

**AMST 372:
AMERICAN
FOOD**

Spring 2008

Instructor: Warren Belasco

Office: Fine Arts 459

Office Hours: Tues - Thur 4-5 & by appointment

Office Phone: 410-455-2106 or 2154

Home Phone: 202-291-4756 (before 10PM)

Email: belasco@umbc.edu

Course Web Page: <http://blackboard.umbc.edu>

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are."-- Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826)

"For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior."-- Roland Barthes (1961)

"History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby we thrive; it knows the names of the King's bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. That is the way of human folly."-- Jean Henry Fabre (1825-1915)

"Why did the Mediterranean peoples cease to dominate Europe? What led Europeans subsequently to spread all over the globe in post-Renaissance times? The starting point for the European expansion out of the Mediterranean and the Atlantic continental shelf had nothing to do with, say, religion or the rise of capitalism--but it had a great deal to do with pepper. The Americas were discovered as a byproduct in the search for pepper."-- Henry Hobhouse, Seeds of Change (1985)

"The history of American food is the history of the destruction of its taste."--John and Karen Hess, The Taste of America (1977)

"We may find in the long run that tinned food is a deadlier weapon than the machine gun."-- George Orwell (1937)

"To eat the typical American diet is to participate in the biggest experiment in human nutrition ever conducted."--Frances Moore Lappe, Diet for a Small Planet (1982)

Cholesterol is poisonous
So never ever eat it.
Sugar, too, may murder you,
There's no way to beat it.
And fatty food may do you in,
Be certain to avoid it.
Some food was rich in vitamin,
But processing destroyed it.
So let your life be ordered
By each "documented" fact.
And die of malnutrition,
But with arteries intact.

-- David Kritchevsky, biochemist (1956)

"What is food to one man may be fierce poison to others."-- Lucretius (99-55 BC)

"Forget the pig as an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season is like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods."-- J. Byrnes, Hog Farm Management (1976)

"We do it all for you."--famous corporate motto

"Someone out there is growing you. Someone is going to produce and subsequently manipulate the materials out of which each of us is made. Are people really prepared to trust that responsibility to Philip Morris [the nation's largest food company]?"--Joan Dye Gussow, Chicken Little, Tomato Sauce, and Agriculture (1991)

"We taste the spices of Arabia yet never feel the scorching sun which brings them forth."

-- Report of the East India Company (1701)

Confused? Bemused? Fed up? (Pardon the pun.) Good! Now you're ready to study food--the first of the essentials of life, our biggest industry, our most frequently indulged pleasure, and also the object of major anxiety, for food may be the single most important cause of disease and death.

But why, you ask, in an American Studies course? Doesn't the study of food more properly belong in those distant places where people specialize in nutrition, agriculture, engineering (yes, especially chemical engineering), and marketing? "No," I reply. It's precisely because all those specialists have long dominated the study of food that we generalists--ordinary people with a dash of background here, a smattering of experience there--need to take a look, too. The food supply belongs to us all. And we in American Studies may be especially well equipped to look at it because we are, by nature, interdisciplinary. We do not respect departmental or institutional barriers. True, we may not understand all the biochemistry involved in digestion, but we can speculate about why certain foods "taste good" at particular times and to particular people. We may not understand why one pesticide works better on mites than another, but we can still ask why farm workers' children seem especially cancer-prone. We may not understand how genetic engineering works, but we still can wonder whether it is necessary in the first place.

Besides being a bit rude to the "experts" and specialists, we in American Studies are well positioned to study food as a system, because we are accustomed to thinking about matters political, historical, economic, socio-cultural, and scientific all at once. Here are some of the questions we will be pondering this term:

-- **Food and Identity:** If we are what we eat, what are we? What do our meals reveal about personality, ethnicity, gender roles, sexuality, family vitality, sub-cultural loyalties, political commitments? In what ways are our meals the source of considerable pleasure (e.g., ritual feasts) and dread (e.g., concerns about weight and hunger)?

-- **The Morality and Ecology of Fast Food:** When we down a Big Mac, what exactly are we doing? Does a meat-centered diet contribute to worldwide environmental problems, e.g. energy shortages, pollution, tropical deforestation, the greenhouse effect, ozone depletion? Do farm animals have rights? Is it sexist to eat meat? Do fast food workers get a fair shake?

-- **Food and Health:** Why *are* we Americans so fat? We have the cheapest, most abundant food supply on earth, yet what we eat is killing us. And amidst plenty, many go hungry. What's going on?

-- **The Corporate Cuisine:** Where does our food come from? What is happening to the family farmer? Who picks our vegetables? Are we being poisoned by pesticides? How safe is Safeway? How on earth did the same company (Philip Morris) that sells Marlboro cigarettes and Miller Lite wind up owning Velveeta and Grape Nuts?

-- **The Future:** What will our grandchildren be eating in the year 2058? Who will control our food supply? Will there be enough food for 10-15 billion people? Will hunger increase? Is the party over? Is corporate biotechnology our only hope? Are there sustainable, low-tech

alternatives?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

To take this course you'll need to:

1. Read the syllabus very carefully and certify that you have done so by signing the "Contract" attached at the end. It's your job to ask about course requirements and material you don't understand. If you find any of these requirements to be onerous or repugnant, you should not enroll in this course, which is a pure elective that no one is obligated to take.

2. Read all books, articles, web pages, and handouts slowly and carefully. Unless you've read the material, you'll have nothing to talk or write about.

3. Attend all classes. Your physical and mental attendance is needed and expected. For spirited discussion we'll need your active attention and participation. Also, we will be covering a lot of material that can not be found in the readings. I do take attendance every day, as I believe that it is impossible to learn this stuff without coming to class. I know some of you may resent this requirement, and I respect your views on this issue. But after much teaching experience, I've found that most of us do need clear rules to keep us on track--especially in the spring. I'll allow you **3 absences** for an A or B, **4** for a C or D. If you miss more than that I will lower your course grade one full letter. Disruptive late arrivals or early departures may count as $\frac{1}{2}$ of an absence. If you are experiencing a personal crisis and must miss more classes, please let me know **at that time** (not afterwards). It is possible to work off up to **two** extra absences by doing one extra exercise (see #5 below) or by earning 10 extra participation points (#4 below) for *each* extra absence.

4. Participate in class discussions. For this seminar-style class to succeed, everyone must take an active role in class discussions. Participation does count in your grade. I will keep track of **participation points**. (See page 6 for how participation contributes to your final grade.) To earn an A or B you must have at least 15 of your points by April 10. There are six ways to earn participation points in this class:

a. Make comments in class. These comments may consist of a good question, a relevant answer, a useful reaction to what someone else says in class, or an observation from your written exercises (see #5 below). While you are welcome to speak as much as you'd like in class, you may earn no more than *one* point per class, unless you bring food (see 4c below). This is to encourage you to speak in *several* classes. I do not evaluate what you say, but your comments must be relevant to what we're discussing in class.

b. Write to the Discussion Board. I have established a discussion list on Blackboard specifically for this course. You will receive *two* participation points for each 150-word contribution. Everyone must post at least 5 contributions (10 points). Of these, at least 3 postings (= 6 points) must be earned by evaluating food-related websites. Specific instructions for postings are spelled out on the Discussion Board page. See also page 7 below.

c. Bring an *appropriate* food to class. It really helps to *taste* food while *talking* about it. You will receive *four* participation points every time you bring a food sample that is *relevant to the assigned topic* for the week. Food needs to be *prepared* in some way. Chips out of the bag do not count. Be prepared to discuss your sample. And please bring enough to give everyone a taste.

d. Evaluate other students' exercises (See #5 below). Every time you evaluate another student's exercise fairly and helpfully, you'll receive *two* participation points. (On the other hand, if you do a lousy job of evaluation, you will *lose* five points.)

e. Visit the Writing Center to discuss your papers. Each visit = 3 points.

f. Group Work: There will be several times when we will divide up for small group discussions and brainstorming = 2 points per meeting

You can make up extra absences with extra participation: 10 extra points = 1 absence.

5. Write exercises. These exercises will require you to think carefully and sensitively about food. In each case you will be asked to make some observations, conduct interviews, and/or reflect on an issue or reading. Exercises must be handed in on time, except for one (your choice), which may be submitted *one class late* (except for #7, which must be on time if you want the revision option). Papers need to be neatly typed, doublespaced, and grammatically sound. You must submit each exercise to Turnitin (on Blackboard). Exercises will be read first by your classmates. Evaluation criteria will be spelled out on each exercise. Student readers must return the exercise by the *next class* session so that I will have time to read it, too. If your reader thinks that you have fulfilled the stated criteria, s/he will mark it "Good." Then I will evaluate it. If I decide it is "Not Good" you may revise **within 7 days** of the day it was returned to you. ***You may rewrite only if your first draft was substantially complete. This means you need to answer all the questions the first time.*** I will serve as a court of appeals and read all rewrites as well. Also, for your revision to count, you must ***mark all the changes*** on the new draft and hand in the original draft as well. If your exercise is still not "good" after one revision, you must ***see me in my office*** before attempting another draft.

To protect your privacy you will have a number (on your contract) known only to you and me. Use only this number when you are submitting your exercise or when you are reading someone else's exercise.

This system works well *if* readers take their responsibilities seriously. Readers who do a good job earn 2 participation points. Readers who fail to read carefully or to answer all evaluation questions will lose 5 points for each poorly evaluated exercise.

The complete assignment for each exercise will be distributed well in advance, but here are the due dates and topics. Depending on the grade you want, **choose 4 or 5 of the following 7 options**. Everyone **MUST** submit #1 and 7.

	exercise #	1 due 2/12	Food memoirs [required]
<u>Calf</u>	2 due 2/21		Reaction to <u>Portrait of a Burger as a Young</u>
	3 due 3/4		<u>Fast Food Nation</u>
	4 due 4/1		<u>Mindless Eating</u>
	5 due 4/22		Food marketing
	6 due 5/1		Hunger
	7 due 5/8		A Sustainable Feast [required]

While you have to submit at least 5 exercises to receive an A or B for the course, 4 for a C or D, (see below), you may do more to work off absences beyond those allowed: one "Good" exercise per additional absence. Extra exercises need to be in by 5/13.

GRADING SYSTEM

So how do all these assignments add up? To do well here you must work hard, but since you can revise exercises, your final grade is basically in your own hands:

To earn an A in this course you must:

Complete 5 "Good" exercises.

Miss no more than 3 classes (or do makeup work).

Earn 40 participation points (at least 15 pts by April 10).

To earn a B in this course you must:

Submit 5 exercises, 4 of which must be "Good."

Miss no more than 3 classes (or do makeup work).

Earn 30 participation points (at least 15 pts by April 10).

To earn a C in this course, you must:

Submit 4 exercises, 3 of which must be "Good."

Miss no more than 4 classes (or do makeup work).

Earn 20 participation points.

To earn a D or to "pass" if you are taking the course pass/fail:

Submit 4 exercises, 3 of which must be "Good."

Miss no more than 4 classes (or do makeup work).

Earn 16 participation points.

NOTE: While you must submit exercises 1 and 7, they do not necessarily have to be "Good"--as long as you do other "Good" exercises that add up to the number needed for the grade you want--e.g. 5 Good for an A, 4 Good for a B, etc. *Huh?* See me if you are confused about this.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Before writing exercises, make sure you familiarize yourself with University rules concerning plagiarism (the theft of someone else's work). In all exercises you **must always** identify your sources in a standard citation format (e.g. Chicago, MLA, APA). It is best to avoid quotations, but if on some *rare* occasion you do quote, give exact page numbers. Close paraphrases can also get you into trouble. Even if you borrow just a few words from another work without quotation marks and citation, that's plagiarism. The safest and most honest course, therefore, is to *use your own words*. You learn more that way, too. To protect against plagiarism, I ask you to run every exercise through Turnitin – accessible at the bottom of each assignment on Blackboard. Plagiarism is always reported to the appropriate University authorities and is punished by an automatic F on the assignment. Particularly egregious cases may result in failure of the course. (For rules, guidelines, and tips, go to <http://www.umbc.edu/integrity/>)

DISCUSSION BOARD

The purpose of this feature is to give you an informal way to discuss course issues, ideas and materials. This is also a way to earn "participation points" – 2 points per 150-word contribution. To contribute go to “Discussion Board” on Blackboard and start writing! You may start your own thread, reply to an existing thread, or, in the separate section, evaluate a food-related website. This is an unmoderated discussion, meaning that whatever you post will be sent automatically to all, so do be discrete, respectful, and thoughtful. Discussion is supposed to be informal and accessible, but the same rules of etiquette found in the classroom should apply here, too. Private concerns should be addressed to me: belasco@umbc.edu

To receive 2 participation points, your message or reply must be at least 150 words long. While grammar and spelling don't have to be perfect, try to write well. **To receive credit, be sure to sign your messages!** And to encourage you to participate throughout the term (rather than saving up all your messages until the last week of classes), you may earn no more than 4 email pts a day.

COURSE READINGS

You can buy the following required books in the UMBC bookstore:

Arlene Avakian, *Through the Kitchen Window* -- an elegant collection of memoirs that show how we can find much social significance in what, how, and where we eat.

Peter Lovenheim, *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf* – a reporter adopts a steer as a way to find out how our meat gets from field to table.

Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation* – best selling expose of our most famous industry, now a major motion picture in a theater near you

Brian Wansink, *Mindless Eating* – an astonishing research report that reveals how little self-control we actually have when it comes to eating. No wonder we're so fat!

Brian Halweil, *Eat Here: Reclaiming Homegrown Pleasures in a Global Supermarket* – an argument for a regional, organic, sustainable food system.

In addition, there are many handouts and Web readings & videos (see Course Documents and External Links on our Blackboard site.) These are also required.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Here is the general outline. There's a lot to read, so do keep up.

Readings include required books (listed by author), articles on Blackboard (listed by Course Document Folder #), and external links on Blackboard (grouped by Links Folder #).

Links to videos and radio shows are marked with * on Blackboard.

1/29 Introduction

1/31 to 2/14 Food and Identity

READ Avakian + Course Docs 1-2 + Links Folders 1-2

Exercise 1 due 2/12

2/19 to 3/4 Meat:
Moral, Medical, and
Ecological Concerns

READ Lovenheim + Schlosser + Course Docs 3-7 + Links Folder 3

Exercise 2 due 2/21. Exercise 3 due 3/4

3/6 to 3/13 Working on the Food Chain

READ Schlosser + Course Docs 8 + Links Folder 4

3/18 - 3/20 No Classes (Spring Break)

3/25 to 4/1 Obesity

READ Wansink + Course Docs 9-13 + Links Folder 5-6

Exercise 4 due 4/1

4/3 to 4/22 Corporate Cuisine

READ Course Docs 14 + Links Folder 6

Exercise 5 Due 4/22

4/24 to 5/1 Hunger & Food Insecurity

READ Course Docs 9 + Links Folder 7

Exercise 6 due 5/1

5/6 to 5/8 The Future?

READ Halweil + Course Docs 14-16 + Links Folders 8-9

Exercise 7 due 5/8 (can't be late if you want to revise)

5/13 Last Meal

Extra makeup exercises due 5/13

MY GRADES: Use this page to keep track of your various grades and points.

Exercises (* = required) **Absences**

1.*

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.*

makeups (for up to 2 extra absences)

Participation (list dates) – *Earn at least 15 by April 10!*

Comments in class (1 pt each class):

Brought Food (4 pts): Group Work (2 pts):

Discussion List (2 pts) (minimum of 10 pts, 6 of which must be website evaluations):

Evaluated Other Exercises (2 pts): Visited Writing Center (3 pts):