[Food for Thought (Series): Ep. 2 Foodie Culture]

You're listening to *Death and Numbers*, a podcast created by the Humanities Media Project in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. Today on we ask a seriously hashtag-important question, **does instafood actually taste good?**

Introductory music - "rainbow" songs collage, Judy Garland, "Somewhere over the Rainbow," "Rainbow Connection,"

Welcome back to our "Food for Thought" series. I'm Amy Vidor.

I'm Caroline Barta. Can you taste that rainbow in your bagel? The unicorn in that milkshake? Should sushi be in your burrito?

Today's episode about "foodie culture" breaks down into several bite-size pieces: first, we'll consider how our visually-obsessed world encourages both viral food culture and community.

We'll think about why you might buy a real, physical cookbook in 2017…

and discuss the influence of "tastemakers" on food trends. Then, we'll debate the future of the professional food critic in the age of Yelp.

[Pause]

We're putting on our predictor hats...diving into the weird, wonderful world of modern food writing and criticism. Join us, won't you, as we consider the world's most bewildering archive: the internet.

Viral food. While that might sound unpleasant at first, it's one of the hottest trends in the foodie world.

Sometimes, viral success comes overnight and remains, like the perennially stacked line of Franklin's barbeque in Austin, Texas. Franklin's opens at 11 AM...and stays open until they sell out of meat...

and from the 1st day Franklin's opened in 2009, they've sold out. The "Line" at Franklin's is now as famous as Franklin's itself.

Part of the experience of this hallowed institution seems to be the communal effort and patience it necessarily requires.

And they aren't kidding about the line. They wouldn't let Kanye West cut (and he's been known to interrupt a few people in his day).

I mean, they let President Obama cut. But he had a country to run. And he was really polite about it.

Sometimes, viral success seems accidental, and can happen after years of obscurity. "The Bagel Store in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, had been making rainbow bagels for 20 years when a *Business Insider* video about the candy-colored carbs went viral on Facebook."

65.1 million views later, the store was so slammed with customers, seeking to insta-document their rainbow dreams, they were forced to shut down until they could cope with the overwhelming interest in their product.

Sometimes, food virality targets insta-audiences with concoctions designed to be shared. This is patently the case with Austin-area's, Southern-Asian restaurant, The Peached Tortilla, which created two "sharable" milkshakes for Spredfast (a social media marketing and management software company)'s lounge at South by Southwest.

The "Donut Shake Me Up" vanilla milkshake was topped with a sprinkled donut, and three donut holes. The other, the "Socially Sweet," was a stunning-to-the-eyes shake crafted with blue-tinted vanilla ice cream, cotton candy, whipped cream, sour tapes, a lollipop, and a candy necklace.

They've capitalized on the success of their viral creations by staging multiple "popups" --special, ticketed events around "viral" milkshakes, often curated by a guest chef and promoted / supported by several venues. These people don't play around!

With viral food, the question comes down to: if you don't share, post, or stream it, did it happen?

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In this series, when we talk about *food writing*, we broadly mean almost any writing that focuses on food. This might be a critical or reference work by a food critic or a food historian, or the genre most associated with the kitchen, the cookbook. The cookbook represents a particular subset within food writing, for while it may contain images, as well as some descriptive or instructive passages, the majority of the text of a cookbook typically comes in the form of recipes, which teach a cook how to make a dish by presenting a formulaic set of instructions.

Our insta-culture encourages us to expand food writing to include social media posts, essays about food, food blogs, and an increasing number of food "critics." Virality hasn't just changed how we dine out; it's changed how we cook in. Time to talk 21st-century cookbooks.

Amazon's introduction of the Kindle e-Reader in 2007 and Apple's introduction of the iPad in 2010 caused consternation in both the publishing industry and the print media more broadly. Rampant speculation accompanied these technological advances.

Surely now, "the book" was dead. Many who participated in this mass hysteria mode especially assumed that the bottom would fall out of the cookbook market.

After all, cookbooks tend to be pricier than the average hardback--often filled with high-quality photos printed on glossy paper. Much to the publishing industry's surprise, cookbook sales flourished in the following years, with books like celebrity chef Ina Garten's *Cooking for Jeffrey* selling over 400,000 copies in 2016.

The reason cookbook consumers remained faithful to print editions, however, is quite simple. As the "Queen of Cookbooks," editor Emilia Terragni, explains, (quote) *The way in which books are put together, the selection of the recipes, the photographs, the idea of going back and forth when you turn the page. It's an experience that I think the digital format hasn't managed to reach in the same way* (unquote).

Cookbooks today are more than just technical manuals. They can be aspirational or decorative. Filled with rich images, and sprinkled with narrative, they are prime candidates for coffee table browsing.

This desire for narrative--to get a glimpse into a chef's life, while reading about the recipes they create--developed with the explosion of cooking blogs. Fans get attached to different blogs, often because of their fundamental "gimmick."

For Smitten Kitchen's Deb Perelman, posts about "fearless cooking in a tiny NYC apartment," interspersed with stories about her adorable children reel in readers. [PAUSE] For Molly of My Name is Yeh and The Pioneer Woman, Ree Drummond, it's their decision to leave bustling city life for a rural farm in North Dakota and a cattle ranch in Oklahoma. [PAUSE] For Thug Kitchen readers, it's profanity-laced, borderline-insulting, vegan recipes for those who need more veggies in their life. [PAUSE] Whatever your cup of tea, food bloggers are here to serve it up.

In return, readers get to interact with the bloggers: leaving feedback about the "success" of a recipe, making suggestions and requesting substitutions, debating the merit of high-quality ingredients, or inquiring further into their personal lives. [PAUSE]Who knows, if you follow these bloggers, you might just cook your way into your own unique life, too.

It is no surprise, then, that bloggers score book deals because publishers are willing to bet on their massive fanbase, quantifiable in daily site visits or social media followers.[PAUSE] It is a gamble, as writer Leslie Kaufman notes, (quote) *Transferring readers — even loyal ones — from a blog to a book is tricky business….[because] there is no magic formula for knowing which bloggers have audiences that are invested enough in them to purchase an expensive hardcover when much of the material is available free online* (unquote).

For many, that gamble has paid off. Thanks to the ubiquity of blogger personalities and their glossy cookbooks emblazoned with mouthwatering images of food, and an ingrained "foodie" culture, it's now hard to imagine a time before international cuisine and culture seemed approachable for the home cook.

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Of course, not all food is created equally. Surely some things look better than they taste. But who gets to make that call?

In previous decades, being a "tastemaker" meant exclusivity, and usually anonymity. Publications like the Michelin Guide dictated global food standards, and local food journalists at large newspapers handled local reviews. These critics cultivated a certain mystique. Hiding their personas from the public eye, they wanted their reviews to be as "unbiased" as possible. That's to say, they wanted to critique the experience as if they were an average diner, not someone special. A restaurant's quality had to be consistent for all guests.

Even today, reviewers for Michelin maintain high standards. There are only 120 "inspectors" worldwide, operating in 23 different countries. They are to maintain their anonymity. In fact, if an inspector suspects their identity has been compromised, they cancel the booking, and have a colleague manage reschedule for a random future date, and then do not visit that region for 10 years.

Michelin, of course, is at the extreme of the food criticism spectrum. The other extreme is the 21st century self-proclaimed capital T- Tastemaker, who flaunt their status on their various social platforms, pushing their names and faces alongside their content. These social media tastemakers often have their meals comped, in exchange for a positive Instagram post (few write negative posts).

Increasingly, it seems the importance of not just presentation--the momentary appeal of food before it is consumed, but the lasting, frozen image of the meal, matters to the ranking and appreciation of the food experience. If it's not "Instagram-worthy," is it fine dining?

That begs the question: what separates your cousin, who insists on photographing her every meal from a professional "tastemaker"? Followers? Time? Effort? In the modern world, the line seems increasingly blurred. Restaurants are aware that audience-posted bad internet reviews, whether they be on a site like Yelp or on a longer-form site {?}, can severely harm business.

The internet seems to be changing criticism itself. Whereas professional critics doled out both positive and negative reviews (perhaps not in equal measure, but both varieties), criticism seems to be increasingly segregated by platform and design of the archive individual tastemakers prefer.

The carefully curated world of Instagram leads to "tastemakers" who spread only positive criticism, in part because their experience lacks the clarity anonymity can provide, as well as encouraging an anodyne brand of critical language.

The other side of internet criticism leans into the trolling side criticism necessarily includes, with language that sees the flaws of a place. Without the restraining forces of an editorial staff or a professional code of ethics, however, vitriol, particularly on anonymous review sites breeds easily.

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Our last episode, we talked quite a bit about the line between cooking as trade and cooking as hobby.

Today's episode pivoted once again on this line between professional / hobbyist: as we look toward the future, we're asking: who will last as the "chefs" and "critics" of our era?

The breakdown of the hierarchy between critic and audience enabled by the open internet has inspired new kinds of food appreciation and culture to arise.

OUTRO: This has been *Death and Numbers*, a podcast created and produced by the Humanities Media Project in the College of Liberal Arts at UT-Austin and **Liberal Arts Instructional Technology Services**. We are Amy Vidor and Caroline Barta. Notes for the show, including links and photos can be found on our website, humanities media project dot org. Our theme music is "Enthusiast" by Tours. Thank you for listening.