllabus, my instructions were simple:

**In 1–2 pages, describe one of your favorite foods (or drinks) in mouth-watering detail. Use all five senses, exploring your food's color, shape, size, flavor, texture, smell, and the sound it makes when you're chewing it. What memories or traditions do you associate with this food? Does the food remind you of someone, somewhere, or something in particular?**

All members of the class, including me, brought samples of favorite foods and presented our essays aloud to the class. On the day of my presentation I brought seaweed flavored rice crackers—a food that didn't require napkins, plates or cleaning up—and a food that inspired me to write about my love of Japanese culture and the salty ocean. I encouraged students to bring store-bought snacks, and not to spend too much

money or time preparing the food. When one student said she wanted to write about lasagna, I encouraged her to bring cheese cubes or tomato slices instead of a pan of lasagna.

“But I *want* to bring the whole lasagna!” my student exclaimed. My students wanted to feed me. How could I refuse?

There was a flurry of activity and excitement when I walked into the warm, steam-filled classroom. Microwaveable Tupperware covered my desk. Students who'd been strangers to each other the week before were chatting and laughing as they passed out plastic utensils, as if it were a family reunion.

Many students' essays painted family portraits. Angel's essay explored the role coffee played in his parents' relationship. “Coffee has been the topic of some very heated arguments,” he writes. “You see, my mother is Puerto Rican and likes her coffee with milk and a little sugar. My father is Cuban and likes espresso, heavy and dark. The only thing they can agree on is that they're both passionate coffee drinkers.”

“How do you drink your coffee?” one student asked at the end of Angel's pre-



A student from Jess deCourcy Hinds' essay-writing class at Lehman College. Photo by George Rosario.

sentation. “Who do you take after, your mom or dad?”

“Still figuring that out,” Angel said with a laugh. “Hey, Professor? Do you think I should write more about myself, and my identity, in this essay?”

I tossed the question back to the class, “What do you think?” and we explored some of the possible paths his revision might take.

Angel had insisted on bringing an enormous silver coffee decanter to school, as well as his family’s heirloom china espresso cup—the only object his father managed to bring with him from Cuba. As Angel read his essay aloud, raising the precious antique cup in the air for emphasis, his classmates gasped, and cried: “Be careful! Don’t break your cup! Put it down!” But Angel didn’t want to put the cup down; he so relished the opportunity to share his family’s coffee tradition with the class.

Persida wrote about maizena, a breakfast porridge of cornstarch, milk, water, vanilla extract, and cinnamon. “I’m awoken by the faint yet familiar scent of cinnamon. . . . Immediately, I shoot straight up in bed. . . . The warmth reminds me of the warm covers I just rolled out of.” Persida went on to write about how mothers in the Dominican Republic make this dish to show affection for their daughters. “Not their sons?” one young man asked, and Persida shook her head and said proudly, “Only for daughters.” Towards the end of the essay, she wrote:

“You may be thinking, ‘Maizena is only corn starch, what’s the big deal?’ Well, to me maizena is much more than corn starch; it represents my mother’s love and our relationship I hold so dear. Now as a married woman I can still have a bit of my mother with me (even though I prepare maizena with more vanilla than my mother does!)”

Several students wrote about inheriting traditional family recipes. One of my younger students, a 21-year-old named Nixaly, also from the Dominican Republic, came to my office several times to show me drafts of an essay about remolacha, a potato salad stained bright pink with beets. “Every time my family’s together, remolacha! I can’t escape it!”

Nixaly’s essay listed all of the ingredients (“diced beets, celery, carrots, red onion, chives, hard boiled egg, . . . salt, vinegar, ground pepper, and oil”) and described the preparation instructions in great detail. She also told us the price of the ingredients (\$15). Finally, she described what it was like to take the first bite of salad, “Well, the soft potatoes feel moist upon entering your mouth, engaging you with a smooth, sweet, and perfectly salted taste; it also has a slight sourness to it. You may also feel the crunch-

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Students from Jess deCourcy Hinds' essay-writing class at Lehman College. Photo by George Rosario.

iness within the potato salad from the healthy crisp vegetables.” Despite her meticulousness, the essay seemed incomplete—Nixaly also sensed that something was missing. “Let’s brainstorm,” I said. “It’s amazing to me that you invested so much time shopping for all these ingredients, and slicing and dicing. What compelled you to take on such a big project? And what were you thinking about while you prepared this dish?”

Nixaly paused, looking out the window. “I was thinking, ‘This is the first time I’ve made remolacha on my own.’” A look of pain, and also pride, swept over

her fine features. “And I was thinking, if I’m making remolacha all by myself, I must be growing up.” She brightened. “Could I put that in my essay?”

Rites of passage also factored into Jonathan’s essay. Jonathan, another Latino student, wrote an essay about Reese’s peanut butter cups—and what they meant to him while he studied at “Ghetto Film School.” He described G.F.S. as “a summer program that teaches young filmmakers like myself how to make films and how to get ahead in the industry.” As Jonathan produced his very first film, “Reese’s went along for the wild ride.” He credited the candy for helping him create a documentary about a day in the life of a hearing-impaired teenager. “There’s something about that peanut butter that just brings out creative story ideas,” he wrote. When his film premiered at Lincoln Center, and Jonathan spotted Spike Lee in the audience, he ate five Reese’s for good luck—and, lo and behold, his film was voted one of the top three films of the night, and he went home with a trophy and a college scholarship. At the end of his essay, Jonathan vowed to pursue his dream to become a filmmaker, “with Reese’s by my side.” Although his essay was charming and original, there were moments where it sounded like a TV commercial for Reese’s. Several students’ essays, in fact, borrowed advertising language, so we spent time in class trying to freshen up the language.

Like Jonathan, Jorge thought of his favorite food as a companion and friend. His spicy cashew crackers from Chinatown assuaged his loneliness the first time he spent Christmas without his family. As Jorge wrote:

I was so lonely during the Christmas holiday because my parents decided to visit my grandmother, Maria Antonia, in Bogota, Colombia [while I stayed home] and I did not know what to do. So, I went over to [the] 99 cent [store] and bought \$10.00 bulks of Cashew Nuts Crackers [sic]. My crackers are magical! Not only [do] they tend to be romantic, but they care for you.

Jorge, an actor and comedian, enthralled the class with an essay that was by turns sad and funny—especially when he batted his eyelashes and described his “romance” with the cashew crackers. At the end of his piece, Jorge revealed that he’d restrained himself from consuming the bulk packages of crackers all by himself. Instead, he’d invited over some friends and “we had a tea party!” I was impressed by how Jorge used the cashew crackers to convey his experience of wrestling with loneliness and despair, and reclaiming a holiday for himself.

I think writing about food helps students access their emotional lives with more ease and openness than if they’d tried to approach a theme like “loneliness” head-on. Even students who usually resisted writing anything personal warmed up to the idea of writing about food and the role it played in their lives.

Although I still haven’t read any of M.F.K Fisher’s books, I was lucky to stumble upon one of her quotations that helped me understand why culinary writing is so vital:

It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it, and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it; and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied; and it is all one.

Food writing should be a component of all creative writing classes because it’s one of the most basic, primal kinds of writing—and the most profound. Why do certain foods help us love and heal? Why do some foods have a mysterious, almost magical effect on us? As Timea, a recent immigrant from Hungary wrote in “The Magic of Eggplant”:

Since my little brother was born, time has built distance between my mom and me. So I buy an eggplant for us. We mash it up and eat it on bread, and talk about our long days of school and work. Eggplant cures the sickness in the heart.

