

# Picturing Food

## Sense and Sensuality of Culinary Content on Social Media

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**Abstract** *Food content is among the most popular topics on Instagram; the so-called FoodTok is becoming more and more trendy on TikTok. This article aims to expand the discussion (often reduced to the question of distinction) about food photography on social media and to find out about the most popular dishes, leitmotifs, and aesthetic conventions by looking at a sample of concrete examples of posts on #food and #foodtok. The analysis shows: alimentary communication is not reduced to self-representation but also bears sensual and ludic traits that can be identified through a close reading.*

### 1. Alimentary Signs: Introductory Remarks

In *Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine*, the semiologist Roland Barthes (1961) emphasizes the symbolic nature of food, i.e. the *significance* (in the most literal sense) of food choices, traditions and preferences, which can be read not only in terms of nutritional physiology, but also historically, sociologically/culturally, and psychologically. Among other things, he discusses the US-American preference for sugar (its consumption being twice as high as that of the French). With reference to the French national drink, wine, he shows that sugar and wine are not just sugar and wine, but institutions and attitudes which evoke dreams, taboos, tastes, preferences, values and, above all, emotions. He therefore calls on the (social) sciences and humanities to take a closer look at food and, among other things, to dive into advertising, which not only creates needs, but also reveals them. Barthes urges researchers to think outside the box in order to realize the potential of food decoding.

I have started out with the example of the American use of sugar because it permits to get outside of what we, as Frenchmen, consider 'obvious'. For we do not see our own food or, worse, we assume that it is insignificant. Even – or perhaps especially – to the scholar, the subject of food connotes triviality or guilt. (Barthes 1997 [1961]: 20)

Approximately sixty years after his plea, this volume, among others, shows that academia has taken up his suggestion and that most of us would sign the article's main thesis without any hesitation. Barthes asks and concludes: "For what is food? It is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior." (Barthes 1997 [1961]: 21)

In order to *see* or *read* food communication, as suggested by Barthes in his *Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, we today dispose of a very productive source, in addition to advertising and artistic works dealing with food. How fascinated Barthes would have been by a platform like Instagram as an inexhaustible collection of food pictures or Generation Z's TikTok as a never-ending supply of visual, verbal, and filmic food performance! Both platforms stage (or pretend to represent) the everyday life of so many different users of highly diverse geographical and subcultural provenances, and both offer *food for thought*: more specifically an infinite source of visual and filmic food-related material.

Of course, Barthes was not the first person to realize that food is not only about nourishment and sustenance, but also reveals a lot about personality, origin, and emotional state. "You are what you eat" is the corresponding *bon mot* that is often used as a catchy motto in nutritional advice, TV formats, columns and (popular) scientific contributions on the subject of food culture.

The two authors of this (admittedly slightly varied) phrase, who (independently of each other) expressed a similar thought, are Ludwig Feuerbach and Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin. The Feuerbach quote from 1850 has a sensual dimension as well as an ethical one: Feuerbach not only pleads for responsible nutrition, but also for the freedom to enjoy; he sees culinary connoisseurship as a source of potential happiness (see the chapter *Der Mensch ist, was er isst oder Zum Ursprung der gastrosophischen Feuerbach-These* in Lemke 2016). The fact that Brillat-Savarin, probably the most famous gastrosopher, boldly proclaimed in his *Physiology of Taste*, published in 1825, that he could fathom the essence of man by means of his eating habits points even more explicitly to the fact that food intake does not merely serve to secure one's existence but is connected with culture, sophistication and (pleasure) cult. Brillat-Savarin's *Physiology* is a treasure trove of sharp-tongued aphorisms on the doctrine of the pleasures of the table: "Have we not seen in our own time that gourmands can distinguish the flavor of the thigh on which the partridge lies down from the other?" (Brillat-Savarin 2008 [1825]: 67) It is no wonder that the author himself can distinguish the gourmand from the real connoisseur and interpret the alimentary signs: "Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are." (idem: 12)

In the era of Instagram and TikTok, the *bon mot* can be varied in a number of different ways: "Show me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are" is one of them, "Show me what food you're looking at and I'll tell you who you are" is another. Pro-

ceeding loosely from Feuerbach, one could argue that: “We photograph what we eat” or, in a reversal that in some cases is probably more appropriate to the realities of social media: “We eat what we photograph.” After all, in addition to taste, health and ecological/ethical and financial considerations, the photogenicity of a food item, as summarized in the questions “Is it (insta -)grammable?” or (increasingly more frequently in the last two three years) “Is it tiktokable?” can certainly represent a criterion for taking a picture. The question of how to grasp *Instagrammability* in culinary contexts will be the focus of my considerations; due to the increasing importance of TikTok, a concluding part will be devoted to initial observations on *Tiktokability*. Roland Barthes can once again serve as inspiration here. After all, he has not only pointed out that food itself is charged as a sign, or as multiple signs; but he has also shown that *pictures* of food, whether in advertisements for Italian pasta (Barthes 1964) or in the opulent arrangements in women’s magazines (Barthes 1957), create and satisfy needs that are worth taking a closer look at.

## 2. The Why: Notes on the Sense of Food Postings

What caused at least some irritation back in 2010, when Instagram was brand-new, has become an everyday scene in culinary contexts: People using mobile phones go to great lengths to put the meal waiting to be eaten in the right light. This applies not only to spectacularly prepared dishes from Michelin-starred cuisine, but also to cafeteria meals, breakfast cereals, burgers in all variations or (not only in Corona times) home-cooked meals. Some restaurants have benefited from this development and adapted their décor and recipes to the app<sup>1</sup>; others ignore, defy, or even resist the trend for different reasons (some of them trying to retain sovereign rights

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1 In their introduction to the first volume on the subject *Food Instagram. Identity, Influence and Negotiation*, the editors refer to Isabelle de Solier’s take on McLuhan’s famous declaration and conclude that “the medium *shapes* the message”. Creators and restaurateurs have reacted accordingly: “Beyond ‘grammable’ foods gorgeously plated on attractive dishes, restaurants seeking to go viral invested in eye-catching wallpaper, photography-enhancing lightning, decorative floor tiles, exterior feature walls, and a revival of colorful, neon signage.” (Kish/Contois 2022: 1–2) Leaver et al. share a few Food Instagram anecdotes in the first monograph dedicated to Instagram, including the story of how a restaurateur in Singapore refused to make a slight modification to a dessert (specifically, omitting the whipped cream) because “every item was part of their branding” to ensure the dishes’ photogenicity (2020: 167). Both publications provide detailed information on the concrete dynamics of Instagram; a similar elaboration on TikTok has not yet been published. *Food Instagram* deals with various media, with cultural studies and, not least of all, with sociological approaches to the analysis of Instagram content; an overall view of the most popular dishes/posts is less in focus than the specific analysis of individual food trends (such as #unicornlatte) or representation trends (such as @hotdudesandhummus).

over the images and the resulting image). The gourmet restaurant Nobelhart und Schmutzig in Berlin is not the only one with a no-photography policy, explicitly asking its customers to refrain from using their mobile phones. The request is printed in the menu: “Please take memories not pictures.” The “either-or” mentality implied by this (admittedly tongue-in-cheek) formulation could, of course, be questioned. It is not for nothing that a number of examples of *Ars memoriae* (like the *Mind Palace*, for example) are based on pictorial memory aids<sup>2</sup>. No matter how critical individual restaurateurs are, it is obvious that the trend is not likely to go away. While an in-depth academic classification (with the exception of nutritional sciences) is still awaited, the trend has been debated and not infrequently criticized in feuilleton articles, in commentaries and interviews, especially in the early phase of Instagram. Nearly a decade ago in 2013, the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* asked the sociologist Eva Barlösius about the (then quite recent) phenomenon [translation by the author]: “In restaurants, you can often see guests taking pictures of their food. Later they post the picture on Facebook. What’s the point?” (Spiegel 2013: 46) The primary reason, according to the sociologist’s answer, is to exhibit the poster’s culinary cultural capital with the celebration of special occasions and the corresponding high-end meals. She states: “It’s not about everyday life. You will hardly come across fast food pictures in the social networks. With these photos you show: I can afford this. But also, and this is much more important: I have cultural knowledge and know how to appreciate ‘good food’.” (Spiegel 2013: 46) Ten years after the publication of this interview, I agree with Barlösius on one point and strongly disagree on the other: Yes, instagramming and TikToking are (also, but not only) about exhibiting cultural capital; but no, it doesn’t have to be special food. Instagram and everyday life, albeit a staged one, and Instagram and fast food (specifically burgers), belong together like the *beefsteak et pommes-frites* to which Roland Barthes paid homage in his *Mythologies*. The (pseudo-)authenticity of shared intimacy is a decisive feature of successful postings; the food can then also be quite profane. Too often the sensual, pleasurable, positive element is lost in the journalistic discussion of food postings, which concentrates on sociological or psychological aspects: the fact that food is also shown *for food’s sake*, that images stimulate the imagination, and that the pictures could be simply meant to generate enjoyment seems to be ruled out. I would therefore like to deal implicitly with the sociological facet (as Barthes and Bourdieu have shown, aesthetic preferences and thus sensual experience can also be explained sociologically) and primarily ask whether and how enjoyment is transported with the help of food photography or videos, by examining which posts are particularly popular. What is

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2 I have remarked elsewhere that images can certainly serve as a memory aid and that Instagram posts, not least of all, also represent diaristic functions for visual autobiographers (see Schröder 2020).

generally appealing about food content on social media and which images do users like to look at and why? Are these images particularly sensual and, if so, in what way?

### 3. The What and the How: Sensuality and Aesthetics of Food Postings

#instafood, #omnomnom, #foodporn, #food, #foodie, #organic, #healthyeats, #goodeats, #vegetarian, #vegan, #glutenfree, #hungry, #homemade, #madefromscratch, #foodiesofinstagram, #eats, #instacool, #foodstagram, #instafood, #foodpic, #foodgasm, #delicious, #foodoftheday, #foodpics, #cleaneating: These are just some of the hashtags that specialized sites with names like [www.top-hashtags.com](http://www.top-hashtags.com) or [best-hashtags.com](http://best-hashtags.com) recommend to social networkers to accompany culinary posts for the purpose of optimal distribution and follower generation. Digital cameras and especially smartphones offer tools with which food can be photographed particularly well or special apps with which photos can be edited afterwards. Countless blogs give tips with regard to good exposure, suitable backgrounds and varied composition. There are currently (December 2022) 490 million posts under the hashtag #food, compared to 416 million in November 2020. TikTok, which is the fastest growing social network of all times, has not replaced Instagram, even though it can be noted that the number of new postings per month on Instagram has slightly decreased since food content has become so popular on TikTok. Some of the similarities and differences will be sketched in lieu of a summary; it is obvious that #foodtok would not have existed without Instagram. The observation that people who post on the topic of food are often active on both networks (and, for example, refer in their TikTok videos to the fact that the recipe can be read on Instagram) shows that the portals a) sometimes fulfill different, complementary functions or also b) focus on a different target group (the older ones on Instagram, the younger ones on TikTok) with similar content/aesthetics. In any case, both networks (separately or in dialogue with each other) offer the opportunity to heed Barthes' call to search for fertile sources (besides advertising) in order to make food communication or food-picture communication visible. The identified recurring aesthetics and recurrent content promise to reveal significant things about the users and the zeitgeist they translate visually. Instagram came first: In order to understand TikTok you have to know Instagram.

It can be assumed that food postings on Instagram are (still) so popular among viewers because they convey an aura of intimacy much more than do those that depict furniture and also more than those that show clothes. As research shows, social media is constantly concerned with the question of the authenticity of self-representation (see e.g. Allan S. Taylor's *Authenticity as Performativity on Social Media* from

2022). Sharing<sup>3</sup> (pictures of) food can be understood as a particularly intimate act which automatically transports an *effet de réel*. It is directly related to the physical dimension, which is especially crucial in the context of digital *technologies of the self*. After all, furniture and clothes are close to the poster's body but what we see in the food pictures is something that is supposed to become part of the body in a few moments. This implied physicality (and sensuality) makes the digital distance seem smaller; even more so when familiar tastes are involved. The motivations of the posters and the readers are as different as the motives and the quality of the artistic *mise-en-image*, which sometimes places itself decidedly in the tradition of still-life painting and sometimes acts entirely without regard to aesthetic demands. The glimpses into the private lives (especially of influencers with high numbers of followers) are of course styled in many cases (see Leaver et al. 2020: 104). The more imperfect the performance (think of Erving Goffman's "expressions given off"), the more authentic it appears. As Contois and Kish put it when they describe the changing Instagram aesthetics of the late 2010s: "While nonetheless curated, users produced unfiltered, less edited, even 'ugly' images, performing authenticity as an act of rebellion." (2022: 8) However: the exhibition of individual eating practices does not only or always serve to gain distinction (on the part of the posters) or voyeurism or sublimation<sup>4</sup> (because one does not allow oneself certain food for financial, health-related, or other reasons) on the part of the consumers, but also serves to increase enjoyment.

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- 3 The verb "to share", which is often used synonymously with "to post" in the social media context, already implies the social, sociable component. As Nicholas A. John shows in his study *The Social Logics of Sharing*, the verb was often employed without this connotation in the Web 2.0: "In the most general terms possible, sharing in this context quite simply means participating in Web 2.0." (2013: 172) However, it can be used differently on social media today: "While sharing still has concrete objects today, these have been joined by fuzzy objects of sharing, which vastly extends the scope of what we are expected to share so as to include our lives or our worlds. In this context, sharing is more about communication than distribution, and is at one and the same time both much vaguer and far more inclusive." (John 2013: 173) Especially when food pictures are shared or even exchanged almost live, i.e. immediately before consumption, one can certainly speak of a shared experience, even if it remains virtual consumption on the side of the picture recipient.
- 4 The philosopher Robert Pfaller (2010: 59–67) argues that the widespread consumption of cooking programs and books is in many cases a "delegated enjoyment" [translation by the author], i.e. a substitute action for actual cooking. He subsumes compensation acts of this kind under the term "interpassivity". A quick glance at the Twitter feed shows that this definitely does not apply to all viewers of cooking shows. When shows like "Das perfekte Dinner" are on, the community (using the hashtag #dasperfektedinner) not only exchanges gossip about the candidates, but also shares pictures of their own (mostly homemade) dishes, which are consumed parallel to watching the show (and tweeting). The event is thus celebrated on different levels.

In view of this rampant “gastromania” (Gianfranco Marrone 2014), I assume that both the act of photographing and the act of exhibiting and sharing and consuming food photographs serve to prolong and intensify the moment of enjoyment, whether at home or in a restaurant. A function that is as sensual as it is pragmatic is obvious: the fleeting pleasure is preserved photographically and can be recreated to some extent when viewed again or also externally (perhaps even a photo of the madeleine would have triggered a minor memory shock in Proust in a parallel universe). A diaristic function can be seen here, in which the image is of course also accompanied by sometimes descriptive, sometimes emphatic comments. The act of photographing becomes part of the ritual, in that the gustatory is preceded by the visual pleasure: hence Feuerbach’s and Brillat-Savarin’s *bon mot* can be varied in the following triad: you are what you photograph; you are what you eat; or (in the case of home-cooking even more small-step, more holistic, more sensual) you are what you cook, what you prepare, what you photograph, what you eat. A study in the *Journal of Consumer Marketing* from 2016 actually says that photographing food leads to a more intense taste experience. The eye literally eats with you (as it is expressed in the German saying *Das Auge isst mit*); the experience is a multi-sensory one. The Instagram community, which does not post and eat but only consumes visually, is possibly inspired to cook or at least to consume; but in any case, it can share the moment of pleasure. As John states: “Part of what we are encouraged to share on SNSs is our feelings, and so there is an overlap between a common spoken use of the term and the Web 2.0 meaning.” (2013: 175)

In order to substantiate these initial intuitive observations and thoughts, I undertook a close reading of selected Instagram posts over a limited period of six days in May 2021 (25.05.21–30.05.21), which was intended to filter out leitmotifs and representational conventions<sup>5</sup>. I chose the most general of the food-related posts, namely those collected under the hashtag #food, and analyzed the top posts suggested by Instagram, i.e. those nine posts that are constantly updated at any given time and suggested by the algorithm based on the popularity of the profiles or follower interaction that has already taken place. So I looked at a total of 54 posts that are or will be among the most popular. This ensures that the selection is reasonably representative and not limited to particularly aesthetic images. Entries with a *bad taste touch* with their very own modes of presentation are also popular: after all, the craving for junk food can also be stimulated visually and translated accordingly. I examined the sample with the following questions in mind:

Which foods appear again and again? Are they popular because they are photogenic? With which image-inherent (composition, color design, use of filters,

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5 The challenges of scientific work with social media and Web 2.0 are currently one of the most important topics in media studies. A good review article on the current literature is provided by Carolin Säugling (2021).

metaphor, intertextuality) and paratextual stylistic means (hashtags, comment function, placement, making-off) is the taste experience translated or conveyed? Which traditions of food representation of a commercial and/or artistic nature are referenced? And which eating aesthetics result from the different stagings, which conventions are established? Or, in short: How is the gustatory experience translated into Instagram?

The first question was easy to answer: What are the most popular foods in the mini-sample and why? Desserts are way out in front (16 posts), followed by burgers (8 posts), meat in general (6 posts), pasta (5 posts) and fish dishes (5 posts). No big surprise, but of course a direct refutation of Barlösius' thesis that no one photographs fast food. The fact that desserts and cakes are so well-placed is not astonishing given their photogenicity. Desserts can definitely be staged better than a stew or a soup. However, following Barthes, one could also speculate about the high value placed on sugar, or talk about the need for sweet and also figuratively cute, 'cure-all' food, which is no longer a US-American peculiarity (think of cupcakes, donuts, etc. and other icing, color and sprinkle-decorated examples of "ornamental cuisine"<sup>6</sup>).

I have tried to outline why burgers are also predestined for the Instagram presence and which common modes of presentation appeal across all foods under the keywords listed below. The keywords can give an idea of why there is always talk of *foodporn* in the feuilleton and, as a result, also in academic discourse – the connotation of indecency arises not only from the 'sinful' content of the food depicted (such as fat, sugar, calories), but also from the perspective and the image detail chosen<sup>7</sup>. Of course, there are intersections between the categories, so several keywords can be assigned to individual posts: a) Exhibition of the Inside, b) Proximity, c) Quantity/Size, d) Still-Life Elements, e) Seduction and Availability, f) Comfort and Intuition.

a) *Exhibition of the Inside*: As can be seen in fig. 1 burgers and sandwiches offer themselves as Insta-favorites through their richness of layers; the different colors, textures and ingredients are predestined for the sometimes almost sculptural staging. The clear division makes a sensual re-experience through visual consumption more vivid. The food is transparent and thus comprehensible; the textures and tastes are revealed at first glance. This dynamic can also be found in other interior images in which the products are cut open for the same effect; the contents are explicit and thus convey a clear picture of the taste experience to be expected: see, for example,

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- 6 "Ornamental Cuisine" is the title of one of Barthes essays in *Mythologies* from 1957. In the following, it will be discussed what differences exist between the ornamental cuisine diagnosed by Barthes and the ornamental cuisine on Instagram.
  - 7 "Foodporn" is now an umbrella term that encompasses all possible facets and, of course, a common term for tagging via hashtag on Instagram. I have subsumed those connotations of the notion of porn that can be made productive for analysis under the keywords cited here. An overview of the genesis and polysemy of the term can be found in "Foodporn: An Anatomy of the Meal Gaze" (David/Allard 2022).

the very tempting chocolate patisserie (here of course potentiated by the sensuality already connoted with the product chocolate). Particularly in the case of pastry and cakes, cutting is a good way to present the structure of the dough and thus also the craft of the patissier, or to score points with the pastry's surprising inner life, which very often consists of a liquid or at least creamy core that can stimulate the imagination. If the product is bitten into instead of merely cut into, as in the case of the cream puff in my sample, there is an additional directly physical or "gastro-erotic" (Kofahl 2018) reference.

Fig. 1: Exhibition of the Inside.



Source: Compilation of Instagram Posts tagged with #food (05/25/2021-05/30/2021).

b) *Proximity*: The posts that I have subsumed under this keyword have a similarly physical reference. The zoom is mainly on the tempting surface: from crispy poultry skin to oily, shiny pasta. Here, viewers get close and personal with the food, so that there is an almost voyeuristic moment which enables immersion.

c) *Quantity/Size*: Speaking of the 'indecent touch', images that focus primarily on quantity, abundance and size (often combined with meat consumption) also enjoy great popularity. These celebrate the unrepentant hedonism that wastes no thought on aestheticizing frills or moderate consumption but cultivates the pleasure of gluttony – here the paratexts in the comments' column confirm the animal-orgiastic moment by paying respect to the post/the food depicted in the corresponding metaphorical lexis. In the comments' column, user "taste\_felicity" pays her respects to a double-decker burger garnished with bacon and cheddar with the following words: "What a beast" (fig. 1).

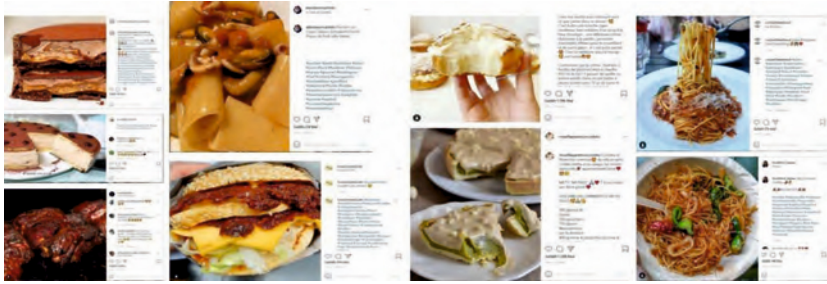
d) *Still-Life Elements*: Of course, among the top posts there are also those that focus less on (food)porn and more on the aesthetics familiar from the cooking magazines and cookbooks of these days, in the tradition of various phases of still-life painting as can be seen in the color scheme and arrangement of the components. These depictions stimulate the appetite more subtly, and are perceived more as pictorial compositions than the others, which place the focus very decidedly on the matter depicted – i.e. the food – and with it on the physical lusts or cravings of the posters and viewers. Apart from the color selection, familiar tropes of still-life painting are integrated as decorative elements: i.e. isolated ‘fallen’ berries, colorful ceramics in the background, and of course silver cutlery, which brings some additional glamour into the scenery. Heavy cutlery contributes to the fact that a meal is enjoyed more, as the neurogastronomy professor Charles Spence from Oxford University found out (2013); possibly the depiction of heavy cutlery also contributes to a potentiation of enjoyment in the viewers. Opulent, colorful fruit arrangements are a classic of still-life painting. This topos is also recalled, of course, when, as in one example of the sample, raw vegetables in all conceivable versions stand for freshness, health, and variety (note also the bouquet of dandelions in the background), even if this ‘natural’ harmony is irritated by the object to be advertised, an industrial product, namely a mayonnaise *façon maison* (homemade style).

e) *Seduction and Availability*: The observation that posts with a still-life character depict pleasure and are aesthetically very appealing, but still do not make up the majority of the most popular posts is, I assume, due to the fact that photographically they keep the viewers at a distance. We look at an entire arrangement or an opulently set table; but the degree of immersion, the possibility to really dive in and put ourselves in the position of the diner is comparatively low. This is why the keywords *seduction* and *availability* are apparently so important for Instagram posts. Many dishes present themselves (through cut pieces, bitten corners, or even prepared forks with carefully sauce-laden spaghetti: fig. 2) as *ready-to-be-eaten* or shared. Here, the aesthetics have almost the character of an appeal. The food shines in a seductive way; the burger is ready at mouth level. Canonized classic dishes such as spaghetti bolognese with which the viewer is lured in are reminiscent of correspondingly canonized food photography<sup>8</sup> and are connoted with Italianity (Barthes 1964), timelessness, light-heartedness, unpretentiousness, and down-to-earth enjoyment. All these associations are contained in the fork which is offered to the viewer.

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8 Weegee's photo [Phillip J. Stazzone Is on WPA and Enjoys His Favorite Food as He's Heard That the Army Doesn't Go in Very Strong for Serving Spaghetti] from 1940 has become iconic.

Fig. 2: *Seduction and Availability.*



Source: Compilation of Instagram Posts tagged with #food (05/25/2021-05/30/2021).

f) *Comfort and Intuition*: It is precisely in this aspect of light-hearted, down-to-earth, familiar enjoyment that the common denominator of most of the top posts lies. It is striking that many of the dishes can be eaten with the hands or with just one piece of cutlery. Filleting fish, plucking artichoke leaves, cutting meat: all these steps that are part of the eating ritual in upscale cuisine do not play a role in most of the posts. The dishes pictured are easy to handle, quasi-intuitive (no elaborate cutlery skills required) and can also be eaten on the couch in combination with binge-watching. Interestingly, they are mainly dishes that do *not* fall into the category of ‘acquired taste’ (i.e. the acquired taste for less easily accessible foods such as artichokes, oysters or coriander that can only be cultivated when the products have been tasted more often; see Birch 1999), but are dishes that would probably have been tasty even to the children in us. Exceptions confirm this rule: in the sample of 54 posts, one red mullet on liquid stock was actually the only food that meant extra effort in consumption. Here cutlery is needed.

Of course, Instagram consists not only of images, but also of commentary, recipe details, emoticons, and chat dialogue. Looking at these additional texts and codes and seeing how they enhance the moment of enjoyment would be a further, certainly very productive task. In conclusion, two keywords can be found with which the top posts can be contextualized. Indeed, the power of *seduction* through voyeuristic images, zooms, staging of textures and suggestion of availability is a common denominator of many posts. The second common denominator is *comfort*, evoking comfortable consumption as well as consolation. Instagram food, even if it is not labelled with the hashtag #comfortfood, is first and foremost approachable, intuitive food that makes the world a little less complicated for the duration of its consumption. And that’s why, despite all the criticism of the shallow, superficial Instagram world, the “what” is often more decisive than the “how” in the case of food photographs. Even a blurred, poorly exposed burger photo will probably not go without “likes”.

The categories that have been distilled from reading the top posts have shown the following: Even if the original motivation of the content creators is to distinguish themselves individually in their timelines (the distinction factor stressed by Barlösius remains a relevant motivation for posting), the motives and realizations of their postings reveal not only something about their self-image (“I am what and how I show what I eat”), but also something about the current zeitgeist, collective food preferences and aesthetic conventions. A look at the more recent phenomenon (FoodTok) should make it possible to find out whether the trends there are different. After noting the parallels and differences, i.e. identifying recurrent signs we can ask with Barthes what these might say about the posting and reading clientele – or even about current society in general.

#### 4. Outlook: TikTok – Performance, Play and Pleasure

The sound-on platform was best known for dance videos and music clips in its beginning. In the last two years, TikTok has also been repeatedly talked about for its food content. Accelerated not least by the Corona pandemic (due to closed restaurants, a general search for home-based hobbies and digital companionship), a new target group for food content was opened up, and creators like Eitan Bernath and Emily Mariko have become famous.

First of all, it can be said that some of the factors that make Instagram exciting for people interested in food can be found on TikTok in a kind of extended version. TikTok is based on videos. This means that motion and sounds play a major role; other senses than those on Instagram are inevitably addressed. However, this does not mean that still-life conventions are not used when some dishes are placed in a perfect light and arrangement. All in all, the network is initially difficult to grasp for the untrained eye: TikTok is a celebration of sensory overload and eclecticism. As is also the case with Instagram, the video feed is tailored to the individual algorithm, so it is not easy to identify the posts that appeal to the majority of TikTok users. It is even more difficult to identify the particularly popular posts than is the case on Instagram, inasmuch as a selection of ‘top posts’ is not offered but viewers are instead bombarded with a multitude of deliberately unsorted videos. As on Instagram, different target groups are addressed with very different food content: top chefs demonstrate their skills, sometimes accompanied by classical music, sometimes by hard rap beats; mothers explain how they cut out vegetables in a ‘kawaii’ manner to fill their children’s bento boxes; influencers who don’t specialize in food recreate TikTok trend dishes and report on their experiences. In short, similar to the analysis of Instagram posts, it makes little sense to base the exploration of the FoodTok universe on one’s own algorithm, which does not necessarily correspond to the majority taste. Journalistic articles reveal which are the most popular Food Tik-

Tokers and describe their stellar careers on the network, in some cases as a result of alternative employment/occupation sought during the COVID-19 pandemic (most prominently Thomas Straker, who is about to open a restaurant in Notting Hill as a result of his new fame). To find out which food-related posts are the most popular and to gain an overview of the possible stylistic and culinary range, I consulted different best-of lists of 2022 (on the Network itself and on food blogs) and looked at the most-mentioned posts and topics<sup>9</sup>. I asked to what extent the keywords and leitmotifs identified in the Instagram analysis also apply to TikTok and which other senses are addressed and how. Summarized in one question: What kind of food is particularly popular on TikTok and (how) is it aestheticized?

To have a representative selection, I took a closer look at the trends whose names kept coming up in magazines' and newspapers' relevant best-of lists. These include the viral posts about Cloud bread, butter boards/charcuterie boards (which can be easily viewed together given the very similar aesthetics), Pasta Chips, Lemon Pasta, Green Goddess Salad, and Pink Sauce. There are countless videos on each of these food trends; I watched the ones with the most likes. It is not so easy to categorize the videos clearly; a large number of them (in keeping with the TikTok mentality) lie between (syn)aesthetic staging of the cooking process, autobiographical performance with anecdotal parts, and step-by-step-recipe videos with specific cooking tips – or reviews of recipe videos and restaurants – and all that in just a few seconds. It is precisely this hybrid mixture that constitutes TikTok's unique selling proposition. The immersion in the hitherto unknown FoodTok world and the "close reading/viewing" of a selected number of videos enabled me to identify some recurring motifs and common denominators here as well. It is well known that TikTok is first and foremost an entertainment network.

In this respect, it is not surprising that the recipes and products presented, or simply the way they are presented, often have a ludic component. Mythologically connoted names such as *Cloud Bread* or *Green Goddess Salad* whose pathos (as shown in the videos) comes across with a twinkle in the eye, show this just as much as the almost childlike joy in drawing and modeling with food (for example, staging vegan dinosaur nuggets from the frozen food section in a landscape of mashed potatoes and small broccoli trees). Bento Boxes are the specialty of one of the most successful TikTokers, Jessica Woo, who currently (December 2022) has 5.8 million followers. Even though her catchphrase "let's make some lunch for my kids" implies otherwise, surely the cravings of not only children are satisfied. Homage is paid to the former and inner child when rice figures are dressed in nori costumes and little stars and flowers are cut out of raw vegetables. After all, who says you can't play with food? The

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9 The hashtag #foodTikTok recorded over 106 billion views in 2022. Among others, Chiquito, a restaurant chain in the UK, has identified the food trends with the most clicks (see "The Top 10 Food Trends of 2022, According to TikTok. Have mug cakes taken over your feed, too?").

consumable fantasy worlds tell of the ludic, creative, and escapist potential of “picturing food”. It’s a similar story with trends like the *pink sauce* that caused a sensation on TikTok in 2022. The allure of novelty (none of the well-known sauces were pink until now) combines with the connotations of the color as sweet, cute, and trashy and also provides a fun and comfort factor. Dipped in pink sauce, the world is immediately less boring and gray; the green sauce turns simple salad into the food of a goddess. It is fascinating how Barthes’ reflections on ornamental cuisine in *Elle* are still relevant to some of the TikTok food trends, even though the ingredients are different. Barthes writes:

But above all, coatings prepare and support one of the major developments of genteel cookery: ornamentation. Glazing, in *Elle*, serves as background for unbridled beautification: chiseled mushrooms, punctuation of cherries, motifs of carved lemon, shavings of truffle, silver pastilles, arabesques of glacé fruit: the underlying coat (and this is why I called it a sediment, since the food itself becomes no more than an indeterminate bedrock) is intended to be the page on which can be read a whole rococo cookery (there is a partiality for a pinkish color). (2012 [1957]: 78)

However, the case of *Elle*, according to Barthes, depicts a purely fictional kitchen whose recipes are merely for viewing: “This ornamental cookery is indeed supported by wholly mythical economics. This is an openly dream-like cookery, as proven in fact by the photography in *Elle*, which never shows the dishes except from a high angle, as objects, at once near and inaccessible, whose consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking.” (Barthes 2012 [1957]: 79) In contrast to the world of *Elle*, the TikTok universe is often both magical and real. The feasibility and affordability factors play a big role in the success of the posts, as the most popular posts clearly show. The steps that need to be taken to become a green goddess or to embed rice eggs in lettuce leaves are comparatively uncomplicated. It is striking how many of the videos end with a hearty bite into the created dish. While the staging of eaters tends to be avoided in the visual arts (see, for example, in still-life painting) and also on Instagram (after all, it’s not easy to take a favorable and non-sexualized picture of an eating person), TikTok is full of people who are happily eating. Often the tasting scene marks the end of the video; this structure has become a signature trait of TikTok videos. Especially from a feminist point of view, the fact that women are publicly eating needs to be emphasized. Again and again, blogs draw attention to the fact that authentically eating women are a rarity in the film and series landscape; TikTok is full of them.<sup>10</sup> The most popular videos are therefore those that provide

10 I am not referring to the mok-bang trend imported from South Korea, which basically consists of people filming themselves eating oversized portions. This popular trend can of course also be found on TikTok (see Hakimey/Yazdanifard 2015).

concrete tips and inspiration – it can be assumed that these will actually set one or two cooking processes in motion (even if it is to make a TikTok response video).

This does not mean, however, that (as is also the case for *Elle's* readership) imaginary dishes can't be created in which the criterion of re-cookability no longer plays a role. This cuisine, created primarily for the senses and the imagination, is found above all in the videos of professional chefs who show the large number of steps of the cooking process in fast forward, often supported by music that underlines and dramatizes the individual steps. It is clear that a potential for conveying the sensory experiences generated by cooking and tasting comes with the additional video and audio levels. The sound component brings us to an important feature found in the vast majority of top posts about food. While the videos do in many cases feature speaking (sometimes as a voice-over by the creator himself or by a female, robotic voice, sometimes in real time) and music is frequently but not always present, cooking sounds are part of the DNA of most FoodTok videos. The success of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response<sup>11</sup>) is not limited to food-content videos but can be implemented particularly well here. Even if not all viewers are equally receptive to all degrees and types of sounds (and find, for example, smacking and slurping noises or even the whispering noises popular with ASMR fans to be less pleasant), most can apparently agree on the common denominator of cooking noises. This may be where two interest groups come together: those who are generally ASMR-affine and consume all kinds of sounds that have a calming effect; and those who perceive cooking itself as a meditative activity and can put themselves in the cooking process through the visual and auditory background. For videos of chefs who want to demonstrate their speed, artistry and virtuosity, the cooking sounds (like music) are a way to give rhythm and tempo to the cooking process, whose different steps are accented by the sounds. The popularity of trends like pasta chips may be due not only to a love of life hacks, new experiments, and the simplicity of the recipe, but also to their suitability for ASMR effects – crunch is at the top of the list. One of the most popular pasta-chips videos shows creator Nick Di Giovanni dressed in black and wielding a knife with a mesmerizing look, an artist in his element. Without the intensified sounds, the performance would immediately be less powerful.

Another common denominator of TikTok videos of different genres is a fondness for lifehacks. Particularly popular are hacks that show tricks for achieving a big effect with little effort. Pizza buns are made by thawing frozen pizza and then rolling and cutting it; for the revival of the charcuterie board, there is a simple technique to quickly form salami florets with the help of a glass.

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11 ASMR is a pleasurable sensation of shivering in the skull or other peripheral areas of the body in response to an (auditory or other) stimulus. ASMR-video-creators try to stimulate that sensation: for example, by eating food and playing with its wrapping in front of a good microphone.

Fig. 3: *Lemon Pasta*.



Source: TikTok Post by Emily Mariko from 07/14/2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/@emilymariko/video/7120084633638718766>. Retrieved July 6, 2023.

Many dishes, such as the legendary feta pasta of 2021, are one-pot dishes that virtually cook themselves once the ingredients are assembled. Among the hits of 2022 was *Lemon Pasta* by Emily Mariko, which is also a dish with limited ingredients and minor level of difficulty. Since her viral hit *Salmon Rice* (a simple but tasty Japanese-inspired rice dish) in 2021, her follower count has steadily increased, and she is arguably the most important food influencer on TikTok. Right now, she has 12.5 million followers. Unlike most creators, Mariko doesn't play her videos in an accelerated way; she doesn't talk, but cooks uncomplicated dishes in silence. Only the cooking sounds can be heard. Perhaps one reason for her success is this contemplative aspect, which provides a break in the extremely hectic TikTok world. In addition, she perfectly fulfills the 'that girl' profile of the life-affirming 'girl next door' that was much discussed in 2021 (cf. Sweeney-Romero/Marisol 2022). Her video on lemon pasta (fig. 3) also

demonstrates the ‘that girl’ aesthetics and well-being (nice, clean, uncomplicated) and the easy take on food (and thus on life?) with which the young woman obviously attracts many viewers. The clip is 1.06 minute long. We see fragments of the following steps: Mariko, dressed to match her dish (cute shorts with a lemon motif and a lemon yellow top), takes perfect huge lemons from a bowl, grates a giant mountain of Parmesan, cuts lemons and a fair amount of high-quality butter, cooks bronze-cut spaghetti in a Le Creuset-style pot, squeezes lemon juice over the cooked pasta, adds the butter pieces, some pasta water and more lemons, stirs everything ceremonially, pours herself a glass of red wine, and gleefully turns up some pasta with her fork. Finally, she takes a bite and shows with happy gestures and a smile how satisfied she is with the result. The cooking sounds replace speech: we hear the soothing sound of concentrated cutting, grating, sizzling; the uncomplicated recipe is understood without words. The entire production celebrates the cheerful, summery, light, Italian taste. As we saw in the analysis of the top Instagram posts, pasta is the social media star alongside burgers. They evoke Italianity/Mediterraneity (Barthes 1964), a down-to-earth quality and comfort. No wonder the sun-colored video went viral: here, unchanging pasta popularity and an easy but aesthetically pleasing dish meet currently popular stagings of the authentic that imply effortlessness. The trend towards charcuterie boards<sup>12</sup> and butter boards meets similar demands. Cooking is omitted altogether (as long as the mixing of butter with spices or herbs is not considered cooking), and the focus is on the arrangement. The result is simple but attractive. The sliced meats and cheese landscapes arranged on the boards in turn stimulate the imagination and are reminiscent not least of still-life paintings in their coloring and also in their range of products (butter, ham, cheese).

In a culturally pessimistic manner, the FoodTok development could be interpreted as follows: TikTok fits perfectly into this time of sensory overload, in which the attention span is minimal and complexity reduction is the top priority, even in the field of cooking, if anything is to be conveyed at all. To dismiss the whole thing as ‘cooking for dummies’ would, however, be short-sighted: it is true that “culinary intelligence” (Kofahl 2010; Dollase 2020) or gourmetism and the art of cooking are less in focus than the *gourmandise*. Nevertheless: unlike *Elle’s* kitchen, this is not a purely fictional kitchen but a real one with a penchant for self-irony. The food that is staged can actually be re-cooked and eaten, usually with very little effort. Nevertheless, it is not a purely pragmatic anti-enjoyment endeavor. People who like to stage food AND people who like to eat and cook gather on Instagram and on TikTok – even if it’s just a pureed sauce that can impress with a flashy color: the posts show how all

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12 TikTok uses the word “charcuterie” very freely (and incorrectly). Plates that present cheese or dessert variations are also labelled accordingly by the users. This is yet another confirmation that TikTok is not home to conventional foodies with the appropriate food knowledge, but to people who enjoy making new discoveries.

types of dishes can help life become more sensual. The celebration of the magic of transformation is part of the joy of cooking and eating and looking at people while they are cooking, in amateur and star cuisine alike. *Eatertainment* and the so-called chaos kitchen may not provide the most refined dishes, but they certainly celebrate pleasure.

## 5. Conclusion

Immersion in the universe of Instagram and TikTok shows that the popularity of the images of (seductive) comfort foods can be interpreted both pessimistically and optimistically in cultural terms. In the first variant, the sugar and fat bombs that can be consumed with bare fingers could be read as a) the abandonment of civilizational and gustatory standards which are, moreover, more compatible with smartphone addiction, or as b) purely visual substitute satisfaction in times of health dictates (keyword 'foodporn' as a kitchen of the imagination). In the second interpretation – which is often left out of the feuilletonistic view – these images are also signs of pleasure, a visual manifesto against the ascetic life and all-too-elitist culinary conventions. The escapist, hedonistic and voyeuristic potential of the posts varies depending on the motive and motivation of the readers and posters. What the preferred dishes and aesthetics reveal about the zeitgeist is difficult to reduce to a thesis or truth. At a time when more than a few foodies complain that there is a lack of culinary intelligence, it is certainly positive that social networks celebrate cooking, arranging and enjoying. They inspire those whose culinary habitus does not correspond to that of haute cuisine to actually cook. The inhibition to participate in culinary discourse is low; food content on Instagram and TikTok is decidedly anti-elitist. The down-to-earth, ornamental cuisine of TikTok and Instagram does not necessarily need to be a cuisine of illusions (unlike the “ornamental cuisine” studied by Barthes), but it certainly invites participation.

With their ability to convey synesthetic experiences, Instagram, TikTok and subsequent platforms are here to stay; they are a playground for people who celebrate their identities through food depictions, and also for those who cherish food as a comforting part of everyday life.

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