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## The Curious Appeal of ‘Bad’ Food

In the age of Instagram-perfect dishes, why are there so many sites and blogs dedicated to culinary disasters?

IRINA DUMITRESCU

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CULTURE

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We live in a time of food perfectionism. Experts shout culinary commandments from every direction: Daily meals, they say, must be ethically sourced, organic, raw, gluten-free, meat-free, dairy-free, protein-rich, low-fat, low in sodium, carbon neutral, dirt-encrusted, pre-soaked, and fair trade. It can be hard to keep track of all these contradictory gastronomic rules. On the one hand, cooking should be simple and traditional, something [our great-grandparents could recognize](#). On the other, food should be chef-inspired, executed with [masterful knife skills](#) in a professional-grade kitchen. One should [eat with family](#), clinking wine glasses over a long table in a Tuscan garden. One should [eat alone](#), undistracted, carefully controlling for portion size. We ought to eat like [cavemen](#): nuts, roots, and seeds. We ought to eat like [spacemen](#): foams and sous-vide. And [by no means should anyone eat sugar](#), because sugar is poison and grandma is

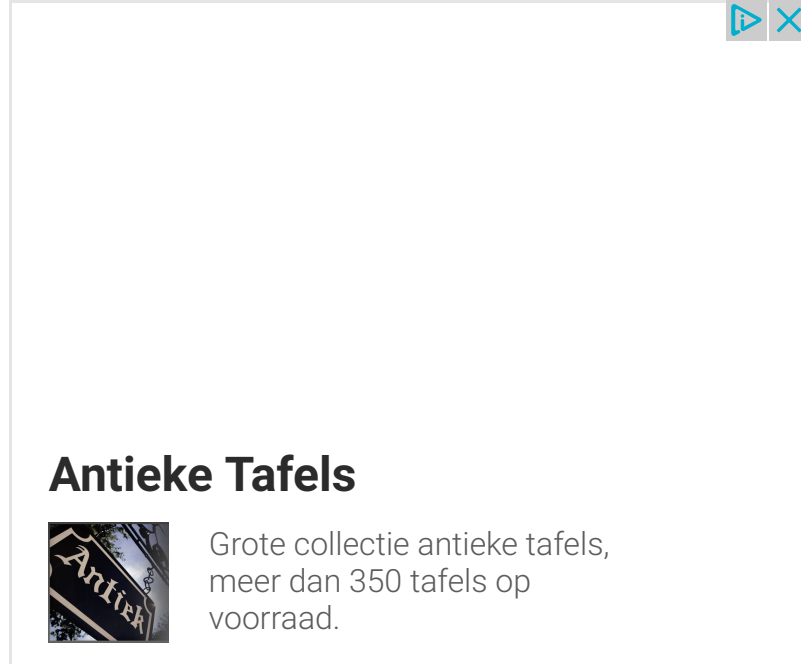
trying to kill us with those cookies.

At the same time, there appears to be growing interest in food that breaks rules. On blogs, in Facebook groups, in [listicles](#) and Tumblrs, people are celebrating “bad” food—dishes that are disastrous, unattractive, or just unhealthy. Some poke fun at the mishaps of chefs, bakers, and cookbook authors, like the website [Cake Wrecks](#), with its pictures of tragically ambitious professional cakes. Other online collections, like the [Gallery of Regrettable Food](#) and [Vintage Food Disasters](#), are filled with scans of disgusting-looking concoctions from old cookbooks. Websites like [Someone Ate This](#) celebrate the failures of home cooking in triumphantly unappetizing photos. Even Martha Stewart, who made a generation of homemakers feel inadequate, has been tweeting [revolting photos](#) of her meals, to general delight and horror.

Why has bad food become so popular? Didn't Julia and Alice and Jim and Marcella teach modern home cooks to draw on the best that continental cuisine had to offer, to buy fresh, local ingredients and treat them with respect? Which part of the culinary revolution was it that led to [deep fried lasagna rolls](#) or [Mac n' Cheetos](#)? At a time when blogs, YouTube videos, and specialized cookbooks can help even a novice produce respectable results in the kitchen, why are folks are turning to 1960s recipes to make [jellied chicken](#) and [Busy Lady Beef Bake](#)? Often, the more stomach-turning the dish, the more gleeful the prose about it, as if making terrible food somehow maintained the noble tradition of human ingenuity and experimentation. Once, humanity asked if it could walk on the moon. Now, it aims to recreate the nightmare of [Tuna and Jell-O Pie](#).

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An advertisement for 'Antieke Tafels' (Antique Tables). It features a small image of a wooden table with the word 'Antiek' written on it. To the right of the image, the text reads: 'Antieke Tafels' in a bold font, followed by 'Grote collectie antieke tafels, meer dan 350 tafels op voorraad.' (Large collection of antique tables, more than 350 tables in stock.)

**Antieke Tafels**

Grote collectie antieke tafels, meer dan 350 tafels op voorraad.

The current Rabelaisian relish for outrageous food is, at least partly, a playful rebellion against the excesses of gastronomic prescriptivism. After decades of being warned against butter, salt, coffee, chocolate, wine, and anything else that makes life on this miserable planet worth enduring, food lovers learn that they are healthful after all. (In fact, it was the foods people replaced them with—margarine, energy drinks, artificially sweetened desserts—that were deadly. Oops.) In the face of rapidly changing scientific recommendations, it feels liberating to throw caution to the wind and [deep fry a Big Mac](#)—or to at least fantasize about doing it.

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## **Food serves a variety of purposes, only one of which is nutrition.**

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Then there are aesthetic standards. It's one thing for magazines and cookbooks to have polished photography and food styling. They are professional productions, and most reasonable people do not expect what they cook in their home kitchen to turn out looking exactly like it did in *Bon Appetit*. But food blogs, Instagram, and Pinterest are also filled with glossy, sunlit photos of organic mason-jar meals and caramel-drizzled cupcakes. Theirs is a dark beauty. They suggest that home-cooked food could look that luscious, that perfect, given a little care and knowledge.

In most cases this is impossible. The majority of people who cook do so under limiting conditions: tired after a day's work, in haste, on a budget, to please a child's picky palate, using leftovers, with processed ingredients, without the special oil or herb that would have required a trip to a distant supermarket. They serve their meals on actual plates, not on slate slabs or rustic [chopping boards](#). Their food is tinged yellow or blue depending on the light bulb they eat it under. Real homemade food often looks like failure, but it's not. Feeding yourself or others is a success, an act of love, even when the meal resembles unappetizing brown mush. This is why it's sometimes necessary to celebrate culinary disasters. They reveal the reality of cooking: tedious but necessary chore, creative outlet, daily ritual.

There's also something deeper to the current fascination with bad food, whether it's unhealthy, inelegant, unpopular, or just plain ugly. Food serves a variety of purposes, only one of which is nutrition. Shared meals strengthen communities, while food restrictions serve to keep groups of people apart. Culinary preferences signal one's class, ethical stance, or outlook on the world. The foods we eat, and especially the ones we talk about eating, tell others how we understand our bodies: sensitive or resilient, hardworking or overflowing, rebellious or disciplined. In short, food offers ways of telling stories about who we are and where we come from. And bad food does this better than good.

Jay Rayner, the *Observer's* restaurant critic, [recognized](#) that terrible food makes for good narrative when he collected his harshest reviews into a slim volume titled *My Dining Hell*. Excellent restaurants are all alike, he points out in his book, a curse for the critic forced to find fresh ways of describing a yawningly pleasant experience. It is indeed easy for descriptions of good food and happy culinary memories to become cloying, as so many food blogs prove. How many more scrumptious, [luscious](#) desserts, or [meltingly tender](#) meats can readers stand to hear about? How many more inspirational grandmas, tending to the stove? Badness, on the other hand, is specific and endlessly varied. There are so many culinary catastrophes, each one with its own individual meaning.

In the kitchen, it's easy to founder in telling ways, with ingrained habits leading to strange fusions and awkward flavors. When I was growing up in Toronto, my mother would occasionally try her hand at a Chinese stir fry. Despite the Food Network's best efforts at instruction of the masses, her stir fries always tasted suspiciously like the Romanian food we usually cooked. No amount of soy sauce could take them out of the Balkans. One day I visited a friend whose Indian-born mother announced she would make us—what else?—a stir fry. I laughed when I tried the result, a sauté that ever so slightly resembled a curry. In their enthusiasm for the new, our mothers drew on the old: the familiar spices and techniques that gave their cooking an accent.

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## **Much of what is important about culture lies in marginal cooking.**

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Even more revealing are the intentional monstrosities: those dishes eaten alone, late at night, generally in front of a screen. Or perhaps with a relative or friend who shares the same predilection. I recently asked my friends about the meals they eat when nobody's looking, their secret gastronomic loves. The answers came fast and thick—people like to confess to odd proclivities—and I began to notice a few patterns.

Many of my friends' guilty cravings are for wallops of predictably intense flavor: Nutella or peanut butter eaten straight from the jar, ketchup on everything, endless applications of Vegemite. They admit to loving processed food: Cheez Balls, Fun Dip, Froot Loops, Little Debbie Tree Cakes, instant mashed potatoes with bacon and cheese eaten dry from the packet. They like the intensity of burnt toast, popcorn, even chocolate, and the kick of weird combinations, like Doritos dipped in soft-boiled eggs. These are foods that speak of abandon, of a sensibility beyond diets and refined taste. One woman wrote that she loved drunk food—cheap, greasy pizzas, street meat—because it reminded her of eating what she

wanted without guilt.

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The vast majority of responses were also connected to childhood memories, usually carb-rich: macaroni and cheese (processed, not home-made), ramen (preferably the cheap kind), Wonder bread sandwiches filled with potato chips, sugar, or nonpareils. Men, in particular, seemed to have a talent for pleasing kids and grandkids with strange improvisations when women are out of the house. Respondents told me about the toast with cinnamon and sugar dad made for breakfast, or the mashed potato sandwiches with mint sauce that were a grandfather's specialty.

Most interesting, and most varied, were foods that people associated with the places they came from. I do not know if fried bologna and ketchup sandwiches are really "a Buffalo NY thing," as one woman insisted, or if Hormel Vienna Sausages on white bread with mustard are typical to Mississippi. What struck me was that people held on to the memory of these simple sandwiches as a marker of home. A German friend recalled pressing a Mars bar into a hot bread roll bought from the local bakery, and inhaling the gooey treat in seconds. A friend from Russia thought back to the raw onion salad, dressed only with mayonnaise, she made for herself when there was nothing else to snack on.

By now it should be clear that there is, in fact, no such thing as "bad" food. There's only food someone else considers bad. People craft identities and



relationships through such differences in taste: In college, two friends and I took advantage of a local store's six-topping special to develop a pizza we considered divine. It featured chicken, roasted red pepper, hot peppers, feta, pineapple, and extra cheese, and when other students came to our dorm room to bum a slice, they left after one look at the pie. Naturally, "The Pizza" became a great source of bonding, a meal only we three could love.

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What's more, so-called bad food is often intensely good. Martha Stewart defended her hideous food tweets by saying the meals were delicious, and she was right: Ugly pictures are a reminder that food can taste wonderful and be deeply nourishing even when it's not styled for a photo shoot. How a dish looks tells us little about how it tastes, especially since the long cooking that produces complex flavors often also results in uncomely brown mush. On the other hand, food that's bad because it breaks rules can offer an unexpected thrill. In *The Language of Food*, the linguist Dan Jurafsky explains the fad for bacon ice cream as a pleasurable violation of American food conventions—pork should be in the main course, and dessert ought to be sweet, so combining them feels rebellious and fun. This kind of playful fusion is trendy, but it's also, as Jurafsky points out, how culinary innovation happens.

It's a cliché by now that food is culture. But it needs to be added that much of what is important about culture lies in marginal cooking. People so often look to the highs to understand their relationship with food, but they also need to look to



the lows—this, I propose, is what lies behind the fascination with food that breaks rules. Weird food is so often personal, the result of home cooking and experimentation in the kitchen. Bad food speaks to individual tastes, to the awful combinations people invent and eat when they're on their own. Junky, sweet, and processed treats recall the freedom enjoyed as children. And unorthodox food can reflect our identities and histories: from the pig parts that our ancestors set in jelly to the meatloaf only mom could burn right.



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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**IRINA DUMITRESCU** is a writer based in Germany. Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *The Yale Review*, *The Southwest Review*, and *Petits Propos Culinaires*.

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