

Coping Through COVID Cooking: Nostalgia and Resilience in Online Communities

ASHLI QUESINBERRY STOKES AND WENDY ATKINS-SAYRE

Food speaks to us and serves several purposes when we find ourselves in need, acting as a time-honored and universal symbol of care and concern. We are told to feed a cold; a broken heart may call for a pint of ice cream; and we deliver casseroles and baked goods to families in mourning. Food nourishes our bodies but can also soothe our hearts and our minds. And so, it is not shocking that one of the hottest topics early in the COVID-19 pandemic was home cooking. In fact, Google searches for sourdough, baking bread, and other similar topics increased by 384% during the pandemic (Wolpert). Instacart, Uber Eats, DoorDash, and other grocery and food delivery options brought quarantining households connections to the outside world. Some reported feelings of “fomo-baking,” fearing that they were missing out on trends that family and friends were trying, so they too tried creating new things. Junk food sales soared, but so did new interest in plant-based and vegan cooking (Danziger). Gathering in person had ground to a halt at the height of the global pandemic, but cooking became a way to enact community by swapping recipes and creating individual twists on dishes.

ASHLI QUESINBERRY STOKES (Ph.D., University of Georgia) is Professor of Communication Studies and former Director of the Center for the Study of the New South at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She recently co-edited *City Places, Country Spaces: Rhetorical Explorations of the Urban/Rural Divide* (Peter Lang), and co-authored *Consuming Identity: The Role of Food in Redefining the South* with Wendy Atkins-Sayre. Her research exploring intersections between food, identity, activism, and regions has also been published in journals including the *Southern Communication Journal*, *Public Relations Inquiry*, *Journal of Public Interest Communications*, and *Journal of Public Relations Research*, among others. She can be reached at aqstokes@uncc.edu.

WENDY ATKINS-SAYRE (Ph.D., University of Georgia) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication & Film at the University of Memphis. Her research centers on identity as constructed through discourse, with an emphasis on regional and social movement studies. Her most recent book, edited with Ashli Stokes, looks at the role that rhetoric plays in building an urban/rural divide in America: *City Places, Country Spaces: Rhetorical Explorations of the Urban/Rural Divide* (Peter Lang). She can be reached at Wendy.Atkins-Sayre@memphis.edu.

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This essay rhetorically analyzes a sampling of popular culture social media engagements with “COVID cooking,”¹ including the rise of Twitter hashtags such as #pandemicbaking and #quarantinebaking, COVID “CookTok,” Instagram posts, and Facebook communities devoted to pandemic cooking such as “Fatten the Curve,” to explore the role that food-based rhetoric played during the pandemic. Social media engagement with COVID cooking fostered connection, helping to build pockets of community and fortifying personal and community resilience, but also served as an escapist balm or nostalgic distraction, stifling reflection and reinforcing community borders. Discussions of COVID cooking included themes of nostalgia and resilience, but also reinforced an idealized version of US American food culture, overlooking the roles social class, gender, and race play in accessing and enjoying traditional American popular food culture. Our analysis illustrates how the need to cope through food eclipsed the opportunity to think more deeply about the challenges in US American food culture that the pandemic highlighted. We first describe the unique expressions of food culture through popular culture during the pandemic, connecting relevant rhetorical concepts. We then analyze a collection of conversations to highlight how communities relied on food to help cope with the pandemic’s challenges, illustrating how their often individual foci overlooked opportunities to confront community challenges exacerbated by COVID-19 and solidified notions about food in popular culture.² We conclude by reflecting on ways in which these forums might be more productive through the connective opportunities that food provides.

The Rise of “COVID Cooking” in Popular Culture

As early as March 2020, media reports about quarantine baking, cooking, and other food and drink related activities began to appear frequently in a host of media. As one article described the level of attention to food, “quarantine cooking made everyone a food influencer. For even the slightly culinarily inclined, cooking – and more so, documenting – became a full on obsession” (Hirsch). Virtual interest in

¹ We use the term “COVID cooking” when referring to any home food preparation. Although we recognize the differences between baking and cooking, especially the difference between cooking to provide needed food versus cooking or baking for pleasure, this essay focuses more on the community-building possibilities of online discussions of food preparation.

² More specifically, we gathered texts from Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram from March 2020 to September 2021, using search terms such as “pandemic baking,” “COVID cooking,” etc.

cooking and baking exploded, with surveys showing a 120 percent increase in home baking and people eager to participate, complaining, “I’d just feel better if I had a bag of flour in my pantry” (Ellis). Indeed, the emergence of the Flour Panic, with sales of flour skyrocketing 20%, flour disappearing from grocery stores, and accusations of “Flour Privilege” lobbed at those who were able to track it down, also attested to the level of interest in COVID cooking (Mull). Describing people’s need to relieve anxiety, pass the time, manage stress, entertain households suddenly sharing space for much longer daily intervals, or make use of limited ingredients, COVID cooking seemed to provide a source of comfort for many. Early research into food choice motives during the pandemic indicates that US adults addressed symptoms associated with psychological distress through food choices that sought solace more than nutrition (Shen et al.).

Baking, in particular, gained popularity, with its focus on process and ritual providing a diversion, sense of flow, and feelings of calm to help process increasingly upsetting news. For some, baking also offered feelings of control and achievement. Although there is limited research on stress baking, studies support anecdotal stories about emotion management, self-care, and stress-reduction through cooking (Brasted). These types of small, creative tasks allowed people to cope with the situation and to feel more relaxed and happier (Brasted). Even early in the pandemic, commentary pointed to the absurdist notion of the desire to bake during a global health crisis; yet, for those who had the time and resources, COVID cooking offered a “coping mechanism that lends some sense of structure in a chaotic world” (Zhang). This renewed interest in baking and cooking would not have happened forty years ago, when US Americans cooked more and ate less processed food. Today, however, as women increasingly enter the workforce and the demands of work increase, and with the easy availability of ready-made breads and other processed foods, more US Americans are less experienced in baking and cooking. The pandemic presented a different way to consider cooking and eating (Mull).

In fact, increased engagement with food during COVID extended eventually beyond digital forums. Chefs, too, changed their habits, starting takeaway services, personal chef gigs, and/or cooking for their communities, with some banding together with other chefs to create “zine-style” pamphlets featuring their comforting new creations to provide to their communities (Ee). Other community initiatives saw people cooking extra meals for those who needed support, organizing through hashtags like #CookforCovid to collect money and supplies. Of

course, as the pandemic raged on, the enthusiasm for cooking waned. Signs of cooking fatigue began to emerge, with sales of prepared and convenience foods rising again (Al-Shalchi). The previously enthusiastic and cooking challenged alike were ready to move on from the cultural obsession with food: “I’ve gotten to the point with eating where I basically just want a nutrient slurry injected into me,” said one Twitter user, while another complained that “I hate cooking now, and I hate that I hate cooking” (Rosner).

Despite varying levels of interest and media attention, the sustained cultural interest in food for more than eighteen months pointed to more than just a need to feed ourselves. Virtual communities offered a way to share food experiences and build connection in a newly physically distanced world. Although general interest in food has been growing for the past several decades, with increased enthusiasm for cookbooks, cooking shows, farmers markets, and local foods, our interest in sourdough starters, banana bread, Dalgona coffee, feta tomato bakes, and “project pizza,” suggested that cooking is more than a way to pass the time (Armstrong; Ledesma and Morales). As one chef who began an online open-source cookbook explained, “What I miss is just the physical sharing of food. You go to someone’s house [...] and you’re exchanging knowledge, exchanging stories, exchanging the craft” (Pruden). Early academic research supports these observations. Shen and colleagues found virtual forums increased social interaction through the sharing of knowledge and skills and cultivated feelings of belonging, companionship, and connectedness. These opportunities were able to, in some cases, offset stress that led to unhealthy emotional eating. In addition, COVID cooking forums presented an opportunity to renew older practices and relationships through family meals and recipe sharing, to reconnect to cultural heritage and traditions, and to develop new traditions (Shen et al.). These online forums helped build the connection and community that food often provides, but in ways that emphasized particular dimensions more than others.

As they connected people experiencing isolation and anxiety, online COVID cooking forums increasingly became part of popular culture that rhetorically represented and reinforced our changing relationships with food. Popular culture reproduces traditional symbols for broad audiences, offering easily accessible representations about a topic (Wilson). It produces well-known symbols that become associated with particular themes, taking individual or collective experiences and projecting them on a larger scale, such that particular expressions come to denote the whole of experience (Wilson). Food serves as a particularly

meaningful symbol of culture. As Presswood explains, “Food, and the many ways in which we procure, prepare, consume, and discuss it, communicates important messages about our culture, relationships, and individual preferences or aspirations” (9). We come to associate beignets, chicory coffee, Lucky Dogs, and po’ boys with New Orleans, for example, or barbecue and bourbon with broad swaths of the Southern United States. Popular culture is mass culture, however, and is less concerned with authenticity and more concerned with promoting consumption. New Orleanians may now consume chicory coffee and beignets infrequently, for example, but many tourists wait in long lines to experience a tradition that has become symbolic of New Orleans. Popular culture’s representations of COVID cooking have similar implications; for example, they may privilege conversations about hobby bread baking rather than discussing how baking signifies hot, back-breaking labor in someone else’s kitchen.

Popular culture discussions about COVID cooking thus became representative of a collective experience, whether accurate or not. We read much about sourdough starters or weekend afternoons making the popular cast iron pizza, for example, but these sorts of stories featured particular experiences more than others. Because what is commonly thought of as comfort food became more popular, especially at the beginning of lockdown, discussions about these foods tended to spark nostalgia for childhood foods, family meals, or passed down family recipes. During a global pandemic, it was natural for isolated individuals to seek out this comfort through food-centered social media. COVID cooking forums, too, tended to evoke nostalgia for family dishes and traditions while helping people to feel resilient, more self-sufficient and in-control during a global health crisis.

Food, Nostalgia, and Resilience

Scholars broadly define nostalgia as a “yearning for the past,” and a “fondness for tangible or intangible possessions and activities linked with the past” (Sierra and McQuitty 99). Often linked to identity creation, nostalgia sustains and recreates identities, whether someone lives an experience or learns about it, where participating in a story about an object also creates identification (Sierra and McQuitty 100). Nostalgia about food, then, presents an opportunity for connection. Although COVID-19 might have kept individuals hundreds of miles away from each other, even a neighboring household was out of reach during quarantine. Food offered an “essential connection with home” during the pandemic, just as it might

with diaspora (Mannur 27). Food also offers a type of “safe nostalgia,” whereby people find a way to initially celebrate shared memories and recognize shared components of an experience, temporarily putting aside troubling parts of history (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre). Celebration of a food offers a sense of connectivity, pride, or achievement, for example, helping people to cope and feel community membership. Lockdown presented this type of opportunity. Unable to physically connect or interact, shared positive memories or experiences with a food provided fodder for conversations, support, and encouragement. In short, food allows people to embrace parts of a common identity while recognizing individual, family, and community differences. Food opens up discursive space between people because it allows particular identity characteristics to be enacted. Although food provides common ground, it is important to understand food as a discourse that offers a framework, not a guarantee, of connection. Using food to rhetorically celebrate shared experiences risks “blending all food experiences into one experience and dropping out all of the historical struggles and inequalities connected with those foods” (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre 90). Indeed, as scholars note, public memory about a variety of topics, not just food, tends to favor one presentation over others.

Nostalgia Rhetoric. Despite the limitations of social media, engagement with COVID cooking served as a rhetorically symbolic and performative way of tapping into nostalgia and public memory to create a sense of community while in isolation. As one person tweeted, “Quarantine = lots of baking and cooking! Those are skills I learned from my grandma and my mom, but the most important part about it is to be able to share with friends and family. That’s what it’s all about” (@MlleLepa). Banana bread, for example, emerged as one of the most frequently searched online recipes and hashtags during the pandemic (Smith). The staple US American quick bread appeared during the Great Depression out of a necessity to salvage food and use simple ingredients. During the pandemic, people yearned for simpler times. Of course, it may seem strange to long for an era when America was so endangered, but perhaps the fact that the country emerged from the Depression – displayed resilience – is what many people tend to remember the most about that period. As one *Kitchn* author noted, “Baking banana bread feels like an easy-to-reach achievement in a time when we’re all feeling defeated” (Paley). Therefore, #pandemicbaking often featured banana bread, serving on Instagram as one of the phases of “isolation stages of grief” (@OfficialKat). Even *Teen Vogue* jumped on

the “gateway baking” trend, explaining, “Instead of a symbol for spiraling out, banana bread shows how we’re making the most of our circumstances” (Bergado).³

Others used nostalgia for family cooking to feel closer to family members or to build relationships and help others through food. As one poster explained on “Fatten the Curve” (FTC), a Charlotte, North Carolina, Facebook community started during the pandemic that gained international followers, food connects generations but also reaches out to others:

You see Dough and A Pan of Chicken and Dumplings. I see my 94 year old Grandmas Face and her Laughter and her Patience of her teaching me for years how to make HER grandmas chicken and dumplings from scratch. . . I made this batch for a friend whose family has covid 19 and I find it interesting how a meal can be healing in so many ways ! (FTC, “You see Dough”)

Beyond connecting the past to those in the present, many social media food discussions commented on feeling attached to their homes or their cultures through comforting family foods. A common Twitter theme focused on recreating family recipes. For example, one person wrote, “One thing about this year. If not for the pandemic, we wouldn’t have a virtual baking day making my great grandma’s apple streudel [sic] with my aunt in Colorado. #familymatters” (@robbieschneider). Frequently, platforms featured multicultural family connections, as in one Twitter user posting: “My mother would be so proud! Perfectly circular #Southeastasian #bread #chapatti. The perfect time to reconnect with ones roots #heritage #culture in #quarantine through food. Show me your breads and #cooking from around the world! #Covidkitchen @labcentral” (@ShaziaMir71). Instagrammers, too, celebrated their Taiwanese or Cantonese heritage through dishes they learned to make during quarantine, such as moon cakes or beef noodle soup. “Cooktok,” or using TikTok to share recipes and cooking techniques, also reflected these themes of nostalgia for family cultural traditions. One user posted a recipe and “how to” video for her “gramma’s” chorizo burritos, traditionally served for her family’s Easter breakfast. Interspersed with various family photos, she made more than 70 burritos, showing viewers ingredients and each step, exclaiming her intention to surprise family members with them by leaving the burritos on their doorsteps (@juliiafaiith).

³ This example was previously used in a posting on *InMediaRes* by Wendy Atkins-Sayre; <http://mediacommons.org/imr/content/baking-memories-during-pandemic>.

Another home cook noted that the cooking activities motivated by pandemic-induced nostalgia moved beyond merely recreating recipes and into a more permanent outcome:

I landed on the idea of writing a cookbook filled with recipes that remind me of my hometown of Chicago, of my family, of happier and simpler times. I grabbed paper and literally started to handwrite the book beginning with Mandelbrot. As I was testing the recipe, it dawned on me that every Ashkenazi Jewish family in America has their own version of this recipe. So, I thought, why not do a series...? (Wojcik)

In some cases, that permanency came in the form of writings, but in others, it was a commitment to long-term behavior changes involving food. As one person tweeted, “The fact that we’re all baking like crazy during quarantine demonstrates our dissatisfaction w/the industrial food system. We don’t want to be fed. We want to hunt...bake, grow, make!” (@reectums). Another reflected that cooking more was positively changing her life: “One thing that has changed for me during quarantine is I’ve actually started enjoying life again; been cooking/baking daily, spending more time with my family” (@AnnaKhoda1). Similarly, Instagram’s Black Food Fridays, started in 2020, encouraged followers to be intentional about their food purchases, featuring Black food businesses each week along with culinary history. Although potentially fleeting, the commitment to food-related lifestyle changes beyond the pandemic was notable.

Ironically, even nostalgia for the early pandemic days appeared, primarily posted by those who were able to stay home and participate in a kind of homesteading environment. As one Twitter user said, “I have occasional nostalgia pangs for those innocent early pandemic quarantine days where folks were just like doing puzzles and baking bread” (@finishingahat). Others noted the difference between the novelty of quarantine in the early days versus the grinding repetition that the pandemic brought: “I miss the early days of quarantine when I was feeling creative and hopeful and spent my time baking and crafting and playing guitar. Now I’m just tired. So tired” (@LibrarianPunk). Although many did not have the opportunity to enjoy COVID cooking, for those who were able, the simplicity of the experience was frequently mentioned.

Resilience Rhetoric

Although resiliency rhetoric is increasingly seen throughout contemporary discourse in general, the pandemic saw its frequent connection to people's practices surrounding food. Virtual baking classes or happy hour zooms allowed friends and family to come together, often over a shared, entertaining task, fostering feelings of control, responsibility, and resilience. Resilience is the capacity to spring back from a setback, to recover, or to withstand adversity. The idea of resilience is generally read as a constructive attribute, although it can also be understood as reinforcing a community's negative qualities. Stemming from the Latin *resilire* (to "leap back"), resilience refers to withstanding or recovering from adversity, being strong in the face of threats, responding to challenges with "stoicism," and "toughness," and often, a desire to build community strength to meet other challenges (Bean et al.; McMurry). Writing about the rhetoric of resilience, Jeffery Kurtz explains that discourses centered on this theme provide a framework "from which we might collectively create a kind of fortitude, the realization of a rhetorical imagination with which to overcome these challenges and obstacles that otherwise will bury us where we stand" (719). Nicholas Paliewicz adds to that description, explaining that "resilience has emerged as a rhetorical structure of feeling capable of psychologically uplifting subjects by extracting rays of hope and optimism from dark hours," perhaps even mending "psychological wounds" (3). Because the pandemic left so many people feeling helpless – unable to even leave their homes to find comfort from family and friends or to provide support for those directly affected by COVID-19 – focusing on the positive elements of social distancing provided a balm while also cultivating feelings of control.

For example, many approached the idea of cooking or baking during the pandemic as providing a much-needed break from concentrating on everything that was falling apart at the time. Food preparation served as a welcomed distraction. As Sarah Ostiguy explained on TikTok, "baking is great to distract yourself because it requires a lot of concentration," as she happily bakes cookies, still reminding viewers "but remember it's ok not to be ok all of the time" (@sarah_ostiguy). In fact, TikTok's many CookTok videos provided humorous examples of this theme. They often reused bits of popular culture to offer commentary on their quarantine experiences. One series of posts featured the phrase/recording "You ok there Olaf?" from the movie *Frozen*, as people stress bake while miming Olaf's response, "Oh yeah, we're calling this controlling what you can when things feel out of control."

Some CookTok users also participated in a popular “IDGAF” dance/baking video challenge that pushed back against the idea that COVID baking would make them “fat,” instead choosing to embrace the entertainment that baking combined with social media provides. One young man dressed in a frilly apron danced into the frame holding a tray of blondies, with the IDGAF music and lyrics playing in the background, while another danced into the frame holding a cake, captions reading, “When mom says, ‘stop baking, you’re gonna get us all fat’ and “#can’tstop,won’tstop,” and “#quarantine” (@richardspitzz).

Another social media theme featured baking and cooking as community care. As one person explained, cooking provided a way to connect with their communities despite quarantine rules: “Last week I was troubled when I couldn’t give a colleague a hug I thought she needed. Figured out that a homemade loaf of banana bread expresses the same sentiment. #PandemicBaking” (@LadyScorcher). Sometimes these expressions reflected sadness as people used food to stand-in for human connection. As one aunt wrote,

I planned to take my niece and nephew to New York city for the first time this year. We were going to see Beetle Juice, eat NY bagels [...] our airline points are on hold while we wait for the world to right itself, but I can sneak up to the porch on Christmas Eve and leave Esse Bagels, flown in from NYC, for them to find. (FTC, “I planned to take my niece”).

Despite their difficulties and grief, people became creative in continuing to rely on cooking to connect while in challenging circumstances, “It’s family reunion food SUNDAY and although we cannot gather this year James and I are packing up food and making deliveries! Missing all of the cousins today and this deep connection to my Mother and Grandmother! #keeptrack #humanitykindness” (FTC, “It’s Family”). Although sharing and talking about food could not replace human interaction, it is noteworthy rhetorically that it became a performative way to express this need. Posters substituted hugs and gatherings with foods that offered a tactile way to remain connected with each other. Food’s ability to symbolize memories or particular people seemed especially important in the effort to remain resilient during the crisis.

For others, the focus was on shifting a mindset of helplessness to feeling more in control, displaying innovativeness in cooking in the face of limitations on supplies and suppliers. As one person exclaimed, “This whole quarantine baking and herb garden thing I’ve got going on is really building up my ego. Like I can just...make things. From ingredients. I can just grow things. With seeds, soil, and

water. WHY does this feel so POWERFUL?" (@EhWhit). Others used what they had on hand to offer their own spin on old recipes: "Old church cookbook or Pillsbury casserole? Can't recall. But combined turkey chili and beans, chopped turkey hot dogs, cheddar and cut biscuits brushed with garlic and parsley butter, along with some creamed farmer's market corn equals a Solid Tuesday Night Yum. And plenty left over to freeze" (FTC, "Old church cookbook"). Online communities frequently shared ideas for "making do" with what was on hand, offering recipe substitution ideas or providing tips such as "10 packets of soy sauce = 1/3 cup. #quarantinecooking" (@BethBinDC). The idea of survival in the face of adversity was a driving force online and was often tinged with humor or wry acceptance, as in, "part of me is kind of glad I get to live through this historic Covid-19 pandemic...I imagine a toothless wrinkly me telling my great grandkids fierce stories of survival with masks, Netflix, and baking banana bread" (@Trixie75). These online food communities create a kind of "collective intelligence," as described by Henry Jenkins (drawing on Pierre Lévy). "None of us can know everything," Jenkins argues, but "each of us knows something; and we can put the pieces together if we pool our resources and combine our skills" (4). Using the collective knowledge, these communities found ways to remain resilient.

The need to rely on different ingredients also connected some people to their communities' pasts in both painful and celebratory ways. The pandemic offered some cooks the chance to reevaluate ingredients, finding joy rather than derision in connecting with family traditions and practices. Southerners' use of ingredients like Bisquick, for example, are sometimes mocked in culinary circles, but using these "cheap," "inferior," or "inauthentic" items during the pandemic showed people that they could be resilient while creating something delicious. The ability to create these satisfying dishes provided a sense of "making do with what you have" and provided creative ways to connect with family, past and present. Pandemic home cooking became a "powerful vessel that Americans fill with meaning because it represents both the continuity of the past and adaptability of the present" (Dutch). And yet, some struggled with food symbolizing difficult relationships, family histories, or inequality. One person, for instance, tweeted about how food memories made her sad, "We watched a video of my grandma making her signature cookies...video was over an hour long I felt like we were baking with her ☺" (@FabiolaLuevanos). Others noted the preponderance of whiteness and race in dominating COVID cooking trends, asking, "Remember when the quarantine

started and white people instinctively and collectively started baking their own bread?” (@michaelquinones).

Cautions with Nostalgia and Resilience Rhetoric

The rhetorical force of nostalgia and resilience during times of turmoil are apparent from these examples of online community discourse, with many social media users indicating their role in coping during the pandemic. At the same time, each has limitations, particularly in generalizing experience in ways that popular culture then solidifies. In waxing nostalgic, for example, we often favor one story over others and overlook negative experiences, associations, and histories. If the majority of COVID cooking social media posts cultivate feelings of nostalgia by offering memories of satisfying, comforting, familiar dishes, they may omit the difficult legacies they evoke for others. Baking pound cake may be a happy experience for some but serve as a reminder of low wage labor or unequal power relations for others. In this way, nostalgia may mask tensions and hierarchies, offering a false sense of unity (Von Burg and Johnson). As Mannur explains, this yearning for home “can elicit nostalgia for things that never were – nostalgia for a past blind in some ways to the structural inequities and forms of difference that might structure the past” (32).

For example, as Bruckner, Cajic, and Bauhardt point out in their study of food practices during the pandemic, the availability of time, as well as money, often dictated whether people could participate in forms of cooking nostalgia (290). Social media users frequently echoed these concerns. As one tweet read, “I’m an essential worker and don’t have the option of working from home and every day I go into work is a mixture of worry that the [sic] could be the way I’m exposed to COVID and also like I’m missing out because I’m not baking bread like the rest of the internet” (@emmymik). Another commented on the unending job of cooking that the pandemic created: “Having a love hate relationship with cooking during quarantine. Love experimenting with new recipes, and at the same time so TIRED of cooking three meals a day!” (@maddiebrightman).

Gender, too, played an important role, with women more frequently taking on a home-maker role. Some nostalgic paradigms about food are dependent on conservative notions about gender and heterosexual, nuclear families, where nostalgic food pining can be romantic. Indeed, scholarship about the COVID-19 pandemic and cooking already points to the danger in the popular gendered

romanticized narrative overtaking memories that reflect a more realistic assessment of how people managed their cooking and shopping needs. Bruckner, Cajic, and Bauhardt write, for example, that women carried the pressure of responsibility and overwork related to food practices during the pandemic, tasked with accessing food, performing extra labor surrounding food tasks, and carrying increased mental loads regarding meal planning (289). Forums devoted to project baking or weekend cooking often featured elaborate ingredients and labor-intensive practices that replicated these gendered forms of social capital and authority, reinforcing gender inequality. Still, posters pushed back against gendered nostalgia. One woman on TikTok posted a video of herself seated in a car with the phrase ‘What the Hell?!’ playing on repeat, commenting: “When you are in quarantine and realize your family actually eats 23 meals a day/644 dishes a week/2153 more complaints a week/And you have been doing this for a year now” flashed across her dejected face (@sunezy).

COVID cooking forums also privileged whiteness, with some nostalgic musings equating white food culture with US American food culture and overlooking how a variety of communities reconsidered food during the pandemic. This tendency for popular culture to focus on white perspectives is, of course, evident in many forms of art and entertainment (King; Poirot and Watson). The process of white dominance over cultural narratives is evident in discussions about food, too. Lily Kelting argues that food nostalgia operates as a site of erasure, explaining that the New Southern Food Movement, with its celebration of heritage foods and prodigal chefs, creates an “antihistorical fantasy past,” that ignores the South’s racial trauma and African-American labor to posit a pleasurable, more egalitarian future (362). As Wallach points out, America’s white supremacist system is partially constructed through thinking about food in different racialized ways. Often, “classic Americana” is construed as white and prized over other forms. Swapping recipes online through the use of hashtags cultivated nostalgia for “simpler times” that connected some people in virtual environments, but often overlooked how cooking was painful and exclusionary for non-white communities. One person, pointing out the irony of bemoaning cooking at home, wrote, “white people be like ‘ugh yeah i’ve been cooking sooo much for myself during quarantine’ and then proceed to make a box of Annie’s Homegrown Shells & White Cheddar Macaroni & Cheese” (@pamelaofhoney). The “feel good” COVID cooking online experience thus sometimes had a limited audience, but some users sought to broaden its appeal to more audiences, with Instagram platforms such as

@BlackFoodFridays and @TabithaBrown offering educational, humorous, and comforting posts about the importance of African Americans in US American food culture.

In this way, momentarily “safe” nostalgic encounters did not always remain shallow, exclusionary, or introductory, and were sometimes built into more thoughtful, meaningful interactions. Some posters engaged their positive memories of prized foods to uncover and highlight difficult or overlooked histories for others, recognizing the painful memories that might be associated with a dish while still finding room to connect over its particular qualities. Food serves as an entry point to learn about others in an accessible way, opening up important conversations (Stokes and Atkins-Sayre). Several posts on the Facebook group “Fatten the Curve,” for example, highlighted particular ingredients or engaged with dishes in culturally meaningful ways, pointing out overlooked histories or similarities in preparation among different communities. Posting a link to a *New York Times* article about the importance of okra in Gullah Geechee South Carolina culture, one poster remarks that she got a history lesson and a new soup recipe to “elevate (at least my grandmother’s) stewed okra and tomatoes” (FTC, “A history lesson”). On the historically African American Juneteenth holiday, the administrator posted an article about “red drink,” and the significance of the color red at Black American Juneteenth family celebrations. Readers responded with comments ranging from “thank you for sharing this link – very interesting!” to continuing the conversation in a more reflective manner. Other users also directed members to additional content that would “help diversify our cooking,” linking to articles about Netflix’s “High on the Hog” documentary about Black cooking, local newspaper series about Black cuisine, and offering histories of ingredients used to create traditional Southern meals on New Year’s Day. Similarly, on Instagram’s @BlackFoodFridays, K.J. Kearney offered a series of @BlackFoodFacts, teaching viewers about Nearest Green, a Black man who taught Jack Daniels to make whiskey, or about the connection between slavery and Haiti’s sugar empire. Although some platforms and channels seemed to invite more diverse memberships than others, engagement with them, in terms of comments and likes, seemed varied and enthusiastic.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that many people cooked and baked their way through the pandemic. The role that the activity played in shaping people's experiences and in the way that the popular culture phenomenon of COVID cooking more generally shaped mediated discussions about the pandemic is still being assessed. That is especially true because, as we write this essay, we are approaching year three of the pandemic with no end in sight. As we enter what many public health experts warn will be the "dark winter" of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, discussions about food continue to play a central role in how we experience the crisis, from serving as mental health activities to catalyzing changes in how we cook in general. Indeed, survey data suggests that people will continue to cook more at home after the pandemic, with data about how pandemic cooking will affect us continuing to emerge (Brasted). Although every national or international crisis invites reactions about how society will change, the interest in engaging about cooking during COVID-19 is rhetorically significant, helping people to cope while simultaneously influencing popular US American cooking culture as a whole.

Perhaps one of the more significant messages from the pandemic was our understanding of the role of online communities in providing support, comfort, care, and community through food. This cultural moment will be marked with memories of baked goods, experimental cooking, and expanded homesteading skills, shared with friends, families, and strangers through pictures, stories, and videos. As one online poster wrote,

Where does a Facebook group devoted to community and cooking during these times fit into all this, and why does it matter at all? I'll tell you. Despite all the crap that social media can funnel into the collective conversation, the ability to meet friends, and friends of friends, and complete strangers in a welcoming place to cook and commiserate has been a small saving grace.

At least for me. (FTC, "2020 was the worst")

Through themes of nostalgia and resilience, these online communities created a feeling of closeness despite distance, brought many back to their cultural roots, changed some lives for the better, and showed how innovative people can be in times marked by stress and limitation. Online COVID cooking forums often noted the difficulty of isolation, but food, in particular, seemed to play an important role in bridging the gaps between people. From organizing porch drop offs, stimulating

conversation, or serving as commiseration, it was food that often symbolized connection.

The tendency for online food communities to focus on nostalgia and resilience during the pandemic also influences broader popular food culture. The sheer volume of people commenting on recipes, offering reviews of meal services and take out, and simply trying new things or learning to cook more during the COVID-19 pandemic makes food culture less elitist, more accessible, and more reflective of different cultures. Online culture in general has shifted perceptions of expertise, invited more to participate, and offered new forms of expression in terms of platforms. Working together, online communicators create a collective intelligence that challenges “traditional assumptions about expertise” (Jenkins 52). This trend is particularly observable in online COVID food forums. Other users challenged the “chef centric” characteristics of food culture, with home cooks using short TikToks to teach others and challenging the idea that they needed special ingredients to succeed. Brand new cooks and chefs alike engaged with COVID cooking and food culture on social media, with media coverage of the phenomenon reinforcing this interest, gradually attracting more people into the cultural conversation about food.

Still, the intense interest in food during the pandemic may have broadened access to food culture in some ways, but firmly policed its borders in others. Stories featured in news articles and on social media primarily featured individuals happily embracing the idea of slowing down and going back to the basics, excluding a large swath of our communities. People who never stayed home from work or who were out of work and without income for the lifestyle, those who had no positive memories of the kind of lifestyle celebrated in the discussions, and those who were too sick or tired or worried or grieving to participate in that world found no solace in these pandemic activities. Similarly, in our research, the overall media characterization of pandemic cooking tended to be white, female, and affluent despite vibrant social media multicultural engagement. White women continued to be the featured (home) cooks, not Black chefs, Latinx food bloggers, or Indigenous food activists, who were also working to use food to support their communities during the pandemic. All are limited by the typical popular culture representation of COVID cooking. In at least these two ways, the COVID cooking phenomenon put the borders of communities into stark relief.

In addition, the attention on particular types of food culture risks eclipsing other stories, sedimenting popular culture surrounding the pandemic in limiting ways. If

the preponderance of stories showcased white, female, plucky cooks happily making do, even if frustrated or lonely, the tragedy of the pandemic is dulled, softening the edges of its lessons. Social media posts were far less concerned with how people suffered increased food insecurity during the pandemic, for example, or how some communities' food traditions were appropriated by others. Posts about connecting with loved ones or new friends online through food also becomes its own nostalgia, where we focus on memories of cooking our way through the pandemic rather than on the great suffering the virus caused. And, of course, attention to food is limited in itself as a coping mechanism; as one person cautioned on Twitter, "How amazing would it be to see white people put as much energy and intent into being anti-racist as they did into baking quarantine sourdough?" (@WalshYourself). Indeed, culturally-specific online cooking content offers background into traditions and prized recipes, but, as Black Food Fridays does, more outlets might suggest tangible ways for readers to support communities beyond cooking.

Ultimately, then, our research illustrates that the COVID cooking phenomenon fulfilled a much-needed coping function but is incomplete. It offered an outlet for connection and creativity for some through its focus on nostalgia and resilience. It helped broaden access to food culture for new audiences through new platforms and different types of conversations. Overall, though, we needed to learn more about the variety of ways food fueled our collective need to carry on during a difficult time and helped to build a more resilient community as a whole, not just for white women dropping off sourdough starters to their friends. COVID cooking social media engagement offered moments of joy, humor, education, and hope. The reach of food popular culture is broad, however, sending out echoes of a familiar narrative. We risk forgetting many important stories about pandemic survival in favor of those only featuring the nostalgic cocoon of a warm, comforting, COVID kitchen.

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