

---

Introduction

# Food in Gender Studies and Gender in Food Studies

BY KATRINE MELDGAARD KJÆR AND JONATAN LEER

---

**F**ood is many things. At the most basic level, food is nutrition, a necessity for our collective survival. It prevents us from starving or becoming sick, and provides us with the energy we need to live and perform basic tasks. But food is much more than this. Food is also social and cultural – just consider how central the social experience of eating is when we celebrate, when we turn on the TV to watch the latest cooking- or baking show, and when we do business over lunch meetings. Indeed, food, eating and culinary traditions are omnipresent in contemporary culture and are often key elements of social interaction. Precisely because food is social, cultural and deeply embedded in everyday life, it is also both ideological and political. These ideological and political dimensions of everyday food practices are the main objects of inquiry of this issue. The texts in this special issue of *Women, Gender and Research* all seek to demonstrate how contemporary ‘foodscapes’ – a concept John-

ston and Goodman define as describing “the encounters, contestations and resistances that make up the everyday spaces of food we inhabit” (2015:207) – can in fact be viewed as arenas for the negotiation between differing discourses of what a ‘good’ or ‘proper’ life constitutes. Gender is a central part of this negotiation, and has been so for centuries.

Despite the cultural embeddedness of food, the study of food within the social sciences and humanities has only relatively recently begun to take form, and the attention to the ways food and gender intersect even more recently so. Before US anthropologist Carole Counihan began working with the topic in the 1970s, the food/gender connection was only touched upon sporadically, as in Roland Barthes’ discussion of “ornamental cuisine” and the symbolism of wine in French culture (Barthes 1957). Counihan, however, helped put the study of food and gender on the academic map, not least when one of her early studies on women and body ideals was featured in the first issue of the important food studies journal *Food and Foodways* (1985). In Denmark, media scholar Karen Klitgaard Povlsen played a vital role in introducing the study of food and gender to the academic community with her PhD dissertation *Blikfang* (1986). Klitgaard’s work remains a touchstone of Danish food-gender research today. We are very happy to be able to include interviews with both of these important scholars in this issue. These interviews offer two accounts of how to engage in the study of food and gender and how changing academic landscapes have viewed – and often created obstacles for – the social and cultural study of food and gender.

Over the last decades, however, the study food-gender intersections has gained popularity and recognition across academic disciplines. In cultural- and media studies, scholars have especially focused on analyses

of gender in an array of different food media genres, ranging from cookbooks (Neuhaus 2003), magazines (Parasecoli 2005, Hollows 2002), to post-war food television (Moseley 2009, Strange 1999). The social and cultural significance of specific media food celebrities such as Nigella Lawson (Hollows 2003b, Magee 2007), Gordon Ramsay (Nilsson 2012) and Jamie Oliver (Brownlie and Hewer 2007) have also been popular sources of enquiry here. Studies with a sociological and anthropological approach, in turn, have devoted their attention to mapping the gendering of food practices in social institutions, notably the restaurant kitchen (Steno and Friche 2015), the work place (Deutsch 2005), the school (Allison 1991) and the home (Devault 1991). Many of the initial studies of food and gender focused on women, and particularly on how food practices were used to maintain women in subordinated positions (Adams 1990). However, more recently, the study of men, masculinities and food has also begun to attract academic attention. Here, the focus has also been on media representations, often with a critical description of its stereotypical character (Parasecoli 2005, Nilsson 2012) as well as on how men’s integration into the domestic kitchen in the contemporary has challenged classic gendered structures and created new and less explicit modes of gendered distinction in the home kitchen (Aarseth and Olsen 2008, Szabo 2014).

In the Danish context, the study of the interaction between food media models and social food practices has constituted an especially vibrant area of research. Here, communication studies scholar Bente Halkier has worked on the integration of food media into everyday practices of mothering (Halkier 2009, 2016), Stinne Gunder Strøm Kroeger has examined how children’s food practices and media uses are highly interconnected and highly gendered

(Kroager 2012, 2016), and Nanna Friche and Anne Mia Steno have explored constructions of idol-based masculinity among male apprentice cooks (Steno & Friche 2013, 2015). Historian Caroline Nyvang has also produced notable work on gender in Danish cookbooks from the 1600s to the contemporary (Nyvang 2010, 2013, 2016). In a more contemporary perspective, our own work has examined food and masculinity in European food television (Leer 2013a, 2013b, 2014, forthcoming, Leer og Povlsen 2016), construction of gender and celebrity in anti-obesity activism (Kjær 2016) and the role of the male celebrity chef in travelogue cooking shows (Leer and Kjær 2015). Finally, sociologist Lotte Holm has authored several important studies, including a global literature review on the gendered consumption of food with Katherine O'Doherthy (1999).

The food studies community in Denmark, however, is still relatively new, relatively small, and typically favors research without a specific focus on gender. For these reasons, this special issue of *Women, Gender and Research* is intended to open the field of gender-food studies to especially Scandinavian audiences, and showcase the potential that both food as an empirical object and food studies as a theoretical basis can offer gender-focused cultural analyses. We hope the various perspectives on food and gender presented in this volume will be seen as an invitation for further explorations both at a micro and macro level.

This issue of *Women, Gender and Research* should be read as an appetizer and not a full meal; what are presented here are points of entry into food-gender studies rather than an exhaustive overview of the potential of the field. Precisely because this special issue is meant to serve as an introduction to considering food in gender studies and vice versa, we have opted to include a range of different types of texts,

from traditional academic articles to interviews and essays.

The issue opens with interviews with Karen Klitgaard and Carole Counihan. Here, the food-gender studies pioneers share their thoughts on the academic potential of the fusion of the two fields. While especially Klitgaard has faced skepticism from her peers about the value of studying food from a cultural perspective, Klitgaard and Counihan agree that food is becoming a more respected field, and are very optimistic about future contributions from cultural food-gender studies, especially in an interdisciplinary context. Both separately and together, these interviews provide an overview of the evolution of food-gender studies over the last thirty years, and how these have differed in a US and Danish context.

The articles that follow offer different perspectives on how food and eating can be studied in relation to social and individual gendered identities today. While the first article, Iben Charlotte Aamand's *Class, Mothering and the Values of Food*, investigates how food plays a central role in contemporary negotiations of Danish motherhood, the second, Julie Parson's *The Joy of Food Play*, examines masculinity in thirteen British men's 'food life stories'. In their articles, Aamand and Parsons find that their subjects use food both consciously and unconsciously as a flexible entity to negotiate and social positionings in their everyday lives – their specific 'foodie' identities help them negotiate class and gendered identities. Aamand and Parson's texts also showcase ways in which the material dimensions of food – food preparation, food shopping and food tools – deserve in-depth analysis, both as isolated phenomena and in their interaction with the bodies that use them.

The volume is concluded with Richard Wilk's essay *Teaching about Food, Sex and Gender in the Classroom*. Here, the experi-

enced food studies scholar and professor offers a practical guide to how teaching food and gender might be approached by educators. As he shares his thoughts on the especially delicate nature of teaching courses on food and gender, Wilk's essay also opens up for a consideration of the ways in which teaching food can be understood as an affective exchange, and indeed whether food as an object of study is somehow especially affectively charged.

The issue is illustrated by Danish artist Søren Dahlgaard's *Dough Portraits*. Here, Dahlgaard materializes the connection between food and identity construction by creating absurdist portraits of people with their heads encased in dough. The works are part of an ongoing research project in which artist and participants co-create the portraits. As such, the models in *Dough Portraits* help the artist by kneading the dough and placing it on their heads, and, importantly, by selecting their poses themselves. The portraits demonstrate how food can provoke and challenge social and aesthetic codes, and humorously underscores how food literately is 'in your face' in contemporary culture.

Collectively, the texts in this issue highlight a number of areas and themes in which gender and food studies could productively meet in the future. A common thread throughout the issue is how food practices/identities interact with classed and heteronormative gender identities in the Global North. While food studies have a long tradition for working with food and race, the lack of queer-inspired analyses in this issue is undoubtedly reflective of a general trend within food studies today. In addition, the volume also points to other areas to be further investigated, not least the interdisciplinary potential of food-gender studies, and the material and affective dimensions of food. As such, the texts in the issue highlight the ways in which the

study of food can contribute to the development of areas that have gained significant interest within gender studies in recent years.

Indeed, it is our hope that this issue of *Women, Gender and Research* will inspire scholars within gender studies to pursue work within food studies and vice versa, as we believe that precisely this meeting of fields holds considerable potential for the further development of both fields.

## LITERATURE

- Aarseth, Helene and Olsen, Bente M.: (2008): Food and Masculinity in Dual-career Couples, in: *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 17, (4): 277-287.
- Adams, Carol J. (2010/1990): *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. NY: Continuum. London.
- Allison, Anne (1991): Japanese Mothers and Obents: The Lunch-box as Ideological State Apparatus, in: *Anthropological Quarterly* 64 (4): 195-208.
- Brownlie, Douglas and Hewer Peter (2006): Prime Beef Cuts: Culinary Images For Thinking Men, in: *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 10 (3) 229-250.
- Barthes, Roland (1957/2002): *Mythologies (Oeuvres Complètes, t. I)*. Editions du Seuil. Paris.
- Counihan, Carole (1985): What does it mean to be fat, thin, and female in the United States: A review essay. *Food and Foodways* 1 (1-2): 77-94.
- Deutsch, Jonathan (2005): Please Pass the Chicken Tits: Rethinking Men and Cooking at an Urban Fire House, in: *Food and Foodways*, 13 (1-2), 91-114.
- Friche, Nanna & Steno, Anne Mia (2013): Kok, køn og krop – mediekokke og maskuliniteter blandt kokkedrenge på erhvervsskolen, i: Jørgensen, Christian Helms (red.) *Drenge og maskulinitet i ungdomsuddannelserne*. Roskilde universitetsforlag, Roskilde.
- Halkier, Bente (2009): Suitable cooking? Performances and Positionings in Cooking Practices among Danish Women, in: *Food, Culture & Society* 12 (3): 357-377.
- Halkier, Bente (2016): Comparing Contested Food Across Genres: Everyday Relations with Different Genres of Media Food in Mothering, in: Leer, Jonatan and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (2016): *Food and Media*. Ashgate, London.

- Hollows, Joanne (2002): The Bachelor Dinner: Masculinity, Class and Cooking in Playboy, 1953-1961, in: *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 16(2) 143-155.
- Hollows, Joanne (2003a): Oliver's Twist: Leisure, Labour and Domestic Masculinity in The Naked Chef, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (1) 229-248.
- Hollows, Joanne (2003b): Feeling like a domestic goddess: postfeminism and cooking, in: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (2) 179-202.
- Johnson, Josée and Goodman, Michael K. (2015): Spectacular Foodscapes: Food Celebrities and the Politics of Lifestyle Mediation in an Age of Inequality, in: *Food, Culture and Society* 18 (2), 205-222.
- Krogager, Stinne Gunder Strøm. (2012) Når piger og drenge bruger medier og mad. Ph.d.-Disseration. Aarhus Universitet, Aarhus Århus.
- Krogager, Stinne Gunder Strøm (2016): Children Cooking Media Food, in: Leer, Jonatan and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (eds.), (2016/forthcoming). *Food and Media*. Ashgate. London.
- Kjør, Katrine M. (2016): Just A Happy Housewife? Michelle Obama, Food Activism and (African-) American Womanhood, in Leer, Jonatan and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (eds.), (2016): *Food and Media*. Ashgate. London:
- Leer, Jonatan, and Katrine Meldgaard Kjør (2015): Strange Culinary Encounters: Stranger Fetishism in Jamie's Italian Escape and Gordon's Great Escape, in: *Food, Culture & Society* 18.2 (2015): 309-327.
- Leer, Jonatan (2013a). Gastronomiske drags: En diskussion af kønspositionering og subversion i madprogrammer via tv-serien Two Fat Ladies. *Tidsskrift for Kjoennsforskning* 37 (2): 143-160.
- Leer, Jonatan (2013b): Madlavning som maskulin eskapisme: Maskulin identitet i The Naked Chef og Spise med Price, in: *Norma: International Journal of Masculinity Studies* 8 (1), 43-57.
- Leer, Jonatan (2014): Ma(d)skulinitet: maskulinitetskonstruktion i europæiske madprogrammer efter The Naked Chef i lyset af "den maskuline krise". Ph.d. Dissertation. Københavns Universitet, København.
- Leer, Jonatan (forthcoming): "If You Want to, You Can do it!": Home Cooking and Masculinity Makeover in *Le Chef Contre-Attaque*, in Szabo, M. and S. Koch, (forthcoming), *Food, Masculinities and Home*. Bloomsbury Academic, New York.
- Leer, Jonatan and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (eds.) (2016): *Food and Media*. Ashgate, London.
- Magee, Rebecca (2007): Food Puritanism and Food Pornography: The Gourmet Semiotics of Martha and Nigella, in: *American Journal of Popular Culture*, 6, (2), 26-38.
- Moseley, Rachel (2009): Marguerite Patten, Television Cookery and Postwar British Femininity, in Gillis, Stacy & Hollows, Joanne (eds.): *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture* 17-32. Routledge, London.
- Neuhaus, Jessamyn (2003): *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America*. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Nilsson, Gabriella (2012): Ball's Enough: Manliness and Legitimate Violence in Hell's Kitchen, in: *Gender, Work, and Organization* 19(6): 1-17.
- Nyvang, Caroline (2010): Medie og måltid. Danske kokebøger i 1800-tallet, in: Hyldtoft, Ole: *Syn på mad og drikke i 1800-tallet*. Museum Tusulanum Forlag, København.
- Nyvang, Caroline (2013): *Danske trykte kokebøger 1900-1970. Fire kosmologier*. Ph.d.-afhandling. Københavns Universitet, København
- Nyvang, Caroline (2016): Good Fare and Welfare. Perceptions of French and American Food Culture in Postwar Cookbooks, in: Leer, Jonatan and Karen Klitgaard Povlsen (eds.), (2016): *Food and Media*. Ashgate. London.
- O'Doherty, Jensen K., and Lotte Holm (1999): Preferences, quantities and concerns: socio-cultural perspectives on the gendered consumption of foods, in: *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 53.5: 351-359.
- Parasecoli, Fabio (2005): Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men's Fitness Magazines, in: *Food and Foodways* 13 (1-2): 17-37.
- Povlsen, Karen Klitgaard (1986): *Blikfang*. Ph.d.-afhandling Aalborg Universitetscenter, Aalborg.
- Steno, Anne Mia, and Nanna Friche (2015): Celebrity Chefs and Masculinities Among Male Cookery Trainees in Vocational Education, in *Journal of Vocational Education & Training* 67 (1): 47-61.
- Strange, Niki (1999): Perform, Educate, Entertain: Ingredients to the Cookery Program in Geraghty, Christine & Lusted, David, (eds.), (1999): *The Television Studies Reader*. Arnold, London.
- Szabo, M (2014): Men Nurturing Through Food: Challenging Gender Dichotomies Around Domestic Cooking, in: *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1: 18-31.