

Food, Popular Culture, and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Special Issue Introduction

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Coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19, “is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus” (World Health Organization). The virus was first detected in China in late 2019. The first Centers for Disease Control-confirmed case in the United States was noted on January 21, 2020, and over the following weeks the World Health Organization (WHO), declared a health emergency, with many nations across the globe following suit and restricting global air travel. By March 11, 2020, WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. Following that declaration, the novel coronavirus was declared a National Emergency in the United States, and states began to issue stay-at-home orders (AJMC). Along with these stay-at-home orders, governments mandated facial coverings, required six feet of physical distancing, and forced many non-essential businesses and schools to close to restrict the spread of the virus.

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage. As of February 28, 2022, the world has recorded over 435 million novel coronavirus cases and 5.95 million deaths, while the United States as whole has recorded over 237 million cases and 2.85 million deaths (“COVID-19 Data Explorer”). It seems unfortunately clear that the COVID-19 pandemic will be an ongoing health issue. As individuals and governments have struggled to determine how to live with COVID-19, major shifts in cultural practices have occurred to accommodate safety measures and meet the

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needs of a sense of community and control during an era of isolation when we seem reminded daily of our lack of power.

Food is a central aspect of culture. For this reason, it provides a fruitful area of study that can help us better understand the cultural impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Food traditions reflect cultural values, are practices of identities, and help build and delineate community. Food is also a space where cultural and political structures of power are reflected, reinforced, and challenged. Popular culture is a significant space where we can see this broader relationship between food and culture represented.

As Fabio Parasecoli writes in *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*, “Pop Culture constitutes a major repository of visual elements, ideas, practices, and discourses that influence our relationship with the body, with food consumption, and, of course, with the whole system ensuring that we get what we need on a daily basis, with all its social and political ramifications” (3). Using Parasecoli’s definition, in this special issue we define popular culture as “any form of cultural phenomenon, material item, practice, social relations, and even idea that is conceived, produced, distributed, or consumed within a market-driven environment” (4). The “complexity” and “transitory” nature of popular culture are the very reasons that studying it allows us to better understand the broader cultural change brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic (6).

Practices of using food to build community and connection have been disrupted by social distancing and supply chain issues, but through popular culture, old traditions have been maintained in new ways, new traditions have formed, food culture has adapted, and food-focused content has become a tool to build community in an era of isolation. In addition, the economic and political struggles connected to the pandemic have highlighted important innovations in the role food can have during social uncertainty and unrest. Our goal in this issue is to answer two questions: (1) how are people using popular culture to maintain or build community around food and food traditions, and (2) how can tracing popular culture messages and engagement help us to understand the changes in food culture during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The essays in this collection examine how the COVID-19 pandemic allowed people to build communities and resilience, challenge understandings of comfort food, and maintain and remake cultural identities and traditions. Some also explore how technology allowed for the development of new practices for obtaining and consuming food and how chefs and bakers used their platforms to empower

communities and launch challenges to racial injustice. Interspersed within the essays are short narratives written by students in Tracey Deutsch's *Food in History* course at the University of Minnesota. We have included these narratives, because they illustrate how some of the themes that emerge in this issue impact a generation just beginning to find their way in the world as adults. They help us see how these themes appear in the practices of daily life and have lasting impacts.

The personal tone of these narratives, and of so many of the essays included in the collection, highlights how personal food is and how it represents so much more than what we eat. Collectively, the pieces included in this special issue illustrate that food encompasses our relationships with our families, our communities, and our identities. Food and food practices encompass complex emotions and ingrained social power structures. Food also provides space for community building, social progress, reclaiming traditions, and building resilience. The papers in this special issue demonstrate the myriad ways the COVID-19 pandemic influenced popular culture in relation to food and our lives. We acknowledge that one weakness in this issue is that many voices and cultures are absent. Specifically, we would have liked to have included studies that focused on indigenous food cultures and cultures from African nations, Central and South America, and the Middle East. Inclusion of such studies would have provided a more complete understanding of how the COVID-19 Pandemic and popular cultures impacted food practices and traditions across the globe. As scholars continue to study the impacts of COVID-19 on many areas of our lives, we hope others may build on the studies in this issue to explore the global impacts of the pandemic on the relationship between food and popular culture more fully.

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