HEALTH

The Sad Ballad of Salad

Salad is the food of abstention, so of course it's classified as women's food.

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STEVEN MARK NEEDHAM / GETTY

There's an episode of *Seinfeld* where Jerry goes on a date to a steakhouse and orders a salad—"just a salad." The waiter and his date are both appalled. When he realizes the social sacrifice he made with his healthy order, the words reverberate in his head, haunting him: "Just a salad."

"Salad," as a word, as an image, as a category of food, is a shorthand for "healthy eating," but also a shorthand for "joyless healthy eating." It evokes diets and weight-consciousness in a way that no other entire category of food does. Sandwiches don't seem like a chore to eat, soup doesn't get dismissed as "rabbit food."

"Dieting food was always that rabbit food. The salad, it meant deprivation," says Amy Bentley, a professor of food studies at New York University.

In an anti-salad essay in his book *Food: A Love Story,* the comedian Jim Gaffigan also deploys the "just": "When someone orders a salad at lunch, it's presented as the decision of a martyr giving up their happiness to the waiter: 'I'll just have the salad.'" It's the "just" that defines the ethos of the salad, positions it as less than other things you might have eaten. Jerry could have had a meal, but instead he just ordered a salad. "Just" is a word of abstention, and salad the food of abstainers.

And because it's healthy, dainty, diet-y, light, less-than, the salad has always been associated with women.

According to the book *Perfection Salad* by Laura Shapiro, salads took off during the early 20th century, the era of home economics and scientific cooking. Because of their fussy, labor-intensive, and decorative nature, they were associated with refinement, wealth, and femininity. Some of the things categorized as "salad" at that time actually weren't dainty or healthy at all, like "egg yolks mashed with mayonnaise, formed into balls, and rolled in cottage cheese," or Jell-O salads (which signified wealth because you needed a refrigerator to chill them). But their actual composition didn't matter so much as their label as salad: "Despite the often hefty ingredients that were assembled in its name," Shapiro writes, "the salad course never lost its original image as a fragile, leafy interlude that was something of a nutritional frill. ... Salads were perceived as ladies' food, reflecting the image of frailty attached to the women who made them."

Salads today would probably be classified as a health food before a "ladies' food," but research shows that people tend to think of healthy food as feminine, anyway. "Americans, in particular, strongly associate healthy or light foods, such as salad, chicken, and yogurt, with women, and unhealthy or heavy foods, such as beef, potatoes, and beer, with men," reads a study by Luke Zhu, a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Manitoba, and his colleagues. That study found that "both men and women preferred unhealthy foods with masculine packaging and healthy foods with feminine packaging."

Why the division? Bentley suggests it could have something to do with cartoonish associations with hunter-gatherer days, where men went out and hunted mastodons while women gathered plants. (Though in reality, the division of labor was hardly that simple.) "You can't draw a direct line between the way we think of salad and meat and the way hunter-gatherers did—that would be silly and

problematic. But there's no question that some of these ideas still hold over in our society," Bentley says.

There's also the more insidious truth that, as Bentley puts it, "very early on … the pressure to be thin and to look a certain way steers women in a direction to lighter foods." And not only are women supposed to eat these foods; they're supposed to love eating them. See: every yogurt commercial ever. And who could forget "Women Laughing Alone With Salad"?

There's been some cultural pushback on the idea that women should eat daintily to be feminine, but unfortunately, much of it has come in the form of suggesting that, instead, women should eat like men, to be cool.

A 2007 *New York Times* article titled "Be Yourselves, Girls, Order the Rib-Eye" notes that "In an earlier era, conventional dating wisdom for women was to eat something at home alone before a date, and then in company order a light dinner to portray oneself as dainty and ladylike. For some women, that is still the practice." But now, the *Times* reported, women were ordering steaks to portray the opposite image.

"Everyone wants to be the girl who drinks the beer and eats the steak and looks like Kate Hudson," Sloane Crosley, the author of *I Was Told There'd Be Cake*, told the *Times*. Her words foreshadow *Gone Girl*'s famous "Cool Girl" speech, which rails against the new expectation that a woman should be someone who "jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2." So *be* dainty, but don't *eat* dainty.

Both the Cool Girl route and the salad route come to some degree from these stereotypes of what women and men eat, Zhu says. "Maybe on a date, for a girl, if you want to really portray your femininity, consciously or subconsciously, you may go ahead and order that salad." (Another study found that women ate fewer calories when they were sitting with men than with other women.)

But in his study, when the researchers told people about the stereotype that healthy food was associated with women, women stopped preferring the healthy food. In psychology this is called "reactance," and it could be that ordering steak or a hamburger on a date is partially a reaction to the dainty stereotype (as well as, you know, a desire for steak or a hamburger).

Conversely, there may be pressure for men *not* to eat salads. There's been research that shows men overeat when they're with women in a twisted attempt to impress the ladies by showing off how much they can pack in their gullets.

There are other pressures working against salads along with gender stereotypes. For one, salad on its own seems like less than a meal to most Americans (hence the "just"), says Bentley, the New York University food studies professor. Americans tend to think of a meal as "A + 2B," where the A is a meat or some kind of main dish, and the two Bs are sides, one of which might be a salad. This is primarily for dinner—"lunch is a little more fluid," she says—but "salad doesn't feel like quite enough, I think, to most people."'

In restaurants, traditionally, "salad becomes kind of secondary," says Brendan Walsh, the dean of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America. It's the domain of less experienced chefs. "'Oh, you just started working here? You just go on the salad station.' [That's the] old-school chef mentality," he says.

That may be how you end up with a salad menu that just offers iceberg with cherry tomatoes, grated carrots, and some sad ranch, or "baby field greens with a drop of lemon juice and olive oil on it," says Deb Perelman, the author and chef behind the popular food blog (and cookbook) *Smitten Kitchen*. "I completely understand you not feeling any desire to eat that. That would be something I think you would eat because you feel like you *should*."

Walsh says chefs are starting to "honor those [salad] ingredients" more now, and do more creative things with salads. And salad-only lunch restaurants have become very successful in recent years by offering salads with tons of ingredients, including meat and cheese and grains, which make them feel more substantive and meal-like.

"We think of Sweetgreen as more than a salad place," Nicolas Jammet, the co-founder of the restaurant chain told me in an email. "People's perception of what constitutes a meal is changing—a meal doesn't have to be centered around meat, so vegetable-forward, plant-based meals are becoming more common."

Still, outside of salad-focused restaurants, plant-based meals don't seem to be the hottest of tickets. In a study on ordering behavior done by Brenna Ellison, a professor of agricultural and consumer economics at the University of Illinois at

Urbana-Champaign, "salads in general were a very low-probability order item as a main entrée," Ellison says. A 2010 article in *Salon* bemoaned the fact that while fast-food joints had started offering lower-calorie foods, people weren't really ordering them.

Part of the reason may be that salads began as, and in many ways remain, an upper- and upper-middle-class food. Salad ingredients are often expensive and perishable. Even now, as salad restaurants like Chop't and Sweetgreen pop up and do good business (my colleague Bourree Lam recently reported on "America's $300 Million Salad Industry"), the salads they sell still cost like $10 a pop.

Salads may also lose the popularity contest because, as research shows, Americans tend to think that healthy food is less tasty than unhealthy food. (And this isn't a universal truth; the association is reversed in France, for example.)

"I remember early on in my site, I always liked to do salad recipes," Perelman says. "And my husband was always quoting Homer Simpson—he would say 'You don't win friends with salad, Deb.' It's true, they're never that popular of recipes, but at the same time I feel like they're useful recipes. But I definitely feel like there's this healthful stigma to it, and it's very silly."

It's extra silly because salads, especially those at restaurants, are often not healthy at all. As my colleague Olga Khazan reported, a lot of restaurant salads have more calories, fat, sodium, and cholesterol than a Big Mac. But research shows that just classifying food as salad makes people think it's more nutritious. Often, when people eat salad, they take its healthfulness for granted, without looking at what's actually in it. We've canonized the salad category as a whole as virtuous.

And so, when Gaffigan faces a hypothetical choice between a salad and fries by pondering, "Hmm, would I like to pretend to eat healthy, or would I like to enjoy my meal?" he hits the nail on the head with the word "pretend."

The American diet is getting better, unevenly. A recent study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that the percentage of Americans with "poor" diets went down from 55.9 percent to 45.6 percent between 1999 and 2012, though it went down more for those in higher income brackets than those with lower income. And the burgeoning salad industry suggests that leaf piles adorned with toppings are becoming more appealing to Americans.

Still, "it'd be interesting to go into one of those places and measure the ratio of male and female," Bentley says of the new salad restaurants. So I did a small, unscientific survey. When I went to Sweetgreen for lunch last week, there were 25 women at the restaurant, and five men, which is about par for the course in my experience. The first page of both Shutterstock and Getty Image results for "eating salad" are almost all women, with a couple men thrown in. And Zhu's research on stereotypes was done just last year.

So even if salad is shedding its "just" and starting to stand on its own as a meal, it hasn't yet shed its symbolism.

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