

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

To contact professor: mayukh.sen@nyu.edu

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 certainly a curious time to be a food journalist. Food journalism, like many coverage areas, has shifted dramatically since the outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic reminds us that food isn’t just a fluffy diversion. There’s always been more to food journalism than recipes and restaurant reviews.

The above quote from Ruth Reichl captures the ethos of this class: Food deserves to be taken seriously. Food has many stories to tell.

Reporting on food in this current moment poses a number of challenges, but there’s also a wealth of opportunities to find fresh food stories and tell them inventively. The most agile food journalists have risen to this challenge brilliantly, keeping readers informed in a time of uncertainty.

Over six weeks this summer, you’ll immerse yourself in food journalism’s many forms. We’ll be navigating this exciting new online format together. You’ll learn how to write personal essays and profiles of people in the food industry. Together, we’ll also grapple with a challenge many professional food writers are currently facing: How do you write about restaurants in a country without functioning restaurants? We’ll pay particular attention to labor, turning to the stories of restaurant line cooks who’ve suddenly found themselves jobless and grocery store workers who risk their lives to bring food to consumers. Guest speakers will include some of the most important voices working in food journalism.

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 reporting, 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 online 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 who'll speak about the trajectory of their careers and how their work has shifted since the outbreak of COVID-19. 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 three sample deks. 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:

Weekly assignments	50 percent
Final assignment	25 percent
Participation & attendance	25 percent

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. I recommend you also read Eater and the *New York Times* food section to get a sense of the different kinds of food writing that currently populate the digital landscape.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Please note that this is a preliminary schedule, subject to change based on the availability of guest speakers. We’ll regularly set aside time for writing sessions and collaborative exercises.

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 you could possibly tell. A reasonable place to start is by looking inside yourself. The personal food essay is a crowded genre. It’s astonishingly difficult to write a unique, compelling personal food essay. 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*
- [American Like Me](#), Monique Truong, *Gourmet*, 2006
- [For the Love of Hilsa](#), Rituparna Roy, *Roads & Kingdoms*, 2017
- [Life in Chains: Finding Home at Taco Bell](#), John DeVore, *Eater*, 2014

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. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

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.

This week's exercises will position you to start thinking about your final assignment, which will be a profile, 1500 words max, of someone in the food industry who's been impacted by COVID-19.

READINGS:

- [‘He Deserves to Be Put on a Pedestal’](#), Chris Crowley, Grub Street, 2020
- [A Day in the Life of a Food Vendor](#), Tejal Rao, *The New York Times*, 2017
- [She Was Filipino Food’s Greatest Champion. Now Her Work Is Finding New Fans.](#), Ligaya Mishan, *The New York Times*, 2019

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 17, 9 a.m.: Come up with *three* pitches, no more than 200 words, 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, with two sources. (This week, unlike others, you'll need to include one headline/dek combo for each pitch—three headlines and deks total.)

WEEK 3: The Architecture of a Profile

This class places a particular emphasis on profiles. Food stories are fundamentally human stories, so focusing your narrative gaze on one character will reveal many truths about the food industry and its inequities. The more classic, and now somewhat exhausted, mode of profile writing tends to focus on chefs who have the status of celebrities. I'd like to direct you away from that genre and instead orient you towards subjects who can easily be overlooked, even though their work is crucial to the way consumers eat today.

This week will focus on the mechanics of profile writing—how to draw a reader in and sustain their attention, what details to focus on when you find yourself facing hours of audio and pages of transcripts—so that your final assignment is as strong as possible. Our readings this week are profiles that use observational touches to bring their subjects to life. Consider this week a warm-up for your final assignment.

Readings:

- [The Chef Who Can Teach Us a Thing or Two About Grit](#), Julia Bainbridge, *Heated*, 2019
- [The Provocations of Chef Tunde Wey](#), Brett Martin, *GQ*, 2019

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 24, 9AM: At the beginning of this week, I'll distribute a document that contains an "as told to" with a figure in the food industry along with key biographical details about them. Write a 600-word profile of this person drawing from this material. You should also list two potential secondary sources you would want to talk to for this story (indicating why you think their perspective would be relevant to the piece) and five questions you would ask each of those sources. Give me a clear roadmap for your reporting. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 4: Restaurant Coverage in the Time of COVID-19

The current pandemic has many food writers facing a tough existential reality: How do you meaningfully write about restaurants when this pandemic has ravaged the restaurant industry? This week's readings will focus on a few different approaches that writers have taken to distilling the tension of this moment, readying you for your final assignment.

READINGS:

- [A Not-Quite-Restaurant Faces a New Reality](#), Ligaya Mishan, *The New York Times*, 2020
- [Closures, Takeout, and Relief Efforts: How Food Businesses Nationwide Are Handling Coronavirus](#), *Bon Appetit*, 2020
- ["It Was Gone Overnight."](#) Christina Cauterucci, *Slate*, 2020

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 31, 9AM: Write an as-told-to with a worker in the food industry whose livelihood has been affected in some way by COVID-19. Your as-told-to should be no longer than 500 words, based on an interview with your subject. An as-told-to is much trickier than it sounds: You'll want to make sure the copy flows naturally enough so that it feels conversational, but your piece should also be cogent, thus requiring some self-editing. This exercise will help you refine your sense of what narrative details matter and which ones you should discard. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 5: Describing Taste

A lot of food journalism provides a service: Food writers tell you what to cook. This is especially true in a time when the pandemic is making home cooks out of people who've subsisted on takeout. 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 talk about how to describe flavor with inventiveness (and avoiding cliché).

READINGS:

- [Fireworks Oreos? A Reporter Digests](#), Tejal Rao, *The New York Times*, 2017
- [I Ate Mall Pizza and Fell in Love with America](#), Tejal Rao, *The New York Times Magazine*, 2019
- [What to Do with Okra](#), Scott Hocker, TASTE, 2018
- [Coming Back to Ackee and Saffron, Jamaica's National Dish](#), Bryan Washington, *The New Yorker*, 2019

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 7, 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 while writing in a way that speaks to a home cook directly. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

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 and has been impacted directly by the COVID-19 pandemic, maximum 1,500 words, with at least two supporting sources who will lend credibility to your reporting. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

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 mosecsd@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

The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.