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Conclusion: Foodie Continuity, Change, and Moral Ambiguity
As we write the preface to the second edition of *Foodies*, the United States economy is still struggling to grow its way out of an economic recession. Most disturbingly, income inequality is in a state unparalleled since the 1920s (Alvaredo et al., 2013). What is the state, or relevance, of the “foodie lifestyle” in these times? When we wrote the first edition in 2009, the financial crisis had just happened, and it was not surprising that the question was posed of whether it was the right moment to write a book about something as frivolous as food, and even worse, *foodies*—people who obsess about hand-crafting the perfect meatball and then uploading a meatball photo to their blog. Given that tough financial times have persisted or worsened for the least well-off groups in American society, is now the right time for a second edition about foodies?

There are at least of couple of reasons why we think food is not only still relevant as a sociological topic, but vital. First, as we saw right after the start of the financial crisis, foodies and a broad interest in food have not gone away. Instead, some consumers see food as an affordable luxury, something that can be indulged in even when bigger ticket items, like luxury cars and real estate, are priced out of reach. Tellingly, Whole Foods Market stock prices have increased tremendously, from lows of $4/share in 2008 to $40/share at the time of this writing. In 2013 the chain even opened a store in Detroit—just weeks before the city filed for bankruptcy protection. As a cultural phenomenon, foodie discourse is as lively and dynamic and salient as ever. In this revision, we have updated our analysis of foodie discourse with more recent food writing including food blogs. Since we started this research, food blogs have grown tremendously as a cultural phenomenon. Prominent food bloggers have emerged as major sources of influence in the larger culinary field, publishing best-selling cookbooks and gaining a multi-media presence. The food blogosphere is only
one part of the larger culinary field, but its vibrancy suggests that food remains a key way people constitute their identity, channel creativity, and form social connections.

Second, rather than distract us from the topic of inequality, we would argue that the study of food culture can help us better understand the complexity of inequality, and how it is socially reproduced on a day-to-day basis. A study of foodie discourse provides a deep and rich understanding of the ways cultural consumption is implicated in the construction of group boundaries that can reproduce and reinforce social inequality. One type of inequality that we neglected in the first edition of this book is gender inequality. We realized the seriousness of this omission shortly after the publication of the first edition, and are happy to include a chapter on gender inequality in this second edition.

There are, of course, many ways that masculinity is instantiated through foodie culture. Think of the masculine bravado of food competitions like Iron Chef, or the toughness of professional chef culture, or the one-upmanship and status associated with eating unusual kinds of foods, especially meats. At the same time foodie culture has key masculine elements, other parts of foodie culture are closely linked to dominant constructions of femininity. Preparing and serving food is still a key form of feminine carework linked to ideas of love, maternal responsibility, and health. Perhaps not surprisingly, women dominate the realm of food blogging, and continue to carry out the mainstay of everyday cooking and baking in home kitchens. In the chapter on food and gender, we explore some of the gendered tensions and inequalities that emerge in the everyday lives of foodies, and how the world of food blogging also displays these tensions. To be clear, there is no simple foodie binary of self-satisfying men, and pleasure-denying women. Female foodies may feel more responsible for caring for familial health than their male counterparts, but they also challenge long-standing norms about feminine self-sacrifice and the abnegation of culinary pleasure. As with the other chapters in this book, there is a tension between food’s democratizing potential, and its role reproducing and naturalizing social hierarchies.

In our personal lives, we continually observe the tension between the two stories we tell in this book about food’s role promoting greater democracy while naturalizing distinction. We have seen how knowledge of foodie phenomena like sous-vide cooking, “undiscovered” ethnic cuisines, and single-origin
chocolate can operate as a form of cultural capital, even in recessionary times. In the neighborhood where we live, a food journalist reported that “foodie children” are desirable accessories, and described parents who proudly boast that their children eat pig intestines at local Korean restaurants. We can personally attest that having a picky eater can be a source of social shame, while one gains status points parenting children who eat raw oysters and prefer high quality dark chocolate to cheap candy-bars. At the same time food serves as fuel generating cultural status, foodie culture valorizes foods outside of the traditional culinary canon eaten outside of formal dining rooms—foods like Vietnamese bánh mì, South Indian dhosas, and Hakka take-out. Not only is the foodie repertoire wide reaching and relatively multicultural, but we have also observed how food can mobilize social and environmental critique. We live in a city, Toronto, that is known not just for its fine dining and innovative chefs, but for its vibrant food activist scene and municipal food policy council. This city is home to various projects seeking to connect eaters with locally-grown, sustainably-produced, culturally-appropriate foods. In conditions of economic recession, these food projects take on increased importance, while conspicuous culinary consumption can appear excessive and grotesque. In tough times, food writing can be more sensitive to gastronomic excess, and more demotic—publishing comfort food recipes and travel articles about cheap eats in Paris and London (even though the criterion for affordable usually means over $100 for a meal).

When we began our research on food about a decade ago, we didn’t really consider ourselves foodies. Sure, we baked our own bread with a sourdough culture that we vigorously tended like a beloved pet. And yes, we have found ample inspiration in glossy food magazines like *Bon Appétit* and *Saveur,* and were deeply saddened by the shuttering of *Gourmet* in 2009. We have watched all seasons of *Top Chef,* as well as a good share of *Food Network* shows. After watching Bobby Flay’s show, *Throwdown,* we were thrilled—even touched—when friends flew home from Boston transporting six sticky buns from the winning bakery, *Flour,* and we later worked to recreate these sticky buns in our own kitchen. We have spent countless hours reading food blogs, and regularly turn to sites like Smitten Kitchen, *Food 52,* and Sprouted Kitchen to churn out everyday meals and desserts. We have long known the names of our city’s most acclaimed chefs, and read many of their reviews, even though the demands of having young children (and
means that we only eat their food on special occasions. While we feel familiar with our city’s high-end food establishments (even if we read about them more than we eat at them), we frequent an extensive roster of lower-cost eateries selling foods like bibimbap, lamb roti, sushi, and barbeque brisket. We try to eat organic and local foods as frequently as possible, but we are not above tucking into food court french fries, or using the occasional bribe of Cinnabon to obtain compliance in our children during a mall outing. We enjoy the challenge of learning to make time-consuming restaurant meals at home, but we fall back on homely staples like roast chicken, macaroni and cheese, and banana bread. Perhaps because both of us were raised in remote outposts where jello salads and hamburger helper were culinary mainstays, we are acutely conscious of how “fancy” food can mark you as a snob and an outsider. While we tend to reject many of the packaged foods from our childhood (e.g., a neighbor’s chocolate fudge made with Velveeta cheese), we love eating dishes prepared from rural community cookbooks—even though we know that a “sophisticated” palate provides ease and comfort in upscale settings.

Given our obvious affection for foods of various varieties and genres—high and low, fast and slow—doesn’t this make us foodies? The short answer is yes, it does. Like many of the foodies we spoke with, we feel personal discomfort with this label, especially since we know many people who are far more knowledgeable and committed to food than we are. Although we thought we were fairly well versed in foodie discourse, in revising the book, we became acutely aware of just how much one needs to know about food culture in order to stay current. El Bulli was widely regarded as one of the world’s top restaurant at the time of the first edition in 2009, but closed its doors in 2011. Food fashions have changed, and molecular gastronomy now seems passé. Food trends and celebrities come and go (Goodbye, Paula Deen. Goodbye, cronut.). Foodie discourse is knowledge intensive, and it takes a lot of effort to stay ahead of the curve, or even to stay current.

Even though we find it difficult to personally identify as cutting-edge foodies, we take a different position towards the term “foodie” as professional sociologists. As sociologists, we believe that the term “foodie” is useful for describing and conceptualizing the current ‘food-as-lifestyle’ zeitgeist. Our working definition of a foodie in this book is a person who devotes considerable time and energy to eating and learning about
good food, however ‘good food’ is defined. Although some people dislike the term and there has even been somewhat of a backlash against it, we take on the foodie label because it captures the dominant role food plays in so many of our food-focussed lives. At the same time, identifying as foodies does not mean that we “pull [our] punches accordingly” (Meyers 2011). A key part of the foodie story we tell in this book concerns the connections between foodie culture, class, and inequality. Indeed, if we could pinpoint the single-greatest weakness within foodie discourse, we would point to the lack of critical reflexivity about foodie privilege, especially in relation to the larger global food system.

In terms of food scholarship, our ambition is to make clear that the gourmet foodscape cannot be interpreted in simple binary terms: as good or bad, egalitarian or elitist, politically progressive or bourgeois piggery. Transcending these binaries, and instead studying the tension between these polarities, allows us to generate new insights into the cultural underpinnings and political implications of the foodie phenomenon. Analytically, it is important for scholars to avoid a functionalist view of how this inequality is culturally legitimized and rendered invisible. As the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci imagined, hegemony is a fluid process, where common sense must be continually constructed, and remains vulnerable to challenges. While we believe that overall, foodie culture reinforces and legitimizes a positive association between wealth and good food, counter-hegemonic challenges are significant. A study of these tensions also renews the legacy of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, whose seminal scholarship revealed the nuanced connections between taste and social class. While our taste in food continues to speak to our class position, this is not a simple correspondence between rarefied “fancy” food for high-class people, but a more complex, omnivorous affair. Foodies are clearly omnivores—not in the biological sense of eating all things, but in the cultural-sociology sense of carefully selecting from a wide array of genres. Politically, we study the tensions of foodie omnivorousness and hold on to narratives both of democracy and of distinction in order to develop a perspective of
normative critique and hopefulness. Our work is intended to make clear the immense privilege of using food as an art form, leisure pursuit, and source of social status. At the same time, we believe that food can serve as a sort of window into the soul of the capitalist food system, generating awareness of the ecological devastation and social inequality that underpin most of our meals.