

## Research Essay

### The Rhetoric of Recipes: Food Pedagogy in the Pandemic

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**Abstract:** Food is a powerful tool with which to engage students in critical academic work. This paper describes the work of a professor and her student, and their experiences using recipes to study rhetoric. The paper describes three moments of learning: genre and bread baking, power dynamics and key lime pie, and rhetorical appeals in family recipes. The paper also argues that this learning was successful, in part, because food offered a comfortable way into learning after the challenges of the COVID-19 lockdown.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, recipes, pedagogy, pandemic

#### Introduction

Students, like faculty, are emerging from a global pandemic. They live in a climate of political turmoil and face an increasingly daunting future as the effects of climate change ravage the world. While we hope that traditional higher education will engage young adults in learning how to be informed citizens of their communities and that their coursework will help get them there, students are tired and exhausted (McMurtrie 2022). In this paper, general education faculty member Miriam Horne and second-year game design student Zoë Campos reflect on the experience of food as a pedagogical tool in this challenging time. While using recipes to teach is not a novel idea, the opportunity to use recipes as a pedagogical tool in a vulnerable moment for students and society gave both Miriam and Zoë pause for reflection on teaching and learning. More specifically, we consider how a food focused general education class called, “The rhetoric of recipes” facilitated students’ critical thinking as they struggled to engage in academic work.

#### Context

##### *The Pandemic*

The COVID-19 virus changed the world as we know it. One of the most profound changes came to the education system as students were forced into online learning. Zoë, a transfer student at Champlain College in Burlington, Vermont, describes what the pandemic was like for her learning:

Not only was my high school experience cut short due to the pandemic, my first years of college started in my bedroom. The most stressful part of the pandemic for me and those that were my age around me was the education aspect. While the world was going up in flames, students were expected to continue to work and learn from home. Virtual learning was the biggest learning curve students had to adapt to. Many students in my area dropped out of college due to the inability to learn through online teaching. It was not a pleasant time for me and those around me. However, all this changed once campuses were finally starting to open again, which happened for me in my second year of college. It was nerve-wracking to not only have to transfer schools due to the pandemic, but the college I wanted to go to also

wasn't worth paying thousands for online classes where I wouldn't retain much information anyway. Upon returning to in-person classes, it was another learning curve I had to overcome. Not only did we have to adapt to an online setting, but now we were sophomores in college without ever stepping foot on campus. There was no way to expect what a real in-person college class would be like. It was hard to adjust to campus life post-pandemic, but there was a comfort in knowing at least students were feeling similar everywhere, no matter the school.

Echoing Zoë's account, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reflected on the pandemic, remarking that "being a college student often comes with a set of struggles, like homesickness, poor time-management skills, and impostor syndrome. Add a global pandemic to the mix, which has disrupted students' education, wiped out their finances, and upended their social support systems, and the stage is set for them to experience a wide range of psychological repercussions" (June 2021: 5). As Zoë's experience illustrates, the pandemic meant that college was no longer a place where students learned to socialize and live on their own as they attended classes and worked toward their degrees. Instead, it was a space that many students found difficult to navigate as they transitioned back to the classroom. When students emerged from lockdown and returned to in-person learning, many of them, including Zoë, were unaware of how to manage these new experiences as the first two years of the college had been online in isolation.

### *The Course*

Champlain College is a small 2000-student population professionally-focused school in Burlington, Vermont. Beginning as a business school in 1878, Champlain College has set itself apart from other colleges by providing cutting-edge professional degrees like digital forensics and game design. These professional programs boast what is called an "upside-down curriculum" with students getting hands-on experience in the program in their first year. This professional focus means that the college attracts students who are focused on their professional goals and who struggle to find purpose in their liberal arts requirements. To this end, with the goal of allowing students increased choice in their liberal arts requirement, faculty, the opportunity to highlight their expertise, and, most importantly, the development of interdisciplinary thinking, the new curriculum, called Core, sought to engage the students in more meaningful ways. All students, regardless of their major or professional courses, were required to take a series of liberal arts courses carefully designed to introduce interdisciplinarity to traditionally isolated liberal arts subjects. Instead of separating history and philosophy classes, Core put students from across disciplines into situations in which they had to, for example, draw from history, philosophy, and art, to examine questions of an ideal community. In the context of a lockdown and worldwide pandemic, Champlain College launched a fresh approach to its interdisciplinary liberal arts curriculum in its Core program. The new Core curriculum, introduced in 2020, continued to meet general education requirements and mixed classrooms of students from multiple majors, but moved away from common subject matter and focused more on the production of common interdisciplinary and critical thinking skills. It introduced a structure of two classes per semester: foundations and explorations. Each semester, students take a common foundational course in interdisciplinary learning and then have

the choice of taking a differently-themed class that may align more with their personal interests.

For the purposes of this paper, we discuss a second-year, second-semester exploration class, "Rhetoric of Recipes," in which students apply a theory, rhetoric, to a cultural phenomenon, recipes. In this specific case, the class was "The rhetoric of recipes." The general description for this course, labeled Core 204 in the college catalogue, reads:

In this course, you will explore theoretical perspectives that ask you to interrogate systems of power and power relationships. You will learn the history of those perspectives, including how they, too, have been shaped by multiple contexts and compare with other viewpoints. You will use those perspectives to analyze a specific topic, collection of texts, or cultural phenomena.

This passage describes every 204 course, of which Rhetoric of Recipes is one. It is up to the individual instructor to choose an appropriate theory and the cultural context in which to apply it. The course learning outcomes lend continuity across courses. Professors teach the class such that each student is able to:

1. Define key terms and concepts associated with certain theoretical perspectives;
2. Situate the theoretical perspectives within relevant social, geographical, and cultural contexts;
3. Apply theoretical perspectives to a specific topic, collection of texts, or cultural phenomena; and
4. Interrogate systems of power and power relationships using theoretical perspectives.

### **The Rationale**

With Core 204 sections with titles such as Capitalism; Collective Memory and National Crisis: Remembering and Forgetting; and Nazis, Emperors, Vampires, and Masochists: The Evolution of Racial Ideology in Austria, how did Miriam end up with the Rhetoric of Recipes? There are five arguments for teaching a course about the rhetoric of recipes: Miriam's background in Rhetoric, a unifying topic for a disparate student population, accessibility of issues around diversity, equity and inclusion, the comfort of food, and the opportunity for an engaged pedagogy.

First, with a background in composition and rhetoric, Miriam wanted to bring rhetoric into the classroom in meaningful ways because it is a critical skill not only in speaking but also in understanding all forms of communication. Rhetoric is a tool for lifelong critical thinking. Drawing on the work of modern rhetoricians (Bitzer 1982, McGee 1982, Richards 1965, Burke 1969, Lunsford 1979, Lindeman 1983), Miriam teaches rhetoric as a technique of persuasion and as a socially constructed communicative act. In other words, she communicates to students that to get someone to consider their point of view, they must understand the context in which the exchange takes place, which includes appreciating the audience and the audience's needs and the best tools for persuading the audience given the exigence and particular set of circumstances in which they find themselves. While these aims may be achieved in a variety of ways, Miriam wanted something that would engage her students and might, in a world full of complex and challenging rhetoric (US politics,

climate change, the global pandemic, and more) not lead the students to become angry, frustrated, or fed up with the world in which they live and give up on the work. She wanted them to appreciate the complexity of the world around them and to engage with it through critical eyes. Drawing perhaps from her own love affair with chocolate, but also seeing the academic potential in critically thinking around something that is a human need, Miriam felt that food would be a soft target and that recipes, in particular, would provide a unique framework for looking at food academically. As a result, she drew on the work of scholars like Long (2004), Jacob (2005), Dutch (2012) Lowe Swift and Wilk (2015), Cognard-Black (2017) and Mastrangelo (2020) who laid a substantial groundwork for looking at recipes rhetorically. These writers looked at recipes rhetorically, as stories, as transmission of information, and as tools of power. This served as a basis for much of the work that Miriam did in working with specific learning outcomes for the course in teaching rhetoric and about power differentials through recipes.

A second reason for choosing to apply rhetoric to recipes was the challenge of having students from across campus and across different majors with varied backgrounds. As all students take Core classes, these courses enlist a variety of majors from education to international business to digital forensics to game design, like Zoë. Bringing these diverse identities together can be a challenge. Part of Miriam's hope in using food as subject matter was to find common ground across disparate groups. Vester (2015), who writes about food and identities, supports this line of reasoning, maintaining, "[e]xamining how food advice interacts with gender, class, national and ethnic identity allows a glimpse into how knowledge creates privilege, tastes can marginalize, and how we endorse what we are, or are expected to be, in the act of eating and talking about food" (2). In other words, the complexity of food allows for rich and problematic discussions from multiple perspectives and presents multiple entry points.

Miriam posited that teaching students how to use rhetoric to understand recipes would equip the students to use and understand rhetoric as a tool for communication with a specific audience in a specific context. She also felt that, for a variety of reasons, recipes would be an appropriate cultural artifact to which rhetoric could be applied. That is, while recipes serve a variety of functions including, but not limited to, storytelling (Bosman 2009), building community (Bower 1997), political activism (Mastrangelo 2020), and personal promotion (Denveater 2009), at their most basic function, recipes describe a process for (in most cases) preparing food (though we also explored the ways recipes can be used for medicinal purposes). Even those who do not cook understand that the preparation of food usually has steps and procedures. Using food recipes, therefore, reaches a broad audience in a population with a diverse student body. Therefore, taking a step back and looking at food as a common interest serves to unite even the most disparate group.

A third reason for the choice of rhetoric and recipes is that using food recipes as a subject affords students the depth to address complex learning outcomes that include diversity, equity, and inclusion, inherent in which are systems and structures of power—specific mandates of the course learning outcomes. Vester (2015) explains how this range of outcomes is possible, writing:

Discourses produce experts, people invested with the power to decide what is right or not... Knowledge, privilege, and power intersect in food discourses, pronouncing who belongs by performing appropriately and marginalizing and excluding those who do not from equal access to cultural, political, and financial resources. Conversely, food discourses have (albeit limited) democratizing potential: being raised in a culinary culture leaves everyone with a vast treasury of knowledge about the gender, race, and class implications of foodways as well as table manners (of some kind), preparation procedures, regional and national food habits, and diverse clusters of information that may include botanical, zoological, nutritional, chemical, and historical fragments. (2-3)

Because food impacts everyone, it levels the playing field while exposing students to multiple ways of seeing and thinking.

A fourth reason for studying rhetoric and recipes, and perhaps most relevant during a worldwide pandemic, food has a clear connection to comfort and well-being. Gregory and Wayne (2020), for example, examine the role that food had in boosting the morale of the United States Army Air Force during World War II, suggesting that the quality of food soldiers received impacted their morale. Ziegelman (2010) details the lives of five immigrant families who took on their new American identities in work, fashion, and lifestyle but carefully held on to their traditional ways of preparing food to ease their transition to the new world. We also know that stress often leads to increased food consumption, especially in women (Klatzkin, et al. 2019). It is no surprise, then, that food was important to students during the pandemic. They faced unprecedented stress as they dealt with depression, anxiety, and insomnia while their frustration and boredom grew with the lockdown (De Pasquale, et al. 2021). Miriam and Zoë both learned that food—more specifically, recipes, provided an engaging and safe entry into critical thinking, language use, power differentials, and individual perspectives.

Thus, merging the use of rhetoric and food/recipes provided a framework and rationale for this course. It also introduced the value of food as a pedagogical tool. As a fifth rationale for the rhetoric of recipes, we look at food as a pedagogical tool.

Experts in education were quick to comment on the challenges for students coming into the classroom both during and after the lockdown. Newsletters, conference papers, and disciplinary communities began offering advice. From Zoë's perspective, the most important advice encouraged student engagement. In one collective advice article, for example, Glazier et al. (2022), admonished faculty to "Ensure that students 'do' in every session—write, speak, solve problems, create graphs, etc. Design lessons and activities that have students interact and collaborate frequently" (np). In other words, faculty were told to give students opportunities to participate so that the learning they did was meaningful. However, despite widespread attempts to engage students, in a report published in the April 2022 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Beth McMurtrie details an unprecedented level of disengagement among students. Language like "defeated, exhausted, and overwhelmed" characterized student descriptions of their experiences. While Miriam's class was far from perfect—and she saw plenty of stressed and exhausted students, for the most part—students appeared engaged and were able to

participate in class activities in meaningful ways. For example, they made bread, asked questions about power differentials in key lime pie recipes, and were able to use the critical rhetorical strategies they had learned to analyze family recipes. What was the difference between the experiences of students nationwide and those of students in Miriam's classroom? Food.

While food can be a disruptor (particularly in its absence), it can also be a unifier. The late chef James Beard is credited with saying, "Food is our common ground, a universal experience." As such, institutions of education are leaning into food not just as a subject, as seen in food studies that embrace interdisciplinary approaches to food, but also as a pedagogical tool. For example, New York City's Tenement Museum has used food tours of the neighborhood to teach the local history of immigration, integration, assimilation, and urban development (Steinberg 2012). Through exposure to Jewish, Italian, and Irish cooking, and more, participants come to understand how immigrants became "American" through food choices. In a sociology classroom, students were exposed to the food of rural communities in the Midwestern United States as they developed civic agriculture (Wright 2006). They learned about the food habits of communities in which they were working in order to facilitate sustainable agricultural practices and helped students understand the people with whom they were working in more complex ways than had they simply imposed their agricultural knowledge. Natural sciences have also found a place for food. Rowat et al. (2014) used recipes to teach students about chemistry and physics. And in world politics, Ariel (2019) followed Hirsch and Tene's work (2013) and used a simple dish of hummus to help students understand the complexities of the Arab-Israeli conflict. An exploration of hummus elucidated concepts of borders, culture, and identity. In short, food is not just subject matter but a medium through which to teach theory and (inter)disciplinary understanding.

However, while food may be a unifier, it is not a placebo for solving problems. As Joy Harjo's poem "The World Begins at the Kitchen Table" describes it, food leads to both love and loss, war and peace, life and death—the good and the bad events and experiences that bring people together. Miriam never intended the class to be a comfort or a way of easing students gently back into college pursuits. She designed it as a way to teach rhetoric that would cross disciplinary boundaries and might draw some student interest. What she found, however, was that talking about food—more specifically, recipes—allowed students to engage in intellectual thinking in ways that connected them to home and family, to their identities, to their histories, and, at times, to process some of the struggles of the pandemic.

## **Learning Moments**

### *Bread*

Learning outcomes one and three of the course provide guidance for what students should learn about the theory that they need to apply.

- Define key terms and concepts associated with certain theoretical perspectives; and
- Apply theoretical perspectives to a specific topic, collection of texts, or cultural phenomena.

An important part of understanding rhetoric is understanding genre. Genre, according to Paré and Smart (1994), is “a broad rhetorical strategy enacted within the community in order to regularize writer/reader transactions in ways that allow for the creation of particular knowledge” (146). Thus, in the context of rhetoric, genre “seeks to explicate the knowledge that practice creates” (Miller 1984: 27). In other words, genre provides a way to understand the social context that drives the creation and structure of a text. It also shows how the text is a response to the situation in which it occurs. To that end, Miriam wanted students to understand genre as a key term and concept of rhetoric as per learning outcome one, and to begin to see how it impacts the ways that we read texts (i.e., recipes) as per learning outcome three.

To teach students about genre, and to help them understand why texts assume different forms in different situations, Miriam had students bake bread early in the semester. This assignment may seem ambitious, as many students have never cooked for themselves, but she chose Mark Bittman’s no-knead bread recipe (2018), which makes bread-making accessible to even the most novice bakers. She discussed genre in general terms in class and wanted this hands-on experience to help students understand how genre works. In addition to providing a set of ingredients for each student (a lively experience for some who had never cooked or used flour or had never seen yeast), Miriam provided the recipe in three formats: a handwritten notecard aged to look like it was well used with only the simplest of instructions, the fully typed instructions that Bittman provides on his website, and a four-minute video that Miriam created in which she went through the steps of making the recipe complete with the recipe in floating word bubbles beside her head. Students were given hard copies of these recipes including a QR code to access the video and electronic versions in their homework on Canvas, the learning management system. The goal of the assignment was to get students to think about genre and how genre impacts the way they interact with a text. Why did they choose to use the form that they did?

When students reported back on their bread-making homework, Miriam was surprised that, of the students who actually made the bread, only about one-third used the video for guidance. She had assumed that the TikTok generation would be video dependent. The handful of students who used the recipe card said they wanted a “challenge” and wanted an “authentic” experience. The card appeared to be the “original” recipe and therefore the most accurate. Those who used the typed text did so because they thought it was the easiest to follow. The video, they explained, had to be paused. The typed form, they argued, allowed them to easily go back and review the instructions. Those who watched the video and used the video for guidance talked about the importance of seeing what they were doing. Zoë described the experience as follows:

The written recipe didn’t persuade me to want to try this recipe since it was hard to read and used more traditional language. The typed recipe used language that was easy to digest and easy to follow even if it was your first time making bread. The video recipe was the most effective recipe for myself, it used easy language to follow, the visual of actually seeing someone bake the bread made it easier for me, the audience, to believe that I too could bake this bread and it comes out looking good.

Zoë further explained that:

The real meat to this assignment was more focused on being introduced to the different forms of rhetoric found on each of the recipe formats and how even if you follow the same set of ingredients, there is still a different style of persuasion happening within each recipe resulting in a different outcome.

Although Zoë admits that, at the time, she did not really understand what Miriam was trying to teach them with the three different forms of recipes, in hindsight, with the benefit of a semester studying rhetoric, she was able to appreciate how the different formats or genres of the bread recipe had different ways of persuading the user to act. This was a powerful lesson for Zoë because it helped her to understand the complexity of genre and the importance of employing the right genre for the right audience. In rhetoric, we make assumptions about audience (ideally, based on careful observation, research, and experience). Zoë learned that form matters—that recipes, like other fields, can have multiple formats and that she does better with some formats than others.

After making bread, students were asked to choose a recipe and analyze the context in which it occurred (this was part of a continued effort to teach students that genre has a particular exigence). Many students chose family recipes that their parents had emailed them, recipes their grandmothers used to make, recipes that came from the country of their cultural heritage, and so on. Although the assignment was challenging, students were willing to engage with it because the recipe had personal meaning for them. One student, who was late returning for the semester because he had just lost his grandmother to COVID, wrote about a recipe to which he had an emotional connection and explained how it became a way to process her death. Another student used the opportunity to dig into his family history and ask more questions about life for his great-grandparents. Zoë explored a particular time in Nicaragua and some of the ingredients that would have been available to her ancestors during WWII. The bread and genre assignment introduced the importance of considering the context in which a recipe occurs so that students were able to transfer that frame of thought to a recipe of their choosing.

### *Key lime pie*

Learning outcome four in Core 204 says:

- Interrogate systems of power and power relationships using theoretical perspectives.

Miriam needed to use rhetoric to help students understand and challenge power. Rhetoric exercises power or authority, and learning to recognize that power is critical for active and engaged citizens. During early classes in the semester, Miriam encouraged students to see this link, but she approached it too broadly and theoretically and needed a specific recipe that could help students see the power being wielded. To that end, in one class period, Miriam asked students to think about power and in small groups to define what they thought the word meant. They came up with definitions that reflected control of one thing over another. The class then reviewed the meaning of rhetoric and then discussed the relationship between power and rhetoric so that they were not passive listeners, but had to create a joint understanding of that relationship. Finally, Miriam asked them to generate a

list of questions that could interrogate the power relationships they saw in the rhetoric of recipes. They asked about the context, the author, the intended audience, and the goal. Zoë reflected that these introductory steps were useful because they helped focus later discussions and drive questions about key lime pie. She was able to understand, as shown below, that deceptive advertising may act as a form of power over the recipient.

McCALL'S MAGAZINE MAY 1950

# Here's a page of JANE ELLISON'S MAGIC!

**ON THE AIR SHE MAKES COOKING QUICKER AND EASIER FOR MILLIONS**  
*Don't miss these recipes*

JANE ELLISON specializes in *modern* cooking methods—quicker, easier, surer ways of doing things. And when she steps up to the microphone and says "Good morning, everybody. I'm going to give you a new group of Magic Recipes"—well, then, women all over the country reach for pencil and paper, hush the children, ignore the doorbell, and get these recipes!

Now, here's Jane Ellison in print for the first time. We'll let her speak for herself . . . Ladies—Jane Ellison.



**FIRST . . . a rich and economical Ice Box Cake (illustrated)**  
Here's a recipe my radio audience adores! No wonder! It's so easy and economical to make—yet so creamily rich and smooth. That's because of my magic ingredient—Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk.  
Eagle Brand, you see, is *two ingredients in one*. Full-cream milk, blended with finest sugar. And it's double-rich, like heavy cream, because most of the water has been cooked out.

**FRENCH ICE BOX CAKE**  
1½ cups Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk  
2 squares unsweetened chocolate  
Vanilla wafers ½ cup water

Melt chocolate in double boiler having lower part ½ full of boiling water. Add condensed milk and stir occasionally for three minutes, until mixture thickens. Add water. Line long narrow oblong mold with paraffin paper, and cover bottom of mold with thin layer of chocolate. Then add layer of vanilla wafers and another layer of chocolate. Alternate in this way until chocolate mixture is all used and cover with layer of the wafers. Let season in ice box for 24 hours. To serve cut in slices and serve plain or with cream.

**SECOND . . . An Uncooked Frosting that's simply perfect**  
This uncooked frosting will amaze you. It has just the right consistency for spreading—it goes on the cake beautifully—it stays put perfectly—and it keeps fresh and smooth and creamy until every crumb of the cake is gone.  
This frosting can easily be tinted with the pure vegetable colorings you buy at any grocery store. And there are a dozen other uncooked frosting recipes in the Eagle Brand booklet "New Magic in the Kitchen." You'll be especially interested in the easy directions the book gives for decorating cakes with a pastry tube. You'll find it easy to make beautiful decorations if you use Magic Chocolate Frosting, Caramel Frosting and Butter Frosting. Be sure to mail the coupon for this booklet.

**WHITE FROSTING**  
½ cup Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk 1½ teaspoons vanilla  
1½ cups confectioner's sugar, sifted

Stir sugar gradually into condensed milk, then add vanilla. Beat until smooth and creamy. Cool cake before spreading frosting.

**THIRD . . . A Magic Mayonnaise made in five minutes—can't fail**  
You ought to read the letters women write me about this mayonnaise! Many of them make it up in great quantities for church suppers, club meetings, etc. It's delicious—it's economical—it keeps indefinitely even without ice—and it won't separate.  
And from this one basic recipe you can make—just think of it!—Fruit Salad Mayonnaise, Chili Mayonnaise, Thousand Island Dressing, Russian Dressing, Cream Mayonnaise, Savory Mayonnaise, and Spanish Dressing. Directions for making all these are in "New Magic in the Kitchen."

**MAGIC MAYONNAISE**  
1 egg yolk ¼ cup pure cider  
½ cup Eagle Brand vinegar  
Sweetened Con- 1 teaspoon dry  
densed Milk mustard  
½ teaspoon salt ¼ cup salad oil  
Few grains cayenne

Beat egg thoroughly and add the other ingredients in the order listed, stirring with fork or beating with Dover egg beater. (This dressing will carry an additional cup of oil and ¼ cup more vinegar if desired.)

Send for "New Magic in the Kitchen," free—and dates of Jane Ellison's broadcasts

Mail the coupon below and get Jane Ellison's wonderful recipe booklet—free. 208 Magic Recipes. Quicker and easier methods for making desserts—frostings—French pastries—salad dressings—ice cream—candies.  
You can't imagine how much time, trouble and expense this booklet will save you! Send for it today. Jane Ellison will send you also the complete information for hearing her on the air—date, hour, and station.

**MAIL THE COUPON NOW!**

THE BORDEN COMPANY,  
Dept. D-1, Borden Bldg.  
350 Madison Ave., New York

Please send me the free recipe booklet, "New Magic in the Kitchen," and dates of Jane Ellison's broadcasts.

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_

Print name and address plainly

Image 1: Scanned from McCall's Magazine, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

To critique the power or influence inherent in a recipe, Miriam started with what students knew about key lime pie. For Zoë, prior to this class, key lime was just another flavor of pie

that she could get at her local diner. Miriam asked the students to look at the context in which the recipe was created. The pie's earliest known record comes from 1931. It was promoted by Jane Ellison, spokesperson for Eagle Brand Borden condensed milk, and had been adapted from "Aunt Sally's lemon pie" (Parks 2017). Miriam showed images of Jane Ellison taken from *McCall's Magazine* (1930). She went on to explain, however, that Jane Ellison did not, in fact, exist; she was a fictional character designed by Borden to increase the use and sales of sweetened condensed milk. Furthermore, key limes, are not, in fact, native to the Florida Keys and were largely wiped out in a hurricane in 1926 and replaced by a type of Persian limes. Few key limes actually exist in Florida (Parks 2017).

With this background—and the relatively simple recipe calling for eggs, sweetened condensed milk, and lime juice—students returned to the discussion of power and their questions about audience and purpose. Understanding the context of the recipe shaped how they understood the power differentials. Students had not thought about the recipe for food as being an advertising tactic put in place to persuade them to particular action. At first glance, one would not think of key lime pie as being an exertion of power, and yet the experience of the students says otherwise. First, their reaction to the fact that key lime pie is a relatively recent recipe not made with key limes made them feel deceived. Second, the idea that a canned milk company would create a fictional character just to find ways to sell more milk seemed somehow to be a violation of the simple and tasty dish they thought was emblematic of the Florida Keys. They had never connected this food to capitalism. It was this connection that helped them to understand the myriad ways that rhetoric can exert power in subtle ways.

Learning the origin of key lime pie was a key moment in how students like Zoë understood just how powerful rhetoric is. This realization led her to question the ethics of those behind the key lime pie recipe. She found a strong connection to *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, the class textbook, in which Keith and Lundberg argue that "the power to use rhetoric implies the power to misuse rhetoric" (2008: 22). Rhetoric wields a double-edged sword; speakers must treat their audience as they want to be treated. The text further concludes that deception is "a strategic mistake; in the long run, people find out and then don't trust the speaker" (22). Discovering the background of the key lime pie recipe allowed many students to realize just how present rhetoric is—even in a seemingly innocuous recipe.

The context of key lime pie includes history, advertising, and politics, all of which work together to frame a piece of Americana. Even students who have not had key lime pie will likely have heard of it. The commonality of the food brings them together and the context of the creation of the recipe helps them see that recipes are political and powerful. If something so innocuous as key lime pie can be manipulated, what else is being engineered to influence the students?

### *A Recipe*

Learning outcome two, which we have not yet discussed, asks students to

- Situate theoretical perspectives within social, geographical, and cultural contexts.

While Miriam addressed this step throughout the course in various lessons, it was not assessed in an assignment in terms of situating the concept of rhetoric socially,

geographically, and culturally. She had a class period in which she showed the history and ongoing development of the theory, but no assignment for grades was given. Instead, Miriam asked students to use rhetorical theory to situate a recipe socially, geographically, and culturally. For example, one assignment was a rhetorical analysis of a recipe. Students were able to choose whatever recipe they wanted and then analyze it. Those who grasped the situatedness of texts were able to analyze the context in which the text emerged, what the author was trying to do, and how the author went about achieving their purpose.

Zoë's rhetorical analysis showed how she was able to dig into an unusually written recipe and learn more about the time period in which it was created as well as the strategies the author used. She chose a recipe called Mozzarella in Carrozza (literally meaning mozzarella in a carriage). This recipe came from a 1950s collection by British author Elizabeth David (1954) who was influential in raising the profile of home cooking in England. So strong was her influence that she published eight different cookbooks over thirty-year career that remain in print. Her focus was on simple food that tasted delicious—food that she experienced during her years abroad in Europe. On her return to England, she found the food distasteful and wanted to share what she had learned.

In choosing this recipe, Zoë explored food from 1950s Britain. She learned that this postwar period saw food shortages, little interest in international foods, and difficulty finding specialized ingredients like parmesan cheese. This close study helped Zoë understand the challenges that David faced as she tried to compile her work and situated the work in a struggling post-war rebuilding period.

Zoë was also struck by the structure of the work. A common recipe format presents a list of ingredients followed by a list of instructions. Although this recipe still follows a sequential order, it does so in prose form with limited specific guidance. This departure from the modern conventional form caught Zoë's attention. For example, rather than give a specific cooking time, David (1987) writes, "Fry them quickly in hot oil" (180). In her analysis, Zoë explained that "David thought that part of the experience of this recipe is to do what each individual person seems right"—encouraging individual action and ownership. Zoë also noted that this style of writing allowed David to appeal to the rhetorical strategy of pathos. To support this assertion, Zoë quotes David explaining the need to change the cloth for stewed snails frequently or it will become "smelly and dirty beyond endurance" (246). She suggested that the allusion to yucky snails would resonate with wrinkling readers' noses and therefore their emotional connection with the writer. In her analysis, Zoë connects this remark to the class textbook, *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric* (Keith and Lundberg 2017), and its description of pathos, which she then uses to justify her claim about stinky snail cloth being an appeal to pathos.

Though Zoë is a busy student with multiple demands on her time, she so enjoyed exploring the David recipe that she took the time to talk about it with Miriam during office hours and to revise and resubmit her original analysis. Having gone through the process of contextualizing the recipe socially, geographically, and culturally, and examining the purposes and strategies within those contexts, Zoë learned to dive deeper into a text, no matter how common it may seem, or, in Zoë's words, how "normal" it might

appear. Before taking Rhetoric of Recipes, Zoë felt that a recipe with a different writing style would not have caught her attention. Yet, Zoë notes that there is a special moment when a student is able to grasp concepts and dive deeper into what exactly an author is trying to portray. In this case, with Mozzarella in Carozzo, she saw persuasion happening with the style of writing and language that David used to convince her reader to make the recipe. Rather than simply writing a step-by-step recipe, David made the recipes more enjoyable and interesting by writing in a tone that pushes readers to take more risks in following her recipes. Writing in a more open-ended way persuades recipe users to take a chance and try something new. However, it was not only the engaging recipes, but also the rhetorical analysis of David's writing taught Zoë how versatile rhetoric can be.

Through her work in rhetorical analysis, Zoë realized that rhetorical strategies were not just relevant to her writing for this class, but also in her game-making classes and her day-to-day life. For example, she recalls visiting a friend's apartment and noticing they had a book titled *Recipes Every Man Should Know*. It took just a few flips of the pages to analyze the language the authors chose to use and realize how they tried to cater to a male with no prior cooking experience. Additionally, Zoë recalls an assignment in a game development class. The purpose of the assignment was to look at how game developers targeted their desired audience and deconstruct whether the game successfully completed this task. The entire deconstruction process was much easier to conduct because she knew what questions to ask, such as, "Who are the developers, and what made them choose this specific audience to cater to?" and "Why did the developers write in a certain style in order to cater to their intended audience?" and so on.

Thus, as Zoë learned to think about texts themselves as being socially, geographically, and culturally situated, she began to see recipes and other artifacts in ways she had not considered. Notably, she was able to apply the skills she gained in the Rhetoric of Recipes to similar analysis in another class and in a friend's apartment.

## Conclusion

Personal experience and the literature alike (Ziegleman 2010, Vester 2015, Gregory and Wayne 2020) confirm that food is intricately intertwined with stress and that people turn to food for comfort. The worldwide pandemic hit university students in unprecedented ways as they struggled to make sense of a new stage of university life first from a computer screen and then from isolated dorm rooms. The pandemic also required university faculty to change how they taught and to engage students beyond a lecture at the front of the room. Students needed to *do*. In these circumstances, Miriam and Zoë found themselves allies. Miriam wanted the class to be about rhetoric so that students would understand that rhetoric is an essential skill to function in a complex world. A student like Zoë, who is studying game design, a major heavily focused on coding, math, and technology, initially found it hard to imagine how a class named Rhetoric of Recipes would have an impact on her degree. As the course progressed, however, Zoë came to understand rhetoric as ubiquitous. She learned to see it in political speech, in marketing, and, yes, in recipes. It is, she says, "around us all the time whether we realize it or not," and "the art of being able to dissect anything that is presented to you by asking who the target audience is, who the

author is, what the style of language that an author is utilizing, and many other questions is a very important skill to have.”

In short, choosing a recipe to explore, while still academic work, became an interesting and thought-provoking exercise for the students. Using food as an academic tool connected them to meaningful aspects of their lives and allowed them to connect their learning to more tangible concerns. Through critical study of recipes, they learned to define and use key rhetorical terms, situate rhetorical perspectives while applying the theory to recipes, and examine the power dynamic inherent in a text as seemingly innocuous as a recipe. As others have shown already (Ariel 2019, Rowat et al 2014, Steinberg 2012, Wright 2006) food proves a powerful subject for student learning. In *Rhetoric of Recipes*, this learning happened through hands-on activities like baking bread to understand why we formulate things the way we do, studying the context of key lime pie to examine the connections between rhetoric and manipulation, and analyzing a recipe of their own choosing to determine purpose and strategy. Could students have gained the same set of skills—of defining, situating, applying, and interrogating—with a different theory, using a different text? Could this lesson have been conducted without food? The other sections of the Core 204 class that ran at the same time say absolutely, yes. There are many ways to teach and learn successfully. However, Miriam and Zoë contend that the use of recipes specifically and food more broadly as a topic for a class that teaches critical thinking skills engaged students in a troubled time in uniquely accessible ways.

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