

From Rosy to Regrettable

Mixed Nostalgia and the Meanings of Jell-O Salad

By: Clare Forstie

Regular visits to my Midwestern grandparents' home have provided ample opportunity to sample both a revered and maligned American food-like substance: the Jell-O salad. My immediate reaction (like that of many of my generational peers) when seeing olives suspended in lime-green Jell-O, has been: "ew, gross!" On the other hand, when discussing the subject of this paper, friends and family have offered heart-warming reminiscences about the presence of Jell-O salad at family and community events. It seems that this once-ubiquitous dish provokes responses that run the gamut from horror to adoration. These responses have prompted me to ask: why is there such an extreme range of reaction to the food? Why do Jell-O salad proponents, consumers, and detractors recognize this dish as a distinctly "American" food? What makes it American, and why do many care about it now? Exploring the ways in which proponents and detractors understand Jell-O salad as an American and regional dish tells us something about how "Americanness" is created and why everyday foods matter.

Part of my goal in conducting this research is to investigate how the meaning of food is significantly tethered to the contexts in which it is displayed, consumed, and discussed. Jell-O salad is variously culturally located throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, and it plays a variety of roles; in other words, there is no fundamental "truth" to a Jell-O salad. It is critical to recognize that, while Jell-O salads were a fascinating and colorful product that likely reached its peak of popularity in the 1950s and early 1960s, Jell-O salad as an example of our food history—as an American cultural text—is as much a part of American identity today as it was in 1950. Furthermore, the discourse around Jell-O salad between Jell-O's one hundredth anniversary in 1997 (see: Kraft 1997: 4) and 2008 is explicitly linked to discourses of nationalism and regionalism as well as class and gender. Given that the meanings of Jell-O salad have changed as surely as its ingredients, what is its significance now? I explore the conflicting narratives offered by Kraft, Inc., current holder of the Jell-O brand, as well as cultural critics, asking how is the Jell-O salad as a cultural text "read" by these two types of "readers," and how do their stories contrast or help constitute "Americanness?"

Kraft's American Jell-O Story

Jell-O's parent company, Kraft, presents a Horatio Alger-style story in its advertisements and in its official cookbooks. The company consciously constructs this story in much the same way as the industrial organic food companies described by journalist Michael Pollan. He argues that these companies use a "Supermarket Pastoral" narrative (Pollan 2007). The story Kraft presents, like the story created by "Big Organic," is a literary endeavor that features a traditional tale of achievement and connects consumers to an imagined America of simple, wholesome family "values." In Kraft's Jell-O cookbooks, the story of its cultural evolution parallels an American rags-to-riches tale, from "An

Inauspicious Beginning” (Kraft 1997) to brand-name recognition and implicit financial success. According to Kraft:

Looking back 100 years ago, Jell-O was little more than a brand name and an unfulfilled dream. Today, if placed end to end, the 299 million packages of Jell-O gelatin dessert produced in a year would stretch more than three fifths of the way around the globe. And the Jell-O brand now includes extensive lines of pudding mixes, No Bakes, snacks and yogurts—fun products which meet the needs of families today (1997).

Clearly, Kraft uses Jell-O’s success to present a familiar American narrative: one of humble beginnings and explosive, diverse achievement. This achievement is further reinforced in more recent Kraft Jell-O cookbooks. For example, in the 2001 Collection cookbook, Kraft notes that

For more than 100 years, Jell-O has adapted to changes in lifestyles and eating habits—becoming a brand recognized by 99 percent of Americans and used regularly in nearly every home in America. With more than 125 varieties of snacks and desserts that can help make every day just a little sweeter, it’s no wonder that Jell-O is “America’s Most Famous Dessert™” (Kraft 2001).

In its cookbooks Kraft reminds consumers of America’s story of cultural achievement and assimilation by describing Jell-O’s humble beginnings and subsequent fame and ubiquity as “America’s Most Famous Dessert.” By including the “history” of the Jell-O brand in the introduction to its cookbooks, Kraft hints that consumers literally ingest a distinctly American success story every time they take a wiggly, sweet or savory bite of a Jell-O salad.

Unlike the “Supermarket Pastoral” narrative that features an “American Family Farmer” (Pollan 2007: 137), the American narrative that Kraft creates features the Jell-O brand as the “hero,” rather than a generic individual, as in Pollan’s farmer. The brand is the actor “adapting to changes” and functioning as the aforementioned “Most Famous Dessert.” The brand itself “has” a history, “the Jell-O story.” (Kraft 2001: 4). This strategy effectively erases the Jell-O production process and connects consumers directly to the Jell-O brand. By presenting the Jell-O narrative as the history of a brand, consumers are shielded from the product’s ingredients—namely boiled animal bones (Wyman 2001)—by images of shimmering, colorful, Jell-O brand desserts. Kraft’s Jell-O brand “hero” allows consumers to make and eat the results of a successful, distinctly American narrative while avoiding the messy implications of gelatin production.

Kraft also communicates traditional American values as part of the Jell-O narrative, echoing the ideals represented, interestingly, by Big Organic (Pollan 2007: 137). Pollan quotes a Whole Foods marketing consultant whose comments could describe the experience of a Jell-O consumer. By buying and making Jell-O, she feels as though she is “’engaging in authentic experiences’ and imaginatively enacting a ‘return to a utopian past with the positive aspects of modernity intact.’” (2007: 137). For Kraft, this “utopian past” includes values of family, community, and tradition that its Jell-O narrative makes

explicit to consumers. For example, Kraft notes in the Celebrating cookbook that “Molded gelatin dishes, with their decorative shapes and garnishes, appeared at many a meal for family and guests, as salads, relishes, and gorgeous desserts—each one served with great pride.” (Kraft 1997: 20). Kraft encourages consumers to visualize creating and presenting “gorgeous” Jell-O desserts to family and friends, perhaps at a holiday gathering. Furthermore, consumers can expect to feel a sense of pride as family members ooh and ahh over the “decorative” dish. Kraft creates a personal Jell-O tradition for consumers, one in which recipes are recreated as part of a collective, idealized American past. Kraft emphasizes the imagined “us” by stating that

Many of us recall favorite JELL-O [sic] salads and desserts from our childhood. This chapter contains classic recipes, most of which have been around for at least a generation or two or have been frequently requested... Try these time-tested creations on your family and guests. You’ll soon discover why these are still consumers’ favorite recipes (Kraft 1997: 76).

Kraft implies that Jell-O consumers can either recreate or create (for the first time) traditional, or “classic,” recipes and, by doing so, they participate in long-standing, intra-generational community customs.

At the same time as Kraft’s Jell-O narrative actively constructs an American past, Kraft, as the aforementioned Whole Foods consultant suggests, seeks to keep “the positive aspects of modernity intact” (Pollan 2007: 137). Specifically, Kraft’s narrative moves from a focus on the value of “convenience” to a late 20th- and early 21st-century focus on health. While Americans no longer need to be convinced that “convenient” is better (the ubiquity of fast foods proves that food production industries have been successful in that campaign), they do need to be convinced that “convenient” foods are healthy, or, if they aren’t, that it’s still ok to consume them. In Kraft’s vision of “modernity,” there is room for both “healthy” Jell-O salads and Jell-O salad “indulgence.”

On the one hand, Kraft’s cookbooks bear the imprint of the health concerns of the 1990s, employing labels that suggest that “fat free” and “sugar free” are healthy. Several Jell-O salads are marked as “fat free” (sugar content notwithstanding): “Gazpacho Salad” (Kraft 1997: 22), “Sunset Fruit Salad” (Kraft 1997: 24), “Sparkling Berry Salad” (Kraft 1997: 34), and “Melon Salad” (Kraft 1997: 38). Furthermore, Jell-O salad recipes in Kraft’s Celebrating cookbook feature the newly-created “JELL-O [sic] Brand Sugar Free Low Calorie Gelatin Dessert,” which “is prepared in the same way” as “regular” Jell-O (Kraft 2001: 9). Finally, the Celebrating cookbook includes nutritional information per serving for each recipe, marked by an apple, which is intended to signify “healthy” to the savvy consumer. The modern elements of Kraft’s Jell-O narrative ply the consumer with promises of a “fat free” or “low calorie” (read: healthy) food.

On the other hand, as journalist Linda Kulman illustrates, the Jell-O narrative contains a contradictory message about America’s need for decidedly unhealthy “comfort foods” (2000: 76-77). Kulman connects consumption of “simple” foods (notably Jell-O salads) with nostalgia for the simple, the

sweet, and—significantly—the fattening. Yesteryear foods are used to define a contemporary America in need of a dip into the past. Implicitly, America is seen as too obsessed with calories, and the Kraft cookbooks communicate this mixed message as part of Jell-O's modern narrative: at the same time as Kraft employs "fat free" language (and illustrations feature brightly-colored, fresh and healthy-looking produce), Kraft uses words that signal "comfort" and "calories." For example, the JELL-O Collection cookbook features the slogan "I could go for something JELL-O," which marks Jell-O (and Jell-O salads) as a food craving and not a part of a healthy meal. This cookbook in particular focuses on the "indulgence" (Kraft 2001: 2) of Jell-O and describes how Jell-O can "make each day just a little sweeter" and "answer the call for something sweet" (Kraft 2001: 3). Thus, the shimmery confines of this wiggly food product encapsulate the paradox of American convenience food as "healthy/not healthy," and Kraft in its American Jell-O narrative maintains consumers' access to modern "healthy" foods as well as the modern "need" for indulgence.

Jell-O salad consumers, in turn, reflect and recreate this American narrative. First, consumers reinforce the core values of family and community as they create the dish in specific, ritualized contexts. Consumers produce Jell-O salad at family and community gatherings, for example, as folklorist Sarah Newton suggests:

Jell-O dishes, from a simple sheet of lime Jell-O with bananas to towering, layered, whipped-creamed creations, have signaled to countless Americans times of gathering or celebration—funerals, potlucks, family reunions, church suppers, baby and wedding showers, Christmas and Thanksgiving (1992: 251).

These celebrations and holidays fit squarely within Kraft's constructed narrative of Jell-O salads as American icons of family and community. Marketing researchers Melanie Wallendorf and Eric Arnould remark on the ubiquity of Jell-O salads at Thanksgiving rituals, as well, stating that "At Thanksgiving, the congealed mass represents both the transmutation of a mass-produced consumer product into an element of tradition and the congealing of family differences into a bounded, molded whole" (1991: 28). Jell-O salad consumers make this American narrative by producing and consuming Jell-O salad in these contexts. Finally, Kulman describes Jell-O salad as an artifact of the American past (featuring family and community); she describes the "new" obsession with "retro" desserts (like Jell-O salads) and explains how elite restaurants are producing "comfort" foods "from a box" for interested diners (2000: 76-77). As one chef suggests, contemporary chefs who produce Jell-O salads offer consumers "a way to connect with the past" (Kulman 2000: 76-77). Whether by preparing the Jell-O salad for family and friends or simply by ordering Jell-O salad in an elite restaurant, consumers can literally ingest a memory, a feeling of pride, a sense of indulgent "comfort," and (significantly) align themselves with a specific, Kraft-articulated version of the American past.

In accordance with its limited appearance in elite restaurants, Jell-O salad is most popular among working-class Americans. Cheap, colorful, flexible, and super-sweet, Jell-O salad offers opportunities for home cooks to express their creativity and provides a way to economically employ leftovers (Inness 2001). Roland Barthes, commenting on "Ornamental Cookery" in the French working-class magazine

Elle, notes that “This is an openly dream-like cookery [in which] consumption can perfectly well be accomplished simply by looking” (1972: 79). In its cookbooks, Kraft presents Jell-O salad, defined as an American working-class dish (Inness 2001), as “dream-like”. Given the cookbooks’ large, full-page photographs of glistening, rainbow-colored Jell-O salads, it seems possible to consume Jell-O salad “simply by looking,” as well. As affordable, “easy,” quick, and visually stunning foods, Jell-O salads are meant to appeal specifically to working-class Americans.

While Kraft presents the American narrative of Jell-O as a unifying national narrative, its sweetness and hyperfemininity carry more cultural weight as elements of Southern foods. Kraft highlights Jell-O’s sweetness by suggesting that its cookbooks’ recipes “are sure to answer the call for something sweet... When you can go for something sweet, creamy, fun or festive... [sic] remember to go for something Jell-O” (Kraft 2001: 3). As Sherrie Inness argues, Jell-O salad’s “sweetness” marked it as a traditionally “feminine” food (2001). Furthermore, the “South,” is explicitly celebrated in the official story, which claims that “Congealed’ salad molds have long been party and buffet dinner favorites of Southern hostesses” (Inness 2001: 42). While this national narrative is meant to be all-inclusive, Jell-O salad’s appeal seems bound to working-class and Southern American contexts.

The Contested Jell-O Narrative

Whether or not Americans actually believe the narrative offered by Kraft is up for debate. Jell-O salad’s critics object vehemently to Kraft’s idealized picture of American life-via-Jell-O. In sharp contrast to Kraft’s “rosy” American narrative, critics describe how the shiny beacon of Jell-O salad reminds them of the false, horrific, damaging, and deadly aspects of the mid 20th century. American cultural critic James Lileks sharply remarks that the Jell-O salad images he (re)presents in his Gallery of Regrettable Food are

...the commercial bones of the past, what we’re left with. They’re mostly lies that promise happiness and, of course, they can’t deliver it... Even then, no one believed something just because the corporate cookbook said so (2001: 4).

Here, Lileks makes this “corporate” narrative visible, suggesting that Kraft’s narrative was composed of “lies” they “can’t deliver.” Furthermore, cultural critic Wendy Wall notes that Jell-O is “criticized as helping to dumb down women’s work, ruin the environment, tame appetites into blandness, promote a vapid consumerism and mock nutrition, [and] has been blamed by critics for the demise of an array of values” (2006: 48). As Wall suggests, Jell-O operates as a cog in the machine that grinds out the downfall of American cuisine. If Kraft and Jell-O salad proponents present Jell-O salad as the manifestation of an American narrative of success, family, and community, Jell-O salad critics offer a contradictory national narrative of America as broken, citing the horrific history of Jell-O salad as evidence.

Critics use disturbing images from American history to construct this counter-narrative. Lileks, commenting on the “Snowy Chicken Confetti Salad,” states: “Little Boy, Fat Man, meet White Guy. Between the Atom Bomb and the Hydrogen Bomb, there was this one: the Gelatin Bomb” (2001: 44).

Here, the Jell-O salad is called into service as a representative of the atomic and hydrogen bombs and reminds Jell-O salad consumers of the horrors of World War II. In fact, Lileks makes a tongue-in-cheek connection between Jell-O and the wholesale destruction of “Western Civilization” on his website “The Decline and Fall of Western Civilization as Seen Through the Medium of Jell-O” (www.lileks.com/institute/gallery/jello/). Wendy McClure, *Weight Watchers* critic, references frightening images of suburban uniformity. She asks viewers, “Could it be that the Soup Cult has left its compound and moved to the suburbs? Where they serve beautifully arranged platters of Molded Asparagus Salad to innocent housewives? Who ingest the salad spiked with the mind-altering drugs that rob them of their free will?” (2006: 26). Finally, the satirical publication *The Onion* uses a Jell-O salad to invoke images of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center by posting a fictitious article about “conceptual terrorists” molding a Jell-O salad around the Sears Tower in Chicago (2007). These critics employ Jell-O salad in much the same manner as Jell-O proponents: to promote a particular narrative of the American past, although the “Americanness” they present leans more toward apocalyptic fantasy than toward the “rosy” image constructed by Kraft.

Some Jell-O critics, like Jell-O proponents, connect Jell-O salad with a more innocent time, suggesting that American life has become too complicated and “fake.” Lileks in his introduction challenges readers by asking why “...we laugh at the past? At least they had real food with real ingredients. We have NutraSweet, Simplese, and fat substitutes that require the words ‘anal leakage’ on our snack-food packages...” (2001: 12). Irrespective of whether we mark Jell-O salads as “real food,” Lileks promotes the idea that the Jell-O salad as a representative of the past also embodies a “real” or more authentic time. Furthermore, Lileks solidifies the connection between Jell-O and a worry-free time explicit when he comments: “Just think: this kid with the Mikey coif is now old enough to start worrying about his prostate. But he had no worries then! Not with Jell-O” (2001: 97). As Sarah Newton, writing about Jell-O folklore, notes, even Garrison Keillor famously connects Jell-O salad to the “unsophisticated but sincere Mid-Western life and culture. It is Jell-O-and not the sophisticated cuisine of barely cooked tiny green beans and dried porcini mushrooms that is the wholesome staple of the American Heartland” (1992: 255). Jell-O salad critics link this maligned food product to American simplicity.

Garrison Keillor also describes Jell-O salad as a distinctly Midwestern, specifically Minnesotan, food. Like Jell-O salad proponents, critics view America through the lens of regional identity and construct Jell-O salad as a Midwestern, not necessarily Southern, dish. In fact, geographer Barbara Shortridge responds to this equation of Minnesota to Jell-O salad in her survey of Minnesotan foods titled “Not Just Jello [sic] and Hot Dishes: Representative Foods of Minnesota” (2003). Lileks explicitly connects Jell-O salad to the Midwest, as well; referring to a picture of a foamy-topped Jell-O salad-in-a-glass, he remarks “Stare at this photo long enough and it really starts to bother you... It’s what happens when you feed LSD to lowans, perhaps. This is as surreal a juxtaposition as their minds can create” (2001: 90). Clearly, Jell-O salad represents a particular geography of America to detractors—one of the Midwest.

Critics respond most strongly to Jell-O salad as a kind of not-food, using the grotesque to mark Jell-O salads as examples of “wrong” American food. Lileks comments on the sensual facets of the Jell-O salad, from its lurid appearance to feel to taste. In his introduction to *Gallery*, he remarks that

to modern eyes, the pictures in the book are ghastly, florid, gorge-tweaking abominations—the Italian dishes look like what happened when a surgeon gets a sneezing fit during an operation, and the queasy casseroles look like something the dog heaved up on the good rug (Lileks 2001: 10).

Lileks further identifies “Another brain mold, this one spattered with indigestible seeds. You know, when something bears such a close resemblance to a human body part, it would make sense NOT to surround it with red pulpy slices. Watermelon? Sugared muscle tissue? You make the call [sic]” (2001: 46). Wendy McClure’s comments also emphasize the unattractiveness and inedible qualities of the Jell-O salad: “Did you know that some molded salads can blend into their surroundings to escape predators, just like chameleons? Observe the Spinach and Egg Mold as it begins to take on the appearance of the Formica countertop” (2006: 2). Finally, the aesthetic connection between Jell-O salad and un-Americanness is made visible in the aforementioned article in *The Onion* in which the Sears Tower is reported to have been made into a gigantic Jell-O salad as an act of “conceptual terrorism (2007). Lileks’s grotesque comparison of Jell-O salads to body parts, McClure’s critique of Jell-O salad as ugly not-food, and *The Onion*’s representation of Jell-O salad-as-terrorism offer a powerful commentary on what American food is not supposed to be: garish, sleek, shiny sites of “aesthetic terrorism.”

Beyond their horror at Jell-O’s aesthetics, Jell-O salad’s critics also challenge Kraft’s health claims by proposing the Jell-O salad-as-unhealthy trope, thus reifying the modern American connection between food and health. Lileks, significantly, compares various Jell-O salads to inedible body parts (as described above). He emphasizes “fat” in a plate of mini Jell-O salads, or, what he calls “Lanceable Boils with Fat Sauce” (2001: 158). In some cases, too, Jell-O salads are described as not simply unhealthy but lethal: again, Lileks describes a Jell-O salad-like pie in which “an MRI scan shows that the nodes of oversaturated cherry Jell-O have spread throughout the delicious, refreshing prune-flavored foam. Prognosis: dessert!” (2001: 91), thus making a link between Jell-O salad and cancer explicit. Newton cites a college informant who “expressed her distaste for the family’s ‘Congealed Salad’ by calling it ‘Slime Mold’” (1992: 258). Like Sylvester Graham’s perception of some American foods as polluting (Nissenbaum 1980), Jell-O salad critics perceive the food item as grotesque—as unhealthy—and reinforce the power of cultural discourses of American food as a source of (un)health.

Jell-O Salad as a Gendering Tool

At first blush, Jell-O salad critics and proponents alike leave the gendered nature of Jell-O salad “labor” —the process of producing a finished Jell-O salad—intact. The Jell-O cookbooks authored by Kraft continue in the tradition of connecting women with the production of food (Shapiro 2004, Inness 2001, and Schenone 2003). Illustrations of “Gelatin Consistencies” show well-manicured, young-looking, white women’s hands engaged in “checking” the consistency of a bright red Jell-O mold (Kraft 1997: 11). Those same hands appear to demonstrate the “Un-molding” (Kraft 1997: 13) process, as well

as “Easy Garnishing Tips” (Kraft 1997: 16-19). Furthermore, Kraft, by connecting the labor of Jell-O salad with terms like “easy,” “fun,” “speedy,” and “can be served either way” (Kraft 1997) go a long way toward answering the question “Do women like to cook?” (Shapiro 2004: xix). As Shapiro argues, “Before the question could even be asked, it was answered with a powerful ‘Not anymore.’ The ones speaking up so convincingly were the advertisers” (2004: xix). Kraft certainly provides the “not anymore” response in its cookbooks. A close read of the Kraft cookbooks also illustrates the “paradox of modern life” articulated by Schenone:

Food companies understood that if their products took away all labor and work, women would no longer care about cooking at all. And so, countless advertising campaigns reminded women of their emotional connections to food, even if the products came in boxes and tins. Manufacturers encouraged women to express their love and creativity with food by making time-consuming dishes using their products. In a strange paradox of modern life, the new world of commercial foods promised freedom and then reminded women that they were not so free (2003: 274-75).

Jell-O salads described in these cookbooks continue to reinscribe the role of women as household food producers and Jell-O salad consumers, a process that began and accelerated in the 1950’s (Inness 2001, Newton 1992). For example, the terms used to describe Jell-O salads—including “shimmering,” “shimmery,” “gorgeous,” “elegant,” “pretty,” and “beautiful” (Kraft 1997: 20-28)—are themselves gendered, designed specifically to “speak” to women. Women are the expected cookbook consumers and, thus, Jell-O salad producers.

While horrified at what Barthes calls the “frenzied baroque” and “incongruous artifice” (1972: 79) of Jell-O salad, critics don’t challenge the cultural narratives of sweetness and femininity. Critics reinforce the feminine connection to preparation and presentation. Schenone describes the Jell-O salads as “Pastel colored with fruity perfumes, gelatin was a pretty, shimmery thing, a decorative object as much as a food. Pliable in spirit and texture, it could form itself to the trends of any generation—not unlike the stereotypes of women” (2003: 320). Lileks, for example, reinforces these gendered images of Jell-O production. All of the Jell-O “cooks” represented in Lileks’s publications are (again, not surprisingly) women, and he soundly decries their role in producing the horrifying aesthetics of Jell-O salad. In a section titled “Swanson’s Parade of Lost Identity,” Lileks describes the unnamed chicken-based Jell-O salad recipe belonging to Myrtle, one of the “lost women of Swanson” (2001: 157). Her “contribution is one of the least appetizing of the batch—one of those puke-in-a-bowl-and-shove-it-in-the-icebox surprise dishes that occur with alarming frequency in the Gallery. Garnish with shaved things; serve with whipped lard” (Lileks, 2001: 161). Furthermore, Grammy-winning composer, William Bolcom, presents a veritable cornucopia of feminized Jell-O salad dishes in his ironic song, “My Lime Jello Marshmallow Cottage Cheese Surprise” (Bolcom 1994; See Appendix A for full lyrics). As in Lileks’s Gallery, Bolcom’s song is meant to be sung, announcement-style, by a stereotypic arguably Midwestern woman, at a ladies’ meeting in which attendees have prepared a variety of gastronomically unthinkable dishes (including Jell-O salads, of course). In these criticisms, the aesthetics (appearance, flavor) of Jell-O salad are soundly critiqued, but women’s role as the creators of these dishes remains

intact. Jell-O salads, even to their critics, are firmly connected to feminized food production through explicit narratives about food provision/labor and gender.

Interestingly, Jell-O salad critics don't question the gendered production of Jell-O salads. Some critics take pains to link the horrors of Jell-O salads to the specific women who produce them, arguing, in a sense, that these women bear the brunt of the blame for the horrors of Jell-O salad in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. Lileks, for example, employs the voice of an imagined child who complains that "[Mom] just gets so enthusiastic about the strangest things... Then when she finally settles down and makes Jell-O, it's always something weird. It's so embarrassing to have your friends come over and get this; you could just die" (Lileks 2001: 89). Furthermore, both Lileks and McClure emphasize the fact that their moms didn't—or wouldn't—prepare these awful recipes. In her dedication, McClure writes that her book was compiled "For my mom (who never makes these recipes)..." (2006: n.p.). Here McClure implies that her mother functioned in the appropriate gendered role, "protecting" her family from the horrors of a "diet" Jell-O salad (among other Weight Watchers items). McClure reinforces the notion that Jell-O salads were created by mothers, and that there was a risk that hers might have produced such a product—to which she felt compelled to reassure readers that this was not the case. Lileks, similarly, begins the preface to his *Gallery* with the description of the neighborhood "Welcome Wagon" visiting his mother when he was a child in Fargo, North Dakota. As his story goes, his mother was presented with a cookbook sponsored by the North Dakota State Durum Wheat Commission (2001: 9). He ends his preface by asking, "Did my mom believe that any of these things would make her life perfect? Of course not... Mom just looked at the pictures. The recipes kept her slim and lovely for one reason: she never made them" (Lileks 2001:14). Again, mothers are the implied labor force behind the family's food production. Good mothers "should" protect their families from hideous (and potentially unhealthy) food. For both Jell-O salad proponents and critics, then, Jell-O salad functions as a vehicle for reinforcing the gendered nature and product of food labor: as the Kraft cookbooks illustrate, women remain the expected producers of such celebratory fare as Jell-O salads (and other foods), and, as Jell-O salad critics suggest, women remain the expected producers of not-Jell-O salads. Either way, women provide the domestic food labor and are responsible for ensuring the family's health through the food they produce.

Conclusion

Significantly, the answer to the question "what is it about Jell-O salad?" relates to the ways in which Jell-O salad calls forth narratives of America's history, values, and gendered hierarchies and either reinforces or challenges these narratives. While interpretations of this still-ubiquitous dessert run between triumphant and proto-apocalyptic, it's clear that an American narrative of Jell-O salad speaks to consumers and critics alike. Kraft conveys multiple meanings of "Americanness" via the slippery, shiny, mixed-media domes of Jell-O salad, to which devotees and critics vehemently respond. Simultaneously, critics' responses both challenge and reinforce these meanings.

Kraft seems to have taken critics' cultural hints, rebranding Jell-O as, first, a visually-appealing food product and, second, a historically-, seasonally-relevant, "classic," "original," and fun dessert (Kraft

2012). Kraft now emphasizes Jell-O's aesthetics over its edibility, as its website asks readers: "Do you shake it, bounce it, jiggle it or just eat it? JELL-O [sic] gelatin is the colorful snack that taught the world to jiggle" (Kraft 2012). Here Kraft emphasizes Jell-O's colorful and jiggly quality, rather than its flavor, minimizing its status as food by employing the term "just." Furthermore, it's worth noting that in the chronological progression of Kraft cookbooks explored for this paper, Jell-O salads are rapidly disappearing as voices like Lileks, McClure, and more health-focused food critics gain cultural traction. On Kraft's website, Jell-O salads have almost completely disappeared, replaced by recognizable individual-serving desserts like cupcakes, "cookie balls," "pudding squares," and various "bites" (Kraft 2012). Jell-O salad molds are relegated increasingly to "special" occasions like holiday celebrations where they continue to operate as a marker of a shared family/American past (Wallendorf et al. 1991). In this paper, I have shown how a maligned/revered food like Jell-O Salad still holds a great deal of cultural currency even if it is consumed less frequently today than it once was. Even the disappearing Jell-O salad elicits strong responses both supportive and critical of the value of such nostalgic or loathed food. In either case, cultural products' disappearance from the dinner table does not signal the death of their meanings. Rather, Jell-O salad's circumscription in ritual and memory both by corporate producers like Kraft and by cultural critics continually reinscribe the meanings of such foods in Americans' cultural imaginations. Investigations of similarly criticized or romanticized foods promise to yield further insights into how everyday foods from the past and present constitute Americans' identities and sense of nation, family, community, health, and gender.

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Lyrics to "My Lime Jello Marshmallow Cottage Cheese Surprise" Words and Music by William Bolcom

Ladies, the minutes will soon be read today.
 The garden club and weaving class
 I'm sure have much to say...
 But next week is our culture night,
 Our biggest, best event,
 And I've just made a dish for it
 You'll all find heaven sent:
 It's my lime Jello marshmallow cottage cheese surprise
 With slices of pimento,

(You won't believe your eyes,)
All topped with a pineapple ring
And a dash of mayonnaise,
My vanilla wafers 'round the edge
Will win your highest praise.
And Missus Jones is making scones
That are filled with peanut mousse;
To be followed by a chicken mold
That's made in the shape of a goose.
For ladies who must watch those pounds
We've found a special dish:
Strawberry ice
Enshrined in rice
With bits of tuna fish.
And my lime Jello marshmallow cottage cheese surprise
(Truly a creation that description defies)
Will go so well
With Missus Bell's creation of the week:
Shrimp salad topped with choc'late sauce
And garnished with a leek.
And Missus Perkins' walnut loaf
That's crowned with melted cheese
Was such a hit last culture night,
We ask: no seconds please!
Now you must try
Her hot dog pie
With candied mushroom slices...
Those ladies who resigned last year,
They just don't know what nice is!
But my lime Jello marshmallow cottage cheese surprise,
I did not steal that recipe,
It's lies,
I tell you, lies!
Our grand award:
A picture hat
And a salmon sequined gown
For any girl who tries each dish
And keeps her whole lunch down.
I'm sure you all are waiting
For the biggest news: desert!
We've thought of things

In molds and rings
Your diet to subvert.
You must try our choc'late layer cake
On a peanut brittle base
With slices of bananas
That make a funny face.
Around the edges peppermints
Just swimming in peach custard,
With lovely little curlicues
Of lovely yellow mustard!
If all this is too much for you,
Permit me to advise
More lime Jello marshmallow cottage cheese surprise!
(I've made heaps!)