

Warwick Sabin

The Rich Get Thinner, the Poor Get Fatter

[*Oxford American*, #68, March 2010]

BEFORE YOU READ

When you eat, do you reach for fresh, locally grown foods, or are you more likely to eat prepackaged, processed foods? What influences your choices about food? Are price and availability factors in your decision about how to eat?

WORDS TO LEARN

<i>indicate</i> (para. 3): show (verb).	<i>indulgences</i> (para. 12): something gratifying to one's desires or feelings (noun).
<i>intuitively</i> (para. 6): being perceived or known by insight (adverb).	<i>dominant</i> (para. 14): in an elevated position (adjective).
<i>phenomenon</i> (para. 6): an observed or observable occurrence (noun).	<i>efficient</i> (para. 15): performing in the best possible manner (adjective).
<i>prevalence</i> (para. 6): wide extent (noun).	<i>requisite</i> (para. 17): required or necessary (adjective).
<i>disproportionally</i> (para. 7): out of proportion (adverb).	
<i>attributable</i> (para. 7): designated (adjective).	

1 Our appreciation of Southern cuisine has a dark side. We usually acknowledge it with a laugh, or a devil-may-care sense of recklessness.

2 That fried chicken leg may kill you; that pork rib is going to take a year off your life. But it's worth it, you say. You are willing to live on the edge.

3 This apparent choice between good health and good eating is made even starker with every new report issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The latest, issued in November 2009, was titled "Highest Rates of Obesity, Diabetes in the South," and it included some sobering statistics. Most Southern states have obesity

Warwick Sabin has been a journalist for the Arkansas Times and is publisher of the well-known Southern magazine Oxford American, which comes out of the University of Central Arkansas.

rates hovering near, or above, the thirty-percent mark, and projections indicate that the problem is going to get much worse in the years ahead.

Of course, it doesn't take long for the researchers to trace the expanding waistlines back to the biscuits and gravy.

"Southern culture plays a role in the rising obesity rates in the region," reports a 2008 article in the *Chattanooga Times Free Press*. "Traditional Southern foods — even vegetables such as fried green tomatoes and fried okra — can be land mines for the weight-conscious, health experts said."

Intuitively, that may seem true, but it does not explain why our nation's skyrocketing obesity problem is a relatively recent phenomenon that is not confined to the South. The CDC data indicates that no state had an obesity rate higher than fifteen percent in 1990. By 1998, no state had a prevalence of obesity less than ten percent. As our lives become less physi-

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cally demanding (with fewer jobs in agriculture and blue-collar trades), and our diets become less wholesome (with more sugar and artificial ingredients), all Americans are at risk of becoming ensnared in the obesity trap.

Still, there is a particularly sad irony in the South disproportionately suffering from an obesity epidemic that could be attributable to its regional cuisine. Many of what are now considered traditional Southern dishes were to a large degree designed to fill empty stomachs and provide essential energy when work was hard and food was scarce.

Then, like now, the South had a higher rate of poverty than almost anywhere else in the nation. So what has changed?

Take a walk through the aisles of your grocery store and compare the prices of fresh fruits, vegetables, and meats to those of the mass-produced processed foods. It will quickly become clear that the poor people of the South are making the exact same decisions they made during the time of James Agee and Walker Evans — they are opting for the affordable calories.

The cruel fact is that fewer than one hundred years ago being poor meant you were painfully thin. Now, it means you are dangerously fat.

But this time, it's probably not the biscuits and gravy that are to blame so much as candy bars, soft drinks, and fast food.

In fact, our favorite Southern foods actually have become indulgences because an increasing number of Southerners cannot afford them. By an

extraordinary twist of economics, the fresh, local produce once available cheaply at the back-road farm stand has become the preserve of the elites, available in gourmet-food shops at inflated prices.

It used to be that keeping a few free-range chickens, tending some grain-fed hogs, and raising a small vegetable garden was how people simply survived. Now these are often vanity projects for young hipsters and retired hedge-fund executives who have discovered the forgotten pleasures of "heirloom" tomatoes and artisanal sausage. Incredibly, we've reached a point in our society where things that humans have done for thousands of years — grow a vegetable, smoke or cure a piece of meat — now provide the grounds for smug satisfaction. (Think of Marie Antoinette at Versailles, playing shepherdess and milking the cows.)

In a region where farming is still a dominant industry, how can food that is fresh, local, and organic be beyond the reach of so many Southerners? Our states are among the nation's leaders in the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, rice, peanuts, poultry, and other agricultural products. Yet schoolchildren in poor, rural districts, surrounded by fields and chicken houses, eat processed lunches delivered by food-service tractor-trailers from facilities that are thousands of miles away.

In the end, this paradox can be traced back to those fields and chicken houses, which are now incorporated elements of the devastatingly efficient agribusiness giants. Mechanization, genetic engineering, herbicides, pesticides, growth hormones, and massive economies of scale ensure that anything grown in the next town over is as likely to end up in a grocery store in Maine as in your neighborhood supermarket. In this environment, running a small farm according to organic principles and traditional methods requires greater commitment and investment, which explains why fresh produce is rarer and more expensive.

It is therefore easy to understand how the local food movement also has become another form of social protest against the forces that are corporatizing and homogenizing our society. Fair enough, but it should not make wholesome food so precious and inaccessible that it becomes a luxury item.

Already there has been a noticeable elevation of familiar Southern cuisine from the dairy bar to the martini bar; from the checkered tablecloth to the white tablecloth; from the blue plate to fine china. We're getting used to exclusive restaurants offering their interpretations of fried chicken, greens, pork rinds, and grits — with the requisite menu credit of the nearby organic farm where the meat and produce was raised.

In a bizarre reversal, now it is the wealthy who are rail-thin and eating beans and cornbread. And the poor? The message seems to be: Let them eat (Little Debbie) cake.

VOCABULARY/USING A DICTIONARY

1. What is the root of the word *ensnared* (para. 6)? What does its prefix mean?
2. What is a *processed* food (para. 9)? How does it differ from a fresh food?
3. What is an *epidemic* (para. 7)? How do you understand the phrase *obesity epidemic*?

RESPONDING TO WORDS IN CONTEXT

1. What is an *obesity rate* (para. 3)?
2. From what language is the word *cuisine* (para. 1) derived? What is a Southern cuisine (para. 1)? A regional cuisine (para. 7)?
3. Sabin says forces are “corporatizing and homogenizing our society” (para. 16). Given that pronunciation, how do you understand what these forces are doing to our food choices?

DISCUSSING MAIN POINT AND MEANING

1. Why are “traditional” Southern foods so high in calories?
2. Explain why the poor people of a hundred years ago were likely to be very thin while the poor people of today are more likely to be very fat.
3. Why are fruits and vegetables grown so close to some people in rural areas often very difficult to find in their local supermarkets?

EXAMINING SENTENCES, PARAGRAPHS, AND ORGANIZATION

1. What is the effect of the change in point of view (from first-person plural to second-person singular to third person) throughout the article? Which point of view is dominant?
2. Sabin writes, “By an extraordinary twist of economics, the fresh, local produce once available cheaply at the back-road farm stand has become the preserve of the elites...” (para. 12). How do you understand the phrase “an extraordinary twist of economics,” based on the statement that follows?
3. Why does the writer end the essay by stating that the message to the poor of this country seems to be “let them eat (little Debbie) cake” (para. 18)?

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Sabin quotes some startling statistics about the change in obesity rates in this country from 1990 to 1998 (para. 6). Do you agree with the reasons given for this change? What other factors might be at play?
2. What sort of foods are available in your grocery store? Do you know where they are from? What affects your choices when buying food to eat?
3. Why might a “local food movement” (para. 16) be considered a “form of social protest”?

IN-CLASS WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Research “Southern cuisine” and include the examples of foods given by Sabin in this essay. Consider the history of the South pre- and post-Civil War. What do you know about the region? Based on your research, explain how the cuisine of the area is a reflection of the region agriculturally and economically.
2. In a brief essay, agree or disagree with the argument Sabin lays out for why the poor of this country seem to be suffering from obesity disproportionately when compared with more affluent people. Are there points left out that Sabin didn’t make?
3. What is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention? Why is it concerned with the issues of obesity and food choices brought out in this article? Is it a good organization to monitor such issues? Why?

Amy Domini

Why Investing in Fast Food May Be a Good Thing

[Ode Magazine, March 2009]

BEFORE YOU READ

People invest in different companies for different reasons. If you consider yourself health-conscious or environmentally conscious, do you think you would ever invest your money in a fast food company? Why or why not?

WORDS TO LEARN

<i>incalculable</i> (para. 1): beyond calculation (adjective).	<i>impact</i> (para. 7): effect or influence (noun).
<i>invest</i> (para. 2): to put money into something that offers a potential return of interest or income (verb).	<i>endangered</i> (para. 7): threatened with danger or extinction (adjective).
<i>competitors</i> (para. 4): rivals (noun).	<i>industry</i> (para. 9): trade or manufacturing activity (noun).
<i>ban</i> (para. 5): to prohibit (verb).	

Amy Domini is the founder and CEO of Domini Social Investments. She is the author of *The Challenges of Wealth: Mastering the Personal and Financial Conflicts* (1988) and *Socially Responsible Investing: Making a Difference and Making Money* (2001). She was named one of the top 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine in 2005.