New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
EAT NYC: Food Reporting and Writing
Summer 2020
SS2: JOUR-UA 204.061
Professor: Sen, Mayukh
Tuesday and Thursday, 3:00 PM - 6:00 PM
20 Cooper Square, 655

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Course Description
“Food writing is stepping out. It’s about time. For far too long it's been the timid little sister of the writing world, afraid to raise its voice.” — Ruth Reichl, The Best American Food Writing 2018

It’s an exciting time to be a food journalist. The field is incredibly dynamic, due to both the nature of digital media and shifting cultural mores. A vividly-written recipe column can give you ideas for what to cook for dinner tonight; an evocative restaurant review can tell you where to go for dinner.

But there’s more to food journalism than recipes and restaurant reviews. Food isn’t just a fluffy diversion. The above quote from Ruth Reichl captures the ethos of this class: Food deserves to be taken seriously. Food has many stories to tell.

Over six weeks this summer, you’ll immerse yourself in food journalism’s many forms. These include the aforementioned recipes and restaurant reviews; personal essays; profiles of chefs, cookbook authors, growers, service workers who bring food to our plates; pieces on food history. Guest speakers will include some of the most important voices working in food journalism. Together, we’ll explore our city; New York City itself provides a wealth of food stories waiting to be written.

By the end of the class, you’ll be in a position to confidently pitch the story you’re proudest of to a publication. Whether you’d like to pursue food journalism as a career or merely get your feet wet in it, you’ll fare well if you bring eagerness and a dose of healthy journalistic skepticism to every story you encounter. And you must have a good appetite.

Learning Objectives
In this course, students will:

● Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values
● Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
- Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
- Interview subjects, conduct research, and evaluate information
- Ensure that sources, whether derived from interviews or written documents (books, articles), are easily verifiable and can be held up to the scrutiny of fact-checking
- Exhibit working fluency in different modes of food journalism, including restaurant criticism, personal essay, profiles, and recipe-driven essays
- Understand and articulate food journalism’s function in a thriving democratic landscape

Course Expectations
This class is for a spectrum of students: those who may have a fleeting interest in food journalism, ones who may want to pursue food journalism as careers, and people who fall in between. Regardless of which of these groups you belong to, though, you’ll need to show up to class on time and deliver assignments promptly, and those who don’t will be downgraded. If you need to miss class for any reason, you’ll need to notify me before class via email or text. Do not arrive late to class without prior warning. It’s disruptive and often disrespectful to your fellow classmates and guest speakers. Active class participation is as important as the strength of your work, too. You’ll be bouncing ideas off of one another as you learn how to navigate the current food journalism landscape. Any strong journalist must know how to communicate their ideas clearly and confidently.

Assignments and Class Structure
The class will meet twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, between 3 and 6 p.m. You’ll have regular reading assignments each week that will help serve as models for the reporting you’ll do in this class. Make sure you’re setting aside enough time to do actual reporting for stories: Writing assignments will range from 500 to 1000 words.

Each week, we’ll have a guest speaker from the world of food media, past or present, who’ll speak about the trajectory of their careers, their work, and the different facets of the food journalism industry they occupy. These guest speakers are meant to give you advice and guidance—please use these sessions to engage with them and soak up their knowledge.

All assignments will be listed on the syllabus. They’ll be due on Fridays at 9 a.m. to me via email: mayukh.sen@nyu.edu.

You’re expected to conform to AP style for all assignments.

For each story, submit three different headlines and one sample “dek”. We’ll go over this in class, but a dek is an explanatory sentence, two sentences tops, that gives more context to what the story’s about, further enticing a reader to click on a story and read it.
All assignments should be typed and double-spaced. On the first page, in the upper left corner, include your last name, date, and the page number.

**Fact-Checking**
When applicable, on the last page of each assignment, you’ll need to list the names and contact information (phone or email) for your sources. If you’re working from books or previously-published articles, cite those at the end as well (formatted as such: writer, publication, date published, headline or title).

**Grading**
Your final grade will be determined by the following metrics:

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<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekly assignments</td>
<td>50 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final assignment</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
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<td>Participation &amp; attendance</td>
<td>25 percent</td>
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**Grading will conform to the Journalism Department’s policy:**
- A = publishable as is
- B = publishable with light editing
- C = publishable with a rewrite
- D = major problems with organization, facts, reporting, writing
- F = missing key information, containing gross misspellings, plagiarism or libel

**Revisions**
Journalism is a collaborative process—a strong editor will give feedback to a writer to make a point more lucid and sharper. I’ll be your editor in this class, working with you to get your strongest work out of you. We’ll be working on tight deadlines that mirror the quick, breakneck pace of journalism.

You will receive grades for each assignment by the Monday after submission. If you submit a rewrite by 5pm on the Friday of the week after you originally turned in your initial version of the assignment, I’ll take that rewrite into consideration for a grade change. (For example: Say you’d like to submit a rewrite for a piece you initially turned in on July 10. You’d receive your grade from me by the 13th, and you’d have until 5pm on the 17th to send me a rewrite.) The final grade for a revised assignment will be an average of the two grades. In the event that your two grades are close to one another—say, a B- and a B—I’ll go with the higher grade.

**Academic Integrity**
Any plagiarism or unauthorized collaboration on assignments will result in a failure, and could be grounds for failure in the course. All quotes must be original and verifiable. That means you must have a means of contacting anyone you quote for further clarification, or for me to verify accuracy of quotes. If you draw from someone else’s work without properly crediting them, you will fail that assignment.
Reading
All of the assignments for this class will be available online. You’ll get more out of the class if you read each Wednesday’s Food section of the New York Times. I recommend you also read the following food publications to get a sense of the different kinds of food writing that currently populate the digital landscape: Eater, the New York Times food section, and TASTE.

CLASS SCHEDULE
Please note that this is a preliminary schedule, subject to change based on the availability of guest speakers. We’ll take trips to restaurants or other food-related venues, have group workshops in class, and set aside time for writing sessions.

WEEK 1: The Basics, and the Personal

We’ll spend this week getting to know one another: What brought you to this class, and what food means to you (if it means anything at all—though I’m betting it does!). We’ll discuss what the function of a food journalist is in America today.

If you’ve never written about food in your life, you might be wondering what stories one could possibly tell. A reasonable place to start is by looking inside yourself. The personal food essay is a crowded genre. It’s easy to write an adequate personal food essay, but astonishingly difficult to do it right. You’ll read some of the strongest examples of the genre before tackling it yourself.

READINGS:
- Excerpt from *Food Porn*, Molly O’Neill, Columbia Journalism Review, 2003
- Introduction, Ruth Reichl, *The Best American Food Writing 2018*

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 10, 9 a.m.: Write a 500-700 word personal essay on a memorable food experience in your life that may allow readers to better understand who you are and your place in the world. I’ll circulate some writing prompts during class that will help orient you.

WEEK 2: Pitching and Reporting

This week, we’ll go over best practices for reporting stories. Just so we’re all on the same page, we’ll go through how to conceive of and pitch a story, how to identify interview subjects, how to approach those subjects, how to record an interview, what to look for in an interview, and then, finally, how to structure a story once you sit down to write it.
We’ll place a particular emphasis on profiles. Food stories are fundamentally human stories: What we eat tells us who we are. Profiles have always been a substantial part of food writing. The more classic, and now somewhat exhausted, mode of profile writing tends to focus on chefs who have the status of celebrities; it’s a tough genre to nail. Your subjects don’t have to be famous: Some of the richest profile subjects are people who can so easily be overlooked, even though their work is crucial they are to the way we eat today.

This week’s exercises will position you to start thinking about your final assignment, which will be a profile, 1500 words max, of someone—living or dead—in the food industry.

READINGS:
- The Chef Who Can Teach Us a Thing or Two About Grit, Julia Bainbridge, Heated, 2019

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 17, 9 a.m.: Come up with three 100-word pitches for potential profile subjects, using what you’ve learned this week about what makes a strong pitch. We’ll discuss these pitches as a class. This will lay the groundwork for your final assignment, which will be a reported profile, 1500 words max, ideally with two sources (one of whom is an “expert”; we’ll discuss what makes an expert in class).

WEEK 3: Fusing History with the Personal

There’s an increasing interest in telling stories of the history of food: How certain ingredients became popular, how certain chefs or cookbooks architected modern-day culinary techniques, or a controversy from a bygone era that has more relevance in the present day than one may initially imagine.

The most compelling food history pieces focus on stories that were overlooked or ignored in their time, but brilliantly make the case for how those stories hold lessons for how we eat and cook today. Tracing that line directly from the past into the present is a challenge more journalists have increasingly taken on, but some of the most exciting examples of the genre weave together personal stories and sources to tell these stories. Think of this week as an extension of the skills you cultivated during your first week with personal writing; now, you’re going to learn how to apply a sense of journalistic rigor to the personal, examining how a story that lives inside you can stand for larger themes.

READINGS:
- America, Your Food Is So Gay, John Birdsall, Lucky Peach, 2013
- My Life in Domestic Goddesses, Emily Gould, The Cut, 2017
Let’s Call It Assimilation Food, Soleil Ho, TASTE, 2017

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 24, 9AM: Weaving in your own personal story, pitch and write a story about a food history-related topic that firmly establishes its relevance to the present day. This story should be at least 800 words (it can go slightly beyond 1,000 words if the subject demands it), but you must quote at least two, no more than three, sources in the piece.

WEEK 4: Describing Taste, and Making the Recipe Come Alive

A lot of food journalism, as it exists today, provides a service: It tells you what to cook or where to eat. We’ll focus on the former this week. Many articles about food, whether they’re profiles or trend pieces, can have recipes attached to them. The internet is flush with recipes; so are old food magazines. So what makes a good recipe? It’s one that’s written accessibly, even for the least proficient of home cooks, with a surrounding story full of voice, personality, and warmth. Your primary objective here is to nudge the reader into the kitchen. We’ll start this week out by talking about how to describe flavor with inventiveness (and avoiding cliche).

READINGS:
● What to Do with Okra, Scott Hocker, TASTE, 2018
● Coming Back to Ackee and Saltfish, Jamaica’s National Dish, Bryan Washington, The New Yorker, 2019

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 31, 9AM: Pick any recipe you’d like—one you cook often, one you’ve found from a cookbook or a blog—and write a 400 - 600-word story about it, styled after one of the above columns, along with a 100-word headnote (we’ll go over what makes a good headnote) that concisely and accurately describes the dish. As you’ll see, the best recipe columns have journalistic backbone: Skilled recipe writers are able to shed light on the story of a certain dish, or its history, while writing in a way that speaks to a home cook directly. If a recipe is written by a food blogger or cookbook author, you’ll want to speak to them about that story; if there’s an intriguing history, speaking to a food historian or other source who can authoritatively qualify this dish’s intrigue.

WEEK 5: Eating Out

Restaurant criticism is a highly coveted, somewhat misunderstood profession. You’ll read examples of how to do restaurant criticism right, making the experience of eating a restaurant sound both approachable and alluring (unless, of course, your meal is neither of those things, in which case you’ll learn the delicate art of the pan), describe the food in ways that feel vibrant and devoid of cliche, and report if necessary. We’ll read three New
York Times reviews that capture different eras and modes of food criticism.

READINGS:

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 7, 9AM: Write a 500-800-word review of a meal at a restaurant of your choice.

WEEK 6: Pitching Your Final Stories for Publication
This week, you’ll present the profiles that you’ve been working on for the duration of our time together. We’ll discuss strategies for how and where to pitch to, and how to optimize your story for publication.

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 14, 9AM: Your final assignment, a profile that brings to life the story of someone who works (or, if a posthumous profile, worked) in food, maximum 1,500 words, with at least two supporting sources who will lend credibility to your reporting.

Accommodations
Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

Diversity & Inclusion
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