

Commensality: The Essential Concept of Food Studies

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When you reflect on the most pleasurable or happiest meals you have experienced, what do you picture? For me, any number of meals might come to mind. They range from ornate wedding feasts, birthday parties, holiday meals, and exquisite dishes prepared by chefs to a fish fry held on an island in a South Carolina swamp, a box lunch on a Barbados hillside, and s'mores around a campfire. The menus, the stated purposes, the costs, and the skills of the cooks varied greatly among these meals. What they share, though, is the social setting of group dining. The quality that holds them together is the most important idea for the understanding of humans and food, once we meet our basic needs of nutrition.¹



Figure 1. History of Food class meal 2018. Photo credit: James H. Tuten.

Scholars and writers coming from a wide range of disciplines—biology, sociology, gastronomy, anthropology, philosophy, archaeology, and history—in the nineteenth century began to study food and its uses and meanings. They explored the major facets of food for humans, including nutrition, that is, what people need to consume to survive. As gastronomy came into existence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tomes about taste appeared. There are, after all, essential sensory elements of eating

and drinking: textures and mouthfeel, flavors, temperatures, and so forth. You can say they are experiences of sensuality that can be public. In the twentieth century, scholars realized what novelists had already demonstrated much earlier: human relations happen during meals. Today, we call the examination of this feature of human experience commensal studies.²

Commensality: the term derives from Latin and means “together at the table.” A more accurate figurative sense of the meaning is the experience of people coming together over food, which results in human interaction. Sharing food in service to human needs beyond sustenance is an old idea, but the term “commensality” is a more recent coinage for it. To enlarge upon the notion, bonds and relationships take shape over meals. Those can be the relationships of kinship created and reinforced across countless meals together or of a church’s congregation routinely setting aside time for potluck suppers. As food scholars Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chou put it, “in a nutshell, commensality is the essence of food, and commensal acts are essential for the integration of a society.”³

To think about food as a category that humans use to create meaning and relationships is to move past the more basic notion of food as nutrition. A research team studying commensality put this well: “Food, which is nourishment transformed by culture, would also have an integrative function for humans.”⁴ In many regards, when talking about food history, it is possible to name-drop some of the major figures of twentieth-century social science. For example, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote about how food and meals function as social space. He rendered the ideas in many ways, but a charming one runs: “Food must not only be good to eat, but also good to think.”⁵ Clifford Geertz, one of the most important scholars of culture, certainly earned a place in deepening our understanding of commensality in different cultures around the world. Commensality, after all, appears to be a global human phenomenon, sweeping up Pacific Islanders, Pashtuns, and sumo wrestlers alike.

A dozen years ago, as I was preparing to teach a course on food history for the first time, my focus zeroed in on other things than commensality: how different cultures interact, the Columbian Exchange, the African diaspora mixing with Native American foodways. In teaching the course, though, in listening to students, observing them, and reading the artifacts they wrote, I learned that the most important part of thinking about food is not historical processes but commensality.

My colleague, Anthony Richards, is an ethnobotanist with extensive experience in the West Indies, the United Kingdom, and several countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. Meals taken together are signifiers of social and familial bonds. For example, Richards notes, “In West Africa, this act of sharing a communal meal is, perhaps, the critical gesture of reconciliation”; he goes on to say, “In Sierra Leone, family meals are commonly eaten out of one plate or out of one bowl. For a family member to be excluded is grave.”⁶

Commensality not only marks meals around the world but has also left its traces deep in the chronological scale. Sociologists, historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists have looked at commensality through ethnographic research, excavation, and the documentary record, examining ancient Sparta, the court of Sargon II of Assyria, medieval feasting, the Eucharist, Amazonian groups during the era of Spanish and Portuguese contact, and the family.⁷

Part of what commensality captures as a concept is that there is something common but significant when we gather, and we can gather in all sorts of groups—as family, friends, and teammates—to take our meals together. Students eat many meals in the college cafeteria or refectory with a group that is not their family unit. If we reflect upon that experience, can we detect the building of group bonds during those repasts? The home or the college dining hall are but two potential places for commensality—people can gather in all sorts of settings. There could be meals at a literal table, but in order not to become fixated on furniture, a physical table may be replaced by everyone sitting or standing around a campfire. Sometimes athletes eat box lunches on the team bus. Most important is the fact that people are gathering together and breaking bread, so to speak. The sharing of food and drink resides at the heart of these gatherings. Eating may be the ultimate quotidian act; you do it every single day of your life. Eat with any one other person or more, though, and eating becomes commensality.



Figure 2. Cookout with Juniata history students, 2016. Commensality takes place in a range of settings and, despite the literal translation (“at the table, together”), a table is not required. Photo credit: James H. Tuten.

Christina Koch, a US astronaut, achieved the second-longest amount of time spent in space by any human—over 328 days—and returned to Earth in early February 2020. On the International Space Station (ISS), among the many different things that they research, they always investigate human life in space. The effects of zero gravity have long been a part of that. One area of Koch’s research on the ISS this time was a study of whether growing plants on the station affected how the residents felt and interacted. As the *New York Times* noted, “Humans bond over food, and being able to grow food in space could be important to social dynamics during future long-duration crewed missions.”⁸ Even if NASA does not use the word commensality, they study the concept and perhaps, in time, they will reveal new understandings about it.

In the sports world, too, there are those who have built group identity through commensality. One example is Gregg Popovich. “Pop,” as fans know him, has been the head coach of the NBA’s San Antonio Spurs since 1996, and he is famous for being both taciturn with the press and a gourmand. Over his nearly quarter century with the Spurs, he has converted many basketball players into oenophiles (wine enthusiasts) along the way to securing five NBA Championships. His longevity and remarkable success tend to be topics the coach dismisses, saying to a reporter once, “What’s my legacy? Food and wine. [The NBA] is just a job.”⁹ Some have attributed part of Popovich’s success to commensality, enough so that a senior ESPN writer spent months investigating this famous coach and how he used commensality as a team-building strategy. One of his former championship players, Danny Green, captured it this way: “Dinners help us have a better understanding of each individual person, which brings us closer to each other—and, on the court, understand each other better.”¹⁰

The examples of NASA research and Popovich’s team building point to the possibility of deliberately creating commensality. On the one hand, planning a meal as a host includes the seating: “Let’s not put those two people together. That’s not a good idea.” But I think it is important to go into a meal with the idea that you want to get a social good out of the meal. On the other hand, an individual attending a meal can take responsibility, asking, “What can I, out of this meal, learn about other people? Can I get a little closer, a little more connected with somebody than I was before?” That is purposeful, but there are a lot of different ways to do it, and it depends a lot on the situation, like all social interaction. What do people put out there, or how reluctant are some folks to engage in interaction?

FEASTS

My favorite dish for a feast is Frogmore stew. Some know it as Lowcountry Boil, a one-pot meal of blue crabs, shrimp, potatoes, sausage, corn on the cob, and a Vidalia onion or two.¹¹ It is not that different from Chesapeake Bay crab boils, and it uses the crab seasonings made famous there. In the South Carolina Lowcountry, these feasts begin in late June when the blue crabs begin to run and are in

plentiful supply. Local sweet corn comes into season then and is still new to the eater and exciting. I could go on, but I am going to make myself salivate. Frogmore stew takes some pains to make well. As a result, when you prepare it, you frequently make it for a big crowd of people. My family loves to feast every summer in June, typically the week after Father's Day. We gather on a Saturday when people are coming together from different states and towns, and we convene over this feast. It's important enough that my father at one point had a welder, whose side hustle was metal fabrication, build a giant stainless-steel pot for cooking this one meal. The pot has a diameter of three feet because it takes a hefty pot to cook enough crabs for all those people. My uncle had a craftsman build a custom tray for serving the stew. One person can't carry it: it takes two people.



Figure 3. Frogmore stew in serving tray. Photo credit: James H. Tuten.

Feasts are highly social meals involving hosts and guests with a large supply of food. As scholars have looked at commensality, they have turned to feasting as an important type of meal. Archeologists especially have studied feasting and commensality in Ancient Rome, elite meals during the Middle Ages in Europe, and such meals in many other times and geographies. To a degree, “feast” is a somewhat imprecise term. It can refer to the scale of a meal, more food than is needed or is usual, but it often denotes a quality of specialness: perhaps a menu that is more expensive or time consuming to prepare. We do not feast every day, and it usually implies a gathering of more than just a nuclear family. Feasts are, to employ an overused term, special. The group of people who gather are not always together, at least not

always together in quite that circumstance. The food may not be the most important part of a feast, or it may amplify the sense of occasion. Feasts can perform different functions, too: celebration, displaying wealth, or building relationships for economic or political purposes.¹²

Let us think about another important feast. Thanksgiving in the United States remains a traditional feast focusing on food, drink, and commensality with family or friends and is enshrined as a national holiday. In the nineteenth century, Thanksgiving, although remembered and observed to some extent, became a national holiday through the efforts of many but also from the context of the Civil War and President Lincoln's decision to formalize it. Despite any number of social factors today that reduce the opportunities for families to gather and feast together, Thanksgiving has persisted and even grown in importance as a commensal event. Thanksgiving remains a food-centric holiday in a way that most other national holidays are not. No doubt, some of this stems from the way Thanksgiving draws upon older harvest festival traditions. The idea of abundance and an idealized image of the proper Thanksgiving exists in most American minds thanks to numerous movies, advertising, and artifacts ranging from Norman Rockwell's 1943 painting "Freedom from Want" to *A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving* television story from 1973.¹³

Feasts are not the only special events where more food and more people than a normal meal remain large in our memory. In the United States, the Super Bowl has grown into an annual commensality event for many people. In some cases, it rises to the level of a feast, but, in others, a family or a group of friends who routinely socialize gather to watch the game, eat, drink, and be together. Some bars and restaurants make special arrangements for this rite of February in North America with Buffalo wings, chips and guacamole, bratwurst, and a wide range of hearty finger foods that go well with beer.

For many, dining around a fire outdoors, independent of the quantity of food or number of people, also heightens commensality. There is some literature, though more research on this would be welcome, that focuses on humans gathering around fire to eat. The cultural value of food became stronger when fire was discovered and started the process of cooking foods. Social scientists including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, Richard Wrangham, and Massimo Montanari emphasized the essential role of fire for nourishment transformation, assigning it a cultural function besides the biological one.¹⁴ Eating around a fire outdoors in a time when we spend much of our life indoors makes a stronger claim on our senses, and it stands apart from everyday meals.

SOCIAL BEVERAGES

Another aspect of commensality worth thinking about is social beverages. Here, part of the focus is the beverage—going out for a cup of coffee, for example, and drinking it in the company of others makes it social. People buy millions of liters of water to drink, but we have no water shops. Though

essential, water is not a social beverage. Humans decided over time that certain beverages warrant or facilitate the gathering of people and that they, in a sense, facilitate commensality. The social beverages include the stimulant-containing tea and coffee and the family of alcoholic drinks from beer to wine and spirits. Whole subcultures have grown up around the production and consumption of these social beverages. There are aficionados of wine; others focus on single malt scotches. Smart phone apps such as Untapped build virtual community around craft beer. The boutique rum distillery Foursquare has a Facebook group boasting 3,400 members. Magazines in print and online cater to all of these, and that is before we take into account coffee and tea.¹⁵



Figure 4. People have developed a wide array of social beverages varying in tastes, potency, and colors. Rockley Beach, Barbados, January 2020. Photo credit: James H. Tuten.

Some towns have more bars than any other kind of eating or drinking businesses. This does not reflect an inherent drinking problem; rather, it reflects ways in which, through custom, we have built up the places for commensality. Although the example may resonate only with a slightly more mature group, the television show *Cheers* (1982-1993) offered an extended comedic lesson in commensality. The *Cheers* theme song, by Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, captured the idea that there is a

psychological need for belonging, or, as they put it: “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.”¹⁶ Popular television comedies frequently lean on the commensality of diners, cafes, bars, and coffee shops, as seen from *Cheers* to *Seinfeld* and from *Friends* to *How I Met Your Mother*. Those in the British Isles have an expression, “down the pub.” This means that they are visiting their local pub (or “local”), where a sense of belonging comes over a pint of ale.¹⁷

To go a step beyond that, if you want to build a coffee shop or a bar or build some kind of space for people to come in and gather and have food or social beverages, you may deliberately think about how to foster commensality. How do you design for or engineer it? Greg Anderson, co-owner and manager of Standing Stone Coffee Company in Huntingdon, Pennsylvania, does not use the word “commensality,” but he began with the goal of building a business where people came together. What kind of place would that be? He did not care for coffee at that time, but he saw a coffee shop as the most logical mechanism



Figure 5. Cassidy Titus '20 and the author enjoying coffee during a study-abroad class in Barbados, January 2020. Photo credit: Nasiha Khan.

for adding more commensality to the community of Huntingdon. In addition to supplying a social beverage, he organized trivia nights, movies in the courtyard, bands, poetry readings, and more. For a month once a year, he posts photos and bios of regulars on the walls so patrons get to know their

neighbors. A routine day may see staff from the local hospital breezing through in scrubs, a police officer, retirees gathered to gab, and college students doing homework or just hanging. In a corner, you may even find a professor trying to write or grade. The author Ray Oldenburg studied the way bars, cafes, and coffee shops serve to build community. The bar, the coffee shop, the teahouse: these are all deliberate places of commensality based around social beverages, which have existed for centuries and which are found around the world because the human need for interaction is both timeless and universal.¹⁸

In addition to the establishment of the spaces dedicated to commensality around social beverages, people have built tools and customs over an unknown period of time dedicated to the making and serving of those beverages. Consider that, before 2600 BC, ancient Sumerians drank beer together using metal drinking straws and slurping the brew from a common vat.¹⁹ Today, many people own a teapot, coffee pot, mugs for drinking hot beverages, wine carafes, growlers for beer, and a complex and broad array of glassware for all the social beverages. Some societies take this really far. Think about the tools you use for making tea or coffee or perhaps other social beverages. Are they teapots, urns, coffeemakers built to serve a single person, or are they for multiple people? Does whether we equip ourselves for sharing beverages or for drinking those beverages alone suggest that we value commensality?

Consider the Moroccan approach to tea. Moroccan tea arrives piping hot, minty, and sweet. When Moroccans pour tea, they make a show of it. The host pours tea from well above the clear glass without



Figure 6. Pouring tea outside Casablanca, Morocco, 2009. Photo credit: James H. Tuten.

spilling a drop. The high pour with aplomb focuses the people gathered together on the drink, the drinkware, and the person who is serving it. Of course, you could do that for your sole enjoyment, but, in Moroccan culture, as in others dedicated to tea drinking, the sharing of tea is key to the experience. While tea with sweet cookies in someone's home makes for a warm gathering, a table isn't required. Tea can take place outside with everyone sitting on the patio or on a mat on the ground as in Figure 6. Tea serving in Morocco, then, offers an example of ritualization around a social beverage. Perhaps tea is as important as it is because, in a Muslim nation, alcoholic social beverages are not part of society.

Similarly, the English enshrined teatime as a ritualized event and part of the day. The point of teatime includes pleasure and even the need to pause and have a little break with some caffeine and maybe something sweet. However, teatime also fostered commensality, and whole teasops emerged as a category of café for its consumption. Indeed, there remains a popular magazine, *TeaTime*, devoted to this cultural artifact of commensality and social beverages: <https://www.teatimemagazine.com/>.

THREATS TO COMMENSALITY

Having established the vital, extensive, and cross-cultural nature of commensality, we should consider whether commensality is in decline. Historians are trained to be skeptical of claims of societal decline because the past is so thickly littered with Cassandras proclaiming it. However, we cannot dismiss claims out of hand, and there are some recognizable threats to commensality today. This list is not comprehensive, but the two largest threats that I see are our phones and our culture of busyness.

Commensality assumes some degree of attentive interaction shared among people eating or drinking together. That our cell phones are ubiquitous hardly needs to be said. Neither do I need to provide a mountain of evidence that the phone often distracts our attention from those with whom we are physically present. Phones are powerfully useful. I have had some cases where what we are doing with our phones is just ignoring each other and other cases where we are bonding, but most of us are habitual with our phones, and we are not great at downtime. When a setting gets slow or quiet, the phone becomes a kind of social buffer between us and boredom or too many thoughts or a buffer against many other things. At this time, it takes intentionality to keep the digital hounds at bay when we want to have commensality.²⁰

Can you re-train yourself to be intentional about commensality? When you sit down to eat or drink with others, remember: I am here for these people and this purpose. A phone is not part of that purpose, or it could get in the way of and undermine this meal, this coffee break, this happy hour. Therefore, I am going to leave the phone in the purse, the backpack, or the back pocket.

The culture of busyness in the United States, likewise, requires little description.²¹ My colleague Bob Miller, Rosenberger professor of Christian and religious studies, occasionally reflects that, compared

to the institutions where he previously taught, the thing that has surprised him most about Juniata College was seeing the faculty sitting in their offices at lunchtime eating their food over a computer or papers. Miller names something with which many of us struggle, our inability to stop working even for something pleasurable and important like sustenance and commensality. It may well be that, as the critics of capitalism would have it, market economics values productivity over the quality of human life.

Over the last twenty years, the press has given considerable coverage to the decline of the family meal. That meal historically has been supper, at least since the emergence of mandatory schooling and industrialization, which took adults away from the home for employment. In the twenty-first century, after school, one child goes to dance, another has soccer practice, somebody else has wrestling, yet another child plays in the band. Adults, too, are working late, participating in civic groups, booster clubs, church choirs, and more. As a result of this lifestyle, we eat fast food in the car. Alternatively, the family eats four different meals in four different places at four different times. It is easy to de-value or take for granted aspects of life that seem obvious and readily available. Because we assume shared meals must always be an option, we more easily sacrifice them. On the other hand, the scarcity of an opportunity sometimes makes us appreciate the value of an activity. When our family got pulled in four different directions for evening meals, it made a dinner together special. Again, this reminds us we should spend time thinking about how we are failing to make use of commensality. We should remember people's favorite meals or feasts, and we should wonder why it is not a big deal to stay at work, labor overtime, and not eat dinner with your family when it would be almost scandalous to stay in the office on Thanksgiving.²²

In January 2020, Norris Z. Muth, professor of biology, and I led a short-term, study-abroad trip to Barbados. During and after the trip, our class observed and wrote about the way Barbadians do a better job than Americans at balancing work and socializing. The students in the class noticed that hustling because you think you are always supposed to be hustling might not be the only way to live a life. Sometimes you want to slow down. I think this runs counter to our dominant culture in the U.S. Based on what I see from what students' lives and those of lots of staff and faculty are like, we are a culture of work. With our technological assets, there are too few barriers to working all the time and, increasingly, in all places.²³

The eminent authority on food and commensality, Claude Fischler, organized an entire conference on questions about the rise of individuality in economically developed societies and, in turn, whether that atomism produces a negative impact on shared food experiences. When eating becomes a nuisance that detracts from work time or is reduced in meaning to being about health alone, commensality declines.²⁴

Another contrasting cultural tradition to the cult of busyness and the failure to value commensality is the Spanish tradition called *sobremesa*, which is a period lasting from thirty minutes up to an hour at the conclusion of the midday meal.²⁵ Commentators often note that English has no comparable term or tradition, but Hispanic cultures in the Americas do. *Sobremesa*, usually accompanied by social beverages, functions especially as a time of commensality among the family but, in more modern times, it may be after lunch with non-family members such as friends or work associates. As celebrated Spanish chef Dani Carnero from Málaga reflected, “When I see people spending time at the table after lunch, I feel that it’s a sign that everything has gone well, but oftentimes people enjoy themselves even more than during the meal itself. The *sobremesa* can be magical.”²⁶ Perhaps you will think me utopian for believing we might import *sobremesa* to the United States one day.

Our changing eating patterns and the complexities of shared meals may be another feature holding back commensality. Many meals among friends or family once took place among a homogenous food culture as defined by religion, ethnicity, and region. Today, however, in a more diverse world, people hold differing religious faiths and ethical commitments. In addition, the last fifty years of medical research has provided us a much greater awareness of health and allergen concerns. The combination of these factors makes for a more fraught meal. As scholar Richard Twine provocatively posed it, are “vegan killjoys” ruining commensality by turning meals into political and ethical zones of debate?²⁷ This reminds us that meals are moments of debate, truth telling, the airing of grievances, and sometimes ill tempers and mean-spirited behavior.²⁸

No talk worth its salt (pun intended) should end on a downbeat note of declension, though. We have to ask ourselves: is commensality valuable to us? If social bonds, family bonds, relaxation, and pleasure are parts of life that we cherish, then we have to have commensality in our minds as we go through our days. I encourage us to recognize the potential for commensality when those special opportunities arise to eat around a campfire or feast with family or when the opportunity emerges to dine or have tea with old friends or new ones. Let us embrace commensality and put aside distractions for an hour. We have to let the work wait sometimes. When we sit at the table with others, let us also be intentional. Certainly, I am recapitulating a point about not using phones at the table, but that is only one aspect of it. We have to go in with the intention of seizing a high-value opportunity: to get to meet people, to interact with them, to build community together. That opportunity places much more weight on a meal. We need to make commensality a priority in our lives, and, when we have those opportunities, let us put down our phones for a while and, as Barbadians sometimes say, raise our glasses to community.

NOTES

1. I owe thanks to a number of persons who contributed to this piece by reading it and making suggestions: Maddie Caso, Anthony Richards, Belle Tuten, Steve Knepper, Anne Hoover, Dave Hsiung, and Deb Roney.
2. Christine A. Hastrof, *The Social Archaeology of Food: Thinking about Eating from Prehistory to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 17.
3. It is worth noting that, despite the high importance of the concept, few full books on the topic exist. Among the best and most recent is Susanne Kerner, Cynthia Chou, and Morten Warmind, eds., *Commensality: From Everyday Food to Feast* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 1-2, 13, 28-29. The quote comes from Kerner and Chou's introduction to the volume. Most literature of recent vintage focuses on commensality in specific settings. For example, Kevin M. Kniffin, Brian Wansink, Carol M. Devine, and Jeffrey Sobal, "Eating Together at the Firehouse: How Workplace Commensality Relates to the Performance of Firefighters," *Human Performance* 28 (2015): 281-306. There are examples of scholars talking about commensality but not employing the term. For example, see Massimo Montanari, *Food Is Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp.93-98.
4. Romilda de Souza Lima, José Ambrósio Ferreira Neto, and Rita de Cássia Pereira Farias, "Food and Culture: The Exercise of Commensality," *Demetra: Food, Nutrition, & Health* 10 (2015): 514.
5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *On Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (London: Merlin Press, 1964), p. 89.
6. Anthony Richards, message to author, January 30, 2020.
7. A tidy review of the literature on commensality may be found in Kerner et al., *Commensality*, pp. 1-11.
8. Mary Robinette Kowal, "Christina Koch Lands on Earth, and Crosses a Threshold for Women in Space," *New York Times*, February 6, 2020.
9. Baxter Holmes, "Michelin Restaurants and Fabulous Wines: Inside the Secret Team Dinners That Have Built the Spurs' Dynasty," *ESPN*, April 18, 2019, https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/26524600/secret-team-dinners-built-spurs-dynasty.
10. Ibid.
11. Michael M. DeWitt Jr., "The Ultimate Lowcountry Boil Does Exist," *Sporting Classics Daily*, June 16, 2020.
12. Scholarship on feasting and commensality include European examples such as Ingrid Mainland and Colleen Batey, "The Nature of the Feast: Commensality and the Politics of Consumption in Viking Age and Early Medieval Northern Europe," *World Archaeology*, 50 (2018): 781-803; and Hastrof, *Social Archaeology of Food*, pp. 29, 194-204.
13. Hastrof, *Social Archaeology of Food*, pp. 225-226.

14. Eating and cooking around a fire taps into a powerful aspect of humanity. Lévi-Strauss, *On Totemism*, 24; Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, trans. Anne Drayton (London: Penguin Books, 1970), especially chapters 125 and 126, “Discovery of Fire” and “Grilling”; Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 25; and Massimo Montanari, “Fire, Cooking, Cuisine, Civilization” in Montanari, *Food Is Culture*, pp. 29-33.
15. The social stratifications and signaling involved in consuming high-end social beverages are a topic all its own. The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu is essential reading on the topic, especially *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). A more succinct and current examination may be found in Susanne Kerner, “Drink and Commensality or How to Hold on to Your Drink in the Chalcolithic,” in Kerner et al., *Commensality*, pp. 125-135.
16. Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart Angelo, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name,” Theme song from *Cheers* (1982).
17. American English favors “bar” or even “tavern” over “pub,” which prevails in the United Kingdom where it can have a somewhat distinct definition from “bar;” see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pub>. Another example of the expression is a British website that aggregates information about neighborhood bars around the United Kingdom called <https://www.useyourlocal.com/>.
18. Oldenburg advanced a theory of “Third Places,” essentially businesses open to the public where people gather to be in community. Prominent among the global list of Third Places he describes are places to eat or consume social beverages. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1989). As Greg and Jesse Anderson state, they took inspiration from Ray Oldenburg to create “a meaningful community hub.” For more on Standing Stone Coffee, see their website <https://standingstonecoffeecompany.com/>.
19. Peter Damerow, “Sumerian Beer: The Origins of Brewing Technology in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal*, 22 (2012): 1-20.
20. Some research shows the increase in eating alone or at work but also, notably, eating while using personal technology. Lotte Holm, Drude Lauridsen, Thomas Bøker Lund, Jukka Gronow, Mari Niva, and Johanna Mäkelä, “Changes in the Social Context and Conduct of Eating in Four Nordic Countries between 1997 and 2012,” *Appetite*, 103 (2016): 358-368.
21. Claude Fischler, “Commensality, Society and Culture,” *Social Science Information* 50 (2011): 528-548. The literature on the speed-up of life and society is large and growing. For a wide-ranging study with a good theoretical basis, see John Tomlinson, *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2007).
22. The literature on the declining frequency of family meals dates back decades and is not limited to the U.S. See Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, Melanie Wall, Jayne A. Fulkerson and Nicole Larson, “Changes in the Frequency of Family Meals From 1999 to 2010 in the Homes of Adolescents: Trends by Sociodemographic Characteristics,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 52 (2013): 201-206. Notably, one study suggests that living arrangements are the most important factor in reducing family commensality: Inge Mestdag and Ignace Glorieux, “Change and Stability in

- Commensality Patterns: A Comparative Analysis of Belgian Time-Use Data from 1966, 1999, and 2004,” *Sociological Review*, 57 (2009): 703-726.
23. Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Drivin’ Man: John Henry, The Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 173.
 24. See also Claude Fischler, “Is Sharing Meals a Thing of the Past?” in Claude Fischler, ed. *Selective Eating: The Rise, Meaning and Sense of “Personal Dietary Requirements”* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2015), pp. 1-20.
 25. *Sobremesa* is a topic worth considerable examination and a model for us all, yet the literature on the subject in English is rather thin. Darien Perez, “Sobremesa: An Analysis of Food and Culture in Hispanic Communities,” *In Situ*, 1 (2010): 23-28; Mike Randolph, “A Uniquely Spanish Part of the Meal,” *BBC Travel*, April 25, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20180424-a-uniquely-spanish-part-of-the-meal>. For a recent reflection on *sobremesa*, nostalgia, and eating, see Arundhati Ail, “Food Memories: The Proust Phenomenon,” *Medium*, January 15, 2020, <https://medium.com/nymble/food-memories-8194c7769d2b>.
 26. Randolph, “Uniquely Spanish.”
 27. Richard Twine, “Vegan Killjoys at the Table: Contesting Happiness and Negotiating Relationships with Food Practices,” *Societies*, 4 (2014): 623-639.
 28. Ibid.