

“You Are a Bright Light in These Crazy Times”: The Rhetorical Strategies of #BakeClub that Counter Pandemic Isolation and Systemic Racism

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On March 23, 2020, Christina Tosi, pastry chef and owner of the renowned New York City bakery Milk Bar, asked her Instagram followers if they wanted to join her baking club (“#baking club starts”). Since then, Tosi has been baking and leading what she calls Bake Club on Instagram Live at 2 p.m.¹ When Bake Club members (known as Bake Clubbers) look back, 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic will be memorialized through photos of food posted on Instagram, which trigger the taste of a countless number of cookies, the relationships such food allowed us to develop, and the unique ways – like exchanging recipes and learning to be more creative in the kitchen – that food connected us to other people through mostly virtual interactions. As a card-carrying Bake Clubber,² I watched, baked, and wondered how the group developed a collective home baker identity for its members, the importance of this identity, and what this community formation teaches us about food and activism. This article attempts to understand how cooking, food, a celebrity chef, and a hashtag foster parasocial relationships (those that might not occur in person) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹ As of April 2022, Tosi still hosts Bake Club, though it is once a week instead of daily.

² I have participated since day one and am an active member. The use of the first person in this article reflects my community involvement.

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More specifically, a study of cooking on social media offers new insights into how women³ use food rhetorically to form communities, promote learning, and to participate in a form of activism. According to Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, hashtags, which are user-generated, “have become the default method to designate collective thoughts, ideas, arguments, and experiences that might otherwise stand alone or be quickly subsumed” (xxvii). Though Jackson and colleagues specifically examine hashtag activism on Twitter – how groups and supporters use hashtags to “advocate for social change, identity redefinition, and political inclusion” (xxviii) – their use on Instagram serves the same function. Ultimately, I argue that Tosi takes a feminist rhetorical approach that “focuses on the rights, contributions, expertise, opportunities, and histories of marginalized groups,” using baking to combat the pandemic and systemic racism (Glenn 3). Tosi uses Instagram to form what I define as a “feminist food community”: a group where members use food to (1) construct a collective home baker identity through the active creation and sharing of content; (2) view learning as integral to community participation; and (3) combat social inequalities linked to racism.

During the pandemic, #BakeClub connected bakers across the United States. For example, Bake Clubber Kelly⁴ says Instagram has been a lifeline: “I post more frequently, interact with a lot more people I haven’t met in real life, and it’s less of like, here’s an update on my life and more of like, here’s something cool I have to share” (Personal interview). Indeed, for many people like Kelly, sharing photos of baked goods formed connections, built community around food, and provided an escape from the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic. This led me to ask: what are the rhetorical moves such online pandemic baking communities use to construct an inclusive community; how does cooking and posting about it on social media ward off the pandemic’s isolating effects; and how is baking used as social activism?

To answer these questions, I use Bake Club as a case study and analyze Instagram posts and personal interviews to understand how the group formed, why members participated, and its role in participants’ lives during the first five months of the pandemic. In a way, the COVID-19 pandemic and #BakeClub offer a time-

³ Throughout this article, “women” refers to anyone who is female-identifying.

⁴ Kelly is one of nine women I interviewed. Thanks to all the interviewees and Bake Clubbers for supporting me. Additionally, thank you to Will Kurlinkus and Katie DeLuca for your encouragement and feedback throughout the writing process.

lapse view applicable to studying how women use social media to form feminist food communities under more normal circumstances.

Creating Food Communities through Parasocial Relationships

To understand how food communities in general form, I begin with research about celebrity chefs. According to Kelsi Matwick and Keri Matwick, “[c]elebrity chefs construct themselves as authorities in cooking but at the same time as authentic and real to viewers” (2). The authenticity and interactions between the celebrity chef and the audience develop intimate relationships as the ordinariness associated with sharing recipes mimics interactions that often occur when exchanging recipes in person. Furthermore, celebrity chefs cultivate relationships between the host and viewers, shaping what Matt Hills defines as parasocial interaction, or “a type of *imagined* rather than co-present social relationship” (463, emphasis in original). These parasocial relationships use media to “give the illusion” of an in-person relationship with the celebrity, including celebrity chefs (Horton and Wohl qtd. in Hills 464). For instance, celebrity chef Rachael Ray uses storytelling to present “herself as ordinary and relatable,” to reach her viewers (Matwick and Matwick 58). While current scholarship emphasizes celebrity chefs on television, this article adds to research on food and parasocial relationships by examining how social media furthers bonds created specifically during a global pandemic that limited in-person interactions.

Indeed, social media sites fulfill a need for belonging when individuals feel ostracized (Iannone et al. 491). Although Iannone and colleagues focus on people who feel excluded, their findings apply to the needs of belonging felt during the pandemic. Bake Clubbers, for example, often receive “likes,” comments, or reposts from Tosi and other members that develop relationships. These interactions helped women stay connected beyond the home during COVID-19-mandated quarantines, despite only knowing each other online. Through “likes,” members share information, establish bonds, and convey support (Carr et al.). As Bake Clubbers comment on each other’s posts, these relationships grow, structuring learning as integral to community participation.

Thus, parasocial relationships develop between celebrity chefs and fans. For example, studying fans of food shows, CarrieLynn D. Reinhard and Lauhona Ganguly argue that “self-identified fans may have more motivation to watch food television shows, which could drive repeated returns and continuous exposure to

content” (71). So as virtual pandemic cooking took off, fans gravitated toward familiar chefs like Tosi to guide them in their kitchen. Reinhard and Ganguly demonstrate how food moves from television to social media as fans engage with related content, including following chefs’ social media accounts (77). However, the authors examine traditional broadcast shows (e.g., *Barefoot Contessa*, *MasterChef*, etc.), leaving a gap in research regarding fan interactions between chefs, like Tosi, that film and distribute cooking content on social media.

Furthermore, chefs using social media often develop microcelebrity status, which Alice E. Marwick explains as “a mindset and set of practices in which the audience is constructed as a fan base” (333). Notably, microcelebrity enhances our understanding of how watching people cook strengthens parasocial relationships. For instance, the YouTube cooking channel associated with the popular food and lifestyle magazine *Bon Appétite* (BA)⁵ is an example of wildly successful microcelebrities. Host Brad Leone, who has been with BA since 2011, has over 800 thousand Instagram followers and practices microcelebrity through directly addressing fans, dismantling the separation between chef and viewer. Tosi similarly uses her microcelebrity status to build parasocial relationships with Bake Clubbers but complicates Marwick’s understanding of practitioners seeing “their audience as fans” by calling Bake Clubbers family (337). Although Tosi’s microcelebrity chef status certainly attracted participants and meant that she received attention from mainstream media outlets like *HuffPost* and *The New Yorker*, Bake Club evolved into a familial space as members built relationships beyond baking at 2 p.m.

Analyzing Instagram Posts and Conducting Interviews through a Feminist Lens

To understand how Bake Club became a significant community during the COVID-19 pandemic and evolved into a feminist food community that uses food to promote the active creation and sharing of baking, learn to be more creative, and address systemic racism, I analyzed Instagram posts beginning with day one (March 24,

⁵ While BA significantly contributes to the conversation on microcelebrity, in June 2020, Test Kitchen assistant editor Sohla El-Waylly revealed that BIPOC colleagues were not receiving equal pay. As a result, by October 2020, ten chefs announced their departure from BA.

2020)⁶ and interviewed nine active members. Using a two-cycle qualitative coding method, I first developed descriptive codes to collect the posts’ content. Then, I inductively coded posts to identify patterns and participation levels. Finally, I chose interview participants from the members who participated since March and posted images of their bakes at least once a week or commented on posts. At first, my analysis stopped with day sixty-nine because on June 1, 2020, Tosi announced that she was pausing to address concerns of systemic racism after the murder of George Floyd (“I started”). I thought Bake Club would cease to exist at that point; however, the pause drives Tosi to question how her whiteness and inaction contribute to systemic racism and how she can use her microcelebrity as allyship.

Though food can further what Kate Cairns and Josée Johnston call “hegemonic feminine ideals” (like using food as care-work), it is also associated with joy, pleasure, and social justice. The women Cairns and Johnston interview express joy through self-care and the “embodied pleasures of cooking,” deemphasizing the role feeding others plays (151-2). Additionally, the authors explore how women change the food system by leading community food projects, demonstrating that food provides pleasure, serves as resistance, and noting that pleasure and activism are not inherently separate (153). Indeed, the prolific writer and Black feminist adrienne maree brown recognizes how, taken together, pleasure and activism use joy to “bring about social and political change” and center “pleasure and joy as resistance” (10; 432). Initially, Tosi designed Bake Club to find joy and pleasure in food to combat pandemic isolation; however, analyzing posts after the Bake Club pause provides insights into how Tosi incorporates self-reflection. This move is integral to Bake Club and feminist food communities because it demonstrates how they use rhetorical feminism to reflect and self-correct (Glenn 4). So, to understand food’s role during the pandemic and how feminist food communities form, this article uses my participation as a Bake Clubber alongside posts and interviews with two members – Elaine and Kelly – and Tosi’s Instagram Live videos and posts. After inductively coding the nine interviews, I determined that Elaine and Kelly represent two diverse types of Bake Clubbers: members who did not post on Instagram before the pandemic (Elaine) and members who follow the hashtag but do not post daily (Kelly). Significantly, zooming in on two Bake Clubbers with

⁶ I hoped to interview at least five members. After qualitatively coding Instagram posts, I sent direct messages to ten active members, only one of whom did not reply. So I moved ahead with the nine interviews to better understand the community.

different participation styles for this article allowed me to provide an in-depth analysis of how digital food communities form parasocial relationships.

Meet Elaine and Kelly. The first participant, Elaine, is a stay-at-home mom with school-age kids who began posting on Instagram as a pandemic-inspired activity. However, it is not until day twenty-six that she posts about Bake Club as an activity where you can participate even if you don't have the exact ingredients ("Christina Tosi's Baking Club"). Bake Club's adventurous baking style is an important design feature because it emphasizes accessibility and interactivity as central to learning. Elaine became one of the most active members throughout the pandemic, commenting on #BakeClub posts and participating during the Bake Club pause. Overall, Elaine represents members who started posting on Instagram and using the hashtag to combat the isolation of the pandemic and replace in-person gatherings with a virtual community.

The second participant, Kelly, is a freelance musician who enjoys finding creative activities overall. She began using Instagram in 2012 to share pictures, and she represents Bake Clubbers who baked on day one. Before Bake Club, Kelly enjoyed following Tosi and watching her judge *MasterChef* and *MasterChef Junior* because her energy is fun, and you can learn a lot from her media appearances. The authenticity Kelly picks up on is a crucial attribute of microcelebrities, and it strengthens her parasocial relationship with Tosi (Marwick 344). Though Kelly does not post daily, she watches the videos live and likes posts, representing those who show up to learn and foster parasocial relationships.

Using Food to Connect in Times of Isolation

Perhaps the primary reason women are attracted to food communities on social media is that they are looking to collaborate through the embodied interactivity of cooking. The need for connection, ultimately heightened during the pandemic, leads participants to search for shared activities to bond over. For example, on day seven, Tosi acknowledges that she sees what viewers share: "Caramel sauce yesterday, y'all. You crushed it. I saw some really great ideas. Chai tea caramel: I would 100% get down with that" ("Baking Club: Day 7" 00:01:19–00:01:29). Tosi uses "strategic intimacy to appeal to followers," building Bake Club's parasocial relationships (Marwick 333). Even though Tosi provides the caramel recipe, she shows she sees members' variations, practicing microcelebrity by interacting with them (e.g., "liking" their Instagram posts and recognizing contributions at the

beginning of videos). Her acknowledgment establishes that participants contribute valuable knowledge. Indeed, recognizing variations from others is central to creating the social context of recipe sharing, which, according to Susan J. Leonardi, makes recipes embedded discourse because they are designed to be exchanged. In this section, we will see how parasocial relationships form through the act of “liking” and commenting on posts, thus using recipe sharing as an embedded food practice to build community.

Creating Community through Hashtags, Comments, and “Likes.” To connect, Tosi and members use the group’s hashtag, #BakeClub, tagging content and demonstrating how images are “used for ‘sharing and communicating significant social experiences’” (Leaver and Highfield qtd. in Leaver et al. 70). #BakeClub allows members to archive their creative process and embrace the platform’s “social sharing opportunities” (Leaver et al. 66). For instance, if I am looking for baking inspiration, I can browse #BakeClub, find a recipe/post from another Bake Clubber, and engage with it by commenting, “liking,” or making it. The use of “likes,” which are “the frequently used one-click tools” on social media platforms such as Facebook’s thumbs up icon, further members’ parasocial relationships (Hayes et al., “When Nobody” 1). “Liking,” which is represented on Instagram by a heart, allows Bake Clubbers to express “social support” (Carr et al. 390). Through hashtags, comments, and “likes,” women use digital food communities to cultivate relationships that support one another by learning to bake and developing a shared home baker identity during COVID-19.

Frequently, Bake Clubbers comment on ingredient choice and baking success to encourage home bakers. On day fifty-five, for instance, members converse about their icebox cakes, and it is the positive interactions on posts that celebrate bonding, ward off isolation, and develop a communal baking identity.⁷ For example, @ailisilia gets “extra credit” for incorporating previous bakes, and @bethany.hopes tells her that “Using the Greta was a pro move! 🍪” Like Tosi’s choose-your-own-adventure approach to baking, the interactions between members exemplify how women interact in digital food communities via comments to build parasocial relationships alongside baking skills.

In particular, Kelly uses Bake Club as a space to connect through “liking” and contributes to the community in a way that remediates the “dual authorship” of

⁷ Trolls comment during the live stream; however, community members keep interactions positive by mentioning ingredients, steps, or something they like about the recipe.

handwritten recipe cards that provide where the recipe came from and include notes that might differ from the original (Cognard-Black 36). For example, my mom's recipe card for "Calico Bean Bake," a signature summer potluck dish growing up, demonstrates traditional dual authorship by including the recipe's origin ("Pat 1994") in the top right-hand corner and noting her customizations. Instead of rewriting the recipe, she crosses out ingredients she does not use (apple cider vinegar and dry mustard), adds that she does not "drain the beans," and indicates that the recipe can be doubled to make "a large crockpot batch!" Kelly and other Bake Clubbers make similar adjustments when posting their bakes, highlighting member interactions alongside baking knowledge.

On day 138, for instance, Kelly attributes the recipe creator at the beginning of the post by tagging Tosi: "@christinatosi." Then, she notes that her Milk Bar Pie, a well-known Tosi creation, deviates from the original recipe, using peanut butter cookies for the crust instead of oatmeal. Finally, she explains that she finishes it by adding a crême brûlée-style topping of caramelized sugar but that it has "OG" Milk Bar Pie filling ("@christinatosi #bakeclub Choose"). From handwritten cards to Instagram posts, what's important here is that social media expands traditional recipe exchange and continues to acknowledge that recipes utilize collaborative authorship. Through citing the source, experimenting and documenting changes, and circulating recipes, Bake Clubbers embrace co-authorship that's unique to cooking but limited during the pandemic.

Like Kelly's modification of written recipes in her Instagram post, the interactions between members, in general, elicit emotional and social gratification through "liking." According to Hayes and colleagues, receiving "likes" makes the poster feel happy and contributes to maintaining parasocial relationships ("One Click" 180). Indeed, Bake Clubbers use hashtags and "likes" to follow one another and satisfy the need to connect during the pandemic. Though commenting and "liking" might seem like passive interactions, they "are significant rhetorical engagements" used by women on social media and demonstrate active participation (DeLuca). Additionally, "liking" an Instagram post is a form of recipe annotation that acknowledges that the recipe has been shared and seen, developing the recipe creator's confidence and building a collective home baker identity. Thus, even if they don't comment on the post, Bake Clubbers' interactions create an empowering community through recipe sharing. Though some posts receive as few as ten likes and others have fifty or more, this simple act strengthens members' relationships.

The Impact of Sharing Ordinary Moments During the Pandemic. While a significant purpose of Bake Club is shifting the in-person exchange of recipes and food online, the parasocial relationships between members and Tosi captured via #BakeClub construct a space where they can cope with COVID-19 through posting, sharing joy, and member interactions. For example, Elaine says her posts aren't just for her followers: “They don't really care that I missed a day. But it's more for my ritual. It's more for my sanity. I'm nervous that if I don't have this every day, something to do, that I might feel lost, and it's just a meditative everyday thing” (Personal interview). In a way, posting about cooking on social media takes the form of journaling for Elaine. According to Lee Humphreys, women write in personal diaries to document “the daily activities, musing, and reflections on the events of the day,” and often share their writing with friends and family (31). Notably, sharing diaries highlights the importance of women's everyday activities and ways of knowing. Like diaries, Bake Clubbers compose social media posts to share experiences because “knowing the daily routines and events of someone's life can build intimacy between people” (Humphreys 46), which became crucial to combating the pandemic's isolation as women took on additional caretaking responsibilities or were unable to interact with friends and family in person.

On day forty-one, for example, Elaine mentions “sharing the joy of @christinatosi #BakeClub” by delivering candied nuts to neighbors (“Christina Tosi Baking Club: Sweet”). The simple act of sharing food keeps Elaine active, gives her an activity she uses for self-care, and posting about it situates and connects her to the surrounding world because cooking provides a “connection to our sense of self, to others, to places, to specific times in rather concrete ways” that the pandemic limited (Abarca 104). When Elaine posts on Instagram, she demonstrates how she participates in the Bake Club community to spread joy despite the loss of activity outside of the home, modeling how digital food communities use parasocial relationships to pull members out of complacency or, in this case, isolation. Despite social distancing restrictions, Bake Club maintained that sharing food was an essential component of memory, creativity, and well-being that contribute to members' building and maintaining a home baker identity.

Indeed, anthropologists like David E. Sutton claim that “food does not simply symbolize social bonds and divisions; it participates in their creation and recreation,” thus playing a more prominent role in forming an identity for individuals and groups (102). So, as the pandemic limited in-person opportunities to connect through food, Tosi and Bake Clubbers maintain food's social qualities

when “sharing” food by posting on Instagram and dropping off goodies for neighbors. Tosi models this sharing after day four when she posts a video leaving bags of meringues on her neighbor’s porch with the caption “Q: what do you do with all your #bakingclub⁸ treats?” Her action demonstrates how, even during quarantine, food is a way to connect and care for one another, and this moment is the beginning of the group’s pleasure activism. “Pleasure is the point,” says brown, and “[w]e can gift it to each other in a million ways: with authentic presence, abundant care, and honesty...[and] with delicious food” (441).

For Kelly in particular, food is a pleasurable and therapeutic experience. “When she’s [Tosi] like, I’m gonna do this Bake Club, and you can just join, I was like, cool, I’m in for whatever it’s gonna be, and I know that baking is going to be a positive strengthening kind of a thing,” she says (Personal interview). Because of her creative mindset, Kelly knew that baking could help her cope with quarantining. Indeed, seeing baking as self-care and therapy was common during the pandemic. For instance, Sarah Weinberg posits that baking uses mindfulness as self-care. “When you’re baking,” says Weinberg, “you can’t help but be engaged.” The engagement helps bakers focus on the activity at hand and, in the end, there is a tangible result in the form of a baked good. In addition, Weinberg explains that posting about baking on social media is part of therapeutic, mindful baking because you can tap into a community of other people sharing a similar interest. Bake Clubbers use baking as mindfulness, embodying brown’s pleasure activism principles through emphasizing paying attention to the process and “tuning” into actions that bring happiness, satisfaction, and joy (14).

Indeed, finding community and friendship through the creative baking process emphasizes the joy Tosi and the community bring. When she receives her Bake Club card in the mail, for instance, Kelly posts to express her joy and gratitude for Tosi, saying, “you are a bright light in these crazy times, and baking with you has brought many a joyful moment to our home these past months” (“Look who is”). Like Elaine, Kelly documents her Bake Club participation to focus on the joy she experiences by counteracting the pandemic’s isolation and embracing the community as a space for pleasure activism.

⁸ Tosi and Bake Club used #BakingClub to tag posts until day thirty-three. Then, Tosi began using #BakeClub instead.

Employing Food as Pleasure Activism

If the primary reason for participating is collaborating and building parasocial relationships through embodied interactivity (cooking), the secondary reason women are attracted to digital food communities during the pandemic is that they provide the opportunity to come together over a shared goal. Tosi designed this digital food community to empower members, whether they are fighting loneliness or raising awareness of a particular social issue. Over months of baking, Bake Club evolves into a feminist food community where sharing content and learning are integral components to combating systemic racism. Indeed, using #BakeClub, members compose posts that contribute to finding joy and combatting the pandemic’s isolation, but we also use food as “pleasure activism,” which is “the work we do to reclaim our whole, happy, and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and limitations of oppression and/or supremacy” (brown 13). Through pleasure activism, we organize “around what we long for rather than what we are against” (brown 278). Though participating in Bake Club is a privileged activity because it requires time, equipment, and ingredients, Tosi’s approach to running her bakeries and building communities uses food as pleasure activism.

The idea that baking is a “transformative” act is central to Tosi’s creation of Milk Bar and community spaces (“About”). Although she does not use the word feminist as part of her microcelebrity persona, feminism is at the center of Tosi’s empire as she builds bakeries where “we learn how to be respectful in how we respect each other as people and how we respect one another’s opinions” (“The ‘Scary’ Enthusiasm” 00:25:34-00:25:48). In this final section, I highlight how Tosi shifts Bake Club from combatting pandemic isolation to use what brings her pleasure and joy – baking together – to address systemic racism and amplify the work of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) during and beyond the pandemic.

“In an Effort to Do My Part”: Using #BakeClub to Amplify BIPOC Voices. For the first sixty-nine days of Bake Club, Tosi’s goal was to use Instagram to spread “posi vibes.” Additionally, social media platforms, explains Zizi Papacharissi, “sustain activities that are organized around information sharing and learning, creativity and innovation, and discourse” (121). Indeed, participants like Elaine see Bake Club as a space for discourse and positive community interaction: “Everyone has nothing but wonderful things to say, to lift each other up...we are all supporting each other. Everything’s gonna be okay” (Personal interview). Here, Elaine

acknowledges Bake Club's supportive network is essential, but even though positivity grounds the community, that does not mean conflicts do not arise. Though "likes" foster positive interactions (and comments on Tosi's posts promote positivity), the tone shifts after the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020.

Four days after a Minneapolis police officer murdered Floyd, comments on Tosi's Bake Club day sixty-nine post reflect the turmoil felt across the United States as protests in support of Black lives began. Unlike the previous sixty-eight days where Bake Clubbers express excitement about baking and ask questions about ingredients, comments call out Tosi's silence and white privilege. They also shame her for not acknowledging systemic racism or using her platform to "speak out about the horrors of this week" (Tosi "#bakeclub day 69"). The response to Tosi's inaction depicts a common occurrence in digital spaces (Jackson et al.). Up to this point, #BakeClub brought bakers together to combat pandemic isolation; however, connecting around shared interests does not inherently lead to civic engagement. In fact, sharing "personalized interests" can enable "people to connect around commonalities without having to compromise their own belief systems" (Papacharissi 128). Indeed, Bake Club attracts members whose motivation to participate is pandemic-driven, and of the nine interview participants, only two don't identify as white. Interviewees mentioned they started baking along because it was fun, gave them something to do, and acted as a distraction from politics,⁹ but Tosi decides she can't remain silent and her acknowledgment of racism begins to "register" its presence (Ahmed 34).

At the beginning of Bake Club day sixty-nine, Tosi says, "what we do here every day is light, it's light-hearted, it's full of joy. It's meant to be an escape, yet also a togetherness, but I just couldn't jump into Bake Club without first acknowledging what's going on in our country at large and especially this weekend" (00:00:49-00:01:10). Her introduction to the day's video shows that, while she is not questioning her privilege to continue baking as a white microcelebrity, she recognizes her inaction. Still, baking's pleasure at this moment resists the pandemic rather than systemic racism as she leads us in making lemon ice. However, instead of going live at 2 p.m. on June 1, 2020, she shares an image of a handwritten note that says, "I've decided to pause Bake Club for now, and instead I am digging in. I ask, I listen, I learn" ("I started").

⁹ I have summarized the responses from all interviewees to respect their anonymity.

The post is still problematic because Tosi’s statement does not indicate any actionable items and can be viewed as “performative allyship,” which Jackson and colleagues explain as “announcing or demonstrating allyship for an audience” (154-5). So what would she be learning by not hosting Bake Club? More importantly, what would she be doing? In stepping back, Tosi demonstrates how digital food communities can use rhetorical feminism to evolve into a feminist food community that operates “in a constant state of response, reassessment, and self-correction” (Glenn 4). Perhaps Tosi could’ve kept Bake Club going while asking, listening, and learning, but the decision to stop and dedicate her energy to support Black lives cultivates an awareness of how inaction contributes to racism and embraces the idea that “to become a feminist is to stay a student” (Ahmed 11).

During the pause, members kept baking and maintained parasocial relationships through the hashtag, and we couldn’t be sure Bake Club would return. So the email newsletter Tosi sent on June 18, 2020 announcing Bake Club’s restart on June 21 was a warm welcome (*Sunday*). Tosi says she wants to “share the microphone” and that she “can think of no better way to be reminded that the things that bring us together are more important than the things that try to tear us apart” than to restart Bake Club. From this email, it is not clear how it will be different. What will it look like for Tosi to highlight “new voices, new perspectives” during our baking sessions? It remained to be seen if #BakeClub and the community overall would move beyond performative support. Generally, “hashtags that claim to move privileged members of society toward solidarity with those less so,” explain Jackson and colleagues, “are often regarded with skepticism as a kind of faux allyship that recenters privileged groups” (156). Thus, I awaited Bake Club’s return with skepticism. To restart, Tosi reads us a note that Bake Clubber Kathleen sent her during the pause:

We [Kathleen and her son Eli] talked about her [Tosi’s] decision to put Bake Club on hiatus during these tumultuous times when our country’s systemic racism has once again senselessly cost another Black life. Tough conversation to have with any kid. Tougher so between a white mom and her Black son. He’s disappointed and doesn’t really get why we can’t bake and fight racism. So, we’ll continue to do both. (“Bake Club: Day 70” 00:04:20-00:04:45)

After sharing, Tosi tells us that she and her Milk Bar team are actively working toward change and participated in the first #BakersAgainstRacism bake sale.¹⁰ Bake Club's first day back acknowledges what Tosi is working on, but when Kathleen and her sons Jonah and Eli join Tosi in the kitchen on day seventy-four, she employs pleasure activism to use food to center "pleasure and joy as resistance" through the inclusion of voices other than her own (brown 432). With the addition of guests after the pause, Tosi moves from saying she is acting to showing her support and shifts the call for social awareness from pandemic isolation to systemic racism.

As Leaver and others explain, groups on Instagram "use the platform to raise social awareness for various causes in a more accessible manner," and Tosi uses her microcelebrity status with over 500 thousand Instagram followers to share the work of diverse makers (151). After Jonah, Eli, and Kathleen, Tosi collaborates with fashion designer Tan France, Milk Bar's communications coordinator Meme Wilson, Jade (a student at Food & Finance High School in New York City), and cookbook author and food editor Kristina Gill. Post-pause, adding voices, specifically BIPOC voices, becomes a central focus. For example, Tosi announces an additional weekly Bake Club segment called Teach Me Something where she does her "part in uplifting and amplifying Black and POC [sic] voices" by asking a friend to join and teach us (*August 2: Week 15*). The weekly collaborations vary in style, but Tosi uses Instagram to promote guests and encourage Bake Clubbers to follow their social media accounts.

Several Teach Me Somethings include a video posted to Tosi's YouTube channel and #TakeoverTuesday, where she gives her Instagram account over to the guest to post and share stories. Post-pause, Tosi uses her platform for "supportive organizing" for racial justice (Jackson et al. 154). For example, when Tosi collaborates with Austin, TX-based chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph for the first Teach Me Something, he teaches us how to bake his six-ounce "Monster Cookies" and shares where his determination and creativity come from:

I grew up in Georgetown, Guyana, and was trying to figure out where I wanted to be [...] I used to bake for punishment because I played basketball all the time, and anytime I would be out playing ball, she [my aunt] would

¹⁰ #BakersAgainstRacism brought bakers of all skill levels, from home cooks to professionals, together to sell their baked goods on June 20, 2020, and donate the proceeds to an organization supporting Black lives. As a result, over 2,000 bakers worldwide created limited edition baked goods to raise funds to fight systemic racism.

try to get me to come home early, and I would want to stay out late, so her punishment was you're gonna bake with me every Saturday for the kids in Sunday school...and then it just kind of [...] turned into this really fun thing to do with my aunt every Saturday. (00:03:24-00:06:50)

The story Bristol-Joseph tells is similar to the one published in *Food & Wine* announcing his Best New Chef 2020 award (Shah). When he won this award, his first restaurant, Emmer & Rye, had been open for five years, but despite his Austin-based success, Bristol-Joseph does not have the same level of fame as Tosi. However, by using her platform to circulate Bristol-Joseph's work, Tosi uses storytelling to “help sustain movements that may yield political impact of a specific form” (Papacharissi 132). In this case, bringing Bristol-Joseph into the kitchen works to combat racial injustice by decentering Tosi's voice and calling on Bake Clubbers to use the pleasure that baking Monster Cookies brings them to learn about BIPOC bakers.

Furthermore, Tosi's #TakeoverTuesday strategically uses social media to advocate for social change, holding up food-inspired pleasure and joy as resistance as guests share their work via her Instagram Stories. Originally designed to disappear within twenty-four hours, users can choose to archive “a collection of themed Story segments” and post them on their profile as Stories Highlights (Leaver et al. 28). Tosi uses this feature to create a space for BIPOC makers to share and preserve their work. Some guests, like Bristol-Joseph, record themselves to show us their work and capture their story as a cohesive video, while others utilize still images with captions and animated text. For example, the Stories Highlight for Lee Lee's Rugelach takeover includes six segments that feature the story of the bakery's owner, Alvin Lee Smalls, and images of rugelach alongside the cakes and cookies sold at the Harlem bakery (Tosi “Lee Lee's”). Like Jackson and others point out in their analysis of hashtags and allies, Tosi's incorporation of #TakeoverTuesday seeks to recognize her positionality and privilege and use her microcelebrity to circulate BIPOC narratives. Tosi works to diversify representation in the food industry through social media and encourages her fans to seek out and support the guests' content.

Conclusion: Parasocial Relationships and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Though Christina Tosi is not the first microcelebrity chef to use food to build digital communities, this analysis uncovers the rhetorical strategies women in an online

baking group (Bake Club) utilized to combat pandemic isolation, expanding scholarship on food and parasocial relationships. Hashtags, comments, and “likes” warded off pandemic isolation while teaching Bake Clubbers baking skills. Additionally, my analysis introduces how microcelebrities and digital food communities use Instagram to advocate for social change and evolve into feminist food communities that use food to (1) construct a collective home baker identity through the active creation and sharing of content; (2) view learning as integral to community participation; and (3) combat social inequalities linked to racism. Led by Tosi, Bake Clubbers like Elaine and Kelly created a community through #BakeClub. Ultimately, sharing food via Instagram establishes ways to exchange recipes and food during the pandemic that emphasizes baking as a form of pleasure activism. Though Tosi initially designed Bake Club to bring happiness, satisfaction, and joy during a time of uncertainty, the additions of Teach Me Something and #TakeoverTuesday invite BIPOC makers to tell their stories and use food to center “pleasure and joy as resistance” to systemic racism (brown 432). As members connect with other bakers, learn how to be more creative in the kitchen, and find joy through baking, they further Tosi’s overall message that baking and baked goods are powerful community-building tools. But, from a feminist perspective, what do Bake Club’s rhetorical strategies teach us about digital food communities more generally?

With the inclusion of multiple voices, Tosi is doing what Sara Ahmed refers to as diversity work, “the work we do when we are attempting to transform an institution” (91). For example, Teach Me Something and #TakeoverTuesday are Tosi’s attempts to transform the professional culinary world through baking, demonstrating how digital food communities can use food to address racism in particular. What this case study shows us is that further research on digital and feminist food communities that began during the pandemic and the summer of 2020, in particular, is needed. Examining #BakeClub’s rhetorical strategies is a starting point for inquiry into such communities and their evolution during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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