THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DIETARY HEALTH

This project began in the mid-1990s when I was working as a cook in San Francisco and discovered a book called *Perfection Salad* in a used bookstore.[1] Laura Shapiro's history of the domestic science movement enthralled me both because of the story it told, through food, about the aspirations of a generation of women responding to industrialization, urbanization, and immigration and because its very existence assured me that, as I had suspected, it was possible and productive to rethink American history through the lens of food. Shapiro's subjects were reformers who believed that changing what people ate could improve their morals and character and ultimately could address some of the most difficult social problems—from intemperance to labor unrest—arising in the rapidly industrializing urban centers of the American Northeast. Ellen Richards, the leader of the domestic science movement, was convinced that teaching people to eat right was essential to creating responsible and moral citizens and maintaining a stable social order. I was struck by the resonance between these ideas about the social importance of eating habits one hundred years earlier and what a certain restaurateur-turned-activist was beginning to preach to a very receptive audience in Berkeley and beyond. Alice Waters was passionately urging people to recognize the connection between eating and ethics, and through her Edible Schoolyard project was attempting to show exactly how teaching people to eat right could create

responsible citizens and address problems in the social order—from nihilism to violence and environmental degradation.

Waters's ideas about how we should be eating in order to protect our most cherished resources, both social and environmental, resonated with me and many of my friends. I had grown up allergic to milk in the shadow of a family dairy business—my great grandfather had started making cottage cheese in his bathtub in the 1920s, and by the time I came along the business had grown to include yogurt, sour cream, and chip dip—so I knew something about the social significance of eating habits. I learned even more about the politics of dietary choice and the complex relationships between morality and health after, without giving it much thought, I became a vegetarian at the age of thirteen (remaining so for about seventeen years). I barely made it through my second year of college on the East Coast before declaring that I was moving to California to "work with vegetables," and by the time I discovered Shapiro and Waters I was a cook at Greens, a well-known vegetarian restaurant in San Francisco founded in 1979 by the San Francisco Zen Center. In the Greens kitchen I absorbed the meaningfulness of the seasons, learned to express my appreciation of good produce through skilled but restrained technique, and developed a worldview in which food was a language for emotions, relationships, and values. I wrote a food column for a local paper, published a community cookbook called *Delicious*, which was bound with chopsticks and wire, and gave readings at local open mics with a wooden spoon in my pocket. Greens was in many ways a cultural and culinary sibling of Waters's Chez Panisse, and Waters's ideas seemed utterly sensible, intuitive, and right to me. Of course we should eat ethically, value the table as a place for community and family, know where our food came from. But the hundred-year-old voice of Ellen Richards taunted me into questioning, instead of joining, the revolution.

Waters's convictions were surprisingly similar to Richards's. While Waters's aim was to overturn exactly the changes in the food system that Shapiro credits the domestic scientists with ushering in (scientific rationality, standardization, industrialization), she shared Richards's fundamental insistence that teaching people to eat right was essential to social well-being and that, by ignoring food, the public schools were failing in their mandate to train citizens. How could two reformers with such entirely different ideas about how people should eat be at the same time so completely alike in their convictions about *why* it was important to

teach people how to eat? Clearly there was something meaningful about telling people how to eat right that transcended the dietary advice itself.

I enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley, to pursue these questions and finish my undergraduate degree. I cut back my hours at Greens, traded creative writing about food for academic writing about food reformers, and wrote a senior thesis called "Banana Salad and Squash Blossoms: A Comparative History of Two Food Reform Movements." The thesis was an exploration of the relationship between the domestic science movement and the "Delicious Revolution" that Alice Waters was fomenting. Through the process of researching and writing, I came to believe that the relationship between Richards and Waters was not at all random or coincidental, but rather the result of a set of cultural beliefs about the meaning of eating right that inspired both of them to see improving people's eating habits as a way to improve their moral character. I began to understand that the reformers involved in both movements played a certain cultural role even when they were not aware of doing so, delineating social norms and imposing the values of the middle class through the seemingly neutral language of diet. My qualms about joining Waters's revolution evolved into a critique of the dietary reform impulse itself, and I started to find it odd that dietary advice was commonly treated as nothing more than the beneficent application of knowledge to the aspiration of living better, healthier lives. By the time national alarm about obesity had reached a near deafening pitch, in the late 1990s, I was in graduate school. Having seen dire warnings about the diets of Americans before—in Ellen Richards's early-twentieth-century caution that the future of the race depended on eating habits, for example—I was certain that understanding the history of dietary reform was essential to making sense of the campaign against obesity and its social ramifications.

While this book is about dietary reform, my aim is not to change people's eating habits. Instead, I hope to illuminate the cultural politics of dietary health in America so we can better understand what happens when we define good diets, talk about eating right, or try to improve other people's eating habits. What are we really talking about when we talk about dietary health? Why is the question of what to eat so morally fraught? Why is teaching people to eat right such a compelling project for the American middle class? What does it really mean to eat right in America? I present the stories of four seemingly distinct reform movements, exposing their continuities and discontinuities, in order to answer these

questions. I start with the contention that despite seemingly scientific origins, dietary ideals are cultural, subjective, and political. While its primary aim may be to improve health, the process of teaching people to "eat right" inevitably involves shaping certain kinds of subjects, and citizens, and shoring up the identity and social boundaries of the ever-threatened American middle class.

The story I tell here is about dietary ideals and the people who have dedicated themselves to promoting "eating right" as a biological and social good. While it's designed to help us understand the social role of ideas about "good diets," this story also illuminates several larger issues, including the cultural politics of health, the historical dynamics of class, and the process of social normalization. The history of dietary reform, for example, raises questions about the massive role that health and health promotion has come to play in our individual and social lives over the last century, and particularly since the 1970s. In tracing this expansion through the history of dietary reform, I hope to provoke a dialogue about what health really means to us, and what its pursuit should look like. Are there important social concerns and aims that the emphasis on health obscures rather than promotes? This history also gives us a chance to think anew about how culturally constructed class differences can come to seem like the natural basis for, rather than the result of, social distinction.[2] I hope to cause readers to think about dietary health as a privilege with consequences that extend far beyond the biomedical. The history of dietary reform also adds to our understanding of how ideas about proper behavior and good citizenship are worked out. This history reveals a means of normalization that is usually obscured by the assumed objectivity of scientific discourses, reminding us that in order to understand and act responsibly within the social world we inhabit, we must be bold about the scope of our critical thinking, extending cultural criticism into realms—like dietary health—that are often reserved for science.

On one hand this book is a chronological journey through dietary advice from the late nineteenth century to the present. I take the reader through four distinct dietary reform movements, each one motivated by a unique set of social and nutritional concerns and oriented around its own definitions of what constitutes a good diet and what constitutes a good eater. I start with the domestic science movement at the end of the nineteenth century, move on to the national nutrition program of the World War II home front, then look at two different movements that

coalesced toward the end of the twentieth century: the alternative food movement and the campaign against obesity. The chronological narrative focuses both on the ongoing relationship between dietary ideals and social ideals and on the evolving nature of those ideals as they have been reshaped by changes in nutritional knowledge as well as in political, economic, and social pressures. I demonstrate that the scope and purview of dietary reform has grown dramatically over the course of the last century, thus providing a new explanation for why we worry so much about eating right today: not because of an increasing incidence of diet-related diseases or because of growing knowledge about the role of diet in preventing such diseases, but because of ongoing expansions in the social significance of dietary health and the moral valence of being a "good eater."

On the other hand, and on a slightly more abstract level, this book is a conceptual journey from a place where we know exactly what dietary advice is—rules about what to eat based on nutritional findings and aimed at improving health and longevity—to a place of disorientation about what dietary advice is. I want to encourage a rethinking of exactly what it is we think we know about dietary health. In her analysis of the nineteenth-century culture of health, Joan Burbick writes, "Common sense statements in a culture are . . . an index of certain beliefs so dear to the heart of the people that they are presented as the bedrock of reality."[3] While the facts of food and health are certainly the subject of intense debates, the notion that dietary advice is an objective reflection of scientific knowledge and that its primary aim is to produce healthier bodies is "an index of certain beliefs" that I seek to reveal and understand in *Eating Right in America*. The chronological journey through the history of dietary reform is the vehicle for this intellectual journey from what we might call an "empirical" view of dietary health as an objective reflection of nutrition facts to what we might call a "constructionist" view that takes seriously the social and cultural process through which those facts attain their authority and their seeming naturalness.

Two ideas are particularly important to the intertwined historical and theoretical aims of this project. First is that health is fundamentally a cultural concept. The sociologist Robert Crawford describes *health* as a "key word" and highlights the cultural content and the social dynamics of health discourses.[4] Crawford explains, "Talking about health is a way people give expression to our cultural notion of well-being or quality of life. . . . 'Health' provides a means for personal and social evaluation."

Furthermore, he argues, health is a "moral discourse," a means of establishing and affirming shared values around what it is to be a good person.[5] If indeed health is a cultural concept, a means of expressing core cultural values and a moral discourse through which we assess ourselves and others, then dietary health is clearly about more than a physiological relationship between food and the body.

My conversations with students bear out this contention and reveal how cultural values are entwined with our commonsense ideas about eating right. In a course I teach about the culture of food and health in the United States, I begin by asking who in the room tries to eat a "good" or "healthy" diet. Almost all of the students raise their hands. I then ask them to explain *why* they try to "eat right," typically ending up with a blackboard list that reads something like this: to get a date or find a mate (be attractive, be sexy, look hot); to have energy for sports, work, or schoolwork; to obey parents, grandparents or teachers who told me to; to live longer; to avoid disease (because diabetes or heart disease or cancer runs in the family); to show I am educated; to show I am disciplined; to be responsible; because I feel guilty if I do not. The list includes some reasons for eating right that have nothing to do with health (being sexy, displaying discipline, responsibility, or education) and others that appear to be more biomedical, such as seeking energy or longevity and wanting to avoid disease. But even seemingly biomedical motivations for maintaining a good diet are inseparable from cultural values. Aren't efficiency, productivity, and longevity culturally distinct personal goals that have to do with shared cultural values? Is this not also true for the idea that individuals can, and should, mitigate disease through good behavior? The classroom exercise illustrates an important premise of my analysis: there is no such thing as dietary health apart from social ideals and, therefore, dietary ideals are never simply objective reflections of nutritional facts.

The second concept that is foundational to this project builds on the first: dietary ideals always communicate not only rules for how to choose a "good diet," but also guidelines for how to be a good person. This concept draws on John Coveney's argument that nutrition is both an empirical and an ethical system. Coveney explains that nutrition always serves two functions, providing rules about what to eat that also function as a system through which people construct themselves as certain kinds of subjects.[6] This means that dietary advice conveys messages about what to eat that are at the same time lessons in how to be a good eater and a good

person. Building on this, my research shows that dietary ideals primarily convey two interlocking sets of social ideals: one communicates emerging cultural notions of good citizenship and prepares people for new social and political realities; the other expresses the social concerns of the middle class and attempts to distinguish its character and identity.

Eating Right in America adds to an emerging body of work that treats nutrition and dietary health as cultural constructs. Histories written by nutrition scientists have, since the emergence of the field itself, approached nutrition as a progressive effort to uncover the truth about food and the human body, tracing the development of scientific methods and discoveries while celebrating their positive impact on human health. Since the 1960s and 1970s social historians have used nutritional data to trace the impact of changes in nutrition status, food supply, and dietary standards on other social conditions, such as the occurrence of deficiency diseases, rates of fertility and mortality, population growth, and worker productivity. Cultural historians influenced by the linguistic turn of the 1970s have treated nutrition as a cultural practice that both shapes and is shaped by other cultural practices, taking into account issues of power, identity, and ideology. Beliefs about the empirical truth of science and the objective reality of the human body that anchor the works described above become the subject of critical inquiry for scholars, like myself, working in an area we might call "critical nutrition studies." We consider nutrition itself—not just its practice but its content—as a product of history. This approach is consistent with poststructuralism's broader impact on the way in which history is viewed and conducted, and it is also shaped by the major insights of science and technology studies about the production of scientific knowledge. My analysis of the history of dietary reform both draws on and seeks to develop two of the key insights that have emerged thus far from this nascent "field": nutrition is not only an empirical set of rules, but also a system of moral measures, and its presumably neutral quantitative strategies are themselves political and ideological.[7]

In approaching dietary health as a cultural concept that conveys social ideals and takes part in the formation of certain kinds of subjects and social formations, I situate *Eating Right in America*, more specifically, at the intersection of the young field of food studies and the even younger field of fat studies. I also illuminate a gap between the two fields that should be developed as a productive intersection. Both food studies and fat studies fall short of providing the full range of tools that we need to critically

assess the culture of dietary health in America, but each does provide essential tools for the job. Food studies alerts us to the cultural significance of eating habits and beliefs about food, provides rich insights into the history of those habits and beliefs, and teaches us to be attentive to how power operates through the seemingly mundane. However, in the United States in particular, food studies scholars have taken remarkably little interest in historicizing or theorizing health and have been largely silent on the very important questions that are raised by the distinctly biomedical orientation of American ideas about what is good to eat. The field, therefore, stands to gain much from those scholars engaged in fat studies, in which the body and its social construction are resolutely central.

While fat studies scholarship is acutely aware of the way in which ideas about health are shaped by cultural predispositions and political motivations, its objects of study and its insights are for the most part focused on current and historical manifestations of fatness and its discourses.[8] This is, of course, absolutely essential to building a field that can account for the ways in which fat bodies and subjectivities are constructed, represented, and maligned and how they can be reclaimed. However, such an accounting also requires a broader perspective that investigates the connections between how we think about fat and how we think about food, health, and identity more broadly. An exclusive focus on fat obscures a set of questions that, properly wielded, yield important insights into why the nation is currently mobilized into a war against fat. The campaign against obesity may seem different in kind than a dietary reform movement like domestic science, focusing as it does on body size, rather than on eating habits. But, on the contrary, the antiobesity movement is an extreme manifestation of the logic of dietary reform that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and an extension of the many expansions in the social role of dietary health that have since occurred.

I begin this history at the end of the nineteenth century because the modern science of human nutrition, which emerged at that time, produced a unique social potential for discourses of eating right. Dietary reformers have helped people to choose diets in accordance with religious or civic ideals since ancient times, and there is an especially interesting and important history of American dietary reformers in the Jacksonian era.[9] There is, however, something unique about the kind of cultural work that dietary reform performs in relation to the seemingly objective, quantitative strategies of science. The phenomenon that I refer to as

"modern dietary reform" was born not only because science made it possible to define a "good diet" in empirical terms, but also because the cultural context meant that such a definition was taken as a neutral and authoritative kind of truth. The science of nutrition began its reign as the dominant means of evaluating and categorizing food just as science itself began to secure its cultural status as an arbiter of truth (becoming only more autonomous and seemingly objective over the course of the twentieth century).[10] Therefore, since the late nineteenth century the ethical content of nutrition has been increasingly obscured even as it has been consistently embraced by reformers who undertake the process of dietary improvement in order to achieve social aims, such as the building of character and the melioration of various forms of social instability. The marriage of scientific empiricism with the social aims of dietary reformers defined a new era in which quantifiable norms provided a seemingly objective but nonetheless moral measure of "eating right."

In each chapter of this book I focus on one reform movement and follow roughly the same trajectory, first tracing the emergence of new dietary ideals in relation to both nutritional and social concerns; then examining the relationship between the new dietary ideals and emerging cultural notions of citizenship to show how lessons in eating right have also functioned as a pedagogy of good citizenship; and finally exploring the dynamics of class that are implicated in each discourse of eating right. After I introduce the era of modern dietary reform, the narrative highlights a series of expansions in the role of dietary reform and the social valence of eating right over the last century, helping to explain why questions about what to eat are so pervasive, and fraught, today.

In chapter 2 I focus on the emergence of the era of modern dietary reform and establish an understanding of nutrition as both empirical and ethical. I explore how domestic scientists capitalized on both of these aspects in their promotion of scientific cookery first among the urban poor and later among the "intelligent classes," and argue that courses in home economics taught more than just domestic skills; they helped students to understand and meet the changing demands of citizenship in the context of Progressive Era social and political reforms. I also argue that domestic scientists played a role in forging a distinct middle-class identity in relation to health and introduce the concept of the "unhealthy other," a dynamic through which the middle class affirms its status through the

ongoing production of an other whose dangerous diets threaten social stability.[11]

I open chapter 3 by looking at the changes in nutritional thinking brought about by the discovery of vitamins and explore how anxieties and aspirations about the eating habits of the population converged with social concerns related to mobilization for World War II. This convergence produced a significant expansion in the scope of dietary reform, which came to encompass the entire population, with eating right serving an important social role on the home front. Exploring the nutrition-education component of the World War II home-front food program, I show that lessons in eating right were a means of promoting home-front morale, of delineating wartime ideals of good citizenship, and of reasserting class and gender hierarchies destabilized by wartime social flux.

The second half of the book is framed by postwar shifts in the broader culture of health in the United States, from concerns about contagious diseases to an emphasis on chronic diseases and the behaviors believed to cause or mitigate them, including diet. These changes laid the groundwork for eating habits to move to the center of health discourses in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first, and for eating habits to take on unprecedented levels of social and moral importance for individuals. In the context of growing attention to "lifestyle" in relation to health, a new nutritional paradigm that focused on avoiding or limiting the consumption of particular foods and nutrients gave rise to two very different dietary reform movements: alternative food and the campaign against obesity. In chapter 4 I argue that the mainstream alternative-food movement reproduced the normalizing function of earlier dietary discourses despite its departure from nutritional thinking and embrace of pleasure as a guide for eating right, and that in so doing it actually expanded the purview of dietary reform deeper into the subjectivity of eaters. I also explore the ways in which this movement promoted social ideals that were consistent with ideals of good citizenship that emerged as part of the late-twentieth-century process of neoliberalization. In chapter 5 I focus on the campaign against obesity, which took place against the same social and cultural backdrop. I explore how the ideals of good citizenship produced by the political-economic project of neoliberalism were expressed in this dietary discourse, examining in particular the equating of health with thinness and self-control. In chapter 5 I am especially attentive to

how, and why, the social stakes related to obesity have become so consequential, especially for those who are fat.

My arguments are based on my analysis of the discourses of dietary reform—the published and unpublished writings of reformers, as well as the vast and varied materials they produced to bring their messages to the public, from posters to public kitchens. As Patricia Allen explains, "Discourse is what forms and maintains social movement identity. In fact, for some, discourse is primarily what a social movement *is*." Furthermore, Allen writes, "discourse is not only constitutive of social movements; it is also one of the primary tools movements employ to work toward social change."[12] Likewise, discourses are to a large extent what dietary-reform movements *are*—they are the primary tool the reform movements employ toward dietary change—and analysis of these discourses is critical to our ability to understand how our taken-for-granted assumptions about food and health have come to seem so true. The language and practices of dietary reform play an important role in constructing commonsense notions not just about eating right, but also about what it means to be a good person and a good citizen, what health is, and how class operates.

Because I have focused on the discourse of reformers, however, I do not attend to whether or not dietary reform actually affected people's eating habits. I also do not address what the targets of dietary reform thought about it, how they reacted to the dietary advice directed at them, or what "eating right" meant to them. And I risk creating a falsely monolithic sense of what dietary health is and means. I hope that the limits of my analysis incite others to undertake more specific studies of the beliefs and behaviors of communities beyond the dietary-reformers studied here. We need to find and analyze historical evidence of how the assumptions embedded in the discourses I study have been adopted, resisted, and contested by the people who have been the targets of reform, and we need to explore how people who are not reformers have generated and acted on their own "truths" about good food. We also need ethnographic and other kinds of qualitative data that can show us how people of different racial, cultural, and class backgrounds currently understand and use, or refuse, concepts such as "good diet," "good eater," and "eating right" in their everyday lives.

My aim here is to analyze the dynamics of dietary advice, not to give dietary advice, so I don't expect to change anybody's eating habits. But I

do intend to change how people think about what it means to eat right. As the voices of the dietary reformers quoted at the beginning of this book suggest, the people who promote dietary advice are hoping to do a lot more than help us each to achieve better health. They see eating habits as a link between individual bodies and the social body, so dietary advice is a way for them to pursue social aims, not just better the health of individuals. While it may often seem like we are each navigating the terrain of dietary choice in purely personal ways that have only to do with our own health and well-being, I hope to have provided a starting point from which to rethink eating right as a social duty, a moral measure, and a form of power worthy of our most critical attention.

SCIENTIFIC MORALIZATION AND THE BEGINNING OF MODERN DIETARY REFORM

The most recent official dietary advice is MyPlate.[1] Issued by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 2011, it is designed to make dietary advice simple by showing which foods belong on your plate and in what proportions. The idea is to take the complex facts of nutrition and convey a simple message about diet in a graphic format that connects to how people really think about food. Behind the guide are numbers of accepted truths about the relationship between food, nutrients, and health: that food comprises various nutrients needed by the body, for example, and that each food contains different amounts and kinds of those nutrients; that food delivers calories, which provide energy but are harmful if consumed in larger quantities than the body can use; that certain vitamins are essential to the prevention of diseases and that some can also enhance health. But these basic tenets of nutrition, established and refined over the course of roughly the last 120 years, are only part of what lies behind MyPlate's version of a good diet. MyPlate's simple graphic also expresses a number of beliefs about how people should behave in relation to food, ideas that have been infused with morality since antiquity. Understanding MyPlate or any other dietary advice therefore requires that we