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SWEETNESS AND FEMININITY:
FASHIONING GENDERED APPETITE IN THE
VICTORIAN AGE

by

MICHAEL KRONDL

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Sweetness and Femininity:

Fashioning Gendered Appetite in the Victorian Age

by

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Since at least the nineteenth century sweetness and a preference for sweet foods has been linked to femininity. Western, middle-class women learned and reproduced normative gendered dietary behavior due to both private and public pressure to control their appetites and those of their children. In performing their gendered roles, they came to embody them through everyday rituals such as teatime. Sugary foods and drinks served as necessary props in these performances. Theorists, most prominently Jean-Jacques Rousseau, began to propose a linkage of sweet foods with femininity in the seventeenth century. In the following century, the medical profession explained women's tastes as a function of their anatomy. "Dainty" became a ubiquitous word to describe respectable women and the preponderantly sweet foods that they supposedly preferred. The theoretical framework provided by Erving Goffman illuminates how women learned to perform their gender and Pierre Bourdieu helps explain the judgement necessary to reproduce class identity. Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon elucidates the space where everyday behavior was disciplined. Women learned proper food habits from a variety of media including dietary advice books, conduct guides, cookbooks, lifestyle magazines and advertising copy. The

same rituals and spaces of gendered food consumption—teatime, parlors, tearooms—that disciplined women’s behavior also gave them an opportunity for homosocial activism. Abolition, temperance, and suffrage are all movements that can be linked to women organizing around the tea table. Teatime also presented a business opportunity in the form of lunchrooms and tearooms to middle class women. Though the focus of the study is the nineteenth century the food-related, gendered behavior described is still commonplace today.

Keywords: sugar, sweetness, Victorian, women, gender, appetite, femininity, foodways, tea

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Introduction

On the good ship lollipop.
It's a sweet trip to a candy shop
Where bon-bons play
On the sunny beach of Peppermint Bay.

Lemonade stands everywhere.
Crackerjack bands fill the air.
And there you are
Happy landing on a chocolate bar.

See the sugar bowl do the tootsie roll
With the big bad devil's food cake.
If you eat too much ooh ooh
You'll awake with a tummy ache.

—Richard Whiting and Sidney Clare, “The Good Ship Lollipop”

Women like sweets. Or at least that has been a recurring trope of Western bourgeois society for some 250 years, and despite all the shifts in food production and consumption in that time—to say nothing of multiple waves of feminism—sweetness and femininity are still linked in our minds today. The clichés may have switched attire, but the essence remains the same. In the Victorian era, the gentleman caller came courting with showy boxes of pricey chocolate while his sweetheart baked him a cake. Today, if things don't work out, the jilted lover drowns her sorrows in pints of Hagen Dazs, he with shots of Jack Daniels.¹ The trouble is, no matter the trappings, clichés have legs: women do eat more ice cream.² Admittedly, ice cream isn't as

¹ For film examples see Rebecca Hawkes, “Why Is It Sad and Lonely Women Who Turn to Chocolate,” *The Telegraph*, April 4, 2015.

² PRNewswire, “The US Ice Cream Market: What Consumers Eat and Why?,” Cision PR Newswire, January 14, 2014, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/the-us-ice-cream-market-what-consumers-eat-and-why-242750161.html#:~:text=The%20population%20of%20the%20US,to%20benefit%20from%20this%20split.>

associated with femininity as some other foods but the self-reproach that follows binge eating is.³ A concern with obesity and dieting, as well as the prevalence and character of eating disorders, are strongly skewed by gender.⁴

A perception of sex-based food preferences is born out not merely by anecdotal but also quantitative evidence. In a 1994 study conducted by Australian sociologist Deborah Luton, almost all participants agreed that there was cultural gender coding of foods, even if they claimed not to ascribe to the coding themselves. “Feminine” foods, Luton points out “were described as light, sweet, milky, soft-textured, refined and delicate...[and] included chocolates, pastries, cakes, small sandwiches (with the crusts removed), white meat, fish, noodles, pasta, salads and vegetables.”⁵ In contrast, the archetypal masculine food was red meat.

It is striking how many of the foods coded as feminine are sweet. After all, what are little girls made of? Consider the young Shirley Temple singing, perhaps her best-known song, to a group of airmen in the 1934 film *Bright Eyes*. “The Good Ship Lollipop” describes a sweet childhood Cockaigne where “bon-bons play/On the sunny beach of Peppermint Bay.” The curly-haired little girl is innocent—the epitome of sugar and spice and all things nice—yet vaguely flirtatious given the hunky surround, and decidedly feminine. Now for a thought experiment: Is it possible to imagine the song performed “straight” by a little boy, never mind an adult man?

³ In at least one study of obesity, where men craved savory foods and women went in for the sweet, ice cream was the only food that made it to both groups’ top ten list. See Adam Drenowski, “Taste Preferences and Food Intake,” *Annual Review of Nutrition* 17 (July 1997), 246.

⁴ See, for example, Barbara J. Rolls, Ingrid C. Fedoroff, and Joanne F. Guthrie, “Gender Differences in Eating Behavior and Body Weight Regulation,” *Health Psychology* 10, no. 2 (1991), 133–42. There is evidence that eating disorders characterized by binge eating are more prevalent among men; see Ruth H. Striegel-Moore et al., “Gender Difference in the Prevalence of Eating Disorder Symptoms.” *The International Journal of Eating Disorders* vol. 42, 5 (2009), 471-4.

⁵ Deborah Lupton, *Food, the Body and the Self* (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 96.

Also note that, in the song, indulgence is followed by punishment: The gluttonous girl suffers from the consequences of her greed, waking up with a “tummy ache.” That pleasure needs to be punished is another heavily gendered trope in Western society. Desserts are described as “sinfully” rich. Sugar is “evil.” Kale salad is “virtuous.” And virtue depends on self-denial and self-control. Perdition—the loss of a svelte body, social opprobrium, guilt—come from self-indulgence. Consequently, the woman who orders a salad (dressing on the side) at a restaurant, may splurge on her secret stash of Oreos on returning home. A moral woman controls her appetites—at least when others can see.

The association of sweetness and femininity isn’t limited to food. Women slather their bodies with sugar cookie lotion and spritz themselves with vanilla scent while young men smear their underarms with cypress-scented deodorant and squirt themselves with colognes suggestive of tobacco and whiskey. Sweetness in a woman implies attractiveness and charm, in a man an innocuous harmlessness.

Moreover, women are not just expected to perform their own sweetness, the roles they play as mothers, wives and lovers are often also deeply implicated with sweet foods. According to social norms, women are the gatekeepers of their children’s diets; a proper mother lets good foods in and keeps out the bad.⁶ Nevertheless women also use sweets to discipline (or bribe) children; dessert has long been used to get kids to eat their spinach, even if childcare experts mostly disapprove of the tactic.⁷ Thus maternal love comes with a helping of dessert. So do other sorts of love. As early as the nineteenth century, commentators pointed out that the way to a

⁶ On mothers’ guilt, see Cairns and Johnston, 71.

⁷ See, for example, William V. Tamborlane and Janet Z. Weiswasser, *The Yale Guide to Children’s Nutrition* (Yale University Press, 1997), 80.

man's heart was through his stomach.⁸ The vehicle didn't necessarily have to be sweet but often it was. As Sherrie Inness points out, cookbooks, well into the 1950s claimed that "The cook who could whip together a stellar banana cream pie or the lightest, moistest chocolate cake was promised more men than she could squeeze into the kitchen."⁹

Food is not merely a transactional token between women, men and children, it also plays a role in intra-gender relationships. As gender scholar Carole M. Counihan points out, "Class, caste, race, and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food. One's place in the social system is revealed by what, how much, and with whom one eats."¹⁰ And here again sweet foods are an essential prop. In the West, female sociability, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, has been closely linked to sugary snacks and drinks, whether at kaffeeklatches in Wilhelmine Germany, candy-making parties in post-bellum America, or a 1990s girls' night out sipping cosmopolitans in swanky Manhattan bars. Historically, public dining had long been an almost exclusively masculine space until women carved out a feminine corner by patronizing tearooms and pastry shops, both sanctuaries of the sugary arts.

In a remarkable number of ways, our current food system is an outgrowth of foodways first fashioned in the nineteenth century, and women continue to act out a good number of the dietary tropes of that era, many of which single out sweet comestibles.

Performing Sweetness

⁸ See W. JUD. Conklin, "A Talk about Digestion," *The Western Monthly*, February 1869, 107.

⁹ Sherrie A. Inness, "'The Enchantment of Mixing Spoons': Cooking Lessons for Girls and Boys," in *Kitchen Culture in America Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 127.

¹⁰ Carole M. Counihan, *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power* (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.

This project seeks to examine the intersection of sugar, the most widely-traded, globalized, industrial foodstuff of the nineteenth century and the performance of Victorian femininity. In part, this approach helps explain how industrial consumption habits were constructed and, in part, how these foodways built on an ideology of gender difference. The interdisciplinary method allows me to bridge feminist history, which has long avoided discussions of food as stigmatizing, and material and cultural history, where research into the historical linkage of food and gender is improbably thin.¹¹

The association of femininity and sweetness would not have been possible without the slave-grown sugar that began to pour in ever greater abundance into Europe in the early modern period. This new saccharine abundance happened to coincide with Enlightenment theories that posited women as “naturally” inclined to sweet and luxurious foods. This proposition was then replicated and extended through both the economic and theoretical frameworks that undergirded nineteenth-century bourgeois society and delineated the Victorian family. Public discourse and semiprivate behavior then reinforced normative behavior. Women participated in this process as subjects but also enforcers by performing and adjudicating a series of overlapping norms that involved sweet foods and beverages. The result was that women came to be essentialized as sweet in both their personas and tastes.

The place where all this was to be practiced was “home sweet home,” upheld as society’s moral heart. Ironically, even as this ideology of domesticity restricted women’s public agency in many ways, it provided activists the moral power to participate, and in some cases to lead, the abolition and temperance movements. Here too sweet comestibles had a part to play, whether in

¹¹ For a discussion of the avoidance of food by feminist scholars see Kate Cairns and Josee Johnston, *Food and Femininity* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 8–9.

the boycott of slave-grown sugar by anti-slavery activists or the propagation of sugar-laced beverages by prohibitionists. Teatime itself—with its cookies and sweetened tea—became a crucial locus for homosocial organization efforts.

Method

This thesis uses a theoretical framework established by Pierre Bourdieu in *A Social Critique of Taste* alongside Erving Goffman's insights into performance theory to investigate a wide variety of publicly disseminated, mostly nineteenth century texts that describe and prescribe women's relationship to food and especially sweet food. As such, it straddles a variety of disciplines including history and sociology, as well as gender, performance, and food studies. The connection of women with food, especially in the historical context, has received scant attention, in part because it falls in the gap between disciplines.

My original inspiration for this project was Wendy A. Woloson's *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (2002), specifically a chapter that focuses on women and confectionary. Another scholar who has looked into the relationship between food and women's fabled sweet-tooth is Jane Dusselier in her insightful "Bonbons, Lemon Drops, and Oh Henry! Bars," which examines how candy eating became gendered. A handful of other researchers have addressed the issue of gendered foodways more broadly, most notably Sherrie Innes in both *Dinner Roles: American Women and Culinary Culture* (2001) and *Kitchen Culture in America Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (2015). My work is broader in scope than Woloson and Dusselier, in that I look to women's relationships to all sweet foods and beverages, exploring not only the what but also the why of how gendered eating habits are constructed, reinforced, and policed through both public discourse and private behavior. Unlike Innes, I focus on the nineteenth century, since I believe that understanding that

era is essential to situating our own dietary attitudes. With its tightly-delineated focus, reinforced by a functional theoretical backbone, this study should contribute to scholarship that touches not merely on a historical phenomenon but on the way gendered food practices (as well as sugar-centered pathologies) continue to be performed and embodied today.

The timeframe of the research spans the years from about 1840 to 1920, bridging a period when sugar was a relative luxury produced on New World slave plantations and consumed almost exclusively by individual households, to an internationally-traded commodity dominated by beet sugar producers in the great land empires of Europe (and America) and predominantly utilized by the food industry. Concomitantly this was a period of steadily increasing sugar consumption. In the United States, this rose from some ten pounds per capita in the early 1840s to eighty pounds by the early 1920s. I focus on the nineteenth-century urban bourgeoisie in North America and Europe since this was the class that set the tenor for contemporary conversations on diet and decorum. It was the middle class that the authors of the period's mass media all targeted, whether in the form of magazines, behavior manuals, popularizing medical texts or fiction.¹² In order to understand the impact of explicitly cultural pressures it is more informative to study women whose decisions about what to eat and serve were primarily driven by social determinants rather than the exigencies of want.

Since my primary focus is the feedback loop between public discourse and personal behavior—and the way that behavior is in turn reflected in the mass media—I am primarily looking to nineteenth-century, published material for my sources. These include conduct guides, cookbooks, periodicals, and other prescriptive lifestyle publications. Given the exigencies of the

¹² Admittedly this is an imperfect category that denies the role of place (urban versus rural) religion, ethnicity (particularly in the Americas and central Europe), and race (especially in the Americas). What does seem to be in common among the women studied here is aspiration and flux.

pandemic, I have accessed only materials that are available digitally. Significant resources have included The Cornell HEARTH (Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, History) collection, the Community Cookbooks collection at the Library of Congress, and the vast resources offered by the Hathi Trust and the Internet Archive. I have also turned to later, secondary sources to provide context and theoretical structure, specifically the work of the Bourdieu and Goffman, as referenced above.

Chapter Summary

The following chapters seek to answer a series of questions both specific and general. How are supposedly innate dietary characteristics (the sweet tooth in this case) constructed? What were the social mechanisms that led to this construction? How were women's essentialized food practices utilized by an incipient capitalist food system to market its production? I suggest that even as women got the vote, their domestic identity was indoctrinated with ever greater efficiency by mass media, advertising and marketing. As a result, while the last hundred years has removed any number of institutional barriers to women, many embodied practices remain, especially in feminine foodways.

The thesis is divided into four chapters that discuss, in turn, the formulation of essentializing theories of female appetite, the performance of these essentialized tastes, the mass media response that replicated and reinforced observed behaviors, and finally how women used the gendered spaces occasioned by sugar-centered dining rituals to grasp political and economic agency.

The first, "Gendered Appetites," examines the construction of women's supposed tastes, starting with eighteenth century-conduct guides and continuing with the following century's medical texts that posited women's appetites as a function of their anatomy. The chapter ex-

plores how this ideology was expanded and refined in the nineteenth century eventually linking conceptions about women's fragility and daintiness to their appetites.

The second chapter, "Performing Femininity," focuses on the occasions when women used sugar-focused dining to act out class and gender identity. I look to the performance theories of Irving Goffman and the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu regarding the formation of class identity to explain the intensification of essentialized behavior as well as Michel Foucault's formulation of the panopticon as a tool for disciplining social behavior.

The third, "Eat What You're Told," looks at the role conduct guides, cookbooks, magazines, advertising, and other forms of mass media played in molding normative behavior. I seek to examine the feedback loop between private performance as explored in the previous chapter and the disciplining role public discourse has on that performance.

The final chapter, "Tea-Time Revolutionaries," explores how women were able to use their alleged moral superiority and primacy in promoting "family values" to further causes such as abolition and temperance. I highlight how slave sugar boycotts allowed women to exert economic power from the tea table, and how prohibition led directly to the primacy of sugary soft drinks in the American diet. Sweet foods are also implicated in the rise of female entrepreneurship as respectable women used their expertise in serving sweet, homosocial meals to open tearooms and lunchrooms.

The conclusion points to the fact that many of these embodied practices are still with us, impacting our own foodways, from excess sugar consumption to moral judgments about good and bad foods, to maternal guilt, and to gendered eating pathologies.

Whereas women's food identities are by no means limited by gender—geography, ethnicity, class are at least as influential—in many societies they have been defined by gender.

By teasing apart these societal pressures, this study should cast light not merely on the fashioning of the feminine sweet tooth but also on the process of learning, embodying, and performing womanhood.

Chapter 1

Gendered Appetites

The emergence of the feminine sweet tooth correlated with the increasing availability of slave-produced Caribbean sugar in the eighteenth century.¹³ Through the early Renaissance, sugar had primarily been used as a spice in elite cookery or an ingredient in pricy electuaries. Later, it would be cast and molded into sculptures (much like bronze) and displayed as a form of conspicuous consumption at European courts.¹⁴ As the price decreased in the latter half of the seventeenth century, it became more widely available to the growing bourgeoisie, a mercantile class that, ironically, could trace at least part of its wealth to the slave-based sugar trade. By the eighteenth century, most Caribbean sugar ended up being stirred into the newly popular, globally-sourced drug beverages: coffee, tea, and chocolate. It was at this time that pundits began to offer explanations for the feminine sweet tooth, something that would impact not only the narrative about women's innate characteristics but also their actual behavior.

An increasingly dominant and supposedly empirical ideology posited that women's tastes, as much as their prescribed social roles, were as innate as the female anatomy. It was in women's "nature" to prefer sweetness. According to one theory bandied about in the Age of Reason, women had childish, emotional natures, and thus similarly were inclined to self-indulgent infantile appetites. Another proposed that due to their fragile and delicate bodies, the "weaker sex" could only imbibe dainty comestibles. Yet another recurring explanation of the link

¹³ Exports from Jamaica alone rose from 5,000 to 70,000 metric tons in the course of the century. J. H. Galloway, *The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from Its Origins to 1914* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 86.

¹⁴ Mintz, 154.

between women and sugar was that they supposedly were inclined to luxury and thus, in the days when the sweet crystals were dear, they were drawn to sweet food due to its expense.¹⁵

Essentialized Taste

Prior to the Enlightenment, there is little evidence that sugar in particular, or sweet foods in general, had any gender associations. On balance, sugar was considered an unalloyed good. In an age when a fish pie recipe might contain more sugar than a cheesecake, sixteenth-century physician and naturalist Costanzo Felici couldn't say enough good things about the ingredient: "Sugar is an excellent accompaniment to everything. . . and human nature finds great pleasure and delight in its sweet flavor."¹⁶ This very hedonistic quality wasn't always appreciated. As sugar became more widely available, experts began to disagree on its virtues. So, while the seventeenth French apothecary Théophile de Garencières would claim that sugar was to blame for English melancholy, others considered it a virtual cure-all.¹⁷

One of the earliest mentions of a feminine penchant for sweetness shows up only in 1715, in *A Vindication of Sugars*, by the English physician Frederick Slare. As the title implies, Slare was an enthusiast, suggesting applying sugar as an eye remedy, a tonic for coughs, and even a dentifrice. His only caveat is "that *Sugar* being so very high a Nourisher, may dispose [women] to be fatter than they desire to be, [and thus unadvised to those] who are afraid of their fine Shapes." He nonetheless dedicates the booklet "to the Ladies" contrasting their refined inclinations to the "debauch'd" tastes of the tobacco-smoking, salt-loving, pickle-eating "coarser

¹⁵ The German economist Werner Sombart made a similar point as late as 1913, positing that it was women's taste for sugar that launched the imperial expansion of Europe and consequently of capitalism itself. Sidney W Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking, 1985), 139–40.

¹⁶ Ken Albala, *Eating Right in the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 173, 211–12.

¹⁷ Mintz, 105.

sex.” He enjoins women to become "Patronesses of the Fair SUGAR" on the premise that "of late [they] had more experience of it, in a more liberal use than formerly." He is also the first to mention a category of explicitly feminine repasts “call’d Break-fasts...consisting of good Materials; namely Bread, Butter, Milk, Water and Sugar” alongside chocolate, tea, and coffee—also heavily sweetened, no doubt.¹⁸

Any number of behavior guides discussed these gender-specific tastes in both England and France. Perhaps the most widely circulated was Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), in which the celebrated philosophe laid out in meticulous detail the rules for the raising of boys and—in a more cursory fashion—those for girls, in a small section that focuses on the upbringing of the model woman named Sophie.¹⁹ Here the influential intellectual lays out the proper character of woman, how she relates to, and complements, man, her assigned role in the family, and the best way to educate her. The shift from girlhood to womanhood is supposedly marked by a transition from the natural to the civilized state. This is especially crucial for woman who, as keeper of the home, is the one who keeps society from devolving into Hobbesian chaos. Since she is tasked with shepherding her offspring from savagery to civilization, she herself must first learn self-control, the precondition to a moral nation. And an object lesson is learning to discipline her own appetite for sweet foods.

While the gluttony of boys can never be fully controlled, Rousseau notes, for girls, “It is too dangerous to be left unchecked.” As she matures, Sophie is no longer supposed to follow her natural, childish inclinations. When she pilfers the *dragées* and bonbons hidden in her mother’s

¹⁸ Frederick Slare, *Experiments and Observations upon Oriental and Other Bezoar-Stones...To Which Is Annex’d, A Vindication of Sugars against the Charge of Dr. Willis, Other Physicians, and Common Prejudices* (London: Tim. Goodwin, 1715), E2–4.

¹⁹ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, trans. Allan David Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

cupboard, her mother punishes her and forces her to fast. She convinces Sophie “that bonbons spoil the teeth and that eating too much fattens the figure.” As Sophie matures “she acquired other tastes which diverted her from this base sensuality.” Her tastes don’t change. “She loves dairy products and sugared things. She loves pastry and sweets but has very little taste for meat.”²⁰

Even if the belief that women were reservoirs of “base sensuality” that needed damming to secure domestic bliss does not originate with Rousseau it would be hard to find a more articulate exposition of it or one that would wield greater influence.²¹ You can hear its echo across the intervening centuries: through every maudlin Victorian admonition of motherhood, every Crisco ad promising household bliss in suburban America, and every blog post proselyting sugar avoidance as the path to family well-being.

Medical Texts

Rousseau’s medical counterparts and their successors determined that women’s innate, child-like taste for sweet foods could be explained by sex-based anatomical differences: Since women’s bodies, and consequently brains, are statistically smaller than men’s, the “weaker” sex must be less able not only physically but intellectually; because women’s reproductive organs take up so much of their anatomy then the womb must dominate all other female functions. By the Victorian era, it sometimes seems that anatomy could explain everything. Yale obstetrician Stephen G. Hubbard, addressing a medical assembly in 1870, explained that “given the sympathies with every other part of the female organism, [it is] as if the Almighty, in creating the

²⁰ Rousseau, *Emile*, 395.

²¹ *Emile* was apparently highly popular in the Thirteen Colonies, see Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 23–26, 243.

female sex, *had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it.*"²² Pretty much any ailment could be traced to uterine distress, from neuralgia to consumption, from constipation to breast cancer.²³ Diet was just one, among other medical interventions, that had to be adjusted to nourish the womb-dominated organism.

Since women's reproductive organs left little space for anything else, their digestive system was necessarily less robust, possessing "great irritability." This, in part, explained women's tendency to frequent fasting. What's more, women's smaller teeth resulted in less energetic mastication. As a result, according to the early nineteenth-century Scottish medical popularizer Alexander Walker "Women prefer light and agreeable food, which flatters the palate by its perfume and its savour" obviating presumably the need to ingest much of it.²⁴ The Scotsman's spouse, beauty maven Mrs. Alexander Walker echoes this commonly held opinion when she notes: "Women, whose constitutions are naturally delicate...prefer light aliments, such as milk, fruit and vegetables, which are easily digested, and do not act too powerfully on their delicate fibres."

Foods appropriate for one sex were contraindicated for the other. Thus, stimulating foods would overtax women's sensitive nervous systems, especially spiced dishes ("highly seasoned concentrated aliment"), alcoholic beverages, and red meat, or at least meat to excess. "Immoderate indulgence" in meat, writes Mrs. Walker "generally agrees with persons engaged in trades which require great muscular exertion" but spells trouble for the lady-like constitution,

²² The italics are the author's. Martin Luther Holbrook, *Parturition Without Pain* (M.L. Holbrook, 1880), 15. The "professor Hubbard of New Haven" mentioned in the text is presumably Stephen G. Hubbard, professor of obstetrics at Yale Medical School from 1864 to 1880.

²³ Ann Douglas Wood, "'The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 29.

²⁴ His proof for this, included in a footnote, is that women cost less to feed in hospitals and prisons. Alexander Walker, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman* (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, 1840), 228–29.

“often [becoming] pernicious, and...liable to produce hemorrhages, and other diseases.” Salty, spicy, or highly acidic preparations were also decidedly unladylike, in part because they might increase a woman’s sexual appetite. Alcohol would certainly lead to depravity. According to Mrs. Walker, except for those “monsters engendered in the corruption of towns,” ladies abstained.²⁵

Society did not approve of ladies who showed an appetite for meat any more than it did of women who overindulged in claret. Lord Byron’s probably apocryphal quip that “a woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be lobster salad and champagne, the only truly feminine and becoming viands” was repeated often enough (usually with the second clause omitted) that some girls starved themselves to conform.²⁶ Novelist George Eliot references this sort of gendered, Byronic revulsion in a scene in her 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, where the course of conversation turns to women’s appetites. One man recalls a story “about the epicurism of the ladies, who had somehow been reported to show a revolting masculine judgement in [consuming] venison, even asking for the fat—a proof of the frightful rate at which corruption might go on in women, but for severe social restraint.”²⁷

In the West, there is a strong historical tradition of linking personality traits with diet. As the saying goes, “you are what you eat.” Thus, British men’s martial prowess supposedly came from a diet of red meat, but the same diet would render women corrupt or—even worse—

²⁵ Mrs. A. Walker, *Female Beauty, as Preserved and Improved by Regimen, Cleanliness and Dress* (New York: Scofield and Voorhies, J. & H.G. Langley, 1840), 73, 98.

²⁶ See for example the opinion of the “amiable Lord Brackenshaw, who was something of a “gourmet.” George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (OUP Oxford, 2014), 94; According to American George Beard, writing in the 1870s, the romantic teen idol was apparently responsible for girls starving themselves to conform to the dead poet’s tastes. See Brumberg, *Fasting Girls*, 180.

²⁷ Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 94.

mannish. So, if women were to act sweet, it only made sense that the food they consumed should be sweet and, conversely, no warrior could prevail on a diet of cream puffs and éclairs.

The Sweet and The Dainty

Early in the Victorian Age, the term “sweet” and “womanhood” sometimes seemed joined at the hip.²⁸ Women were expected to be sweet, even when behaving in ways that transgressed normative power relationships. Even when intemperate temperance activists of the so-called anti-alcohol Crusade met at a crucial Chautauqua convention in 1874, commentators remembered the “rare sweetness” they exhibited. Eliza Thomson, a prominent attendee remarked that her presence was due to the “gentle, sweet, cultured womanhood” of the Ohio State President of the movement.²⁹

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, sweetness may have been seen as *too* innate, a personality trait that could be encouraged or disciplined—much as girls’ supposedly innate sweet tooth—but harder to inculcate. It may have also become too commonplace, as sugar became a cheap source of calories for the working class. Instead, a more refined and malleable concept emerged that could be employed to discipline bourgeois women. “Dainty” became the favorite word of polite society.

Ladies were meant to be “pure, delicate, and dainty,” as was anything they touched, whether “dainty sandwiches and cakes,” “dainty cups of cocoa and of tea” or even the “dainty

²⁸ Though certainly no more than a rough statistical approximation, a search on nineteenth century books on Google Books yields nineteen pages of books that include the term “sweet womanhood” but only four of “sweet manhood.”

²⁹ Holly Fletcher, 102

tea gowns” they wore.³⁰ The word was so ubiquitous that some commentators even tired of it.³¹ While just about anything could be described as dainty—from manners to furniture—its use became almost obligatory when describing women’s victuals. And the more delicate the lady’s constitution the daintier the fare. In a satirical novel *The Female Sufferer; Or, Chapters from Life's Comedy* (1883), Augustus Hoppin depicts an indolent upper-class invalid who lives on little more than “tidbits of fruit and Jelly,” “a snip of a role,” “a wren’s leg on toast,” though she might occasionally become ravenous for “dainty” items such as wedding cake, peaches and cream, and freshly cut melon—all this while carrying on a perpetual social life.³² Dozens of cookbooks published in the latter part of the century are dedicated to “dainty dishes.”³³ Dainty didn’t always mean light and delicate, as we might use the word—often it was just a synonym for fancy—but more often it did. What’s more, a vast number of these dishes were either sweet themselves or served in the context of mostly sweet meals, accompanied by sugary tea, lemonade, or hot chocolate.

By the late eighteenth hundreds, the feminine sweet tooth would be invoked so often in period literature that it almost seemed as much of a dominant feature Victorian women’s anatomy as their reproductive organs: “Women, as a broad and general fact... comparatively

³⁰ See “A Festival of Holidays,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, November 11, 1893; “Good Form,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, January 7, 1899, 21; Sarah Tyson Rorer, “A Pair of Wedding Breakfasts,” *The Ladies’ Home Journal*, April 1894, 17.

³¹ C.G.D., “Overworked Words,” *The Irish Monthly*, February 1891, 104.

³² Joan Jacobs Brumberg, “The Appetite as Voice,” in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd Edition (Routledge New York, 2008), 159–79.

³³ It would be tedious to list them all, but a couple of notable titles should suffice for illustration: Sarah T Rorer, the principal of the influential Philadelphia Cooking School penned *Dainty Dishes for All the Year Round* in 1890 featuring “such Dainty Dishes as Croquettes, Cutlets, Tempting Sandwiches etc. when one’s appetite needs to be pampered with something delicate and tasty.” The book was sponsored by the American Machine Company, a manufacturer of ice cream freezers and other kitchen gadgets. Across the Atlantic, Kate Halford, another cooking teacher, authored *Dainty Dinners and Dishes for Jewish Families* (1907), a decidedly aspirational volume of French influenced recipes for London’s upwardly-mobile Jewish households.

with men, care very little for eating,” pronounced a columnist in an early issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*, “Their noted ‘sweet tooth’ would prove this if there were nothing else.” If left to themselves, they would eat little other “than bread and tea, with an occasional sweetmeat or a tart.”³⁴

To what degree any real-world women conformed to these societal preconceptions is, in many ways, not material. What mattered was that there were widely accepted and publicized norms of taste and behavior that middle class women were expected to learn. Sweet foods and beverages became essential props to the performance of normative femininity.

³⁴ “A Phase of the Cook Question,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, January 27, 1877, 50.

Chapter 2

Performing Sweetness

The essentialized tastes of women, as described by eighteenth and nineteenth-century thinkers, could not have survived as long as they did had it not been for a degree of buy-in from women themselves. Most middle-class women had little choice but to conform to the increasing bifurcation of gender roles in the nineteenth century, their economic survival depended on it. As even politically active women realized, their agency lay in using their status as guardians of domesticity, their “natural” inclination to charitable works, their “sweet” natures to advance social and political agendas alike. As they acted out the tropes of Victorian femininity, they reinforced the perception that certain characteristics—whether saintly motherhood, daintiness, or the apocryphal sweet tooth—were innate. I propose a behavioral model to explain how women came to embody sweetness. Some of the underlying forces were economic while others were social and even moral.

The nineteenth century saw the institutionalization of the cult of domesticity with its accompanying rituals. Both the cult and the rituals needed articulating as well as monitoring. This occurred on a daily, intimate basis through social mechanisms of acceptance or ostracism but also increasingly through public-facing discourse, or “publicity” as Jurgen Habermas calls it. This chapter analyzes the quotidian, personal aspect, from behavior, to socially determined taste, to restrictive fashions that literally constrained women’s bodies and appetites. The subsequent chapter examines the role of print media.

A Sweet Act

To understand the linkage of sweetness with femininity it is helpful to understand how bourgeois Victorian women used both sweet foods and beverages to message class status as well as how they acted out the trope of “sweet” behavior in social as well as more intimate settings. Here Irving Goffman’s ideas of social behavior as a form of performance are helpful. Briefly, the influential sociologist posits that social interaction can be seen as a performative act where one person (or a team) seeks to influence one or more individuals, the “audience,” through the performer’s actions, whether verbal or otherwise. Goffman gives the example of a young woman performing the “dumb blonde” to reassure her boyfriend’s fragile ego.³⁵ To give an example more apposite to this chapter, the way a Victorian woman accepted a box of bonbons and the manner she consumed them in her beau’s presence, directed a torrent of messages at him. A polite thank you conveyed one meaning, a flirtatious nibble something altogether different. In either case, the woman’s act was intended to elicit a response.

Like any presentation, a performance requires a setting or stage, costumes, props, and, most importantly, a script or “routine” as Goffman dubs it. In a domestic setting, today’s middle-class mother might perform her domestic, maternal role by greeting her child with a glass of milk and a plate of cookies at the kitchen table, projecting her nurturing role—or bribing the child with a sugary snack to encourage a Pavlovian response of filial love. At luncheon, women of an elite class will act out their social position through a performance of self-control for their fellow diners by rejecting dessert or any other food seen as indulgent. Here their clothes that show off their fashionably trim bodies are the costume, the Madison Avenue restaurant the setting, and a glass of iced tea, “unsweetened,” the necessary prop.

³⁵ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), 15.

As Goffman points out, “A status, a position, a social place is not a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is nonetheless something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized.”³⁶ This doesn't necessarily mean that the player is actively conscious of the script but rather that she is so fully conversant with her social group's idiom that she can employ it with little calculation or forethought.

Of course, the performer needs to learn the idiom in order to absorb the script in much the way actors need to become conversant with Stuart-era English to master *As You Like It*. The point here is that the idiom, once learned, is internalized, embodied. A bourgeois woman gives no more *conscious* thought to the way she lifts her fork than a professional tennis player gives to her backhand. This behavior is presumably learned, much like language, through a combination of passive observation and active instruction. Thus, a girl sees her mother ordering salad in a restaurant while sneaking cookies in the kitchen pantry thereby learning the distinction between public abstention and private indulgence. To reinforce this behavior—and at times to contradict it—she will also receive further instruction that she should abstain from certain foods to maintain her figure, not to appear gluttonous, and other ways of signaling her status. (Performance can be as much about what you repress as reveal.) As Rousseau implied, from all this she learns the norms of her class and gender. This learned behavior, or idiom, to Goffman's point, is later utilized in adulthood to shape her performance. A neighborhood bar, for example, provides both script and setting, including costumes and props. In this context, a sweet, trendy cocktail sends a

³⁶ Goffman, 74. It's worth mentioning that even if status is not a material thing, any number of material objects are used to broadcast it.

message of feminine conformity, a shot of bourbon signals male identity—even if it’s unlikely a performer gives the communicative aspect a second thought.

The question most germane here is how both idiom and script are learned and replicated and the impact this has on individuals as well as society at large. One way this can be studied is through the performances, rituals, and ceremonies surrounding food. Sweet foods, in particular, appear as necessary props for numerous “routines” associated with the enactment and replication of femininity, whether at afternoon coffee klatches or in the kitchen baking cookies.

The idea that behavior can be a form of messaging is hardly a twentieth-century invention. Nineteenth-century conduct guides are explicit in this regard. Florence Hartley’s popular etiquette guide insisted on repeated rehearsal:

In order to appear perfectly well bred at table when in company, or in public, as at a hotel, you must pay attention three times a day to the points of table etiquette. If you neglect these little details at home and in private, they will be performed awkwardly and with an air of restraint when you are in company. By making them habitual, they will become natural, and appear easily, and sit gracefully upon you.

She stresses that “Even when eating entirely alone, observe these little details, thus making the most finished and elegant manners perfectly familiar,” adding, “Otherwise, you may neglect to do so when the omission will mortify you.”³⁷ She insists that the training needs to start early in life. To learn proper breakfast etiquette, she enjoins the reader to train her children in such minute details as the passing of cream pitchers (always after the coffee is passed, never with it), the proper use of a butter knife, salt-spoon, and sugar-tongs.

Goffman refers to the suite of messages a performer habitually projects as the “front.”³⁸ Since audience and actors receive the same training both sides are well versed in reading this

³⁷ Florence Hartley, *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness: A Complete Handbook for the Use of the Lady in Polite Society ...* (Lee & Shepard, 1872), 105.

³⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.*, 22.

front or any cracks in it. In a text that might have been written by any number of twentieth-century sociologists, a columnist for the religiously oriented *Ladies' Repository* points out that an observer attending a lecture may judge the quality of a lady sitting before them by her bonnet and can read a man by the way he dresses his hair. Trifles can betray even the best performance: "Sometimes the most unconscious gesture has a deeper and a longer influence than the most studied efforts. We may half spoil the work of years by the carelessness of a single moment."³⁹ We can only imagine how she would judge an improperly passed cream pitcher.

Taste and Class

While Goffman's analysis of the construction of "front" speaks to the mechanism of the presentation of self, he is less focused on its utility in maintaining rank, something that was central to women's concerns on the wobbly class ladder of the nineteenth century. In this respect, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of taste in French society in the 1970s is helpful. (The parallels to the Victorian era are, at times, eerily apt.) As the French sociologist points out, an observer can glean a great deal of information from another's everyday choices in food, costume, and décor. Bourdieu refers to the way people utilize these props and scenery to exhibit social identity as "habitus." The concept doesn't merely refer to ingrained taste, however, but also the judgment to recognize it in others. Thus, much like the lady attending the lecture, the subject is both performer and audience (and critic). As Bourdieu writes, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make...."⁴⁰ Habitus both determines lifestyle but is also the result of "the

³⁹ Augusta Hubbard, "The Significance of Trifles," *The Ladies' Repository*, April 1865.

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6.

conditions of existence,” that is cultural upbringing, income, education, geography, and so on.⁴¹ One reason that social identity is relatively sticky, is that many of our tastes (for food and more abstract values such as education) are internalized by what we consume in the home, that is we learn it when most impressionable. One aspect that differentiates socially dynamic societies—such as the nineteenth century—is that they also tend to offer that training outside the domestic setting. Thus, the Victorian middle-class penchant for public lectures, libraries, and museums where one could better oneself—and not merely by adjusting the angle of a bonnet. Even such bourgeois innovations as the restaurant and tearoom served to train the upwardly mobile in aspirational etiquette.

In Bourdieu’s detailed statistical study, when it comes to food, a series of dualities are congruent with occupational classes and educational achievement (but not necessarily income).⁴² Thus, abundance is more valued than refinement by foremen and farm-laborers alike—even though foremen might enjoy a better income than, say, schoolteachers. Similarly, the necessity of ritual and ceremony (scheduling, predetermined seating, the structure of a meal, appropriate flatware) versus an emphasis on conviviality and hedonism distinguishes the professional classes from their social opposite. A final insight is to examine the opposition of necessity and luxury in the way goods are defined.⁴³ To give a sugary example of this, by the late nineteenth century,

⁴¹ Bourdieu, 170.

⁴² A similar consensus existed among turn-of-the-century nutritionists. Occupation determined not only the quantity but the type of food recommended: “Brain-workers (teachers, students, clerks, etc.) need easily digestible food; muscle workers (working-men, etc.) find coarser food better suited to their needs.” Mary E Williams and Katharine Rolston Fisher, *Elements of the Theory and Practice of Cookery a Textbook of Household Science, for Use in Schools*, (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 252.

⁴³ Bourdieu, 177–179, 193–199. It’s worth noting that in elite American and French society, Victorian diners made sure to distance themselves from the sensual, somatic pleasures of food, the former by disdaining any discussion of it at table, the latter by aestheticizing it. The French elite demonstrated its class by analyzing menus and collecting fine vintages, not by demonstrating pleasure in eating *pieds de cochon* or getting drunk off *vin ordinaire*.

heavily sweetened tea had become a caloric necessity for the British proletariat whereas the tea served at ladies' afternoon teas was no more than a prop to a calorically insignificant social ceremony.⁴⁴ This idea that a single kind of food might shift in messaging status is not only applicable to perceived luxury but also conceptions of healthfulness in beverages (water versus soda) or connoisseurship in candy (dark versus milk chocolate).

These class-based foodways can become quite literally embodied (in Bourdieu's definition of the term) in people's appearance. Thus, someone's tastes in food (and exercise) are visible in the distribution of fat and muscle; much the same is true for the prevalence of diseases of both under- and overnutrition. All of these are accompanied by class-based moral judgments: the uptight skinny rich lady, the fat slob with diabetes.⁴⁵ Bourdieu only mentions gender-based food tastes in passing but his approach can easily be adapted to sex-based distinctions. Especially in the nineteenth century, commentators were much more exercised by violations of refinement and "breeding" among elite women than men.

While Bourdieu's view of embodiment is quite literal, in that the results of habitus can be objectively measured in the subject's body, I suggest the idea can be extended further, to originally learned, but now unconscious, behavior. A little like a method actor steps into a role, becoming the character they portray, a social subject comes to embody the person they are expected to be. When it came to women's food it was this very embodiment, the unconscious repetition of particular dietary choices that reinforced Victorian women's individual tastes and sent the message that women "naturally" preferred the sweet and the dainty. Nonetheless,

⁴⁴ Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 143-145.

⁴⁵ See Olga Khazan, "Why Rich Women Don't Get Fat," *The Atlantic*, (April 2014).

repeated practice, performance and embodiment of taste only go so far as to explain how gendered tastes were constructed.

Tea-Time Panopticon

It is helpful, in discussing Victorian women's appetite, to invoke Foucault's idea of the panopticon, that is that the subjects of discipline will behave because they know they are under constant scrutiny. When it comes to disciplining appetite the physical space of that panopticon is the table: the breakfast table for monitoring children, the dinner table for enforcing heterosocial norms, and the luncheon or tea table for policing female homosocial behavior. These daily routines don't merely inculcate conformity to specific norms defined by class, gender, and ethnicity, they mold an individual's identity through the medium of the body.⁴⁶ These rituals take the form of corporal micro-performances—the pouring of the tea, the cradling of the dainty cup, the delicacy of every sip and bite—all policed by the participants.

The panopticon can only function if all the parties know the rules, when both the observer and the subject of scrutiny understand how to behave. It is thus axiomatic that the members of a social group, those who are fluent in the same *habitus* are more adept at discerning and judging appropriate behavior than outsiders. It follows that in a patriarchal society—even one in crisis, as scholars have characterized the nineteenth century—where gender roles are emphatically separated, both women and men will be trained to both act out and assess their own gender's performance and thus will be able to judge their own sex's actions with more alacrity than they will of their opposite. Consider the way a figure skater can judge the routine of a fellow athlete; a casual observer sees the pirouettes and the falls but none of the subtlety. In terms of eating

⁴⁶ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), 129.

habits, a group of women was (and is) able to appraise and regulate its members in ways that would baffle a male intruder. It is thus that homosocial meals are an especially efficient stage for honing performances of prescribed femininity. And it so happens that most of these meals, luncheons but especially teas, were centered around biscuits, cakes, and sugary beverages.

The nineteenth century created a series of feminine social spaces—the parlor, the tearoom, the lunchroom—where women trained in the culture of restraint by following strictly defined scripts that featured dainty, and predominantly sweet foods. It’s important to understand the serving and consumption of these was enmeshed in a larger performance. Yes, a lady couldn’t invite a member of her set for tea without offering some sweet beverage, but the core activity was social, not nutritive; a hostess, would entertain her female acquaintances in order to create crucial networks.⁴⁷ That said, the props she used for performing her social role were far from incidental to establishing and maintaining that role. The bone china tea set, the quality of the tea cakes, even the virtuosity with which she poured the lapsang souchong, were rich with semiotic significance.

As women’s homosocial dining drifted from domestic settings to more public spaces, women’s behavior came to be monitored not only by their immediate acquaintances but by a broader swathe of social peers. If anything, at a tearoom or pastry shop, the exigencies of seeing and being seen—and judged—were even more fraught. It is hard to imagine a better exemplar of Foucault’s panopticon than the original tearoom opened on the Rue Royale in 1871 by Ladurée, the famed confectioner. This *salon-de-thé*, decorated in pseudo-Versailles frippery, is entirely surrounded by mirrors. In this reflective fishbowl, a lady, sitting at a table nibbling her éclair and

⁴⁷ This was explicitly understood at the time. After visiting a Fifth Avenue tearoom, a reporter observed, “At times during the fashionable hour of the room has the appearance of a private entertainment, so many of the patrons being acquainted with one another, and talk extends from one from table to table.” Hester Hoffman, “In the Wider Sphere,” *The Illustrated American*, December 5, 1896, 766.

sipping her sweet *café au lait*, could, with a gentle tilt of her head, survey the entire room but, by the same token, know that she was being scrutinized in turn.

The Caged Body

In public or semipublic places, the panopticon worked well enough but how does society police a woman's appetites when she's out of the public eye?⁴⁸ While a sober if acquisitive lifestyle regulated by self-control was held up as the Victorian ideal for both sexes, it was women who were expected to exemplify the bourgeois culture of restraint. A core necessity of patriarchy is to control women's bodies and consequently their appetites, whether sexual or dietary. And carnal tastes were regularly linked with the gustatory kind. The influential nineteenth-century health guru Silvester Graham linked taking pleasure in eating as a gateway to depravity. According to the sporting press, an overstimulating diet was surely a steppingstone to the solitary vice. While a woman might favor a gentleman caller by nibbling a bonbon or two from the box he had presented her, the solo pleasure of consuming bonbons in private would only bring opprobrium.⁴⁹ So how does a culture instill corporal self-discipline when the chaperone is off duty?

Florence Harley's suggestion to behave in private, as if she were in public, was one solution to a curtained panopticon. Presumably, a body (and appetite) sufficiently rehearsed would not slip out of character even when out of the public eye. What's more, as Bourdieu makes clear, once the curtain was raised a well-versed observer could perceive private appetites

⁴⁸ On privacy and the gendering of domestic space see Jane Hamlett, "The Dining Room Should Be the Man's Paradise, as the Drawing Room Is the Woman's": Gender and Middle-Class Domestic Space in England, 1850–1910," *Gender & History* 21, no. 3 (November 2009): 576–91.

⁴⁹ April R. Haynes, *Riotous Flesh: Women, Physiology, and the Solitary Vice in Nineteenth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 36, 93. On self-indulgence, masturbation, and bonbon-eating see Wendy A. Woloson, *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery, and Consumers in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 143.

revealed by the shape of the subject's body. Thus, a dainty figure signaled delicate dietary desires but also demure sexuality, both crucial indicators of a woman's class identity. A truly adept critic could deduce even more. Anorexia scholar Joan Jacob Brumberg points out, "The thin body not only implied asexuality and an elevated social address, it was also an expression of intelligence, sensitivity, and morality."⁵⁰

Fashion provided another solution to insufficiently inhibited desire. Though the idea of confining women's appetites certainly precedes the nineteenth century, the Victorians were especially enthusiastic about caging desire not merely through social but also physical means. Couture would provide an apparatus that would have a direct, constricting impact on appetite and digestion: the corset.

The exact shape of the corset as well as its circumference waxed and waned throughout the nineteenth century but, in one form or another, it remained an essential item of women's wardrobes into the twentieth. Fashion scholar Helene Roberts thinks it unlikely that most women normally compressed their waists by no more than two or three inches—which is bad enough—however for events that required a woman to represent her position in society, tighter lacing was common.⁵¹ In other words, eating more than a dainty morsel or two in public could be an agonizing experience indeed. In 1887 a writer for *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* reported on the experience: "I suffered sometimes perfect torture from my stays, especially after dinner, not that I ate heartily, for that I found impossible."⁵² This certainly goes far in explaining

⁵⁰ Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York; London: Random House; Hi Marketing, 2001), 187.

⁵¹ Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1977): 554–69.

⁵² Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36.

women's observed dainty appetites as well as a penchant for sweet nibbles and sugar-laced caffeinated beverages: together they would provide rapid bursts of easily digestible energy.

It's no wonder that related pathologies, most especially eating disorders, were widely reported in the late nineteenth century. Not all of these maladies were as extreme as anorexia nervosa (a term coined by William Gull in 1873) but a morbid obsession with female self-control was characteristic of the time. Contemporary medical authorities were mostly united in denouncing young women for starving themselves due to class pressures. Jerome V. C. Smith, a prolific author, professor at New York Medical College (and one-time mayor of Boston) was especially aghast at the fashionable abstemious of the socially ambitious, roundly condemning, "Food most approved and that which carries with it the endorsement of maneuvering mothers anxiously looking forward to the establishment of their children in commanding social positions, even if the intended husband is a baboon, [that] is a slice of dry toast, weak black tea, and an occasional teaspoonful of sweetmeats."⁵³

If today provides any guide, young women likely followed the admonitions of dietary authorities fitfully and incompletely. A more accurate snapshot of actual behavior can likely be found in the diet doctor's complaints: Mainly that young women were more concerned with appearance than health. They were hardly sanguine about it. In the nineteenth century, a deluge of contradictory information about dietary trends, behavior, morality, and health arrived in the form of fashion magazines, novels, lifestyle manuals, medical authorities, cookbooks, and, later, advertisers. Was at least part of the nervous disorder so noted among affluent women caused by guilt and confusion about food itself?

⁵³ Jerome Van Crowninshield Smith, *The Ways of Women in Their Physical, Moral and Intellectual Relations* (Hartford, CT: Dustin, Gilman & Company, 1875), 115.

Chapter 3

Eat What You Are Told

The Industrial Revolution brought with it profound changes in Western diets caused by dislocations that were simultaneously economic, political, social, and geographical. As multinational networks crowded out locally-sourced staples, sugar, for example, lost its status as a luxury good to become a caloric staple for Europe's proletariat.⁵⁴ At the same time as the source of calories became ever more remote, people themselves relocated away from their agricultural roots when they moved from country to city, whether nationally and internationally. This double displacement of location and food availability upended what had been a relatively stable idiom of localized foodways. Any number of new meals had to be invented and dishes created. Ladies had to learn to lunch; hostesses to study the passing of cream pitchers.

In this unfamiliar landscape, members of the ascendant elite, the urban middle class, had to practice a whole new set of performative norms relating not only to foodways but to morality, comportment, and gender relations, to name only a few. All this was made even more difficult by the rapidity of the fortunes made and lost in the milieu of industrial capitalism, the exponential growth of cities and the concomitant scramble among the burgeoning bourgeoisie to join polite society. No wonder middle-class women, the people who depended the most on a carefully constructed "front" for their social position, felt insecure. This insecurity worked out nicely for two other innovations of the eighteen hundreds, mainly cheap newsprint and the professional

⁵⁴ When, for example, the price of sugar spiked during the French Revolution working-class women of Paris rioted in the streets to demand government intervention so they could afford their morning's sweet coffee. See *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795*, edited and translated by Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, and Mary Durham Johnson (University of Illinois Press: 1979), 115–118

scribbler. In combination, the two allowed women to imbibe society's shifting norms and expectations from an ever-increasing stream of mass media.

In this increasingly media-saturated public sphere, gendered foodways were mirrored and amplified creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop. Mass media both informed and codified the modes of behavior, that is the scripts and habitus discussed in the previous chapter. Accordingly, nineteenth-century society expected women to perform in ways prescribed to them by books and magazine articles penned by medical practitioners, religious authorities, etiquette pundits, and, later, advertisers. These would constrain behavior in at least two ways: first by normalizing or stigmatizing certain behavior; second by reflecting observed behavior and, in the process, essentializing it in each sex. The subjects of surveillance, in turn, performed the expected cultural norms, looping back to inform the reportage of those very norms.

Women, unmoored from their origins in any number of ways, could learn normative dietary behavior from a wide variety of media. Diet guides told women it was their calling to nourish a moral society. Conduct guides, cookbooks, and periodical columns provided scripts that needed to be followed to fulfill gender expectations. Advertisers played on women's insecurities to hawk everything from baby formula to Jell-O. To a greater or lesser degree, all of these texts could function to publicly shame transgressors of the norms.

The following are mostly limited to American-published sources for reasons that are, in part, due to space limitations but also because nineteenth-century United States was, in a social sense, in the vanguard of the changes that would later wash over the rest of the industrialized world. On this side of the Atlantic, due to transnational migration patterns and the legacy of slavery, Anglo-Americans' class insecurities were tied up not merely with economics but ethnic

identity.⁵⁵ The strong Protestant ethos was also a powerful force that underpinned everything from high literacy rates to teetotalism to a puritanical condemnation of gustatory pleasure. What's more, when it came to disseminating food culture, American mass media played an outsized role in promoting industrially-produced food.

Dietary Advice

Depending on the time, place, author, and intended audience, advice guides had a moral and or religious slant, a medical perspective, or a narrow concern with etiquette. Often there was a degree of overlap. When it came to physicians, although they tended toward the puritanical in their diet advice for both sexes, it was women who were primarily in their sights. In part, this was because their “natural” love of luxury was more likely to lead them astray but also because it was purportedly mothers’ God-given role to discipline the appetites of their children. This was especially critical when it came to foods seen as too pleasurable. In this respect sugar was a prime suspect, a hedonistic temptation that populist health authorities brought up with predictable regularity. Women could hear it in the anti-sugar sermonizing of the likes of Sylvester Graham and John Harvey Kellogg in the nineteenth century and then again in the anti-sugar crusade spearheaded by Robert Lustig in our own millennium.

An early and influential example of the screed of sugary perdition addressed to mothers was penned by the Presbyterian Scottish doctor William Buchan around the turn of the nineteenth century. In his opinion, sugar’s “frequent use not only gives children a disrelish for wholesome simplicity, but entices them to swallow more than they otherwise would, or that they want, and thus makes gluttons of them even before they can be strictly said to eat.” Like many

⁵⁵ In late-nineteenth century parlance ethnicity was often described as race, as in the “Anglo-Saxon Race.” Nativist sentiment intruded on discussions of food as much as any other field.

others, Buchan links a desire for pleasurable foods to drunkenness and sexual appetite: “How quickly does the immoderate pursuit of carnal pleasures or the abuse of intoxicating liquors ruin the best constitutions.”⁵⁶

Medical opinion then, as now, was inconsistent. While for Buchan sugar was the gateway drug to corporeal corruption, others were more sanguine about saccharides. Pharmacologist and Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians Jonathan Pereira considered sugar consumption perfectly harmless, even suggesting that mothers gratify their children’s natural appetite for sugar “in moderation.”⁵⁷ Some even suggested the parent use candy as a bribe to get children to behave, though others vehemently objected.⁵⁸

Moral censure wasn’t limited to children’s diets. Medical authorities had plenty to say about women’s own eating habits too. One topic that came in for special opprobrium was dieting, or at least specifically controlling food intake for reasons of vanity. Here the moral danger was quite instrumental since bad eating habits might impact a woman’s marriageability. In the opinion of the crotchety Thomas Parry (as the *Spectator* describes him) the “idiotic,” fashionable upbringing of women results in a young lady who is “the worst food taker” having been trained in “restraint and dieting for delicacy.” The resulting Metropolitan belle may have a “beautifully formed bust” but with her “lax and unsteady mouth, leanness and exhausted condition...claimeth no homage from high healthy man.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ William Buchan, *The New Domestic Medicine* (London: Thomas Kelly, 1814), 87; This idea that sugar consumption in childhood leads to later debauchery is an oft repeated trope, see for example Mortimer Dormer Leggett, *Dream of a Modest Prophet* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1890), 100–102.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Pereira, *A Treatise on Food and Diet* (New York: Fowlers & Wells, 1851), 56.

⁵⁸ A proponent of the former was Charles Edward Sargent, *Our Home: Or, The Key to a Nobler Life* (Springfield, MA: W. C. King, 1883), 75; while Julius August Christian Uffelmann, *Manual of the Domestic Hygiene of the Child* (New York; London: Putnam, 1891), 315 is vehemently opposed.

⁵⁹ Thomas Parry, *On Diet, with Its Influence on Man* (London, 1844), 110–11.

While Parry's view had plenty of followers in the medical profession, especially in the puritanical United States, fashionable society on both sides of the Atlantic understood full well the necessity of a constrained waist and full bust. Restraint and dieting for delicacy was and continued to be very much in vogue as the means to an end. In Mrs. Alexander Walker's popular *Female Beauty*, readers learned that consuming vegetables was effective "in subduing the passions and resisting violent affections," whereas meat produced "febrile excitement." Presumably, restraint did not require great effort, since women, "whose constitutions are naturally delicate... prefer light aliments, such as milk, fruit and vegetables." Walker was one of the pundits who came down on the pro-sugar side since it "agrees with every temperament, both sexes, all ages, and in every climate."⁶⁰

If some guides purportedly described women's essentialized constitutions (and the dangers of deviating from the norm) others were more prescriptive. In a collection of Dear Abby-type letters, the Parisian doctor Anna Kingsford sought to cure corpulence in one supplicant and leanness in another. Excess sugar accompanied by too placid a temperament was the diagnosis for the former patient, and too little ease and insufficient sugar for the latter.⁶¹ The cure in each case was to reverse consumption patterns. Both needed to seize control of their diets and discipline their eating habits, if in different ways.

Conduct Guides

Like the diet and beauty books, the etiquette guides, as a rule, were also typically addressed to the "ladies" and prescribe the necessary elements of habitus to signal that one is

⁶⁰ Mrs. Alexander Walker, *Female Beauty* (New York: Scofield and Voorhies, J. & H.G. Langley, 1840), 98. The British author was widely published in the United States.

⁶¹ Anna Bonus Kingsford, *Health, Beauty and the Toilet: Letters to Ladies from a Lady Doctor* (F. Warne, 1886), 1–12.

“well-bred.” They instruct how to stage-manage the many rituals necessary to demonstrate status and provide advice for would-be acting coaches of the rising generation. The specific admonitions shifted, somewhat, with the decades.⁶² By the Gilded Age, enough middle-class women had internalized the basics that the guides offered ever-more detailed instructions on a wider range of meals. The staging varied depending on the intended audience. An especially comprehensive guide for the upper crust was provided by advice maven Maude C. Cooke. She gives elaborate instructions on both hosting and attending dinners, lawn parties, suppers but also homosocial events such as luncheons and teas. (The assumption is that the hostess can command a small army of servants, though the author does deign to supply variants for the penurious household that can only muster a single maid.) The hostess acts out her “good breeding” through every element of holding a dinner party, from knowing whom to invite, the table setting (an individual saltshaker, two knives, three forks, and a soup spoon alongside appropriate glassware), the menu, appropriate conversation, and every other detail—some twenty pages worth. The program for these ritualized dinners followed a standard script proceeding from oysters to soup to one or more roasts, concluding with several sweets.⁶³

At luncheon and afternoon tea, the menus are understandably simpler and designed to appeal to the ladies “for to them [these meals] are usually devoted.”⁶⁴ As such, the viands were dominated by sweetness, that is a selection of sugary beverages, cakes, fruit, and, in summer, ice cream. Even if these homosocial events are much less formal than dinner, once again, the author

⁶² For example, see, in order of publication, Lady of New York, *Etiquette for Ladies* (J. & J.L. Gihon, 1843), 47–53; Jane Aster, *Sensible Etiquette and Good Manners of the Best Society* (New York: G.W. Carleton, 1882); Maud C. Cooke, *Social Life, Or, The Manners and Customs of Polite Society* (Matthews-Northrup Company, 1896); Annie Randall White, *Twentieth Century Etiquette* (Chicago: L.W. Walter, 1903).

⁶³ Cooke, *Social Life, Or, The Manners and Customs of Polite Society*, 189–210.

⁶⁴ Cooke, 216.

goes into great detail about the ceremony involved: Who serves what when, the necessary accouterments, and requisite behavior.

The variety of entertainments Cooke describes—from a “marshmallow toast” for girls to a bachelor party for men, and even a bicycle tea—are dizzying. It is unlikely that most women would have had recourse to all these entertainments, but in a sense, that is not the point. Rather, the litany of behaviors and props necessary for performing class are all there to project a front of “breeding” a term that occurs with metronomic frequency.

Cookbooks

If conduct guides are script-like in their admonitions, cookbooks are, quite literally collections of scripted actions. Unless targeted at professionals they are always addressed to women and, as a rule, to literate middle-class women, even if the actual cooking may have been the province of a servant. Arguably, cookbooks became the most gendered form of literature there was and remained so well into the late twentieth century.⁶⁵ The recipe collections seldom explicitly opine on behavior but then they don’t need to, each step is outlined in full.

The very act of picking up one of these texts was behaviorally gendered as was the implicit message (not always subtly delivered) that in following the author’s advice the reader would fulfill her role as nutritional oracle, nurturing mother, and supportive wife. Even prior to marriage, cookery manuals had their uses. As early as the nineteenth century, commentators pointed out that the way to a man’s heart was through his stomach. “Cupid recognizes the wonderful power of a good dinner in drawing out all one's latent amiability,” opined a columnist for the Chicago-based *Western Monthly* in 1869, “I have a friend who, I always fancied, was

⁶⁵ Inness, “‘The Enchantment of Mixing Spoons’: Cooking Lessons for Girls and Boys,” 121.

cooked into the hymenial vows, by the culinary skill of her who now so gracefully rules his heart and table.”⁶⁶ Not every food implicated in the “hymenial vows” was sweet but many were. As Sherrie Inness points out, as late as the nineteen fifties, cookbooks promised, “The cook who could whip together a stellar banana cream pie or the lightest, moistest chocolate cake was promised more men than she could squeeze into the kitchen.”⁶⁷

Many nineteenth-century cookbooks were as much household manuals as collections of dishes and, as such, the majority of the text was practical with recipes for leftovers mixed in with instruction on how to make wallpaper paste. It was often the dessert recipes that were instrumental as props for influencing others’ behavior. No one suggested that mothers reward children with a nice dish of beans au gratin or that the path to a man’s heart was fringed by a hash of minced mutton.

Baking wasn’t merely a performative act targeting husband and child, it was equally effective in acting out gender and class in public. That is, it allowed women to publicly perform essentialized domesticity (alongside their natural propensity for charity) before an audience of peers. Even in elite New York society, an author for *Harper’s Bazaar* informs us, dainty cups of cocoa and “loaves of good home-made cake” sold well at charity events.⁶⁸ A trendy, well-executed recipe was key. In middle-class society, baking tends to be especially competitive, with cakes, yielding a social capital dividend. As Patricia M. Gantt points out in reference to the American South, “the cakes that make their obligatory appearance at southern gatherings are

⁶⁶ W. JUD. Conklin, “A Talk about Digestion,” *The Western Monthly*, February 1869, 107.

⁶⁷ Sherrie A. Inness, “‘The Enchantment of Mixing Spoons’: Cooking Lessons for Girls and Boys,” in *Kitchen Culture in America Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 127.

⁶⁸ “A Festival of Holidays,” *Harper's Bazaar*. Volume XXVI, Number 45, (November 11, 1893), 924.

emblems of female power politics.”⁶⁹ A similar dynamic was in play at more intimate, Victorian, homosocial events: ice cream parties, teas, lunches, and the like.

Given that desserts provide material support for the power politics of sweetness in both domestic and public setting, they invariably take up large sections of most comprehensive cookbooks. In *The Lady's Receipt-Book* (1847) the best-selling Eliza Leslie devotes a scant 100 pages to savory foods and almost 125 to sweet preparations. In the United Kingdom, Mrs. Beeton, in *The Book of Household Management* (1861) wasn't as generous, with some two savory recipes for every sweet, but that's still a disproportionate number of recipes for the ultimate morsel of a multicourse dinner. This is a similar ratio to Fannie Farmer's *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*, (1896).⁷⁰ Aside from these all-purpose guides, publishers printed numerous cookbooks solely devoted to pastry and dessert. Underscoring the social utility of conspicuous displays of sugary virtuosity in the context of charitable works, community cookbooks are overwhelmingly focused on baking.⁷¹ Moreover, by century's end, food corporations cranked out premium cookbooks by the millions. Not surprisingly cookbooks produced by the likes of Baker's Chocolate, Knox Gelatine, and Royal Baking Powder were pretty much focused on sugary treats.⁷²

⁶⁹ Sherrie A. Inness, *Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 66.

⁷⁰ *The Lady's Receipt-Book* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1847); *The Book of Household Management* (London: S.O. Beeton, 1861); *The Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*. (Boston: Little, Brown and company, 1896).

⁷¹ These community cookbooks were typically assembled for some charitable cause, see, for example *Grand Rapids Receipt Book, Compiled by the Ladies of the Congregational Church* (1873), *California Recipe Book* (1872), *Good Things to Eat; Being a Collection of Recipes Which Have Passed the Crucial Test of Experience* (1904).

⁷² See, for example, *Calumet Cook Book* (Chicago: Calumet Baking Powder Co., 1908); Giuseppe Rudman, *Royal Baker and Pastry Cook* (New York: Royal Baking Powder Company, 1892); James M. Bugbee, *Cocoa and Chocolate* (Dorchester, MA: Walter Baker & Co, 1886).

Yet even that doesn't tell the entire story. What is not immediately obvious from these volumes is who is cooking what, and that it was often the mistress of the house who would do the dainty baking, leaving the everyday drudgery of preparing and cooking to hired help. It is almost axiomatic that to be middle class in the nineteenth century meant a family employed one or more servants. However, especially in the northern United States where labor was dear and domestics often untrained, it was up to the lady of the house to bake high-prestige items such as decorated cakes.

That may account for part of the attraction of dessert making but there may have been another. Many sweet dishes are nutritionally unnecessary, frivolous, and therefore a "fun" and even potentially a creative project detached from quotidian domesticity. A well-executed frosted cake, charlotte russe, or bombe glacé (all illustrated in the Fannie Farmer culinary bible) was likely to bring more praise to the insecure cook than a competently executed pot roast or chicken pot pie.

The training started early. Cookbooks aimed at children especially emphasized sweet foods, presumably because they were more appealing to the younger, sugar-loving demographic. Since these instructional manuals were invariably aimed at girls, they also reinforced women's natural role as cooks—which went hand in hand with making food to please men. An early example of the genre is Elizabeth Stansbury Kirkland's, *Six Little Cooks, Or, Aunt Jane's Cooking Class* (1877). Here the author's conceit is to write a cookbook in the form of narrative, a story about "Aunt Jane" arriving at "Grace's" where she is enjoined by eleven-year-old Grace and her five female friends to teach them how to cook with the explicit aim to make dishes that

her father will like.⁷³ Over the next 15 chapters, the girls learn to cook 207 recipes, from chicken broth to nut cake of which over 75 percent are sweet.

In the few books that targeted both boys and girls, food choices were often gendered. Thus, the *Young American's Cook Book* (1938) showed both boys and girls preparing food. Yet the girls were depicted icing a cake and canning fruit, while the boys were shown in such manly activities as carving a roast, filleting a fish, or serving a rabbit casserole at a male-only cookout.⁷⁴ Unlike boys, girls were supposed to care about appearance not merely in decorating dessert but in all areas of their lives. As Sherrie Innes writes, “This concern is one of the main signifiers of femininity. Thus, cookbooks were not just teaching readers how to concoct a Jell-O salad; they were also subtly demonstrating how femininity was constituted.”⁷⁵

Magazines

Books, whether conduct guides or cookbooks certainly had a role to play in laying out social performative norms, yet even if women consulted them on a regular basis, the texts were largely static. Most periodicals, on the other hand, reiterated much the same script but in innumerable toothsome variations, month in, month out. So, even while these publications parroted both behavior guides and cookbooks, they set out the instructions in periodic, digestible tidbits of acceptable conduct for their female readers. In fiction, advice guides, and fashion plates women could see both a reflection of themselves and instructions on how to mirror approved behavior.

⁷³ Elizabeth Stansbury Kirkland, *Six Little Cooks, Or, Aunt Jane's Cooking Class* (Chicago: Jansen, McClurg & Company, 1877), 6.

⁷⁴ Innes, “‘The Enchantment of Mixing Spoons’: Cooking Lessons for Girls and Boys,” 129.

⁷⁵ Innes, 123–24.

The first of these lifestyle publications was the Philadelphia-based *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830-98) followed by *Harper's Bazar* (1867), *Ladies' Home Journal* (1883), *Good Housekeeping* (1885), and the elite *Vogue* (1892). In these periodicals, and numerous others, readers could learn the ways of society, what was proper and improper behavior for ladies and gentlemen; what they should wear, and what to eat and drink. *Harper's Bazar* (later spelled *Bazaar*) explicitly described itself as “a repository of fashion, pleasure, and *instruction* [my emphasis].”

Two subjects of instruction that come up regularly (and would be familiar to today's reader of women's magazines) are beauty and domestic adeptness. Food was implicated in both. A writer for *Godey's Lady's Book* repeats an oft-written injunction that a "young beauty...as elegant as the Goddess of Love herself, would soon lose these charms by a course of inordinate eating [and] drinking.”⁷⁶ *Harper's Bazar* ran an occasional column in the eighteen seventies called “For the Ugly Girls,” which, other than advice on skin products, prescribed a diet guaranteed to induce undernutrition. The author suggests that a tablespoon of beef jelly will provide the nutrition of three-quarter pounds of beefsteak.⁷⁷ Yet no matter how fashionably emaciated she was, a woman was expected to be a wiz in the kitchen. Even *Harper's Bazar*, the sort of publication that advised girls departing for college to bring a set of furs, a feather boa, and a half-dozen sets of gloves, believed that even ladies should learn to cook.⁷⁸ Articles suggest that a woman must practice her culinary role and pass the skill to her daughter, not merely so that she may nab a superior match but indeed—as one author for the publication opined—to advance the race. And theoretical culinary knowledge is insufficient, it “must be capped with habit and

⁷⁶ Quoted in Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 124.

⁷⁷ June 25, 1870, 410

⁷⁸ “A Girl's College Outfit,” *Harper's Bazaar* (September 11, 1897), 72.

familiarity.” It’s worth noting that the examples the author gives are doughnuts, pudding, tea-biscuits (cookies), bread, and cake.⁷⁹ Yet here too, control was key. When it came to performing her domestic role, a mother needed to know not only the correct proportion of sugar and flour for the doughnuts but also how to apportion the results to her children. She had to learn to reward the little ones with candy, but nonetheless maintain full control lest it “ruins stomachs, perverts the appetite, and destroys teeth”⁸⁰

The life-style magazines trained women on the necessity of disciplining word as well as deed. Accordingly, expressing enjoyment in eating demonstrated “low-breeding.” “To make remarks about the guests or the dishes is excessively rude” is a sentiment commonly expressed by contemporary etiquette authorities.⁸¹ A Gilded Age author for *Good Housekeeping* instructed:

It is not pleasant, and not often profitable for a guest, nor is it advisable for members of the family, to spend the dinner hour in discussing the food that is being put to a legitimate purpose.... Food finds its ultimatum [sic] of use in ministering to physical needs and is out of its sphere when made a leading topic of frequent table talk.⁸²

The magazines acted as a training ground not merely for normative behavior, they also provided a forum for that most ubiquitous form of indoctrination, mainly mass advertising. Despite early reservations about the “tastefulness” of including paid copy in the publications, eventually all the periodicals switched from a paid subscription model to one based on advertising.

⁷⁹ “The Cap-Sheaf,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (December 12, 1885), 794, worth noting that American bread of the period was typically sweetened—as is the case for most packaged bread today. “Race” should probably be understood as native-born Anglo Saxon.

⁸⁰ “Candy-Eating,” *Harper’s Bazaar* (August 8, 1896), 680.

⁸¹ Florence Hartley, *The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: J. S. Locke & Co., 1876), 100.

⁸² “Table Talk,” *Good Housekeeping* (April 28, 1888), 315.

Magazine Advertising

The magazines, then as now, oscillated between the hedonistic temptations of cake, pie and ice cream recipes and instructions on how discipline the body, either a woman's own or her offspring. Once advertising entered the picture in the late eighteenth century, marketers of industrial foods soon learned to weaponize this guilt-inducing contradiction. The duality of sin and virtue would form the spine of their playbook—and remains so to this today.

Even as women were battling for the vote, a vast edifice of commercial enterprises had been built upon a foundation of feminine consumerism that depended on women performing their roles of wife and mother and directing their daughters to do the same. The Nineteenth Amendment seems to have had no impact on women's daily reality, or at least on the perception of their proper roles. Even at a time when women made up some twenty percent of the workforce, Strathmore ad agency copy suggested female consumers could still be reeled in by focusing on "luxury and daintiness."⁸³ The broad assumption that men built and women shopped was undoubtedly reinforced by the upper-middle-class men who set the tone at Madison Avenue agencies. "She is the spender of the nation," was a commonplace sentiment expressed by the Frey agency in 1930.⁸⁴

Yet even if the cult of consumerism seemed to have superseded the creed of domesticity by the twentieth century, the underlying Victorian model of femininity remained largely in place. Despite the upheaval in the marketplace, the admen who shilled this new commercial cornucopia had no interest whatsoever in fomenting a gender revolution. On the contrary, they would exploit

⁸³ The quotation is from Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 10; the employment statistics from Women's Bureau, "History: An Overview 1920 - 2021," accessed December 12, 2021, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/wb/about/history>.

⁸⁴ Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman, 1900-1999*, 10.

and reinforce the essentialized tropes that filled women's lifestyle periodicals well into the twentieth century. As a 1923 ad for the George Batten agency stipulated, it was the adman's job to mold a woman's behavior, to instruct her on being a homemaker and "stewardess of the family budget. In that sphere she will be guided largely by advertising. Good food, good clothing, good furnishings, good values for her household and children-these she will learn from advertising."⁸⁵

The dainty consumer provided the indispensable lubricant for the cogs of capitalism. Well into the twentieth century, the target audience was decidedly white and middle class, even when advertising quotidian goods. A Hostess Cake ad shows ladies in fine attire gossiping over tea. The model featured in a 1927 *Ladies Home Journal* ad for A&P wears a fox (?) stole as does a full-page ad for Hostess Cakes featured in a 1929 issue of *Good Housekeeping*. "Do you wonder then Madam, that these cakes win all who try them," intones the saccharine copy.⁸⁶

Food manufacturers invariably emphasized success in courtship, marriage, and motherhood all being dependent on a woman's homemaking skills. And the earlier learned, the better. In a 1938 Crisco ad children adore their mother for her doughnuts, the boy because they're "swell" but the girl (a nutrition-aware mom-in-training) because they're "digestible."⁸⁷ Targeting a slightly older demographic, a Royal baking powder turned to the proven cliché that good cooking is "the way to a man's heart" in its 1921 advertisement, in which a plain, preteen girl beats out a prettier rival for a boy's interest by presenting him a cake. Well into the 1950s, a

⁸⁵ Hill, 195.

⁸⁶ *Ladies Home Journal* (January 1927), 65; the 1929 Hostess ad shows both the tea-time image and a separate image of the stole-bedecked shopper. *Good Housekeeping*, (January 1929), 190.

⁸⁷ The ad features a recipe for Dandy Mincemeat Doughnuts; "Cristo-Digestible" (1938), accessed December 20, 2021, <https://envisioningtheamericandream.com/2016/06/03/happy-national-donut-day/>

Crisco ad, featured in a 1952 issue of *Time*, depicted an astonished groom embracing his bride with the header, "Can she cook?" In answer, the manufacturer Proctor & Gamble assured the happy couple that the lard substitute "pleased wives because it made cakes and pies that kept Papa coming home for dinner."⁸⁸

To what degree all of this targeted public discourse, whether in the form of dieting guides or ad copy, reflected real life or directed social mores is probably impossible to parse with any exactitude. Nevertheless, all these behavior Baedekers undoubtedly had some role in directing insecure women's behavior, by not only in articulating the expression of "polite" society but also policing it. That said, they never came close to capturing the full range of human expression or appetite in the gilded cage of bourgeois femininity. In a sort of jujitsu move women were able to weaponize their supposed daintiness, weakness, and moral superiority to assert agency well past the borders of the domestic realm. And here too, sweet props and sugary rituals served as indispensable accessories.

⁸⁸ Both ads are featured in Hill, 194.

Chapter 4

Teatime Revolutionaries

In 1898, at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Seneca Falls women's rights conference, Susan B. Anthony took the stage, standing behind a two-foot round mahogany table. On it was displayed a facsimile of the Declaration of Sentiments that had been signed upon this very table a half century ago. With the original text no longer in existence, this banal prop was the only talisman that could be tied to that occasion, and indeed it would become a sort of holy relic (in Lisa Tetrault's formulation) of women's suffrage.⁸⁹ It's worth underlining that this was no desk or lectern but rather a small, pivoting tea table, designed to be pulled away from the wall for that quintessentially gendered ritual of taking tea. There's little doubt that that original declaration would have almost certainly been accessorized by a sugar bowl and dainty plates of sweet biscuits.

Describing the revolutionary occasion in Seneca Falls, Judith Wellman has quipped, "What began as a tea party, turned into something quite different."⁹⁰ Yet despite the feminist historian's dismissive mention of the tea party, the specific form of the occasion as well as the stage created around the tea table was hardly incidental; it was central in both the metaphorical and the physical sense. The structural utility of the homosocial space provided by these afternoon meals is invaluable in exploring how women could negotiate the complexities of their prescribed

⁸⁹ "Declaration of Sentiments Table, 1848 | National Museum of American History," accessed November 16, 2018, http://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_529599; Lisa Tetrault, *The Myth of Seneca Falls: Memory and the Women's Suffrage Movement, 1848-1898* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 174.

⁹⁰ Judith Wellman, *The Road to Seneca Falls*, (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 2004). Her remark is typical of how feminist historians' flight from anything that smacks domesticity has impoverished the field's analytical repertoire.

natures in relationship to their political activism. In the economic sphere, too, an understanding of the domestic space and its rituals helps to explain female entrepreneurship. Even while Victorian society restricted women's performances to a series of gendered norms through a variety of prescriptive texts and disciplinary actions, it was precisely through their normative behavior that many women were able to seize a modicum of agency. The very characteristics of daintiness, sweetness, and charity they had internalized and learned to perform weren't incidental to the political movements, they formed their core principles. There is no better example of the stage where this occurred than the space around the tea table.

As the previous chapters outline the cleavage of social space between the masculine public sphere and a feminine domestic realm, mostly excluded women from public agency. This is not to say that women were absent at public lectures and meetings led by men. In the United States, plenty of women were active in both the abolition and early temperance movements, but public standards restricted them to supporting roles. The one location where opinion makers sanctioned feminine agency was in the space of domesticity. That space turned out to be rather more elastic than patriarchal ideology had probably intended. Using the same reasoning that restricted women to the home, activists argued that since only they truly understood "women's issues" such as child-rearing, the family, and domestic bliss, why should they not have a public voice when it came to these?

What women needed was a wedge into the public sphere, something the stage centered around the tea table could provide. That performative space was remarkably versatile: Women could act out the afternoon's sugar-centered ceremonies in the relative privacy of their parlors, but also in public tearooms, and even at mass events. Even when men were present at these occasions, the semiotic surround was feminine: the sober beverage, the dainty tea sets, the sweet

biscuits and cakes, the table itself reassured everyone that essentialized femininity was not under threat, no matter how radical the demands.

The role of the sugar bowl varied depending on the political and economic exigencies of the time. While structurally necessary to a mostly homosocial event, the saccharine surround at Seneca Falls was mostly incidental.⁹¹ Not so during the abolitionist movements in both the United States and Britain, when the bowl became the center of attention, its crystalline contents evoking the blood of murdered Africans.⁹² Then, during the female-dominated temperance movement, the domestic tea table came to represent the antithesis of the public house, the sweetened feminine beverage the antidote to masculine demon rum.⁹³ Later, the same performative space also created opportunities for economic liberation as women entrepreneurs opened up tea- and lunchrooms. These too would often play host to tea-time revolutionaries.

Setting the Stage, Setting the Table

Place is important. “Corridors” of power don’t merely exist in ostentatious buildings that loom over the Potomac or the Thames. In the nineteenth century, it was elite, masculine institutions the likes of New York’s storied Delmonico’s or gentlemen’s clubs such as London’s Reform Club that created spaces where the architects of Victorian patriarchy drew up their plans.⁹⁴ Women—even elite, powerful, white women—had nothing comparable.

⁹¹ In Britain, the linkage was often more direct, as when specific tea rooms specifically catered to suffragists. See Jessica Sewell, “Tea and Suffrage,” *Food, Culture & Society* 11, no. 4 (2008): 487–507.

⁹² Julie L. Holcomb, *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Cornell University Press, 2016), see especially chapter 5, “Woman’s Heart, Free Produce and Domesticity”.

⁹³ On the preponderance of male alcohol consumption see Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 4. It’s worth noting that the term teetotaler has nothing to do with the Asian beverage; some ardent teetotalers found even tea medically suspect.

⁹⁴ Delmonico’s did admit women but only with male escorts and only for dinner. Suppers and the many events the restaurant catered for were typically homosocial. See Paul Freedman, “Women and Restaurants in the Nineteenth-Century United States.”

What they had was the parlor. Given the severe restrictions on respectable women circulating outside the home, the parlor became the primary site where they could socialize with their peers. It became a liminal space between public and private where women could construct and perform a new model of female sociability.⁹⁵

To read the advice guides, women seemed to use the parlor almost exclusively to serve tea to their social circle. The tea ceremony was precisely structured in terms of invitees, time, dress, and the almost entirely sweet foods and beverages. Regarding allowable topics for conversation, an 1893 column in the gossipy *Table Talk* points out “Woman's chat...should be kept in the domestic line” that is, home, husband, and children. Recipes and servants were game, but evidently nothing of substance.⁹⁶ In theory, the structure lent itself to the policing of these sorts of cultural norms, but in practice—as the Seneca Falls tea table makes clear—the same structure could also be used to reframe those norms, indeed, to precisely invert the prescription provided in *Table Talk*.

It is helpful to consider the opportunities, but also the limits, these quasi-public stages presented to women's agency. In any hegemonic sphere—and it's hard to imagine a more domineering patriarchal system than the nineteenth century—there are ways of appropriating the dominant culture's semiotics to other purposes. Or, as Michel de Certeau describes it in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, to consume the products of capitalism (or colonialism) and through the tactics of consumption to subvert hegemonic power. The strategy of resistance is premised on the fact “that the space of the tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with the terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to

⁹⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1991), 44–45.

⁹⁶ “Decorative Meal,” *Table Talk*, November 1893, 387.

keep it itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver ‘within the enemy’s field of vision,’ as von Bülow put it.”⁹⁷ De Certeau uses the example of indigenous people creolizing Spanish culture in Latin America but a similar argument, with some caveats, can be applied to the carving out of women’s space out of a patriarchal landscape. Using the tropes of essentialized femininity—daintiness and sweet consumption—women could construct a thoroughly feminine stage in full view of the masculine gaze yet obscured by its membership and rituals. The homosocial tea table could encompass discussions of such public matters as the linkage of slavery with the sweet crystals in the sugar bowl, or prohibition, or women’s suffrage—all fueled by sweet tea and cakes.

Abolition

No issue linked the tea table to women’s agency more directly than the boycotts of slave-grown sugar on both sides of the Atlantic that began in the last decade of the eighteenth century and continued intermittently until the American Civil War. At the height of the British boycott of slave-grown sugar in the 1790s, Julie Holcomb points out, “the tea table acted as a centripetal force in public and private debates about commerce and gender.”⁹⁸

The opening salvo of the boycott was William Fox’s influential pamphlet *An Address to the People of Great Britain on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* which enjoined its readers to abstain from a product so “thoroughly died scarlet” with blood.”⁹⁹ While Fox didn’t single out women as the primary culprit, many located the feminine taste for

⁹⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley/Los Angeles, Ca: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

⁹⁸ *Moral Commerce: Quakers and the Transatlantic Boycott of the Slave Labor Economy* (Cornell University Press, 2016), 611.

⁹⁹ *An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the Propriety of Abstaining from West India Sugar and Rum* (London: M. Gurney, 1791), 4–5.

sweets in the sex's supposed love of luxury. Today's scholars have plausibly argued that locating the sins of the slave-grown sugar regime in women's luxury consumption came out of contemporary views of women's undisciplined bodies and the need to control these. But no matter the motivation, the fact is that women could assert both economic and political power around the tea table. In doing so, they could put the lie to the essentializing discourse. As Holcomb points out, women who participated in the boycott "rejected cultural constructions of gender that described women as apolitical and interested only in fashion and consumption. [Slave sugar] abstention transformed the landscape of ladies' tea tables into a liminal zone where conversations about gender, commerce and abolitionism blended into one another."¹⁰⁰ Yet all this could only occur as a function of women's normative taste for sweetness not despite it. Certainly, the result was impressive if only short-lived: Over half a million Britons joined the boycott and grocers reported sugar sales plunging by a third to a half in a matter of months. At the same time imports of so-called free sugar from India increased ten-fold.¹⁰¹

Though in Britain the boycott of the early 1790s soon waned, in part due to rising prices, in part due to the Napoleonic wars, in the United States it gained momentum in the next century. Whereas the public face of British anti-slavery activists was male, in the United States women were often in the vanguard. They could denounce slavery as a moral sin against natural motherhood since the "peculiar institution" not only abused (enslaved) women it thereby had a destructive effect on the family. One influential voice was the Quaker poet Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, who specifically highlighted enslaved mothers' plight. In one widely circulated poem, "Think of Our Country's Glory," the second stanza of the poem enjoins the reader to "Think of

¹⁰⁰ Holcomb, *Moral Commerce*, 624.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Holcomb, 624.

the frantic mother/Lamenting for her child,/Till falling lashes smother/Her cries of anguish wild!”¹⁰²

Even if public activism wasn't entirely respectable for women, changing what went into the sugar bowl fell well within their purview. Chandler wrote that anyone “who bears the name of a woman and a Christian” should “fling from them the luxuries” produced by slave labor “as if they were a deadly poison.” She depicted that tea-time stalwart, the pound cake, as “the sepulcher of the broken heart” and a “delicious ice” as wearing “the red tinge of human blood.”¹⁰³ Accordingly, activists organized (gender-segregated) Free Produce Societies that enjoined consumers (that is women) to abstain from any slave-produced goods. In theory, this included slave-grown cotton, tobacco, and rice, but in practice, it was sugar that received most of the attention.

For Protestant moralists, sugar's long association with luxury and sensual pleasure had already made it suspect. Abolition happened to align with contemporary concerns with excess candy consumption by children as cheap, mass-produced confectionary piled up in store window displays. *The Moral Reformer*, the *Christian Watchman*, *The Friend*, and the *Boston Recorder* all excoriated children's sugar consumption. In 1837, *the Colored American* compared children's purchase of candy to men's frequenting brothels and repeated candy's role as the gateway drug to alcohol.¹⁰⁴

Women's role as guardians of domestic morality gave them the power to influence public discourse—but at a cost. The route to addressing the immorality of slavery was through further

¹⁰² Elizabeth Margaret Chandler and Benjamin Lundy, *The Poetical Works of Elizabeth Margaret Chandler: With a Memoir of Her Life and Character* (L. Howell, 1845), 64.

¹⁰³ Chandler and Lundy, 88.

¹⁰⁴ Holcomb, *Moral Commerce*, 119–20.

control of their own and their children's appetites. With the temperance movement, this instrument of control would be extended to alcohol as well, with decidedly mixed results.

Temperance

The temperance movements in both Britain and the United States had a strong, religious, and especially Methodist component that aligned with the middle-class projection of self-discipline.¹⁰⁵ The reformers considered drunkenness as primarily a masculine vice that led men to moral dissolution and eventually penury, neither desirable for a stable society, and both thoroughly destructive to domestic stability. Women were innately well-suited to address this given their superior morality and religious nature.¹⁰⁶ As guardians of domestic bliss their “influence can nowhere be exercised to better advantage than in the cause of temperance, as it bears upon the domestic circle,” as the editor of *the National Temperance Magazine* opined.¹⁰⁷ Wives had an interest in constraining male behavior for more every-day reasons. Not only could they not countenance a husband unable to perform his patriarchal role as moral exemplar or they were dependent on him as the sole breadwinner. Of course, drunkenness was not acceptable in women either, but since they were supposedly better able to exercise greater self-control, activists saw women's inebriation as an aberration rather than an endemic disease, as it was with men. Here too, as in the sugar boycotts, the space around the tea table came to be employed not merely as the ground for organizing but as a symbolic space, the antithesis of the public saloon.

¹⁰⁵ Holly Berkley Fletcher, *Gender and the American Temperance Movement of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2012), 8.

¹⁰⁶ Fletcher, 103.

¹⁰⁷ “A Word for the Ladies,” *The National Temperance Magazine*, September 1859, 96.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, in Britain, tea had come to represent the anti-alcohol, a beverage that cheers but does not inebriate, to paraphrase the poet William Cowper.¹⁰⁸ And at least according to one authority, adding the sugar and milk made the Asian beverage even more salubrious.¹⁰⁹ Behavioral norms surrounding the serving of the beverage shifted depending on class and gender as the formerly genteel beverage became ubiquitous and sugar cheap. Nonetheless the structure of the meal called “tea” became fixed relatively early. The sugar bowl was essential as was bread and butter and a variety of sweet baked goods. The form remained even as the context shifted. Starting around 1830, teetotal crusaders started to scale these essentially domestic rituals ever larger.¹¹⁰ During the largest temperance lollapaloozas, they would sweeten the occasion with cartloads of sugar.¹¹¹ At one tea party held in Britain in the 1830s, 1400 people consumed 700 pounds of cake, along with almost 200 pounds of sugar (or about 18 sugar packets each!) to stir into their coffee and tea.¹¹² Activists also repeatedly bribed children to listen to abstinence lectures with tea and cake.¹¹³

Whereas in the United Kingdom tea was a drink as common as ale, consumed by men and women alike across the social spectrum, in the United States, tea was hardly a universal beverage. Moreover, it was decidedly coded feminine—“the feeble drink of effeminate men and good old women”—and was strongly associated with the afternoon rituals of polite society.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ “The Task,” in *The Complete Poetical Works* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, Lee & Co., 1860), 233

¹⁰⁹ Walker, *Beauty; Illustrated Chiefly by an Analysis and Classification of Beauty in Woman*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Tea parties apparently originated in 1830, see William Logan (of Logan, *The Early Heroes of the Temperance Reformation* (London: Houlston & Sons, 1873), 64.

¹¹¹ The term teetotaler does not, as it might be assumed, come from the word for tea, but most plausibly from the “t” in total abstainer.

¹¹² Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 74.

¹¹³ See multiple mentions in Western Temperance League, *The Western Temperance Herald* (1859).

¹¹⁴ Robert J. Burdette, “Rum and Patriotism,” in *Readings and Recitations, No. 8: A New and Choice Collection of Articles in Prose and Verse, Embracing Argument and Appeal, Pathos and Humor, by the Foremost*

On this side of the pond, temperance teas were also common but tended to be smaller-scale, feminine affairs. An event reported in a regional Massachusetts paper in 1845, described as a “Social Tea Party of the Tee-total Ladies of Westboro” with refreshment tables “bountifully supplied with Pies, Cake, Fruit, Confectionery, Tea, Coffee, &c.,” seemed a rarer event than the mass gatherings on the other side of the Atlantic.¹¹⁵ More frequent were the tea parties regularly hosted, for example, by regional members of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) for a couple dozen attendees.¹¹⁶

Even in the domestic setting, tea wasn't necessarily the favorite teatime beverage. As American, Victorian-era “tea services” demonstrate, coffee was often offered alongside tea.¹¹⁷ No matter what was served, it was inevitably sweetened, and iced when the mercury rose. Lemonade recipes give some indication of how sweet these beverages could be. Directions call for as much as three tablespoons of sugar for each glass of lemonade, that is, about one and a half times the sweetener in an equivalent glass of Coca-Cola.¹¹⁸ By the latter part of the nineteenth century these homemade drinks would be joined by the industrially-produced kind and once that happened a flood of carbonated sugar water spilled over the genteel dikes that had constrained the space around the tea-table.

Temperance Advocates and Writers ... (Milwaukee: Right Worthy Grand Lodge, Independent Order Good Templars, 1891), 32.

¹¹⁵ “Social Tee Party for the Tee-Total Ladies of Westboro,” *Massachusetts Cataract & Worcester County Waterfall*, January 8, 1845, Vol. 2, Issue 43.

¹¹⁶ See for example Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, *Minutes of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union at The... Annual Meeting in ... with Addresses, Reports, and Constitutions* (Chicago: Women’s Temperance Publication Association, 1884), cxii, lxxvii, lxxxiii.

¹¹⁷ Dorothy Rainwater, “Victorian Dining Silver,” in *Dining in America: 1850-1900*, ed. Kathryn Grover (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press u.a., 1987), 173–204.

¹¹⁸ “Home-Made Summer Drinks,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1894, 18, suggests one cup or more (!) sugar for six cups of lemonade. It’s plausible that Americans developed a taste for these cold beverages due to the climate and the wide availability of ice which both dilutes the drink and decreases the perceptions of sweetness.

One challenge for the temperance movement was that killjoy puritanism was built into its DNA. The true believers insisted that the only proper substitute for alcoholic beverages was water.¹¹⁹ Most—but not all—observers considered soda water and mineral water acceptable as well, though ice water was sometimes suspect for medical reasons.¹²⁰ The less pure of heart turned to a variety of “soft” drinks. Other than lemonade and iced tea, root beer was an early temperance favorite even if (or because?) it contained some alcohol—about two percent according to contemporary reports.¹²¹ Grape juice had its fans as well. Leaving water aside, what all these temperance beverages could offer was the pleasurable rush of sugar.

There is some evidence that sugar wasn't always seen as a gateway drug to liquor, as John Harvey Kellogg and others insisted, but as a viable alternative: the methadone to the heroin of whiskey. Around the turn of the 20th century, more than one observer noted the seeming increase in candy consumption that accompanied the temperance movement. Some made this point explicitly, as when Dr. A. C. Abbott, the Pennsylvania health commissioner wrote, "The appetite for alcohol and the appetite for candy are fundamentally the same." But now, if we are to believe a 1910 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* the rush from “demon rum,” to “demon candy,” might cause as many problems as prohibition itself. One wag even suggested that the WCTU. might soon need to stand for the “Women's Confectionery Temperance Union.”¹²² It's unclear how

¹¹⁹ See American Temperance Society, *Permanent Temperance Documents of the American Temperance Society* (Boston: S. Bliss, 1835), 497–98; also M.S.H., “The Safest Drink,” in *The National Temperance Mirror* (London: National Temperance Publication Depot, 1891), 107.

¹²⁰ At least an ad for Allen's Root Beer claimed iced water would cause “Bright's disease.” See Allen's Root Beer Extract,” advertisement, *Good Housekeeping* 1889, iv: a less self-interested point is made here, though the author looks askance at soda too: Julia Colman, *The Beauties of Temperance: A Practical Guide for Young People's Societies*, Vol. 2 (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1899), 12.

¹²¹ “Temperance Teaching,” *The School Moderator*, Volume 5, Number 2, September 11, 1884, 30

¹²² Jane Dusselier, “Bonbons, Lemon Drops and Oh Henry! Bars: Candy Consumer Culture, and the Construction of Gender, 1895-1920,” in *Kitchen Culture in America Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*, ed. Sherrie A Inness (Philadelphia, Pa: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 31.

serious these objections to candy were; the anti-temperance lobby had its own agenda and stigmatizing men who consumed girly candy instead of manly whiskey likely served their purposes well. But there must have been at least something to it: A contemporary article in the *New York Times* suggested that “Candy will satisfy the craving for whiskey and is an effective cure for any drunkard who cares to try it ” and further noted that candy stores were now substituting for saloons as destinations for “young gadabouts.”¹²³ Soda fountains where “jerks” mixed candy-like syrups with carbonated water played a similar role.

As hordes of men, women, and children signed abstinence pledges in the Victorian age the temperance movement led by the WCTU opened up a vast new market for manufacturers of so-called “soft drinks” (as opposed to the hard drinks peddled by Satan’s minions, the tavern keepers).¹²⁴ Welch’s, which had originally been sold to supply communion “wine” to dry Protestant churches now found a much wider market in “the home as a delicious and healthful temperance drink.” Allen’s Root Beer advertised its extract in the pages of *Good Housekeeping* as “A Sparkling, Healthy Temperance Drink.”¹²⁵ Not to be outdone, Hire’s ran ads with the tagline “The most APPETIZING and WHOLESOME TEMPERANCE DRINK in the world.”¹²⁶ According to at least one contemporary estimate, New England alone consumed some 30 glasses

¹²³ “The Nation’s Annual Candy Bill,” *New York Times*, January 2, 1910, sec.5, p. 8.

¹²⁴ This is no hyperbole, alcohol was widely condemned as the gateway to perdition: “Alcohol, manufactured in conformity with the device of Satan... is most widely the scalding hot water of deadly poison, which Satan vomits from his mouth for men, women and children to drink the till they love it, and then love to drink it to drunkenness and perdition.” Lebbeus Armstrong, *The Temperance Reformation of this XIXth Century* (New York: Pudney, Hooker and Russell, 1845), 6.

¹²⁵ “Allen’s Root Beer,” advertisement, *Good Housekeeping*, 1889, vol. 9, viii.

¹²⁶ “Hires Root Beer,” advertisement, *Life*, August 8, 1889, 30.

per capita in one summer season.¹²⁷ Even Coca-Cola touted itself briefly as “The Great National Temperance Beverage” around the turn of the century.¹²⁸

The success of soft drinks in the United is hard to imagine without the stimulus of Prohibition. In the first six months after the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment, soda consumption doubled and kept increasing throughout the Depression. No one profited more than Canada Dry ginger ale, not because it was a “dry” beverage but because it could be mixed with bootleg liquor to make the hard stuff sweet and palatable. “Canada Dry Ginger Ale,” quipped *Fortune* magazine in August 1931, “had class and cheap gin needed class badly.”¹²⁹ Between 1924, when it was introduced into the United States and 1926, sales exploded from 1.7 million bottles a year to more than 50 million.¹³⁰

That the domesticity agenda promoted by temperance activists succeeded is evident in the Amendment’s passage but that it was a pyrrhic victory is equally clear from the law’s repeal a dozen years later. If the point of the temperance movement was to replace masculine beverages such as lager and whiskey with feminine drinks such as tea and lemonade an even more powerful goal was to replace the public saloon with the domestic parlor. Catherine Gilbert Murdock has argued that the crusade wasn’t so much a war against liquor but a campaign to “domesticate” men and, while at least temporarily effective, it had long-term impacts that the WCTU activists could never have anticipated.¹³¹ One consequence was that sugary drinks lost most of their

¹²⁷ A Remarkable Train, *The Farmer’s Review*, April 24, 1895, 263

¹²⁸ Jack S. Blocker, *Alcohol and Temperance in Modern History: An International Encyclopedia* (ABC-CLIO, 2003), 568.

¹²⁹ Blocker, 570.

¹³⁰ Tristan Donovan, “The Four Horsemen May Charge Over the Earth—but Coca-Cola Will Remain,” *The Atlantic*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/11/the-four-horsemen-may-charge-over-the-earth-but-coca-cola-will-remain/281178/>.

¹³¹ See especially Chapter One in Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

gender associations. Another was that even if Prohibition may have domesticated some men it did just the opposite for society women who began to frequent speakeasies and other dissolute locations where bathtub gin and sweet soda consorted in public. In the end, the main victors in the temperance battle seemed to have been the mobsters and Coca Cola.

Tearooms and Lunchrooms

In many ways, the speakeasy was the debauched doppelganger of those other two institution of the flapper age: the assertively “dry” tearoom and lunchroom. The fashion for these can be traced to an early nineteenth century need for women to find respectable places to eat while shopping. Both the lunchrooms and tearooms reproduced the domestic tea table with its dainty accouterments and sweet-focused menu. What’s more, for women, though mostly middle class but (in the United States) both white and Black, these spaces also provided a business opportunity. The following paragraphs focus primarily on the opening that lunchrooms, and later, tearooms in the United States created for women to step out of their domestic confinement but a similar phenomenon occurred in Western and Central Europe.¹³² The irony here is that women could escape their domestic milieu by reproducing the performance of prescribed femininity in public.

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the gendered segregation of space had led to distinctive dining habits. While breakfast and supper might still be eaten at home, men typically ate the mid-day meal at a restaurant close to work.¹³³ This meant that women would eat lunch

¹³² For the role of *salons de thé* in France and feminine *Café-Konditerei* in the Hapsburg empire see Michael Kronl, *Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2011), 230–37 and 273–77.

¹³³ As Cindy Lobel points out, this distinction between the public and domestic can be overstated. Professional continued to transact business at home and the workplace, especially for the working class, was populated by many women who had to find a place to eat lunch too. see *Urban Appetites: Food and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York*, 2015, 140.

alone or in the company of children. In limited contexts, ladies might dine in a public setting but seldom without a chaperone. So, for example, in New York, at Delmonico's Fourteenth-Street outpost in the 1860s, women were banned from the famed café altogether but could attend the restaurant, however only in the company of men. At lunch, women could book a room, but only if no men were present.¹³⁴

With the coming of the industrial age, as women increasingly performed the role of consumer, shopping created a need for respectable dining options as a respite from this feminine endeavor. Yet even while these new eateries expanded women's permitted sphere, they reinforced their gendered appetites. Late in the century, a *New York Times* reporter pointed out how shopping district restaurants composed menus to cater to their female patrons "most of [whom] are partial to dainty tidbits, pastry and ice cream."¹³⁵ By this point, these feminine taste preferences had long been institutionalized. In Manhattan, when the shopping district was still downtown, a pastry shop operated by François Guerin offered a separate ladies' dining room as early as 1815. In the antebellum period, nearby Thomson's Ice Cream Saloon and the palatial Taylor's Saloon were similarly "intended for ladies," something that was reflected in the menu with its emphasis on ice cream, cakes, and candy (though Taylor's menu also included a variety of savory snacks).¹³⁶

Department stores eventually caught on to female appetites, and opened their own lunchrooms, once again replicating domestic spaces in a public setting. In New York, department stores including Macy's, O'Neill's, and Hearn's added dining options for their almost exclusively

¹³⁴ Paul Freedman, "Women and Restaurants in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Journal of Social History* 48, no. 1 (2014): 5.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Freedman, 10.

¹³⁶ The quote is from "New York Daguerreotyped: Business-Streets, Mercantile Blocks, Stores, and Banks," *Putnam's Monthly*, April 1853, 362–63; the menu detail from Freedman, "Women and Restaurants in the Nineteenth-Century United States," 7.

female customers. The luncheon offerings differed little from teatime. A 1906 fountain luncheon menu from Siegel Cooper department store featured eight sandwiches but some thirty sweet offerings from tarts and pies to cakes and rice pudding.¹³⁷ The editor of *Ladies' Home Journal* reported on one store's dining room, "a women's luncheon resort—a sort of Adamless Eden" where, much to his consternation, his companion orders no more a than a cup of chocolate and a charlotte russe, her definition of a "light luncheon." As he looks around the room, he is astonished (or feigns astonishment?) at the dainty meals the ladies consume:

Here and there was an oyster patty and a cup of tea. In several cases a meringue glacé or a dish of plain ice cream and a glass of milk seemed to suffice. . . . here were women, many of whom I personally knew, possessed of good sense, some of the best and nicest women in all New York, mothers among them who forbid their children to eat sweets during the day, yet who sat in this room, in their full senses, munching candies and indigestible pastries.¹³⁸

Despite our male interloper's dismay, the utility of these spaces was, in fact, nutritive, in that tightly corseted women depended on quickly digestible calories and caffeine to keep them going. Just as importantly, the lunchroom also served a social purpose: Here they could participate in society's panopticon, perform their femininity and status on a thoroughly scripted homosocial stage.

Even more than the lunchrooms, the tearooms that proliferated around the turn of the nineteenth century served a social purpose by expanding respectable women's opportunities to circulate in public. While they replicated the domestic space of the parlor in décor and social function, at least two elements set them apart, the first political and the second economic:

¹³⁷ Rare Book Division, The New York Public Library. "Fountain Luncheon [held by] Siegel Cooper Co. [at] "New York, NY" (other (?department store));" New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed December 7, 2019. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47db-802b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

¹³⁸ Edward W Bok, "Home with the Editor," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1892, 12.

Tearooms played a role in both the suffrage and temperance movements; moreover, women were often the proprietors—unlike the shopping district lunch spots where men were in charge.

In much the way cafés and taverns had once been sites of male political organizing, tearooms created space for women’s political agitation. In the United Kingdom especially, suffrage activists gravitated to suffrage-friendly tearooms in Nottingham, Edinburgh, and Manchester. In London, the Tea Cup Inn catered to the women working at nearby offices of the Women's Social and Political Union (the country’s foremost suffrage organization). Despite its revolutionary mission it too catered to women’s essentialized appetites: An advertisement in the activist publication *Votes for Women* offered, “Dainty luncheons and afternoon teas at moderate charges. Home cookery. Vegetarian dishes and sandwiches; entirely staffed by women.”¹³⁹

In the United States, as elsewhere where the temperance movement was active, women set up tearooms to provide a suitable place where others of their sex could gather and, presumably, publicly perform the temperance lifestyle. In Providence, RI, the local chapter of the YWCTU ran a tearoom and library where they could “distribute Temperance literature and sustain a lunch and tea room for the shop girls.”¹⁴⁰ In New Zealand and Australia, chapters of the WCTU set up tearooms at agricultural and trade fairs.¹⁴¹

The tearooms did not merely provide dainty sweetmeats for their female clientele. As the ad for Tea Cup Inn makes clear, they also provided employment, and, in many cases a business opportunity. Women had long run taverns, brothels, and rooming houses (the three were not

¹³⁹ “Taking Tea and Talking Politics: The Role of Tearooms,” Historic England, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://historicengland.org.uk/research/inclusive-heritage/womens-history/suffrage/taking-tea-and-talking-politics/>.

¹⁴⁰ Christian Temperance Union, *Minutes of the National Woman’s Christian Temperance Union at The... Annual Meeting in ... with Addresses, Reports, and Constitutions*, lxxiii.

¹⁴¹ “WCTU Tearooms,” Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/zoomify/34977/wctu-tearooms>; “White Ribbon Tea Rooms,” Melbourne Royal, accessed October 7, 2021, <https://www.melbournroyal.com.au/virtual-museum/stories/snapshots/white-ribbon-tea-rooms/>.

always distinguishable) but these were hardly acceptable occupations for genteel ladies. Tearooms, however, opened the door to a more respectable form of entrepreneurship. In the United Kingdom, numerous tearooms had been an offshoot of the temperance movement, perhaps none more famous than the chain of establishments opened by the temperance activist Kate Cranston (1850–1934) in Glasgow. The British tearoom idea spread across the English-speaking world and even crossed to France where it was Gallicized as the *salon-de-thé* and got a suitably swanky makeover.

In the United States, the design was decidedly homey, which was exactly the point. One reason these spaces were run and patronized by bourgeois women was that they resembled the domestic parlor.

A reporter for the trade publication *Simons' Spice Mill* in 1915 made this explicitly clear:

The tea room has an aspect the least commercial of all public places of refreshment. This is so because it is woman's invention, an extension of the home into the thoroughfare. Men drop in, but the patronage is essentially feminine. The tea room is domestic, and epitomizes practice in good housekeeping and delicate cookery. It is a place to meet, gossip, compare shopping notes, and conduct some of the negotiations that maintain the activities of society.¹⁴²

The author goes on to explain that, in the main, the menu consists of the eponymous beverage along with toast, waffles, and cakes.

Contemporary observers understood that the success of these early tearooms came from the way they mirrored the panopticon of polite society's parlors. After visiting a Fifth Avenue tearoom, a reporter for the *Illustrated American* noted how, "At times during the fashionable hour of the room has the appearance of a private entertainment, so many of the patrons being

¹⁴² "Increase of the Tea Room," *Simons' Spice Mill*, March 1915, 260. Equally interesting is the author's description of the respectable women who were almost exclusively the owners of these businesses.

acquainted with one another, and talk extends from one from table to table.” And indeed, owner Mrs. John A. Lowery had called on her society friends with “large visiting lists” to help her in spreading the word.¹⁴³ It helped that she was herself on the social register. The writer concluded the article by noting that this was an excellent entrepreneurial opportunity for other respectable ladies. Others concurred. In a compendium of career options for women edited by Frances Willard (the famed founder of the WCTU), the writers expound on the business opportunities tearooms offer, since these “could be made the popular rendezvous for the society women, where they could meet friends by appointment...” adding “It should be a ladies resort exclusively, no men being permitted to share its hospitality.”

Tearoom ownership wasn’t limited to white women; in the early decades of the twentieth century, middle-class Black women opened tearooms in urban locations across the United States. Many were deeply segregated, catering to either a white or Black clientele but seldom both.¹⁴⁴ But either way, they were not open to hoi polloi. A 1922 ad for Mayme Clinkscale’s “chic and colorful” Ideal Tea Room in Chicago promoted itself as a destination for “banquets for sororities, clubs or frats.” In Harlem, press and advertisement copy often describe tearooms as “exclusive,” “the elite of the city are found [here],” or “where the wealthier class of colored people dine.”¹⁴⁵

In the early part of the twentieth century, the independent tearooms mostly morphed into lunchrooms, and outside of swanky hotels, became ever more democratic. As industry ramped up its production of sugary foods, dainty snacks became less of a class marker. Oreos and “Hostess”

¹⁴³ Hester Hoffman, “In the Wider Sphere,” *The Illustrated American*, 1896, 766.

¹⁴⁴ Chicago Commission on Race Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (University of Chicago Press, 1922), 312–13.

¹⁴⁵ Cass, “A Long History Of Tea In Northern Manhattan, NY,” *Harlem World*, June 11, 2012, <https://www.harlemworldmagazine.com/a-short-history-of-tea-in-harlem/>.

cakes may have been marketed as a tea-time treat for white women in fox stoles, but the reality of who consumed them was much more egalitarian. Sweet tea, lemonade, and soda lost most of their gender associations as Americans steadily ramped up their liquid sugar consumption. Nonetheless, much of the essentializing ideology of ideal womanhood remained. Certainly, when it comes to food women continue to rehearse, act out and repeat a repertoire of micro-performances passed down from their grandmothers. It continues to be women who primarily try to discipline their own, or their children's sugar consumption. It is women who are more likely to "indulge" in a "sinfully rich" dessert, to drown their sorrows with ice cream, to sip sugary cocktails or chocolate diet drinks. And it is women who feel guilt that they have sinned against the puritanical strictures of our nutritionism-infused ethos. Brillat-Savarin got it right when he wrote, "tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are."¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du gout* (Paris: Charpentier, 1847), aphorism no. IV.

Conclusion

Sugar, spice, and everything nice
These were the ingredients chosen
To create the perfect little girls
But Professor Utonium accidentally
Added an extra ingredient to the concoction—
Chemical X
Thus, The Powerpuff Girls were born
Using their ultra-super powers
Blossom, Bubbles, and Buttercup
Have dedicated their lives to fighting crime
And the forces of evil

—“The Powerpuff Girls Theme Song”

Although this study has focused primarily on the nineteenth century, many of the embodied behaviors described are very much with us. The revelations about Instagram in the fall of 2021 made clear that while young women have plenty of Chemical X—they can join the Marines and become chancellors of powerful countries—too many still struggle with highly gendered preconceptions of body image and diet. They still act out societal expectations that they should be made of sugar and spice and everything nice. My undergraduate students confess that they still fight “the judgey voice reminding [them] not [to]eat the chocolate and that women eat don’t steak” or some variation on that theme.¹⁴⁷

Food continues to be linked to womanhood and sweetness to femininity. In Cairns’ and Johnson’s words, “Despite the important changes that have occurred, food and femininity remain tightly intertwined in our collective imagination and in [women’s] emotional lives.”¹⁴⁸ Women’s

¹⁴⁷ The quote is from a student from “The Sweet and Bitter,” a class I taught in the 2021 spring semester at the New School.

¹⁴⁸ Cairns and Johnston, vi.

relationship to food continues to be complex and multivalent. Cooking and eating can be both sites of oppression and of validation, of obligation and agency. While women's conduct may be socially constructed it is also deeply internalized, because, as I have argued, it is embodied in day-to-day practices: from breast-feeding to the physical act of cooking and feeding a husband and child to the performative requirements of class but also in the struggle to discipline one's own body, to cravings brought on by self-denial, purging or other attempts to conform to societal body image norms.

For women today, as in the nineteenth century, there is no food that is more semiotically laden than sugar, especially for the middle classes in the developed world. Their conflicted attitudes are reflected in reinforced by public discourse, which often seems to express a kind of societal bulimia. Look to the "Food" section of the *New York Times* where contemporary domesticity is celebrated in a dish of sweet potatoes that contains the full daily recommended allowance of sugar in a single serving even as the "Well" section warns of the dangers of feeding sugar to children.¹⁴⁹ No wonder that in this context a dessert (or even a side dish) has to be characterized as "sinfully rich" and followed by guilt, penance, and repentance. This too continues to be gendered. As in the nineteenth century or in Bourdieu's France of the 1970s, foodways are still embodied, quite literally, in women's bodies. So, for example, in the United States obesity is directly correlated with class and race—but only for women.¹⁵⁰

This thesis has sought to explain how nineteenth-century gendered foodways were constructed through a feedback loop between actual performance and the description and

¹⁴⁹ Yewande Komolafe, "Citrus-Glazed Sweet Potatoes," *New York Times*, (Nov. 8, 2021), Rachel Rabkin Peachman, "Cutting Sugar Rapidly Improves Heart Health Markers" *New York Times*, (July 19, 2016).

¹⁵⁰ See Cynthia L Ogden et al., "Obesity and Socioeconomic Status in Adults: United States, 2005–2008", U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db50.pdf>.

prescription of that performance through a variety of mass media sources. It has also sought to point out how this gendered behavior had personal, political and economic consequences. My interest was primarily historical with a focus on sugar and sugary foods but scholars could apply a similar approach to other foods (a study of men and meat, say) and other eras, including our own.

The necessarily interdisciplinary approach of this sort of research has implications for both gender and food studies. When it comes to the former, insights into the construction of gender can be established by studying something as seemingly personal as food preferences, which turn out to be anything but personal, but rather an embodiment and or performance of societal power dynamics. Women's studies scholars that focus too narrowly on women's inter-gender power relationships can miss the embodied practices that affect people's everyday behavior. Thus, many feminists have tended to focus more on men's objectification of women than on women's embodied and highly complex relationship to food, yet the two are tightly linked in multiple ways. Reducing the problem to the "male gaze" leads to have an incomplete diagnosis of the issue, thus leading to necessarily inadequate remedies.

Yet if certain relationships to food inform the construction of gender, it is equally true that gender affects food choices. Food policy researchers often look to income, class, and race as determinants of diet, yet sex is hugely influential as is illustrated in the gendered food habits of both upper- and lower-income cohorts. Consider, for example, how sweet foods are used by women of different classes. Among elite women they function as levers of control, whereas for lower income women they may provide a rare source of pleasure. Surely this has public health implications.

It's important to note that gender is, or was (even in the nineteenth century, even among the bourgeoisie), hardly the only determinant directing people's dietary choices. Ethnicity, religion, personal preference, convenience, marketing and, above all, availability have guided what the middle classes have been eating ever since they attained cultural dominance some two centuries ago. Moreover, gender is less of a determinant than it used to be in a society where women's roles are less tied up with domesticity and food preparation now that the culinary industrial complex has taken over most food preparation. This is not to say that society doesn't still expect women to be the primary nurturers, as the COVID-19 pandemic amply demonstrated.

Does it matter that we keep repeating our gender-delineated roles? Epidemiological data on eating disorders and cardiovascular disease certainly indicate that it does. And from a global perspective, it would be helpful if eating kale salad wasn't stigmatized as food for soccer moms and sissies. There is another, pernicious effect of men and women embodying gendered behavior without being aware of it. It is that, if society values equality between the sexes and, perhaps even more importantly, the concept of choice, self-awareness of gendered behavior must be a necessary precondition. Of course, our foodways aren't the only way we reproduce nineteenth-century ideas of gender but understanding why we eat what we eat can be used as an indicator of other embodied behavior that stands in the way of a more equal society.

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