

New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Eating America: Food Reporting and Writing
Summer 2021

SS2: JOUR-UA 204.061

Professor: Sen, Mayukh

Tuesday and Thursday, 12:00 PM - 3:00 PM

Office hours by appointment

To contact professor:

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Phone: [732-331-8112]

NOTE: All sessions of this class will be conducted online. I will email all students a Zoom link and password, along with an agenda, the day prior to class. Please keep in mind that the password changes for each session.

“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 challenging time to be a food journalist. Food journalism, like many coverage areas, has shifted dramatically since the outbreak of COVID-19: The pandemic has decimated restaurants and exposed the precarious nature of labor in so many food businesses. This current scenario, however, has also served as a reminder that food journalism isn’t just a fluffy diversion. There’s always been more to the discipline than recipes and restaurant reviews.

The above quote from Ruth Reichl captures the ethos of this course: Food deserves to be taken seriously as a topic of narrative inquiry. Food can serve as a springboard to tell broader stories about politics, labor, and culture.

Over the course of six weeks, you’ll immerse yourself in food journalism's many forms. You'll read noteworthy examples of personal essays, restaurant coverage, and profiles of figures who’ve influenced the way consumers cook and eat today. Assignments will include articles, Q&As, and as told to stories. Some of the most vital voices working in food journalism will visit the class as guest speakers, while we'll also devote time to generative writing and reporting exercises during our sessions.

Throughout the summer, you’ll be working towards a profile of no more than 1,500 words of someone who works in any part of the food industry—a grocery store worker, a delivery driver, a farmer, a restaurant line cook, a chef—who’s been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. You’ll walk away from this class with a firm understanding that reporting on food, when done with rigor and empathy, can touch on matters that go far beyond the plate.

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. 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 and workshopping often.

Assignments and Class Structure

The class will meet online twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, between 12pm and 3pm. 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.

All assignments will be listed on the syllabus. They'll be due on **Fridays at 12pm to me via email: mayukh.sen@nyu.edu**. You will receive grades for each assignment by the Monday after submission.

You're expected to conform to AP style for all assignments. Here's a [handy](#) guideline.

Each story will also require three hed and dek combinations unless otherwise noted. 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.

All assignments should be typed and double-spaced in Times New Roman, 12-point font. On the first page, please include your name and the due date of the assignment.

You should conduct interviews with your sources on the phone, Zoom, or email. No direct messages on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter are allowed to substitute for an actual interview. Given the fact that we're in a pandemic, I by no means expect you to risk your safety and conduct in-person interviews.

Guest Speakers

Every week, we'll have a guest speaker from the world of food who'll speak about the trajectory of their careers. Their visits will, more often than not, revolve around a specific piece they've written. These speakers are meant to give you advice and guidance—please use these sessions to engage with them. **In advance of each class, you'll each be asked to prepare at least one question for your guest speaker (either tied to the piece they're discussing or about their career and body of work more generally).**

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

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

Most of the assignments for this class will be available online, with the exception of a few PDFs I'll send.

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](tel: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.

CLASS SCHEDULE

Please note that this is a preliminary schedule, subject to change based on the availability of guest speakers.

WEEK 1: The politics, 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 by dissecting some reading on the state of food media today, and how it got this way. Afterwards, we'll discuss some exemplary personal essays that use food to probe at larger questions of identity. 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.

READINGS:

- [Food Porn](#), Molly O'Neill, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 2003
- Introduction, Ruth Reichl, *The Best American Food Writing 2018* (PDF to be distributed before class)
- [Stewed Awakening](#), Navneet Alang, *Eater*, 2020
- American, Like Me, Monique Truong, *Gourmet*, 2006 (PDF to be distributed before class)
- [Life in Chains: Finding Home at Taco Bell](#), John DeVore, *Eater*, 2014
- [For the Love of Hilsa](#), Rituparna Roy, *Roads & Kingdoms*, 2017

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 8: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 9, 12PM: Write a 500-700 word personal essay responding to the following prompt: How has the pandemic changed your relationship to food? Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 2: The architecture of a profile, plus pitching

This week, we'll start discussing the mechanics of profile writing. Our readings this week are profiles that use observational touches, rather than secondary sources, to bring their subjects to life. This week's exercises will position you to start thinking about your final assignment, which will be a reported profile, 1500 words max, of someone in the food industry who's been impacted by COVID-19. In conjunction with these lessons, you'll also learn how to write pitches for your final assignment.

READINGS:

- Smoke Signals, Julia Kramer, *Bon Appetit*, 2016 (PDF to be distributed before class)
- [A Day in the Life of a Food Vendor](#), Tejal Rao, *The New York Times*, 2017
- [The Provocations of Chef Tunde Wey](#), Brett Martin, *GQ*, 2019

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 15: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 16, 12PM: Come up with *three* pitches, no more than 250 words each, for potential profile subjects. 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: Reporting profiles

This week, we'll go over best practices for reporting stories. We'll go through how to approach interview subjects, how to record an interview, and what to ask when you conduct these interviews. We'll also build on last week's learnings by exploring profiles that incorporate secondary sources. We'll read and discuss stellar examples of the form this week, which will aid you as you work towards your final assignment.

Readings:

- [Cooking Lessons](#), Daniel Duane, *The California Sunday Magazine*, 2017
- [Meet the table busser who's worked at the same Wilmette pancake house for 54 years](#), Christopher Borrelli, *Chicago Tribune*, 2018
- [First Course](#), Zoe Tennant, *Granta*, 2019

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 22: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 23, 12PM: 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 profile of this person of no more than 800 words drawing from this material. Treat it as if you were reporting this profile—at the end of the

piece, I would like you to name two potential secondary sources (no need to actually speak to them on the record), spending a few sentences telling me why you feel their voice would be germane to this story and then listing five questions you would ask each of them if you were to speak to them for this story. (That's 10 questions in sum.) Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 4: Restaurants, labor, and 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. We'll be looking at stories on working in restaurants—you'll consider the perspective of the person in a position of power (usually restaurant owner or chef) alongside the point of view of laborers. This will ready you for your final assignment.

READINGS:

- [My Restaurant Was My Life for 20 Years. Does the World Need It Anymore?](#), Gabrielle Hamilton, the *New York Times Magazine*, 2020
- [Life Was Not a Peach](#), Hannah Selinger, *Eater*, 2020
- [Jammed Up](#), Lexis Olivier-Ray and Samanta Helou Hernandez, theLAnd, 2020

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 29: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 30, 12PM: Conduct a Q&A with a worker in the food industry whose livelihood has been affected in some way by COVID-19. (Ideally, this would be your final profile subject.) Your Q&A should begin with some brief scene-setting in your own voice that draws the reader in. Be sure to edit your interview for clarity and length. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 5: Writing about food as an object

An essential component of food journalism is, well, the food—being a food journalist requires the ability to describe food's taste, texture, and presentation. This week, we'll look at examples of writers who are able to make their reader experience the food right along with their reader, all while avoiding cliché. This skill will come in handy as you write your final assignment.

READINGS:

- [I Lost My Appetite Because of Covid. This Sichuan Flavor Brought It Back.](#), Tejal Rao, the *New York Times Magazine*, 2021
- [Bread Soup From the Lost Years](#), Scott Hocker, *TASTE*, 2017

- [A Lifetime of Pancakes, and Jamaican Banana Fritters](#), Bryan Washington, *The New Yorker*, 2020

GUEST SPEAKER, AUGUST 5: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 6, 12PM: Repurpose the material from your Q&A to write an as-told-to with a worker in the food industry whose livelihood has been affected in some way by COVID-19 (ideally, this would be your final profile subject). Your as-told-to should be no longer than 500 words, based on an interview with your subject. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

WEEK 6: Presenting 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.

GUEST SPEAKER, AUGUST 12: TBA

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 13, 12PM: Turn in your final assignment, a profile that brings to life the story of someone who works in food and has been impacted directly by the COVID-19 pandemic. The piece will be no longer than 1,500 words, with at least two supporting sources. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.