



Learning how America sells food to men. And to women.

“NOW YOU’RE ABOUT to see the thing men fear most,” says Potter Palmer, a Metropolitan College lecturer in gastronomy. He hits the play command on his laptop, and a commercial for Mike’s Hard Lemonade rolls: the character, an employee in the company’s marketing department, pitches two new drinks, Mike’s Light Lemonade and the fictional Mike’s Hard Double-Caffeinated Soy Lemonade. His boss interrupts him, scolding, “We don’t do soy.”

“How do you sell a light drink to men?” Palmer asks students in his graduate seminar on representations of food and gender in the media. “You compare it to the least manly food there is — soy, apparently.”

Not every instance of pop-culture gender stereotyping is so heavy-handed, of course, but in a wide survey of films, cooking shows, food writing, and cookbooks, Palmer’s course makes clear that the influence of gender on food — its meanings and its marketing — is pervasive.

“The world of food is very gendered, and the media shape this relationship,” Palmer says. “I want my students, whether as cooks, academics, or just people who eat, to understand the role that media play in forming that relationship.”

Real-world examples abound, especially in this year’s heavily scrutinized campaign season. Hillary Clinton, once goaded into sharing her chocolate chip

cookie recipe while campaigning for her husband in 1992, toughened up her commander-in-chief image during her presidential bid this year by downing shots of whiskey with voters at an Indiana bar. And Barack Obama was ridiculed by tough-talking Republicans for his alleged preference for the fancy arugula over less expensive — and presumably manlier — greens.

“Food is symbolic,” Palmer says. “It’s always something more than mere nourishment. It’s cultural, it’s social, it’s political.”

That might as well be the mission statement for MET’s gastronomy program, whose interdisciplinary curriculum offers a chance to study food as a rigorous academic pursuit. While working toward a master of liberal arts, students learn about a range of subjects, from ancient agriculture to global food distribution to professional cooking to culinary media and advertising, says Rebecca Alssid, MET director of lifelong learning, who designed the program with legendary chefs Jacques Pépin and

Cook, points out the lack of emphasis on healthful meals in the book’s recipes. When it comes to preparing a well-balanced diet for a family, “that’s what your wife is supposed to do,” she conjectures.

Palmer, who is finishing his own master’s thesis in gastronomy at MET — he also holds a Ph.D. in film studies from UCLA — takes a turn, discussing books with titles like *A Man, A Can, A Grill* and *A Wolf in Chef’s Clothing*, which target bachelors as consumers who cook either out of necessity or to woo their dates.

“It looks like a children’s book, like it’s for a four-year-old,” Palmer says, holding up one of the books. “These books play on the ineptitude stereotype — that men are intimidated in the kitchen.”

Except when they’re the ones doing the intimidating, as Tacy Taylor (MET’10) says after class. “I’m one of a limited number of female cooks in professional kitchens, which tend to be a man’s world,” says Taylor, a line cook at the upscale North End restaurant Mare. “I’ve found that if you’re

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Julia Child (HON.’76) in the early 1990s.

Tonight, Palmer’s students are presenting their final papers — analyses of gender representations in a cookbook of their choice. One of these students discusses an all-beef recipe book for women that offers advice, she says, on how to “disguise the beef in a vegetable.” Another student, who wrote about the father-oriented *Real Men*

not ‘one of the guys,’ you won’t last long in a restaurant kitchen, and I was intrigued by a class that could offer insight into the reasons.”

Student Charles Shelton (MET’09) puts his interest in the class more simply: “Food, media, and gender are all bound by the practice of creating our ‘selves,” he says. “The food you eat is an expression of who you are.”

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