

**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 a Zoom link, password, and 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 an exciting time to be a food journalist. Food journalism, like many coverage areas, shifted dramatically in 2020: The pandemic changed the restaurant landscape significantly and exposed the precarious nature of labor in so many food businesses. The public also became privy to the racial and socioeconomic inequities in the industry. This current scenario has thus 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 six weeks, you’ll immerse yourself in food journalism’s many forms. You’ll read noteworthy personal essays 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, with two secondary sources. 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, if especially urgent, text). Do not arrive late to class without prior warning. It's disruptive and often disrespectful to your classmates and guest speakers. Active class participation is as important as the strength of your work, too.

## 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, but please 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](mailto:mayukh.sen@nyu.edu)**. You will receive grades for each assignment by the Monday after submission.

Each story will also require three hed (headline) 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.

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 still in a pandemic, I by no means expect you to risk your safety and conduct in-person interviews if that makes you uncomfortable.

### **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 their career 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 to class beforehand.

### **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 [mosescsd@nyu.edu](mailto:mosescsd@nyu.edu). Information about the Moses Center can be found at [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://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**

### **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 today by dissecting some reading on the current state of food media, and how it got this way. Afterwards, we'll discuss some exemplary personal essays that use food to probe 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
- [A Year of Cooking with My Mother](#), Eric Kim, *The New York Times*, 2021

**GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 8:** [Aaron Hutcherson](#), Food Writer and Recipe Developer at the *Washington Post*. Please read his piece [For the Culture magazine celebrates Black women in food. Finally.](#) (*Washington Post*) prior to his visit.

**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 primarily 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, 1,500 words max, of someone in the food industry who's been impacted by COVID-19 (along with two secondary sources). In conjunction with these lessons, you'll learn how to write pitches for your final assignment.

## READINGS:

- [A Day in the Life of a Food Vendor](#), Tejal Rao, the *New York Times*, 2017
- [Chef Omar Tate's Plans for Philly Go Well Beyond Food](#), Jason Sheehan, *Philadelphia Magazine*, 2020
- [One-Horse Town](#), Kieran Dahl, *Eater*, 2021

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 15: [Tejal Rao](#), California Restaurant Critic at the *New York Times*. Please read *The Fruit Saver* (*Women on Food*; PDF to be distributed before class) prior to her visit.

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 16, 12PM: Come up with *three* pitches, no more than 250 words each, for potential profile subjects. Clearly identify your planned secondary sources. This will lay the groundwork for your final assignment, which will be a reported profile, 1,500 words max, with two secondary 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 profiles—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 reading and discussing profiles that incorporate secondary sources.

## **Readings:**

- [The Brief, Extraordinary Life of Cody Spafford](#), Allecia Vermillion, *Seattle Met*, 2015
- [Pete Wells Has His Knives Out](#), Ian Frazier, *The New Yorker*, 2016
- [A Gelato Maestro's Last Scoop](#), Charlotte Druckman, *Eater*, 2017

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 22: [John Birdsall](#), author of *The Man Who Ate Too Much: The Life of James Beard*. Please read [The Forgotten Queer Legacy of Billy West and Zuni Café](#) (the *New York Times*) prior to his visit.

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 23, 12PM: This week, I will distribute materials that pertain to a figure in the food world who died due to complications of COVID-19 (including quotes from other sources). Using these materials, write the lede for a posthumous profile of this figure—keeping the lede around 250 words—and then construct a rough outline for the rest of the profile, clearly identifying who two secondary sources could be. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

## WEEK 4: Writing beyond 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. Yet truly exemplary food writing goes beyond sensory engagement with food, uncovering the broader cultural, social, and political meaning embedded in a dish or ingredient.

### READINGS:

- [Dirty Kitchen](#), Jill Damatac, Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 2020
- [Asafoetida's Lingerin Legacy Goes Beyond Aroma](#), Vidya Balachander, Whetstone, 2020
- [The Problems With Palm Oil Don’t Start With My Recipes](#), Yewande Komolafe, Heated, 2020

GUEST SPEAKER, JULY 29: [Alicia Kennedy](#) of [From the Desk of Alicia Kennedy](#). Please read [Vegan Cheese Is Ready to Compete With Dairy. Is the World Ready to Eat It?](#) (Eater) prior to her visit.

ASSIGNMENT, DUE JULY 30, 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 around 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) and list five questions you would ask them each. (That’s 10 questions in total.) Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

## WEEK 5: Restaurants, labor, and COVID-19

The pandemic pushed conversations about labor in the restaurant industry—who has material power, who doesn’t—into the public sphere. 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.

### READINGS:

- [My Restaurant Was My Life for 20 Years. Does the World Need It Anymore?](#), Gabrielle Hamilton, the *New York Times Magazine*, 2020
- [Twilight of the Imperial Chef](#), Tejal Rao, *The New York Times*, 2020
- [A Boss Is Not A Queen: On Sqirl, Mold, And The Media Myth Of The Food “Pioneer.”](#) Alicia Kennedy, Refinery29, 2020

GUEST SPEAKER, AUGUST 5: [Hannah Selinger](#), freelance food writer. Please read [Life Was Not a Peach](#) (Eater) prior to her visit.

ASSIGNMENT, DUE AUGUST 6, 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 a paragraph of scene-setting in your own voice that draws the reader in. Remember to include three different headlines and three sample deks.

### **WEEK 6: Presenting Your Final Stories for Publication**

This week, you'll workshop and present the profiles that you've been working on for the duration of our time together.

GUEST SPEAKER, AUGUST 10: [Tim Carman](#), Food Reporter at the *Washington Post*. Please read [After Tricking Springs Creamery closes amid fraud allegations, Mennonites are left holding the bag](#) (the *Washington Post*) prior to his visit.

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