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## **Connecting Cultures and Combining Cuisines:**

### **Adapting to Eating with Diverse Female Roommates in College Dorms**

After hustling and bustling around the streets of Washington, D.C., four women rushed back to The George Washington University to fit all of their packages containing food from home into one miniscule kitchen area. They inspected each other’s seemingly foreign foods that had been brought into Thurston 420. Kelsey, with long blonde hair and an enthusiastic grin, broke the silence by asking, “Would y’all mind helping me brew some sweet tea?” Alex, passionate about sweet tea, like most people from North Carolina, jumped at the opportunity and chimed in, “Sure!” The other two women, Pamela and Katie, turned around with disbelief and silently wondered the same thing: what *is* sweet tea? Kelsey, reminded that Pamela is a native of Chicago and that Katie is from Connecticut, realized her new roommates were not familiar with the southern traditions that she was introduced to in Virginia. Thus, she exclaimed, “I brought a little bit of the South with me to Thurston! Let me introduce you to the best drink you’ll ever have!”

Here at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C, such conversations are not uncommon. Since our school is culturally and geographically diverse in this urban environment, cohabitating students often have to change their food habits and adapt to the lifestyles of those they live with. GW’s metropolitan location exposes students to an immense spectrum of dining options. Unlike students at suburban

schools who primarily rely on food from dining halls, GW students have the freedom to seek out their preferred cuisine. The variety in regional backgrounds, in addition to the high economic status of most of the students, brings a multitude of new tastes to the university, as many of the students are very cultured. Since most of the students haven't had to accommodate others, due to their past privileged environments, they don't often anticipate the effects that food can have on their transition to college life. Coming to college forces them to make independent choices about what to eat and prompts them to abandon the expectation that a predetermined meal will be provided for them. It is imperative that individuals learn how to compromise with others in terms of food, since learning to live with others is such an essential part of life.

First, we conducted primary research that studied the changing food habits of first-year women college students when they cohabitate with others in dorms. This research benefits the majority of the general public, as most individuals will make a similar transition in their future. Whether one is attending camp, getting married, or even relocating for a new job, most people will have to learn to reside with others at one point in their lives. In order to gain knowledge about this topic, we performed a series of three interviews with four females who live together in the same dorm room. All four participants come from upper middle class, Caucasian communities, but their regional differences separate them immensely. The interviews allowed us to gain knowledge about how their food habits have changed since they have been exposed to college life, different cultures, and a new environment in which they are forced to share with others and gain independence while preserving personal ideals.

Our study also explores the effects that food has on women's social roles in today's society. Throughout her life, there is an expectation that a woman's relationship with food is mediated by others' needs and demands. Today, the desire to be thin and maintain a certain appearance pressures females to monitor their food intake as well as the nutritional value of the victuals that go into their bodies. Parents can also have a profound effect on their children's relationships with food throughout their maturation process, as demonstrated by Carole Counihan, an anthropologist who studies the food habits of various college students: "College students recognize the power parents can exercise through food: their control of what and how much is available, their efforts to make children eat what they do not want, their ability to reward with or withhold food, and their use of food as emotional power" (122). In most cases, college is the first and only time in a woman's life when she has complete freedom to decide what she consumes. With the absence of parenting, women can develop their relationship with food based on personal choice, goals, and influences. Thus, college eating often forms connections between women due to this newfound "autonomy from their parents and control over their lives" (Counihan 122).

After college, however, the common expectation is that women will get married and become traditional wives and mothers. Again, their personal choices about food are affected by others, as their role to nurture the family places limitations on what they desire to eat. By analyzing the social pressures women may feel compelled to follow, those interested in our study realize that the choices a woman makes at college can indeed affect the rest of her life. Because of this newfound absence of family, women mediate each others' relationships with food in a unique way. Rather than feeling

constrained by parental choices, a woman can extend herself to form social bonds with other women, often through food. Perhaps if these interactions can help her establish an identity through food in college, she can preserve these ideals and dismiss the pressure to uphold traditional social roles, as well as alter the domestic standard for women in society.

In addition to discussing the impact that family has on food choices, Counihan also introduces ideas about the choices college students make when adapting to a new lifestyle and the gender stereotypes that often emerge during such a transition. Because she has devoted her life to studying the power that gender, social hierarchies, and demographics have on food choices, her research, in the form of both books and articles, was the most relevant to our topic. In addition to Counihan, Wendy Wills, and Katherine L. Cason were helpful in terms of exploring the connection between society, food, and human interaction. These sources, all relative to both sociology and anthropology, allowed us to draw conclusions on a larger scale about the importance of food within our overall culture, in addition to the eating habits and beliefs of female college students based on social pressures and gender standards within their environment.

By conducting secondary research, we were able to support and formulate stronger conclusions about our study, as well as elaborate on the primary research we accomplished. After interviewing our five participants and making deductions based on their experiences as women living together in a new college environment, the articles and books we used guided us to further findings and allowed us to elaborate on our topic. We found many studies that were done by other researchers that used different

demographics or slightly different theses than we did, but their results still applied to our topic through various aspects such as gender stereotypes, social hierarchies, or a family's impact on the food choices that their child makes. Thus, since many of the studies that we originally found formed the same conclusions and reemphasized the beliefs of Counihan, Wills, and Cason, it was not necessary to incorporate them into our paper. Overall, we were able to successfully connect the results of our primary research to many studies and articles that were based on the same topic, as well as formulate valuable new conclusions.

Each year, freshman women are grouped into various dorms and paired with roommates whom they have never met. Ranging from a single living partner up to a suite of six, this combination of people alters the way one eats. Living in a new environment also affects one's food options, as one's food choices often change when roommates impose limits on others' eating habits. By studying this topic, we observed the connections and conflicts that occur when women from varying backgrounds are grouped together and are forced to accommodate each other's eating habits. Whether or not they choose to dine together, their limited amount of space restricts them from completely separating their personal food choices. Since such cultural exposure is inevitable, they are forced to learn about each other's traditional meals and food preferences. Also, with the absence of men in the room, they form identities that do not uphold the traditional social standards for women. By observing these four women and combining our results with secondary research, we were able to discover how their new living arrangements, in which they are forced to spatially and culturally accommodate each other, affect their relationships with one another through social bonds and the

dismissal of traditional norms, as well as personal choices that are formed through each individual's food identity. Thus, our main goal was to decipher how women with different social norms adapt to change in their eating habits and choices, while living together in a similar environment.

### **The First Course: Participants on a Plate**

#### **Alexandra Gerhinger: Southern Belle in Need of Soul Food**

As fireworks exploded over the North Carolina sky, hundreds of rowdy southerners mobbed the streets with excitement. Even though the day-long picnics had come to the end, the smell of crispy fried chicken and pulled pork still lingered in the humid summer air. Alex, although she was only three years old, was already quite familiar with this patriotic tradition. This year, she especially anticipated the red, white, and blue sheet cake that her mother had been preparing since the day before. Looking up at the colors shooting from the sky, she smiled, content that she had avoided her mom's typically monotonous meals of tasteless chicken, fried collards, and corn on the cob. She also felt fortunate to be able to share this holiday with her extended family, rather than her consistent daily meals with only her mother, father, and brother. Dozing off in her mother's arms with a full stomach and cozy blanket, she couldn't help but dream that the Fourth of July feast surrounded her every day.

Now a freshman at GW, Alex misses the home-cooked southern food she once took for granted. Although her fond memories of home never included helping her mother in the kitchen, she has now taken over the role as "Suzie Homemaker" in her small dormitory, in which her home-baked goodies from the community kitchen often spoil her roommates. Instead of concerning herself with gaining the "freshman fifteen,"

Alex is not willing to alter her eating choices and doesn't feel guilty sharing a scrumptious plate piled high with fried chicken with the women she lives with. A true advocate of the South, Alex introduces others to her belief that "if things weren't fried down there, people wouldn't exist."

When Alex is buried in work and doesn't have time to prepare her own meals, she complains about resorting to alternate cuisines. Even though J-Street has options for all, Alex insists that:

[It] sucks and affects my eating because the staff is so rude and it makes me not want to eat there. They always yell at their customers and stuff, so I usually just go to other places so I don't have to deal with that stuff. I can get better food from the vending machine, which is totally gross.

Thus, she always finds herself succumbing to her roommates' exotic recommendations, even though she previously vowed that she would never be open to trying new cuisines after a traumatizing Chinese food experience as a child:

I would not have gone ten feet near Thai food or Chipotle if it weren't for my roommates. Everything I've found here is ok, but I still only trust ordering white rice for take out. If the rice isn't good, then that place is definitely crossed off my list! It's so international in D.C. that I thought it would be easy to find good "soul food." George Bush is from the South: maybe he can show a girl where to go for some crispy chicken and fried okra!

With a lackluster tone of voice, Alex expresses how much she despises eating in solitude with homework as her only companion. She often mopes around the door and

lethargically reclines in front of the TV until at least two of her four roommates agree they will accompany her to dinner. It's been like this since move-in day, when Alex first bonded with her new friends by opening a box her favorite store-bought snack: Reduced Fat Wheat Thins. Now several weeks (and dozens of boxes of crackers later), Alex's generosity has contributed to the entire fourth floor's obsession with Wheat Thins. Whenever a fellow Wheat Thin aficionado wakes up for a midnight snack and finds their box empty, she always invites them into their room at any time and shares her extra stash that she hides under her bed. Alex loves how her munificence and influence has helped her connect to both male and female residents of the fourth floor. Her newfound friendships have inspired her to prepare Thurston-style dinners for the community, yet she is often left frustrated by the stacks of dirty dishes that are left on her desk. Always giving people the benefit of the doubt, Alex always curls up in her bed and leaves them until the next day. When she finally realizes that her guests are not coming back to clean the mess, she exclaims, "Who do they think I am, Martha Stewart?"—she digs into the Wheat Thins—"Just because I make the dinner doesn't mean I should have to scrub the dishes alone. Lately I've been making the boys do that."

### **Katie Dickey: Suburban Schoolgirl Craving Coastal Cuisine**

As Katie looked out on the Long Island Sound from the window of Ashley's Ice Cream, she tried to absorb as much of the Connecticut Coastline as possible. Even though she worked five hours a day in the quaint creamery, she passed the hours by watching the surreal waves that crashed against the dock, while taking in the salty summer air. She mentally prepared herself for her big transition to college by

reminiscing about the things she would miss the most: the traditional family picnics on the beach that are always followed by bonfires with her favorite s'mores. Leaving for GW in less than a week, Katie knew she would always crave her aunt's famous coleslaw, and all the other dishes that were spread out on the picnic blanket year after year.

Katie still craves these comfort foods every day, even though she has relocated to an urban setting that is exceptionally diverse in the cuisines it has to offer. Looking through the drawers of her messy desk, she couldn't find any of the family recipes she swears she brought with her from home. Katie shrugs, in surrender to the fact that she will have to find restaurants in order to exercise her taste buds nightly. She even jokes that she will try the craziest places possible, like the "80's themed" night at the Black Cat in Adam's Morgan, a far cry from the traditional Connecticut cuisine! Often experimenting with campus favorites like Pita-Pit, Thai Place, and Java Green, Katie is "pleased with [her] sense of adventure." Her seafood cravings, however, have still been lingering since her arrival. Even though there are a few restaurants where she can find her favorite dishes, she complains that "the fish in Washington is not as fresh" as the kind she is accustomed to in her coastal community. She learned the hard way that the places that serve fresh seafood don't accept her meal plan and are out of her collegiate budget. The first weekend at school, she attempted to treat herself to fresh shrimp at Legal Seafood, but was humiliated when the waiter denied her form of payment, GWorld. Over a month later, she still laughs with her roommates about the "embarrassing incident." Since paying for her meals with GWorld is not an option at

some of her favorite places, Katie cannot afford such extravagant luxuries out-of-pocket and therefore cannot satisfy her cravings.

With a tight budget, Katie feels it is important to manage her own food supplies and snacks in her dormitory. Whenever one of her roommates returns from the market, she immediately slips her a few extra bucks, as she knows that she will munch on many of the snacks from time to time. Although she is willing to contribute to the cost of food that is equally consumed by all five roommates, she prefers to separate her personal items from the group. The minute that she gets a care package from home, she sneaks silently into the room and slips the boxes of packaged delights into her secret “snack drawer” in her closet, hoping the crumbs that she leaves will not give away her supply of delicious snacks.

Five hundred miles away from home with a constant hole in her pocket, Katie has unintentionally changed her eating habits considerably. Now forced to nourish herself independently and purchase her own food, she misses the wholesome food and accessibility that she was accustomed to at home:

I miss balanced meals. I miss finishing a meal and feeling like I ate a vegetable, carbohydrate, and other stuff. When I go to the market, I don't even know what foods to buy. Which vegetable goes best with rice? What kind of bread compliments chicken? I certainly don't know! I like to eat the food pyramid that my mom constructed on my plate.

Even though she misses these staple nutrients from home, Katie admires her surprisingly slimmer figure that she has developed at college. She admits that her lack of fulfilling meals is not the healthiest way to lose weight, and regrets that she does not

spend more time at the market trying to replenish her refrigerator with fruits and vegetables. Her lack of nutritional knowledge, however, restricts her from purchasing many items:

I eat less when I'm here because of time and laziness. I also don't want to gain the "freshman fifteen." If boys gain the "freshman fifteen," it's not that big a deal and they kind of expect it. If girls come home and they're fat then it's like, "Gross, what did *she* do in college?" At first I was worried because I've been eating crap, but since I don't eat that often, it has all balanced out.

At first, Katie expressed concern about how the change in environment could potentially affect her weight, even though it hasn't been the case. In fact, her roommates often accompany her to her Georgetown to purchase new, smaller clothes for the fall. Always up for sharing a burrito at Chipotle after a long day of shopping, Katie is glad that her weight loss has given them more of a reason to bond over meals, especially since she often secludes herself from the bunch on account of her budget.

Other than her roommates, some of Katie's closest friends are boys. Eating meals with them almost every day has forced her to "think twice before [she] orders." Although she is confident about her newly slim image, she can't help but still fear the "freshman fifteen" that she has observed packed onto the bodies of other females around her. When her guy-friends joke about these observations and analyze what other females are eating, she claims:

My choices are not influenced by the guys around me. I am not eating a salad because I'm a woman; I just don't want to be fat! Sure, I am

tempted to try a “Philly Cheesesteak” from Pita Pit, but it’s such a man sandwich! A guy can gain weight and no one cares, but if I blow up, the whole world will notice!

### **Pamela Kuemmerle: Cultured Connoisseur with a Hunger for Health**

As soon as Pamela stepped off the school bus, the cool autumn winds and loud car horns around her served as a constant reminder that a new school year had begun in Chicago. When she walked inside her house, the lingering smell of exotic spices awoke her olfactory senses and welcomed her back into the comforting routine of her traditional family dinners. Now a freshman in college, Pamela often laughs when she looks back on her mother’s culinary experimentation and claims, “My mom liked to pretend we were foreign. She was always trying to mimic recipes from all over the world. She couldn’t accept the fact that an American couldn’t replicate such tastes.”

Throughout her life, Pamela has always looked forward to the weekends--her time to venture out into Chicago and become familiar with the diverse cuisines it has to offer. Now in D.C., she still anticipates culinary expeditions in a new city on Friday and Saturday nights. With Parents’ Weekend only two weeks away, Pamela has been stressed about finding the perfect restaurant to carry on her family tradition. She is certain, however, that she will not take them out for pizza, as no place in D.C. can mimic the mouth-watering “deep dish pizzas that are legendary in Chicago.” She also thought it was necessary to warn her parents in advance about the disparity of geographical jargon. She dreads being humiliated by her parents using the traditional Midwest term, “pop” instead of “soda.”

Pamela is also anticipating the culinary surprises that her parents will bring to her. She has already received a box of her favorite treat: apple-donuts made with fresh cider from an orchard in Illinois. Always eager to expose her roommates to her regional treats, Pamela generously shares her sugar-dusted hometown pride and has no problem distributing any of her snacks among friends. By nourishing her roommates she has taken on a motherly role, and often jokes that with an apron and the right spatula, “No one would know that I’m a college student!” Even her weekly organization of the six stacked shelves in the corner of the room is proof of her admittance that she is “molded to be a housewife.” Influenced by her mother’s domestic role, Pamela has been successful in creating a sense of family and community within her dorm:

I really like coming back to the room after a long day of classes and relaxing with my roommates. Typically, a different snack is passed around as we talk about funny things that happened that day, and it reminds me of what my siblings and I used to do after school. The only bad part about this is that I feel like I’ve been eating a lot more. With five girls in one room, someone is always hungry.

Although Pamela is conscious of her increased food intake, she is attracted to healthier foods: “Fortunately, I genuinely like salad, so that helps me to stay healthy, even though I snack a lot during the day. I get annoyed though when guys question what I eat. Trust me, I don’t eat salad because I’m self-conscious in front of guys.” She loves going next door to the R.H Bistro, and believes that she and her roommates should have a combined dinner with the boys across the hall once a week. Since she eats dinner with at least one of her roommates every day, she likes to dine with a

variety of people, and believes that this tradition has allowed her to widen her food horizons and expand her circle of friends.

Growing up with greens on the table every night, Pamela is able to provide nutritional knowledge about the vegetables she picks out for the room. Even though her roommates often joke that her mom will never find out if she isn't "eating her veggies," Pamela has been permanently impacted by her mother's guidance. As much as the other girls in 420 hate to admit it, they love to snack on Pamela's supply of vegetables, hummus, and other healthy snacks. Even though she has the same low budget as many of her roommates, Pamela never complains about the cost of food. Her desire to create a more domestic environment within the room leads her to believe that "the cost will all even out" by the end of the year, even though it is more expensive to buy fresh food from her favorite stores like Whole Foods and District Market. Pamela's diverse selection of victuals that she purchases weekly fills her fridge with colors and tastes that remind her of home, as she tries to mimic the nurturing environment that she is accustomed to. Accessing the foods that bring back the flavors of her kitchen at home has helped ease her transition into college—" [she's] not about to change that now!"

### **Kelsey Greenwalt: Drive-Thru Dixie Demanding Delivery**

The rowdy crowd at the Roanoke College basketball game shook the seats in the packed auditorium and chanted loudly, "Biscuits! Biscuits!" As the scoreboard changed from 94-82, the fans repeated the phrase with even more intensity than before. From an outsider's perspective, the chaos erupting in the gymnasium was often perplexing and strange. To Kelsey, however, this was a weekly routine that evoked excitement from the student body and fans from the surrounding Roanoke community. Knowing

that if the score reached 100 the fans would all receive free biscuits from Bo Jangles (a local favorite), the mob's enthusiasm became out of control—a clear sign indicating the importance of food and biscuits in particular in southern culture. Kelsey's enthusiasm, however, extended far beyond the basketball court, as every night she looked forward to her next home-cooked meal. Even today, the satiating thought of glistening fried chicken, flaky biscuits, and fresh sweet tea still lingers with her in her new life at GW.

When Kelsey reminisces about her nightly dinner rituals from home, she smirks at the fact that she barely ventured outside her kitchen. Used to constantly being at her mother's side, Kelsey came to college prepared to continue setting the table, preparing meals, or washing dishes. She brags that she has the culinary knowledge of a “gourmet cookbook,” and arrived to school thoroughly prepared to share it with her new roommates. The first night in Thurston, however, she was exposed to the vast world of take-out, which inspired her to leave her cookbook on the shelf and investigate the phenomenon of delivery:

Where I come from, delivery is never an option. The few places that would drive all the way to my house take forever, and the food is cold by the time it gets there. Here, though, it's amazing! Especially places like Campus Snacks. I've gotten into the habit of going online and just ordering some Ben and Jerry's with one click of a mouse and it's usually waiting outside Thurston five minutes later! Did I mention that my ice cream travels by bike?

This aspect of college life was almost as exciting to Kelsey as winning Bo Jangles biscuits, and she has not bothered to venture outside of her newfound culinary

confinement ever since. In fact, she is so consumed with her glorious discoveries that she often turns down her roommates' offers to try new dishes and cuisines. Even though her roommates often dine together, she often denies their invitation, since she prefers to order her own food, as it accommodates her schedule and often arrives before they even leave for dinner. The women she lives with also always ask her to participate in their baking marathons that take place in the community kitchen, but she would now "prefer to order in, rather than try to cook" in an environment so limited in kitchen utilities. She does, however, take pride in the sweet tea that she brews with expertise in her room to share with her roommates, but admits to being hypocritical about experimenting with the different cuisines they recommend to her: "Pamela always wants me to try her sushi, but I absolutely refuse to touch it. In my family, we don't eat anything raw or slimy."

Kelsey often expresses her frustration that J-Street's fast food options are limited to Wendy's. Back home in Virginia, she and her friends made frequent pit stops at their favorite drive-thru, Chick-Fil-A. Thus, as soon as Kelsey arrived in Washington, she logged on to the Chick-Fil-A website to locate the nearest branch. To her surprise, she would have to take the metro to Maryland to devour her favorite sandwich! This lengthy trip, although "worth it for the taste," would defeat her original intention of getting a cheap meal, as the price of the Metro adds on an additional amount of money to her lunch.

Although accessing her favorite food was no longer cheap or easy, Kelsey gathered up a group of males who also felt passionately about Chick-Fil-A, and finally was able to satisfy her craving:

When I bragged to my friends that I finally got to have Chick-Fil-A, they didn't get it. It's the Starbucks of Roanoke—there's one on every block! They were also shocked that I went with a group of guys. Here, so many girls restrict their eating choices in front of guys. In the South, if you order a salad at Chick-Fil-A, you're crazy!

She orders like a champion: a “number two” (a crispy, spicy chicken sandwich with curly fries and extra ketchup), and laughs when people comment on her lack of modesty. No matter how much comfort food she stuffs into her mouth, her thin frame will never change, as weight is never a concern for Kelsey. Besides, “a good southern meal is more important than acting all prim and proper.” When she goes home, the first thing she plans on doing is upholding her favorite tradition so she can ensure that hot biscuits will be waiting for her at Bo Jangles. When she is up in the stands at a Roanoke basketball game, her pride and longing for such comfort will ring above all as she chants her favorite phrase, “Biscuits! Biscuits!”

### **The Second Course: Secondary Sources on the Serving Salver**

All of our sources verified that “food is a product and mirror of the organization of society on both the broadest and most intimate levels” (Counihan “Food, Culture, and Gender” 6). Our secondary sources also observed that food's prominence in our culture clearly influences gender roles, social roles, and individual identity. It is emphasized that when women make the transition from home life to college life, food plays a significant role in their adaptation and ultimately determines their future. Thus, during this time of change and independence, the food choices that women make in college

reveal and establish identities, as well as confirm the fact that “college students’ ideas about food are embedded in the value system of U.S. society” (Counihan “Food Rules in the United States” 113).

Through family meals and traditions, children begin to form their food voice at a young age and strengthen it as they develop into adulthood. Carole Counihan used Freud’s ideas to reemphasize her belief that a “child’s earliest experiences of eating are the stage for important developmental processes and shape his or her lifelong personality” (“Food, Culture, and Gender” 18). Katherine L. Cason, professor of Human nutrition at Clemson University, agreed with Counihan and confirmed that early eating experiences are a significant factor in forming one’s food voice. By conducting a study of thirty-six undergraduate students, she was able to determine that it is common for “childhood habits [to] persist even after the student leaves the parents homes” (53). Her research sample revealed that families influence food choices, the role of meals in forming social relationships, and decision making in terms of preparation.

The meals a woman remembers being served during her childhood significantly influence her nutritional knowledge and future decisions about what she chooses to eat. Cason’s study validated that “college students express their individualism and independence by defining their own good diet” (118). If a woman is used to healthy, balanced meals, the assumption is that this nutritional knowledge will travel with her to college. Counihan emphasized this idea when she stated, “For students, the ability to determine their own and others’ food consumption establishes their place in the social hierarchy and their ability to be autonomous and independent” (“Food Rules in the United States” 114). Since female college freshman are forced to leave their cultural

backgrounds and abandon the social hierarchies that were already set within their family and community, coming to college without a set social role causes food to become a mean by which new positions are formed. Thus, women often let their previous familial roles influence the establishment of their individual social role that is formed in their new environment (Counihan "Food Rules in the United States" 114).

Cason's undergraduate students again agreed with Counihan's findings about the effects that family has on social relationships, concluding that "eating together lies at the heart of social relations; at meals [one] create[s] family and friendships by sharing food, tastes, values, and [them]selves" ("Food, Culture, and Gender" 6). Clearly, if a woman is used to interacting with her family through dining experiences, she will seek to form bonds and connections with others over meals at college. Since females often eat with one another in the presence of their dorm, they often form connections when they are forced to decide who will purchase and prepare the food. Traditionally, a woman will base her decision on the values that her family taught her about task distribution, or she will immediately take on the role that she was accustomed to at home. These different responsibilities that women assume based on their family's influence, will certainly lead to smoother college transition (Counihan "Food and Gender" 130). Thus, this combination of family values and norms strengthens a woman's identity and food voice, and reveals her future role in the family.

The traditional role of women in western society is to bear children and take on the responsibility of providing within the home. Carole Counihan describes this position:

A good deal of consumption occurs in the home, it has been assumed to be the province of women. Women are credited with control over the purchasing,

storing, cooking, and serving of food. In addition, they are perceived as greatly influencing the food habits of family members. ("Food and Gender" 126)

Even though women have progressed socially over the past centuries, their struggle with food roles has not undergone a significant change. Since food is a means by which both conflicts and connections are formed, such responsibility gives women the opportunity to either uphold a more stereotypical position or establish independence from men and societal bounds:

Between men and women, food is a means of differentiation as well as a channel of connection. By claiming different roles in regard to food and distinct attributes through identification with specific food, men and women define their masculinity and femininity, their similarity and difference. (Counihan "Food and Gender" 7)

In turn, food can function to form relationships as well as establish one's independent self. Counihan also concluded that "class, caste, race and gender hierarchies are maintained, in part, through differential control over and access to food" ("Food, Culture, and Gender" 8). Therefore, it is clear that a woman's dietary choices and eating habits reveal a lot about her place in the social system. Since society views food to function as more than just merely a necessity, women's relationships, roles, and actions often revolve around food. Thus, the friendships and connections that are shared over meal preparation and consumption may also reinforce stereotypical gender roles, whether or not one is conscious of it. This idea was again reiterated by Counihan when she stated that, "on a day to day basis, food exchanges are crucial in maintaining good relations between individuals" ("Food, Culture, and Gender" 14).

Throughout all of her published research, Counihan also extensively explored the stereotypes regarding the fact that traditional foods and eating habits are coupled with either men or women. For example, “American college students associate ‘light’ foods like salad, chicken, or yogurt with women, and ‘heavy’ foods like beef, beer, and potatoes with men” (Counihan “Food, Culture and Gender” 10). Such expectations about food consumption reflect the gender labels that our culture has formed to define men as dominant and women as weak and obedient (Counihan “Food, Culture, and Gender” 10). This assumption specifically affects women during their period of transition between home and the working world. Since women stray from their previous reliance on their family and form individual independence, they are able to establish their role in society. According to Wendy Wills’ study that she conducted at University of Edinburgh Medical School, where she a Professor of Behavioral Studies, college students often turn to their newfound peers as influence for what to eat and how to act, a bond that could potentially help create a new social role for each individual (6). Thus, it is clear that “college students eat to show they are individuals, to be special, to be moral; they eat to be themselves and to declare their place in the complex race, class, and gender hierarchy in which they live” (Counihan “Food Rules in the United States” 126).

Within wealthy universities, this struggle to find a place on the social hierarchy often leaves college students with an individual sense of superiority and entitlement. Eating emerges as a complex practice that both distinguishes and unites people, and the sense of power that many students have is reflected through certain eating habits, as well as sophisticated foods. College students, however, may not think about the challenges that people from different socio-economic groups face. When people in a

new environment are establishing their roles, they often connect with people who make similar food choices, as it forms bonds with others in the same social strata. Similar food habits often reflect a comparable demographic, wherein people with the same financial backgrounds often resort to analogous food choices.

Katherine Cason explored similar ideas when she examined the direct connection between gender and diet. Her studies concluded that, “many women fall victim to media’s weight loss messages conveying that all you need is to be thin to be aesthetically appealing” (53). Unfortunately, in today’s society, female college students often restrict their eating due to such stresses. Since women are so susceptible to outside pressures, their food choices often reflect these anxieties by changing what one eats in front of certain people, especially their romantic interests. Beyond this generalization, Cason’s study revealed more nutrition-oriented results, which concluded that college students, regardless of their gender or class, felt that they were not eating healthy. Many claimed that they try to utilize outside resources, such as the food pyramid or nutrition labels, to help them make more nutritional savvy food choices, yet such efforts seem to be ineffective (53-59).

Cason also examined how similar food conflicts bridge the gap between male and female college students, such as the mutual fear of initial weight gain in college. This insecurity comes with justification. According to responses of 290 college freshmen, seventy percent had gained weight by the end of their sophomore year. With so many new food choices on college campuses, however, it is now becoming easier for students to avoid the so-called “freshman fifteen.” Despite these dietary qualms that are not restricted to a certain sex, gender continually influences food choices and

relationships in the social setting. Even though society is constantly progressing and coming closer to a standard of equality, it is nearly impossible to escape the gender stereotypes within our culture. This is especially apparent for women who are often confined to traditional domestic roles and are forced to deal with the social pressure to maintain appeal to the opposite sex (“Typical Eating and Physical Activity Habits of University Students”).

As Counihan first stated, it is clear that “food [has] become a vehicle of power” (“Food Rules in the United States” 113). The way one eats, what one chooses to eat, and one’s eating habits, continually influence relationships and shift social hierarchies, all in the pursuit of authority and personal control. Thus, the gender stereotypes that continue within our culture will remain as long as social roles are relevant within our society, since power undoubtedly defines one’s role.

### **Dessert: Reflecting Back on Feasts, Friends, and Facts**

Through our interviews and observations, in addition to our secondary research, we were able to come to strong conclusions about our study. Fortunately, most of the published research that we used corroborated what we found in our primary research and supported our deductions, rather than serving as a means of contrast. By exploring food’s influence on female college students who are forced to cohabitate with others in dorms and establish relationships with one another, we discovered that many women are open-minded enough to alter their personal norms and form their individual food identity away from home. During this transitional time in a woman’s life, she ultimately utilizes the values and practices that she was taught at home to form her new food voice and fit into a new social hierarchy at college, while forming new relationships.

In our primary research, the responses of our participants about connecting cultures and combining cuisines revealed many similarities and differences that come from adapting to eating with diverse female roommates in college dorms. Alex, Katie, Pamela, and Kelsey each revealed their personal “food voice”: an individual’s identity through food that is established from family backgrounds, meal habits, and social perspectives (Hauck-Lawson). Because our participants had already formed their own food voices prior to coming to GW, it was easier for them to interact with others through food while maintaining their own dietary standards. Before we conducted the interviews, we expected that the interactions between each roommate would have had a far more significant impact on the food voices of the other women in the room. It is clear, however, that one forms her food voice early on in life and uses it to connect to others, but ultimately does not deviate tremendously from her original standards. The variety of each roommates’ geographical influences did not necessarily change the overall food voice of others, but rather exposed each individual to new cuisines, introduced many culinary tastes, and established new food traditions in their dormitory.

Both our primary and secondary research verified that one’s family influences their food choices and values tremendously. Based on our interviews, it was clear that the women who previously played an active role in helping their family cook came to college better prepared with nutritional knowledge and, therefore, were able to more effectively provide for themselves. The wisdom that each woman brought from home shaped each individual’s role within the room. Pamela took on a more motherly role, which ultimately helped her make a smooth transition into college life, yet forced her to feel like she had to be responsible for unforeseen tasks. Katie, however, was used to her mother

catering to her culinary needs, which has left her unprepared for providing for herself and reliant on the other women. Kelsey and Alex also attributed their different roles within the room to the domestic behavior they learned from their mothers. We originally thought that they would conform to similar roles, as they are both from the South, but they proved that a mother's habits can have a much more significant impact than regional influence.

Our secondary research strengthened this idea about parental influence, as Cason's interviews revealed that, "the most influential source of nutrition information is the family" (53). When each of the five girls felt independent at college for the first time in their lives, the only culinary guidelines that they carried with them were those instilled by their families at home, thus proving that "childhood habits can persist even after the student leaves the parent's homes" (Cason 53). This can be applied to our own lives, wherein the anecdotes we included in our primary research revealed the personality and food choices of each individual participant. Just like our participants' experiences, our secondary research proved that family meals and traditions allow children to form a food voice at a young age and strengthen it as they continually try more tastes and are exposed to more familial practices. Clearly, families do indeed influence food choices and decision-making about preparation and purchases when one moves to a new environment.

Our participants also tried to model their choices after the nutritional knowledge they received at home, which was not surprising, since our secondary research also suggested that this awareness should travel with students to college. In this case, there was a direct correlation between a student's eating habits at school and her mother's

cooking habits at home, wherein the more a girl's mother played a traditional housewife role at home, the more nutritionally careful her daughter was at GW. We found that all of our participants missed home-cooked, balanced meals, and admitted that their emphasis on nutritional value sometimes has to be sacrificed due the primary factors in determining their next meal, such as accessibility, price, and overall convenience. Thus, because of this newfound financial independence, our participants were forced to adapt to the wide spectrum of expenses within the room. Since they share their food, they have to make compromises about price restrictions. This often limits them from purchasing healthy options or ingredients to cook traditional family recipes, due to the high expense of many items. Our participants claimed that they all still try to obey their mothers' advice, which is most commonly expressed through the roles they conformed to within the room, but their actual food choices are often altered because of the restricting factors that come along with the transition to college life.

Our study also taught us a lot about how women develop individual social roles in college. Even while lacking males in the room and making choices without their parents, each of the woman's childhoods and family dynamics predetermined their expectations for themselves. Since all four women are part of upper middle class, Caucasian families, and come from homogeneous suburban towns, their similar backgrounds have had a significant impact on our outcome. Although we feel that our participants were a good sample for our study, choosing four different interviewees would produce alternate results. As previously emphasized, the women who reside in this dorm were randomly selected to live together by the GW Student Housing Committee. Since GW prides itself on having such a diverse student body, the results

of our study could have been drastically different if a woman with a different background or set of demographics had been selected to live in Thurston 420.

As demonstrated by our results, women of the same ethnicity and class are often exposed to the same opportunities and thus, tend to make similar culinary choices during a transitional period. Most of the secondary research, in contrast to our study, observed a larger variety of demographics. For example, Counihan observed that “for the most part, working and middle class white students seem to uphold the food rules of their culture” (126). While we found her conclusion to be true in our study as well, since our participants stuck to the “food rules” they were brought up with, our sample was only composed of upper middle class students who were exposed to different dining opportunities and less dietary restrictions than those in a lower social demographic. As our research showed, many women at GW have been fortunate enough to have meals constantly provided for them during their childhood, which therefore made it more difficult for us to relate to the results of our secondary research. If we had analyzed a woman from a less affluent background or different ethnicity, dining preferences and cost may have been a much more significant factor in our study. Thus, it is essential to note that, while college shapes the food habits of all women, each individual is affected differently in terms of food because of their background and demographics.

After reading the articles, one of the most prevalent themes that we noticed was that females feel significant pressure to conform and feel “attractive” in the presence of the opposite sex. For example, Cason noted that “gender is often related to dietary choices. Studies have shown that many women fall victim to media’s weight loss messages conveying that all you need to be is thin to be aesthetically appealing” (53).

In this case, all of the roommates are straight and currently single, but have many male friends who accompany them to eat on a daily basis. After interviewing our participants, however, we observed that none of them consciously doctored their eating in order to appear more attractive to men, even though they all acknowledged that such pressures do exist.. They reached a consensus that the gender stereotypes that are prevalent in the college environment cannot sway a solid food voice, as women are not afraid to communicate their preferences and share their culinary traditions. Self-consciousness can be expected from any woman, but they insisted that male pressure did not play a significant role in their food habits. All five women admitted that they did not want to gain the freshman fifteen to uphold their personal satisfaction, but again insisted that this claim had nothing to do with gaining approval from the opposite sex.

Our participants conveyed that they felt a strong sense of empowerment as women to control their relationships and have a variety of food choices, rather than dealing with pressures to conform to past stereotypes of women, our research often suggested.

Counihan also emphasized that:

[...]women's food provisioning is a mixed bag, one that is a potential source of influence on husbands and children through the ability to give them a valued substance—food—but also is linked with female subordination through women's need to serve, satisfy, and defer to others, particularly husbands or boyfriends.

(4)

In our sample study, however, certain roommates willingly took on traditional domestic roles within the dorm. This rejection of conformity to feminine stereotypes ultimately

varies with each individual, and is one of the greatest factors that defines every woman as unique.

Even though college is a time when a woman is able to have nutritional independence and not feel constrained by her family, there is a significant social component to her food choices. Social dynamics often take priority over monetary restraints and even preferences. Since there is such to pressure to form social bonds early, sharing meals is a common way to develop relationships with peers. When living together, women also often mediate each other's choices about food, as they each bring their separate preferences and are forced to combine them by compromising with each other. Because of this exposure to new food culture and practices, in addition to the fact that food gives women individual power within a social setting, each woman is introduced to original ideas, which could ultimately change their future identities. Although our results proved that women traditionally maintain their own food voice, outside influences still affects their relationship with food, and therefore ultimately determines their future social roles and interactions with others.

As young women at GW, we benefited immensely from this topic as well. Not only did our research help us adjust to college life, but it also taught us a lot more about gender and social roles. By analyzing and understanding others' food voices, we feel that we were able to comprehend the importance of social norms throughout different regions of the country. Additionally, we gained knowledge about how others feel about the social pressures and ideals involving food that exist for women, in comparison to our own experiences as women. Analyzing and observing such people helped us grow as

individuals, evaluate the way we feel about ourselves as women, and define the role that food will have in our future.

Almost two months into the school year, each of the four women in Thurston 420 has reinforced her food voice through the meals they have shared, and the independent habits they have formed. “Hey Kelsey,” Katie shouted from the nook of shelves, “I brewed some sweet tea. Do you want some? I even added that special ingredient that you told me about!” Suddenly, all of her roommates gathered by the pitcher in the refrigerator, cups in hand. Jokingly pushing Pamela out of the way, Alex exclaimed, “What about us?!” Finishing her cup, Kelsey smiled and said, “I never would have thought that a Connecticut girl could have so much southern flavor—this sweet tea is almost as good as mine!”

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