The Ethics of Being a Foodie

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The interest in our ethical relation to food, barely noticeable to observers of Western culture a decade or two ago, seems to have burst into prominence in recent years, thanks to philosophers like Peter Singer and journalists like Michael Pollan. There has been an explosion of books on "food ethics" - clearly, this book is one - not to mention documentary films, college courses, conferences and workshops that testify first to the growing realization that there are moral issues at stake in our attitudes to food and our behavior with respect to it, and second to the remarkable and commendable interest and willingness to confront these issues in the academy, in policy-making institutions, and in the public at large.

Among the topics that fall under the general heading of Food Ethics, our obligations to animals loom large. Is it permissible to raise animals for food? To hunt them if it is not necessary for one's survival? What practices for raising, not to mention slaughtering, food-producing animals, if any, are humane enough to meet minimal moral standards? As our treatment of animals has come under moral scrutiny, so has the treatment of farm workers and others in the food industry. There are grave environmental issues, too, that arise in connection with our techniques for harvesting fish, for fertilizing our fields, for feeding our cattle. Further, the distribution of food, at both the global and the local levels, has significant consequences for the health and flourishing of whole regions and communities.

Relative to these weighty issues, this essay's topic is undeniably frivolous.[1] For those seeking moral edification, this may come as bad news - there is not likely to be much in these pages that will lead to moral improvement or to making the world a better place. But there is good news, too, in the fact that one is not likely to come away from this essay with new reasons for shame and guilt. And, anyway, it does us good to take a break from moral edification once in a while.

Though the topic of this essay is announced in its title, its central term – foodie – is new enough and contested enough to call for more explicit definition. The word did not exist before 1980,[2] and it has been variously embraced, excoriated, and debated in recent years as use of it has proliferated. It is not, I think, a pretty word and I have some sympathy with those who wish it had never been coined, but, in my dialect at least, it identifies the category of people about whom I wish to speak better than "food-lover" on the one hand or "gourmet" on the other, and so I will employ it. What does it mean (or how at any rate shall I be using it)? Let me characterize a foodie, roughly and briefly, as someone who is *an enthusiast about food for aesthetic reasons*; someone, more particularly, who loves food – or more precisely, who loves tasting food, and is interested enough in it to be willing to spend a considerable portion of his or her expendable income and time to exploring,

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[1] Indeed, one might argue that the qualification of *relative* frivolity is unnecessary – that if , ever there were a topic that were *absolutely* frivolous, this would be one.

[2] Roberto A. Ferdman, "I will never use the word 'foodie.' I will never use the word 'foodie.' I will never…" https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/03/01/why-the-word-foodie-is-terrible-and-needs-to-go-away/?tid=sm_tw. I am told that the philosopher Gerald Dworkin is responsible for suggesting the word to journalist Paul Levy, who, with Ann Barr, coauthored *The Official Foodie Handbook*, which brought the word to public attention.

studying, and sampling food, with special interest in the pleasures of the tastes. So understood, the term is narrower than that of "foodlover" insofar as one might describe oneself, or be described by another, as a foodlover for having a hearty appetite and taking great joy in eating, without having any interest in or tendency to develop the kind of refinement of gustatory sensibility and discrimination that the term "foodie" invokes. On the other hand, the term is meant to be broader than "gourmet" in not being restricted in its application to people with an interest in haute cuisine or in rare or exotic ingredients and dishes. Though the traditional gourmet is one kind of foodie, so is the person who chooses to spend her vacations in search of the best chili, the best barbecue, the best ice cream in the world.[3]

Importantly, my use of the term is evaluatively neutral. It is not part of its meaning that there is anything objectionable about being a foodie (nor obviously is it part of its meaning that there is anything admirable about it). It is not, in other words, a slur. In light of that, however, one might wonder why the ethics of being a foodie is a topic at all. For while there are roles, professions, and activities that raise ethical questions distinctive enough to make "the ethics of being an X" a reasonable subject for a lecture or even a course, not just any "X" will do. It would be mystifying for someone to announce an interest in the ethics of being a basketball player or a

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[3] The first book by a foodie I ever read (and which I enthusiastically recommend) was Calvin Trillin's *American Fried* (Penguin Books: New York, 1975), whom it would be very misleading to call a gourmet. Thus in one memorable passage (p. 22), Trillin asks some locals in Muskogee, Oklahoma, if they knew where he could get some good barbecue: "One barbecue place was mentioned, but something about the way it was mentioned made me suspicious.
"They have plates there?" I asked…."Of course they have plates," [the local man] said. "You have any other barbecue restaurants around here?" I asked. I have eaten fine barbecue on plates…but I would hesitate to eat barbecue in a place that has plates "of course" or "naturally" or "certainly.""

pianist. Why, then, think that there is such a thing as an ethics of being a foodie distinct from the ethics of being an ordinary human being?

Why indeed. It is, in fact, this very question that this essay will explore. For it is my impression that although it is rarely made explicit, there is a common sentiment of at least quasi-moral disapproval toward foodies – a feeling or an attitude that there is something morally dubious about a passionate interest in the aesthetics of food, that having such an interest is somehow a sign of bad character.[4] And it is this sentiment and the possible reasons behind it that I want to unearth and assess.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should confess that my interest in this topic is at least partly personal. I consider myself a foodie –it's a status and an interest I share with many of my relatives and friends. But I also have friends and relatives – including some good friends and close relatives – whom I sense are unhappy with this aspect of my character. Though they would not criticize me directly – at least not to my face – or judge that it is strictly speaking immoral to be a foodie, I pick up cues suggesting some sort of vaguely moral disapproval. If you'll pardon the ironic choice of metaphor, I'd say that they find something unsavory about a foodie's sort of interest in food. And, as I've already mentioned, it is my impression that they are not unusual. There are a lot of foodies in the middle classes of 21st century America, but there are also a lot of anti-foodies, where the disdain or dislike is at least roughly moral in character. Confirming my sense of this split in popular culture, is the fact

[4] No doubt this attitude is more prevalent in some cultures than in others.

that when I browsed the internet for a definition of "foodie", the first one I came across – in urbandictionary.com –defined foodie as "a douchebag who likes food."

Now what I have already said should make clear that, however amusing, this definition of "foodie" is unacceptable. One reason why is that it is easy to imagine a douchebag who likes food who is *not* a foodie. Consider for example the sort of person who enters pie-eating contests, or hot-dog eating contests, or, in my home state, the person who enters the Krispy Kreme Challenge. (This is a remarkably popular race in which the participants run two miles, eat a dozen Krispy Kreme doughnuts, and run back.) Though not all the people who enter such competitions would qualify as douchebags, it is probable that some of them would, and that the kind of love of food they have does not necessarily qualify them as foodies. But my interest in this essay is with the flipside of the suggested definition: The question is not whether every douchebag who likes food is a foodie, but whether every foodie is a douchebag.

Since I have already announced that I think of myself as a foodie, you will not be surprised that my answer shall be "no" and you might reasonably expect my remarks to be somewhat defensive. But I hope at least not to be *blindly* defensive. I want to be as open as possible to understanding what lies behind the negative attitudes so many people have to foodies, to make more explicit the bases for such attitudes, to distinguish the prejudices from the reasons.

Why, then, do so many people find foodieism morally questionable? Perhaps the most obvious reasons relate to its associations with being at once bourgeois and elitist. There is no question that foodieism is typically an interest for the privileged.

Foodies are apt to enjoy going out to fancy and expensive restaurants, to stock their cupboards with extra virgin olive oil and Celtic sea salt rather than the cheaper generic versions of the same categories of foods. They may also take the time to shop at four different grocery stores because one has the best meat, another the best produce, and so on. They will drive to the next county for its famed breakfast pastries, or make their own mayonnaise from scratch. These things are all reflective of some degree of luxury. One cause of discomfort, then, comes from an awareness that the foodie is choosing to spend so much time and especially money pursuing self-interested culinary pleasures while others are struggling to survive.

Mixed up with this concern is the impression that foodies are snobbish – that they look down on people who can't tell the difference between heirloom tomatoes and the ordinary ones at the supermarket, or at people who haven't heard of shishito peppers or who think maple bacon cupcakes are just weird.

To a considerable extent, analogous concerns can be raised about any activity or interest that members of the privileged classes tend especially to have. There are legitimate issues to be discussed about how much one ought morally to allow oneself to spend on one's own interests and pleasures (and on the interests and pleasures of one's loved ones) in the face of the disparities of wealth in one's society and the world. And snobbishness, insofar as it involves judging people to be less worthy of one's care or respect - judging them, if you will, to be inferior people - because they lack either the capacity or the interest in cultivating the values and discrimination of a domain like this, is rightly subject to criticism. Yet it seems to me that many people have moral reservations or other negative responses to foodieism

that they don't have to other activities or interests that are at least as exclusionary. Why is this?

It is curious that, even though the cost of a ticket to the opera or to a rock concert or a Broadway play is considerably more than a dinner at most upscale restaurants, the attitudes toward concert-going music lovers are rarely as disapproving as those toward foodies. Indeed, many people who feel morally uncomfortable spending $50 or $100 for a meal, buy such tickets themselves; they drive Volvos rather than Subarus or Hondas; they own large flat-screen TVs. There is no reason to think that the *amount* of money the typical foodie spends in the service of her foodieism, then, is especially large, relative to other middle- and upper-class indulgences. That it should be more likely to arouse moral criticism needs to be explained in other ways.

Part of the explanation, I suspect, has to do with the fact that food is a universal. We all need food. We all buy groceries. And so the comparison between what you eat and what I eat, what you spend and what I spend, comes readily to mind. When considering whether to spend $15.00 for a Wagu Beefburger, one can't help but notice the disparity between that and the Big Mac you can get for $3.99. And the Feeding America site tells me that every dollar I donate will provide the organization enough to secure and distribute ten meals to people facing hunger. One might hope that it would give a person pause to spend an amount on a dinner for himself that could provide meals to 500 or even a 1000 starving people. And yet, we don't expect people to stop and think about all the good they could be doing with their expendable income before buying concert tickets or going to an

amusement park or a sporting event, nor do we blame them for buying a house with a study rather than making do with a smaller one and donating the difference in cost to Habitat for Humanity.[5]

Of course, I am all for donating money to Habitat, and to Feeding America and Oxfam, and I agree that if a person did not think twice before spending a hundred dollars or more on a meal, it would show a troubling kind of callousness or obliviousness to the world we live in. But thinking twice is one thing, having a moral obligation to refrain is another. If one doesn't object to people spending a portion of their resources pursuing their interests in the arts or buying occasional luxury items, or traveling to other countries for a holiday, one shouldn't object to their spending it on food and restaurants without an argument for why this interest should be singled out from all the others.

Similarly, the accusation that foodies are smug or snobbish has something in common with issues about snobbery in other areas. For those (like me) who want to defend and even rejoice in people's ability to develop their powers of discrimination, and who believe that there are, to use Hume's phrase, standards of taste that allow us to distinguish better and worse movies, paintings, works of philosophy, as well as blueberry pies, it is an interesting question how one can be discriminating – even judgmental – about such things without being a snob. But again this challenge is not peculiar to the culinary domain. If the tendency to think of foodies as snobbish or smug is more common than the tendency to think of

[5] Strictly speaking, *most* of us don't expect such things, but there are people – for example, members of the effective altruism movement - with more demanding standards.

movie-lovers or opera-lovers this way, then, this too needs to be explained. Again, I suspect that the universality of our relation to food is behind it.

A part of the explanation for the charge that foodies are snobs may have to do with defensiveness on the part of the non-foodie. Knowing that one's dining companion is a foodie might make one uncomfortable when it is time to order, or when she asks you how like your dinner. Is there a right answer? What if one gets it wrong? One will be humiliated if one shows one's ignorance or lack of sophistication. One may be reluctant to invite one's foodie friends over for dinner, fearing that they will sneer when one passes around the store-brought bread or tosses the salad with Kraft dressing. (Writing this paper, I wonder whether this is why so few people invite *me* to dinner!) Such worries are less likely to come up in connection with other domains – first, because, one is less likely to *go* to the opera or the cinema if one is not an opera or a movie lover, and second, because, there is no shame in being a novice in these fields. But one can't say to one's dinner companion "I've just taken up eating."

These same facts, however, may also make foodies more prone to snobbery than enthusiasts of other domains. It is common knowledge that not everyone likes opera, or movies, or football, and it is rare to find someone who thinks that your interest or lack of it in one of these realms is a reflection of your merit as a person. But we all not only eat, we have preferences about what we eat, and so a foodie might think that these preferences ought to be formed a certain way, or based on a certain kind of consideration. She might think that a person who doesn't notice or care what his food tastes like, or even one who doesn't care very much, shows an

objectionable kind of blindness to his surroundings or detachment from his body. This seems to me to be as moralistic as the anti-foodie stance that I am trying to argue against, however.

Related to this, foodies may be especially susceptible to allowing or encouraging conversations about food to go on, say, around a table, in a way that is insensitive to the interests of the other conversants. Like a childless or a single person in a group that is exchanging stories about their toddlers or their weddings, or the spouse of a philosophy professor stuck in a group of his wife's colleagues, a non-foodie can find herself bored, annoyed, and alienated from a group passionately arguing about where to get the best saag paneer, or what to do with zucchini blossoms. The fact that, in some sense, everyone is interested in food may lead a foodie wrongly to assume that everyone is interested in food in this sort of way. Note to Self and other foodies: Don't let this happen!

So far I have been suggesting some reasons that foodies may be subject to criticism that on reflection I believe are issues for many bourgeois interests. An interest in the aesthetics of food, however, also raises a distinctive set of concerns because, unlike the other interests with which I have been comparing it, such as music, movies, and sports, what we eat is necessarily and obviously subject to evaluations along non-aesthetic dimensions as well as aesthetic ones. Since food nourishes us, we need to be concerned with the healthiness of food; since food is a massive industry, which, among other things, involves the raising and slaughtering of animals, we need to be concerned with the moral consequences of the food-related decisions we make. It is arguably urgently important that we be alert to the

atrocities connected to factory farms, the environmental consequences of fertilizers and pesticides, the dehumanizing conditions to which many farmworkers are subjected, and to the ongoing obesity epidemic.

There is a stereotype of foodies as food-aesthetes – that is, as people who give priority to their personal quest for interesting and delicious tastes over moral and health concerns. And there is no doubt that some foodies fit the stereotype,[6] looking away from or scoffing at those who protest the treatment of veal calves, dairy cows and so on. But it *is* a stereotype, and one that seems to me increasingly obsolete.

To be sure, foodies need to beware of the motives for self-deception. Just as SUV-drivers (and manufacturers) may tend to underrate the evidence of how much gas-guzzlers contribute to climate change, and parents who want to send their children to private school brush off considerations about the effects of their decisions on the quality of public education, foodies may irrationally belittle moral (or for that matter health-related) arguments that would tell them that they ought to forego dishes they especially enjoy. Avoiding the books and documentaries that would make the case against eating meat or fish or dairy or foie gras in the strongest terms is no excuse for not knowing that there is anything morally problematic concerning them. So here is another note to self and other foodies: Face the facts as objectively as possible; weigh the evidence; consider the arguments; and, when called for, change your habits. But of course, this is advice to everyone, dealing, as

[6] At an event during Aspen's annual food and wine festival a few years ago, the group attending a reception hosted by the chefs of a Los Angeles restaurant, was said to burst into applause when one of the chef's expressed gratitude that in Colorado, foie gras was still legal.

everyone must, with the questions of when and how much and at what personal cost moral and political values should lead us to give up or constrain or reshape our interests, our habits, and our ways of life.

Happily, for foodies, it is easier than it has ever been before to make some of the changes that might be at issue. The increasing interest, among chefs, foodies and the public at large, about the moral, political, nutritional and health consequences of our eating and food-raising practices do not stand apart from much less compete with shifts in culinary values. To the contrary, concerns about health and environment, about the treatment of animals and the loss of biodiversity, among other things, have informed the movements in haute cuisine over the past several decades. Fine dining has shifted away from heavy rich sauces, large slabs of meat, and dishes that are insensitive to regional and seasonal ingredients; now good restaurants commonly celebrate sustainably raised produce, foraged mushrooms and herbs, served in moderately sized portions. The variety of ingredients and recipes that is easily available (at least among the middle and upper classes) is greater than ever before. Where once it was a challenge for many a host to figure out what to serve a vegetarian, much less a vegan, houseguest or where one might take him to dinner, coming up with a recipe for a tasty vegan meal, made from ingredients to be found at one's local supermarket , is now only one or two clicks on the internet away.

So far the reasons I have offered in explanation of the antipathy towards foodies have fallen into two overlapping classes: One set, having to do with privilege and elitism, is not restricted or distinctive in its objections to foodies per

se; the other applies to a stereotype to which foodies need not and should not conform. If all these reasons were to be cleared away, would the antipathy toward foodieism vanish? An anti-foodie might employ a thought experiment to answer this question, by focusing on a foodie who met the anti-foodie's standards of moral conscientiousness – he might consider, for example, a vegan foodie who gives a suitable portion of her money and time to soup kitchens and relevant political activism. Would he still find anything morally unsavory about the foodie's attitude and approach to food?

Of course, I can only speculate, but I suspect that a significant range of negative attitudes towards foodies and foodieism would remain. For there seems to me something about people's attitudes to food in particular that makes foodies especially open to censure, and indeed open to censure from multiple directions. Some people, who are leery of aesthetic pursuits generally (as opposed, say, to the quest for truth or social justice), see an aesthetic interest in food as one example among others of a frivolous and unworthy pastime. While others, who might love art or dance or music, and who are therefore sympathetic to aesthetic interests of other kinds, nonetheless regard food as too lowly or otherwise unfit to be a proper object of an aesthetic passion. What is it about food that makes it especially apt to arouse moral suspicion? I think that it is the fact that food is so clearly an aspect of our corporeal and animal nature.

Since ancient times, the idea of humans as rational animals has been associated with a status placing us between beasts and gods. Insofar as we are capable of reasoning and valuing and governing ourselves according to rationally

chosen ends, we are thought to rise above other animals, to possess a special dignity and worth. According to this line of thought,[7] our bodily natures weigh us down, burdening us with needs and appetites, which threaten to override the more admirable parts of ourselves. If we could but shed our bodily nature and its associated needs entirely, we would be better off.[8]

Is there anything to be said in favor of this way of thinking about ourselves and our bodily appetites? It is true that our appetites can be strong and excessive and can lead us astray in ways that can be harmful to ourselves and to others. This is why gluttony is listed in Aristotle's catalogue of vices, and why, along with lust, it is included as one of the seven deadly sins. But it is one thing to want to be able to control one's appetites, another to want to be free of them. Furthermore, it is important to recognize the difference between the desires for food that mark one out as a glutton and those that characterize the foodie. If gluttony is a sin, it is a sin of excess – that is, of desiring too much food, and allowing oneself to satisfy that desire in the face of good reasons not to. It is a kind of substance abuse. But what makes one a foodie is a desire for (aesthetic) quality not quantity. Though some foodies also, and perhaps not coincidentally, struggle against gluttonous tendencies, many do not. And for those of us who do, and whose desires for quantity are a

[7] This view has its roots in Plato and the Stoics, and is present in a branch of Christianity.
[8] See also the essays in this volume by Katja Vogt, Henrik Lagerlund, and Aaron Garrett and John Grey.

consequence of their delight in quality,[9] the interest and joy of culinary experience is well worth the periodic need for dieting and restraint.

In any case, the idea that we should regret our bodily natures and regard our bodily appetites in purely instrumental terms has little to recommend it. Philosophically, it is not obviously coherent to imagine oneself as potentially free of one's body, and psychologically such an alienated view of one's physical self is in tension with full mental health. Though there are people[10] who simply don't get significant pleasure from food, people who would be happy with a diet of soylent[11] that would minimize the time, effort, and attention required to meet their nutritional needs, they don't typically regard their own indifference to taste as a norm toward which others should aspire. And the fact that most of us recoil at the prospect of getting our nourishment from a tasteless paste squeezed from a tube suggests not only that we get more than a little pleasure from eating but also that we value eating for its own sake and not just as a means to survival.[12]

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[9] In contrast to the sentiment of the women Woody Allen describes in the opening of *Annie Hall*: First woman: 'Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.'
Second woman: 'Yeah, I know; and such small portions.'

[10] Including impressive and wonderful people, such as Oliver Sacks, Derek Parfit, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, to name just a few who have come to my attention.

[11] Soylent is a drink or a powder that can be mixed with water, meant to serve as a replacement for meals. It is claimed by its creators to be a nutritionally complete food source. As recommended by its manufacturer Rosa Labs, "Soylent frees up your already burdened schedule and budget by saving you the time and money spent shopping, cooking, and cleaning while making you healthier." (from http://www.rosalabs.com/about/ . See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SGkLWjuiakQ.

[12] In the *Ominivore's Dilemma* (New York: Penguin, 2006), Michael Pollan remarks, about the human desire to eat meat, that it "is not, as the animal rightists would have it, a trivial matter, a mere gastronomic preference. By the same token, we might call sex - also now technically unnecessary for reproduction – a mere

Probably few people today hold so extreme an ascetic ideal as the one I have been discussing. But the traces of such views from our cultural histories may be affecting us nonetheless. It might explain, for example, why so many people refer to chocolate as one of their guilty pleasures, even though, speaking for myself, I can hardly think of a pleasure more innocent. More generally, it might account for the quasi-moral disapproval many people have toward an enthusiastic interest in the aesthetics of food that I am trying to assess today.

Thus, Tolstoy, in the course of defending his theory of art as the communication of human emotion, argues against those who think the point of art is beauty (understanding beauty to be a kind of pleasure) by comparing art to food. "To see the aim and purpose of art in the pleasure we get from it," he writes, "is like assuming that the purpose and aim of food is the pleasure derived when consuming it,"[13] remarking parenthetically that such an assumption is made only "by people of the lowest moral development, e.g., by savages)." Such people, he goes on to say, "cannot recognize the real meaning of eating," which is "the nourishment of the body."[14] People whose development is more advanced, he says, understand that "the satisfaction of our taste cannot serve as a basis for our definition of the merits of food."

But, with respect both to art and to food, Tolstoy's talk of "*the* real meaning" of the thing is uncalled for. Why think that an object or an activity, much less a whole category, like "food" or "art," must have one and only one meaning and

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recreational preference."p. 315. Even if one disagrees with Pollan about meat-eating, the analogy between sex and eating *as such* seems apt.

[13] Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960) p. 46.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

purpose? Such a view would presumably also claim that the point of sex is procreation, the point of clothing is warmth, the point of housing is shelter, and that the pleasure of the act or attractiveness of the object is irrelevant to its merit. But to imagine a world in which people held such attitudes and reflected them in the way they lived is to imagine a dreary and depressing world indeed.

In fairness to Tolstoy (who happens to be one of my literary heroes), what he does think important is humanity and human community. He wanted art to aim at enhancing and promoting the brotherhood of man and thought that good and great art necessarily does so. Insofar as his comments on food are meant to remind us to keep our priorities straight (to value people and their flourishing above exquisitely prepared meals, for example) we can hardly be unsympathetic. But Tolstoy goes wrong first in suggesting that caring about the pleasures of food must be in tension with caring about its nutritional value, and second in failing to realize that one can promote the brotherhood and sisterhood of men and women *through* mutual engagement with the aesthetics of food – through cooking and eating and enjoying food together – and not just independently of it.

In its most extreme version, the ascetic and Stoic ideal reflected in Tolstoy's remarks judges pleasure to be at best irrelevant to the real value of food, at worst a distraction steering us away from a proper appreciation of what is truly valuable. A less extreme and more common version of the view accepts a preference for good-tasting food over bad – since one has to eat, after all, it might as well be a pleasant experience– but insists that one see this as a minor consideration. To take great pains for the sake of deliciousness, to go out of one's way to avoid food that is bitter

or bland, or even to notice too insistently on whether food is tasty or not, would be evidence of bad character and a bad set of values.

Connected to this perspective is a further view about the *kinds* of pleasure that food can provide - namely, low pleasures, pleasures of a kind that lower animals ("beasts") can enjoy, pleasures that do not exploit or express our distinctive and superior humanity. This view, perhaps even more than the view that food's real or main value is instrumental, often underlies the feeling that food is unworthy of the kind of aesthetic enthusiasm constitutive of foodies. But this view is mistaken.[15]

Talk of high and low pleasures, which, in philosophy, is associated with an important passage by John Stuart Mill, is itself in bad repute, charged with being irremediably infected by elitist tendencies and values. Insofar as antifoodies who spurn the distinction are subconsciously applying it nonetheless, consistency calls for them to get over their negative appraisal. For if, as they think, one set of pleasures or passions is as good as another, then their disapproval of foodies in particular is indefensible. Other antifoodies, however, are likely to think that foodies *take themselves* to be pursuing higher pleasures, and that that is part of the problem.

Insofar as the idea of higher pleasures is inextricably identified with an objectionable elitism, I have already suggested that this is a stereotype that right-minded foodies can avoid. I myself, however, am a fan of the distinction between higher and lower pleasures, and believe that, used cautiously, it can serve a good

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[15] See also Frank Sibley, "Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics," in *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) for further discussion of this point.

and useful purpose. Thus I want to argue against the idea that the pleasures of foodies are low pleasures not by questioning the very category of low pleasures, but by suggesting that when the distinction between high and low pleasures is understood properly, the pleasures of foodies are not particularly low.

What is meant by the distinction between high and low pleasures? Mill introduced it in the context of defending utilitarian moral theory against the accusation that, by identifying the ultimate end of morality as the maximization of pleasure (and the minimization of pain), it represents human nature in a degrading light, making utilitarianism "a doctrine worthy only of swine."[16] In reply, Mill countered that the accusation itself "supposes human beings to be capable of no pleasures except those of which swine are capable."[17] But, Mill argued, observation and introspection shows the situation to be otherwise. For there are some pleasures that, despite the fact that they bring with them, discontent, vulnerability, stress and hardship, we would not give up for any amount of other pleasures that are easier to secure.

> Few human creatures would consent to be changed into any of the lower animals for a promise of the fullest allowance of a beast's pleasures; no intelligent human being would consent to be a fool, no instructed person would be an ignoramus, no person of feeling and conscience would be selfish and base, even though they should be persuaded that the fool, the dunce, or the rascal is better satisfied with his lot than they are with theirs….It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. [18]

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[16] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001) 7.
[17] *Ibid*., 8.
[18] *Ibid*., 9-10.

In explanation of these claims, Mill infers that pleasures can differ in quality as well as quantity. Those which we prefer despite the considerable costs that accompany them he considers to be "higher pleasures." They ultimately contribute more to our happiness than the lower ones. They therefore rightly matter more to us and are of greater value.

Although the passages I quoted may fuel the worry that Mill's distinction is inextricably bound up with a kind of intellectual if not social snobbery, it should be noted, in Mill's defense, that even in the passage just quoted he takes the distinction to separate not just the intelligent human being from the fool but also the man of conscience from the cad, and his extended discussion of the higher pleasures explicitly mentions not only those available to "a cultivated mind" such as "the imaginations of poetry" and "the incidents of history" but also those involving and motivated by "public and private affection."[19] The pleasures of friendship, family and community are for Mill as distinctively human and as richly rewarding as those of science and art. Moreover, we need not interpret the pleasures of the intellect in a way that restricts them to domains associated with higher education. A distinctively human intelligence is involved in sport, in craft, in the development of skills and the exercise of tastes of all sorts. Intellectual curiosity is indeed, for Mill, a great source of happiness, but it need not be confined to the halls of the library.

In fact, it seems to me in the spirit of Mill, when he is charitably interpreted, to draw back from the tendency to use the distinction between high and low pleasures to separate some areas of interest from others – low art from high, or

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[19] *Ibid*., 14.

sport from study. His point is rather closer to what John Rawls has called the "Aristotelian principle" – namely that "other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities … and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity. The intuitive idea here is that human beings take more pleasure in doing something as they become more proficient at it, and of two activities they do equally well, they prefer the one calling on a larger repertoire of more intricate and subtle discriminations."[20] The difference between high and low pleasure, in other words, has less to do with whether you prefer to watch television or go to art museums as it does with *how* you watch television or look at paintings respectively.

This brings me back to a discussion of food. There is no question but that our enjoyment of food can sometimes qualify as a low pleasure. The experience of eating a peanut butter sandwich or a candy bar when we are hungry, or of having a cold beer when we are thirsty, may be similar in character to the pleasure of the much maligned swine at feeding time. Nor are these pleasures to be underestimated or scoffed at. But the fact that some pleasure in food is like this does not make the thirst-quenching potential of beer a good model for all culinary pleasure. There is no reason to think that the pleasures of eating are *necessarily* low pleasures, and as such unfit to be cultivated and sought out as foodies do.

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[20] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) 426. And Mill himself: "Now it is an unquestionable fact that those who are equally acquainted with and equally capable of appreciating and enjoying both do give a most marked preference to the manner of existence which employs their higher faculties."*Op. cit.*, 9.

Although the idea of food as a low pleasure is less commonly voiced than it once was, it still seems to me to be implicit in much anti-foodie sentiment, and so it is important to expose it and to point out its error. Two aspects of this idea are worth separating and bringing to light. One has to do with the thought that the pleasures of food are simple and cannot therefore be a domain in which one can exercise the higher faculties either as creator or appreciator. The other involves the thought that the pleasures of food are private and selfish, and therefore, when they occupy a significant place in one's life, self-indulgent. But these ideas are not true to even the non-foodie's experience of cooking and eating.

Anyone who has tried to make a pastry crust or a white sauce, who has had to judge when a roast or a fish is ready to come out of the oven, knows that it takes practice and skill. Anyone who has tried to get her marinara sauce just right or to do something special with the overabundance of zucchini in his garden knows that such tasks call for imagination, discernment, and creativity. And just as the preparer of food can exercise her higher faculties in making interesting and excellent dishes, so the consumer can develop her powers of discrimination and taste, allowing her to appreciate the chefs' achievements.

The idea that the pleasures of food are private and selfish is similarly insupportable: Since ancient times, "breaking bread together" has constituted a paradigm of warmth and sociability, while to make or serve food to others is commonly both intended and understood as an affirmation of love, friendship, or good will.

Even if these last considerations show that a person *can* exercise her higher faculties in the service of the aesthetics of food, however, an anti-foodie might still have reservations about whether one ought to do so. Two last considerations that might support the impression that food is an unworthy object of such effort and attention occur to me. Each are sometimes mentioned in the course of discussions about whether gastronomy can ever be elevated to an art form (and each, of course, is offered in support of a negative answer to that question). [21]

The first has to do with the fact that the products of gastronomy are transient and ephemeral. Paintings and sculptures, not to mention cathedrals, last for a very long time; and barring certain kinds of catastrophe, particularly in our world of computer back-ups and i-cloud storage, poetry and literature, mathematical proofs and scientific knowledge can exist for as long as or longer than humans. Not so with a casserole, much less a soufflé. And so it can seem a frivolous waste of time and resources to put a lot of energy into making an exquisite meal.

Insofar as this criticism relies on a utilitarian perspective that reduces the value of an aesthetic activity or of an event to some quantity of "appreciation-hours" experienced by those who come into contact with it or its products, it should be questioned. Such a perspective would have difficulties justifying any aesthetic activities, even cathedral-building, or indeed almost any endeavor that involves the pursuit of excellence for its own sake. Much contemporary art self-consciously rejects that view, incorporating the very fact of the works' transience into the

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[21] For a complementary discussion of the aesthetics of food that argues that food is an art but a minor one, see Elizabeth Telfer, "Food as Art," in *Food for Thought* (London: Routledge, 1996).

character and quality of the experience, somewhat like Tibetan sandpaintings, or improvisational jazz.[22]

Further, this criticism too closely identifies the pleasures of the foodie – both the foodie cook and the foodie consumer – with the pleasures respectively of making and eating individual dishes. It thus neglects both the fact that recipes are long-lasting, thus vastly extending the permanence of a chef's creation and the considerable interest to be found in observing or creating variations on a theme (say, the theme of a beef stew) or transformations in taste. We need not enter into a debate about whether cooking is an art to recognize the aptness of an analogy between cooking and music: as performers (may) play from musical scores, so cooks (may) use recipes, and as music-lovers may take pleasure in comparing different renditions of a Bach sonata, so may the foodie enjoy sampling several versions of a crème brulee.

The second consideration for continuing to judge food as an unworthy object on which to direct serious effort and expense is that food cannot carry the kind of cognitive content that paintings, literature or even music, can. It cannot communicate human emotion; it cannot tell a story; it cannot offer insight into the human condition. This thought, perhaps more than any other, may explain the low esteem, if not outright skepticism, in which the aesthetics of food is often held, encouraging the idea that unlike the rewards one can get from an appreciation of fine arts such as poetry and drama, the pleasures of food are necessarily dumb.

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[22] The movie *Babette's Feast* – maybe the best food movie of all time – makes an eloquent case against this view of a kind that expository philosophical writing cannot capture.

To an extent, the critic who cites this consideration has a point: A dish, or a meal, or a menu, cannot comment on man's inhumanity to man, it cannot teach us about the stages of grief or inspire us to adopt a more expansive and deeper commitment to justice.[23] But, as many others have pointed out, neither can a Turkish rug or an Amish quilt, or a piece of Chinese ceramics. Not every art needs to be classified as a fine art. Not every aesthetic experience needs to be compared to *War and Peace* or the Sistine Chapel.

What is less often noted, but I think equally important, is the fact that even if food cannot have representational much less propositional content, a wealth of information, both natural and cultural, can inform and affect both the preparation of food and the aesthetic experience of the attentive consumer, in ways that suggest that, if "meaning" and "emotion" are generously interpreted, food may be said to convey meaning and emotion after all. [24], [25]

When a botanist walks through the woods, she sees something different from that of the unschooled nature-lover. A child's first exposure to opera is quite a different experience from that of a person who has heard and attended a lot of them. One's reaction to a vase of flowers is apt to shift dramatically upon learning that the lilies that one took to be natural are actually made of silk. The information that the vivid colors of a sunset are a result of pollution may (for better or worse) affect its beauty.

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[23] Some might wonder whether, if a meal *could* do any of these things, anyone would want to eat it!

[24] Oenophiles make similar claims about their experience of wines.

[25] See also Caroline Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), Chapter 4, and Caroline Korsmeyer, "Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:3 (2002).

How things taste to us is similarly affected by a wide range of information and knowledge. It is common for a person who enjoys his first bite of meat on his plate to lose his appetite for it upon learning that it is horsemeat or tongue. A pie may taste better when one knows that one's friend made it from scratch than it would have if one had assumed it was bought from a store. And the taste of foods may become more or less appealing as one becomes more keenly aware of their relation to health. (When a person complains that a dessert is "too rich" - a complaint, I confess, I have never been tempted to make - it is usually meant as an aesthetic description, but it is one that I suspect is often based subliminally on one's beliefs about its effects on one's physique or one's circulatory system.)

The associations a food or a dish has to cultural traditions, geography, and one's own personal history, also affect the quality of one's experience of it. The familiar category of comfort food is an implicit acknowledgement of this, as is the importance many attach to having the same dishes on Christmas every year. The appearance of shad roe marks the first signs of spring – and conversely, the first signs of spring mark the availability of shad roe! To many people collard greens implicitly allude to the American South; pavlovas "mean" Australia.

The chef who is aware of these associations can exploit them, making dishes and serving meals to suit particular occasions, dishes that express personality and that celebrate seasons, locations, cultures, and more. And while almost all of us are affected by such associations involuntarily and subconsciously, foodies are apt to delight in these connections. By expanding their culinary knowledge as well as

refining their powers of taste-discrimination, their tasting and eating experiences are enriched.

As I hope my examples have suggested, one need not be a foodie for the aesthetic quality and character of food to affect you. A family reunion, a religious ritual, a romantic picnic can be immeasurably enhanced by the inclusion of the right kind of food prepared in the (or in a) right kind of way, as it can be significantly marred by the opposite. Once one notices how much the aesthetic aspects of food affect people's lives, it seems to me that the thought that food is a low pleasure, unworthy of strong interest or attention, should simply disappear. The fact that that thought and its subconscious effects on our values have survived for so long seems to me plausibly explained by a false ideology distorting our understanding of our own experience.

But once we have banished that thought, no basis for moral or quasi-moral disapproval of foodieism remains. A strong, even passionate interest in the aesthetics of food is no more morally questionable than a passionate interest in opera or basketball. Though one can be an ethically better or worse foodie (as one can be an ethically better or worse sports fan or opera-lover), there is no cause to object to foodieism as such.

As I mentioned near the beginning of this essay, there may be reasons, connected to the universal but non-aesthetic role that food plays in our lives, that explain why foodies might be especially prone to certain sorts of obnoxious behaviors, and why non-foodies might be especially sensitive to foodies' real or imagined faults. But I want to conclude by bringing out a way that this same

universality also provides a reason not just for defending foodieism as morally permissible but for positively supporting it, as an interest that, as hobbies and other extracurricular activities go, has an exceptional potential to be ethically good.

The psychologist Jonathan Haidt, citing the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes the phenomenon of "vital engagement" which is characteristic of people who live exceptionally rewarding lives. Such people, Haidt writes, typically find in themselves some deep interest or activity to which they are drawn, "but then, gradually,… [they weave] an ever more encompassing web of knowledge, action, identity, and relationships." As an example, he mentions a student in his class who was passionate about horses. As a child, she had begged her parents for riding lessons, and over time, in addition to becoming an expert equestrian, she began to study the history of horses, to develop a community of friends through riding, and so on. Her relationship with horses became an important part of her identity – it gave meaning as well as happiness to her life.[26]

I expect that this phenomenon of vital engagement will be familiar to many of you. To a considerable extent, it explains how a deep interest in virtually any morally innocent topic or activity – sports or the arts, horses or philosophy, stamp-collecting, Star Trek or Dungeons and Dragons - can be an opportunity to exercise one's higher faculties, to develop expertise, to acquire knowledge, to expand one's communities of friends. But food is, if you'll pardon the pun, an especially fruitful interest with which to vitally engage.

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[26] In Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, 2010) 94-95.

Because our need for food is universal and essential, its history is as long and its geography as wide as the history and geography of humanity itself. The activities of growing or procuring food, of preparing food, and of eating food are central to every culture. For people who are interested in the aesthetics of food– in other words, for foodies – vital engagement is apt to connect one not just to high-end restaurants and like-minded people with similar levels of education and income. It will also connect one to communities and ways of life all around the world. An interest in food leads to an interest in Indian food, Guatemalan food, Ethiopian food, and so on, and from there to an interest in the attitudes and customs, the rituals and holidays, in which specific foods and dishes have their place.[27] An interest and joy in the aesthetics of food can thus lead us to an expanded and strengthened appreciation and delight in human diversity and ingenuity. It can serve, much more than most interests, as a window to the world.

In addition, the universal and basic need for food can take vital engagement with the aesthetics of food in explicitly political and ethical directions. For an interest in food that is grounded in aesthetic concerns can spark an interest in other aspects of food and our relation to it. It can make one attentive to articles and programs that inform one of objectionable farming practices or acquaint one with the environmental effects of the fishing industry. Foodies, wanting to share their delight in good-tasting food, may be especially likely to get involved in campaigns to improve the quality of school lunches, to support urban farms, and to support ways of bringing high-quality food products and restaurants to poor and struggling

[27] See also Lee McBride's essay in this volume.

neighborhoods. In other words, the phenomenon of vital engagement may make it more likely rather than less that a person who is deeply interested in the aesthetics of food will develop an interest in the ethics of food. These interests and values, far from being in tension, can complement and enhance each other.

I conclude therefore that foodies, as a self-identified group, have nothing to be ashamed of. Not only is there nothing morally wrong with being a foodie, being a foodie has the potential to influence and contribute to one's life in particularly rich and ethically rewarding ways. Like everyone else, foodies must take care to keep their interests in perspective; they should avoid moralizing and expecting everyone to care about food in the way and to the degree that they do; they should be willing to consider and acknowledge facts that, in conjunction with moral principles, call for the sacrifice of certain culinary pleasures. Ideally, a foodie's interest in the aesthetics of food will lead to an interest in promoting and supporting projects that are rightly advocated by those whose main focus is in food ethics. But of course if these projects are *rightly* advocated, we all ought to support them, foodies and non-foodies alike.