



# *Soupbone Syllabus: Food and Family*

*Adapted from [Soupbone Collective](#) discussions in August 2020  
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## Course Description

For many of us, food is at the center of our lives; it's how we feed ourselves, something we can form relationships over, forge identities with, acquire deep embodied knowledge about, and use to mend heartbreaks. For others, food is an afterthought. Still, the connection that we have with our origins can quite often be related to what we ate growing up, and how our families interacted (or didn't) around the kitchen table. In this course, we explore how artists depict food and families through film, narrative essays, poetry, and memoir.

Unit One focuses on how our parental figures influence our very first food memories, begin and continue our first traditions around food, and build our first ties to our cultures. Through these readings, we discuss generational tension, nostalgia, and family lore. Unit Two is about growing up—how as we age and build our own identities, what is it about food that consistently pulls us back to our families, or conversely propels us forward, alone? In Unit Three, we look at nontraditional uses of food and form in writings to talk about and around difficult topics. Finally, we concluded with a fourth unit celebrating Black food history and culture.

Each unit includes several short readings as well as discussion questions to aid your reflections. We encourage you to get some friends together, read, and meet up (safely) to discuss, maybe with some snacks? We've also included a list of suggested action items you might use to mindfully embody the concepts we've explored. We hope you enjoy this inaugural Soupbone Syllabus and get as much out of these discussions as we did. Please come to the table, pour yourself a glass of whatever you'd like, and use this time to grow in camaraderie with your fellow readers and maybe enjoy a quiet moment of introspection as you do the dishes.

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## **Unit One: Parental Figures**

*What is a dish your parents cooked for you when you were growing up?* Food is so commonly used in writing and film as a symbol of love and nurturing in the family setting. Who starts food traditions, and who carries them on? How does your parents' food follow you into adulthood?

### **Readings:**

- Eat Drink Man Woman* dir. Ang Lee
- [“The Abuelita Poem”](#) by Paul Martínez Pompa
- [“The Struggle of Eating Well When You’re Poor”](#) by Marissa Higgins

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. “I struggle with the equation of food of love, of effort with love. Women, especially, are held to a standard that equates cooking as a way to express love and care. How often does society equate the time spent at the stove with how much love went into the meal?” (Higgins). How do you relate to this quote?
2. Who do you see as the Abuelita in part one of “The Abuelita Poem?” Is it literally Paul Martinez Pompa’s abuela, or something else?
3. Do you have a food ritual that connects you to your past, like Higgins’ weekly doughnut? Has it changed since you were a child? What does that mean to you?
4. “They communicate through singing, we communicate through eating” (*Eat Drink Man Woman*). While cooking is often connoted as being a means of self-expression or demonstrating love and affection, how is *eating* a means of communication in the family sphere?

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## **Unit Two: Growing Up**

*How does how you eat and cook on your own differ from how you ate growing up?* While the food you ate as a child nurtures you and becomes some of your earliest memories, childhood food traditions have the potential to be lost. Diaspora, death, and disappointed families make up these readings by Chen Chen, Michelle Zauner, and Toni Morrison. How does food represent the process of growing up and out of the family unit?

### **Readings:**

- [“Self-Portrait As So Much Potential”](#) by Chen Chen
- [“Crying in H Mart”](#) by Michelle Zauner
- [“Cooking Out”](#) by Toni Morrison

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. “We were all there. All of us, bound by something we could not name. Cooking, honey, cooking under the stars.” (Morrison) How can food traditions bring together seemingly disparate/estranged members of our family? Does this extend beyond family to members of your community/culture/generation? How?
  2. To continue the discussion of food and love—why the “whole tribal effort”? Is this necessary for love, for gathering? How big is your family and what does big mean to you? Who is your tribe?
  3. “I remember the snacks Mom told me she ate when she was a kid and how I tried to imagine her at my age. I wanted to like all the things she did, to embody her completely” (Zauner) How does what we eat embody who we are?
  4. “Am I even Korean anymore if there’s no one left in my life to call and ask which brand of seaweed we used to buy? ... I can hardly speak Korean, but in H Mart I feel like I’m fluent.” To what objects do you tie your identity?
  5. What connection do you find between “Crying in H Mart” and Self-Portrait of So Much Potential? What is it about what and how we eat that connects so strongly to the mother/child relationship?
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*If your state of mind was a food, what would it be?* Food can take many forms, from a roadside snack to a twelve-course tasting meal. It can also be used in writing to represent volatile emotions, political unrest, and forging a community in a new place. In this unit, we look at how food is a vessel for communicating an unhappy marriage seen through the eyes of a child in Gabrielle Hamilton’s memoir *Blood Bones & Butter*. In “How Apples Go Bad,” Helen Rosner responds to the nation’s history of police brutality without mentioning the police at all. Finally, in “On How to Use this Book,” Sarah Gambito experiments with the form of a recipe in poetry. How does the form in which these readings influence your own emotional response to them?

### Readings:

- ❑ (book excerpt) *Blood Bones & Butter* by Gabrielle Hamilton, Chapters 1 & 2
- ❑ (*The New Yorker*) [“How Apples Go Bad”](#) by Helen Rosner
- ❑ (poem) [“On How to Use This Book”](#) by Sarah Gambito

### Discussion Questions:

1. So often our responses to food are somatic, e.g. when Hamilton writes (at the end of Chapter 1): “the lamb was crisp-skinned and sticky from slow roasting, and the root beer was frigid and it caught, like an emotion, in the back of my throat.” In what ways are our physical responses to food capable of producing emotion? What does that have to do with the social spaces in which we cook and eat? Does food enhance our emotional responses to our family members? If so, in what way?
2. In what way can food be used as subterfuge/avoidance? How do we convey emotion through food?
3. In “How Apples Go Bad,” Helen Rosner responds to police violence against Black bodies through the metaphor of rotting apples. What’s the point of circumscription here? In the wake of the shooting of Jacob Blake, what does work like this do? As thinkers, humanists, people, workers, what can/should we do? What is the point of choosing a form in which to express ourselves?
4. What does it mean for Gambito to add a recipe at the end of “On How to Use This Book?” How do we engage with (or not engage with) recipes in our lives? What different ways are there to communicate *how* to make food?

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## **Unit Four: Black Food Writing**

After curating the three weeks of food and family readings, we felt that there was a severe lack of representation among Black authors writing about food. In American food culture, Black influence can be seen since the conception of the Atlantic world through the crops enslaved people brought (as legend says, hidden in the hair in order to ensure life when faced with the unknown) to the cooking methods and recipes we use today. So, we thought it only right to include a bonus round featuring prominent food writers today as well as a bit of poetry and memoir. Culinary historian Michael Twitty looks to both the past and present to articulate this impact and bring it to the forefront of food writing. Audre Lorde experiences coming-of-age moments both in the harshness of segregation and in the confusion and passion of becoming a woman. Korsha Wilson shows that racism and microaggressions are still present to this day in “A Critic for All Seasons.” Finally, Gwendolyn Brooks shows us a quiet moment between a pair of people and the importance of remembering.

### **Readings:**

- ❑ [“A Critic for All Seasons”](#) by Korsha Wilson
- ❑ [“I Had Never Eaten in Ghana Before. But My Ancestors Had.”](#) by Michael W. Twitty
- ❑ Chapter 1 from *The Cooking Gene* by Michael W. Twitty
- ❑ Chapters 10 and 11 from *Zami: a New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde.
- ❑ [“The Bean Eaters”](#) by Gwendolyn Brooks

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Compare the segregation in *Zami* (trip to D.C., ice cream) with the segregation in Korsha Wilson’s “A Critic for All Seasons.” What has changed? What hasn’t? What work is there to be done? How can we contribute to that work?
2. In *Zami*, what is the significance of Lorde’s association between sexuality and food?
  - a. “As I continued to pound the spice, a vital connection seemed to establish itself between the muscles of my fingers curved tightly around the smooth pestle in its insistent downward motion, and the molten core of my body whose source emanated from a new ripe fullness just beneath the pit of my stomach.”

3. In *The Cooking Gene*, Twitty writes about the relationship between trauma and food, the difficulty of claiming a connection to heritage when that heritage involves your oppression. What is the purpose of using food to connect to heritage, and why go to a traumatic source at all?
  4. Twitty also writes of how food empowers. In what way does food empower him, and how does it empower BIPOC and oppressed people in this country?
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### **Action Items:**

- Ask your oldest living relative what their favorite food was growing up. Try to recreate it.
- Try to recreate a homemade version of your favorite childhood junk food. Or, go out to the store and buy a box of it and snarf it down. Does it hold up?
- Change up where you eat your meals. Do you usually eat in front of the TV? Try sitting at a table, even if you're alone. Commune with yourself.
- Host a (virtual) dinner party where everyone cooks the same meal. Design a menu that speaks to important moments in your life. Is dessert your favorite candy from childhood? Drinks from a disastrous date? Dinner from a family gathering?
- Write about a time that food has been involved in a conflict — in your life, your neighborhood, in history, in fiction.
- Visit a Black-owned restaurant.