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Food, Comfort, and Community: Media Coverage of Last Meals for the Dying

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Abstract

This article examines the media coverage of food in the context of community-based end of life rituals and death meals that are increasingly being observed by those undergoing a medically assisted death (medical assistance in dying; MAID). I employ a reconstituted form of media analysis that aims to identify and unpack the socio-cultural themes, values, and assumptions that underpin these food events. These include the central frames of plenty, community/family, personality, comfort, and gender. My objective is to provoke a discussion about how media coverage acts as a site from which to understand the significance of food in the context of death, when death is desired, and how new avenues of research can be pursued therein.

Keywords

Death meals; assisted dying; MAID; food studies; ritual; symbol; cultural capital; gender.

The relationship between food and conviviality, nostalgia, comfort, and ritual have been written about by sociologists, anthropologists, and social scientists for the last thirty years (Barthes 1968; Counihan 2018; Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Shuman 2000; Visser 1999). The study of food, eating, and death have also been examined by historians and ethnographers interested in funereal practices (Yoder 1986; Graham 2017), social and cultural theorists researching the symbolic significance of the “final meals” of inmates on death row (Cook-Whearty 2015; Gerwig-Moore, Davies, and Atkins 2014; Treadwell and Vernon 2011), sociologists of death and dying (Kellehear 1984; Walter 2008) and medical practitioners who, with the help of scholars in the humanities and social sciences, are learning more about the positive social role food can play in palliative care (Forbes 1997; Hanssen and Kuven 2016).

More specialized work that incorporates a media driven sociological study of food and the meal in relation to an *intended or intentional* ending of ones' life, however, has not been conducted to any significant degree. Cann's (2018) edited collection examining the history of food, death, and memory in funereal rituals comes close, particularly in those chapters that examine how closely food is connected to practices of grief post-death. It is in this area that I hope to make a contribution as it relates

specifically to the subject areas of food and cultural studies (Counihan, and Van Esterik 1997; Ashley *et al.* 2004). While the field is vast in its interdisciplinary study of the significance of food from a variety of sites or locations (e.g. production, consumption, meaning, regulation, representation, history, identity etc.), food and cultural studies also contains a growing amount of work on the subjects of food and death as well as media representations of food (Friese and Hofmann 2008; Ranteallo and Andilolo 2017). In this article I draw these two areas together in an attempt to contribute novel insights to the field around how food and food cultures function in the case of living wakes or “death meals” observed in cases of “medical assistance in dying” (MAID).

This article examines the media coverage of a recent phenomenon, namely, community-based end of life rituals or “death meals” that are increasingly being observed by those undergoing a medically assisted death (MAID). This phenomenon first became visible to me in newspaper articles in which at least some part of the coverage of a party or living wake preceding MAID made food a central part of the story. While existing literature provides a framework through which to understand the significance of food at these events (i.e. as ritual, community practice, pleasure and comfort), I focus specifically on cases when the person dying is both present and has a central role in organizing the gathering itself. These parties, as media coverage attests, allow individuals to say goodbye in an environment ripe with conviviality, belonging, and comfort so as to cultivate a kind of collective effervescence in pursuit of group solidarity and expressions of love (Trees and Dean 2018).

I begin this article by providing some background into MAID (also commonly referred to as assisted dying, physician assisted dying, and/or euthanasia) and an overview of the media coverage of “end of life parties” or “living wakes” held by individuals who are about to undergo this procedure. I examine the importance of food at these gatherings and draw on more contemporary work with particular attention paid to the significance of how gustatory imaginings and experiences are made all the more significant in the context of an impending *chosen* death.

The majority of this article engages in a reconstituted form of media analysis (described further below) to identify and unpack the socio-cultural themes, values, and assumptions that shape these food events (D’Angelo and Kuypers 2010; De Vreese 2005). These include the central frames of plenty, community/family, food choice, and comfort, with a coda at the end on gender. My objective is to provoke a discussion about how media coverage signifies a site from which to understand the significance of food in the context of death, when death is desired, and how new avenues of research can be pursued therein. Before engaging in this analysis, however, a certain amount of background and context is needed with respect to MAID as well as existing work on food vis-à-vis community, family, food choice and comfort.

Background and Context

Medically assisted dying in some form exists in a number of countries including The Netherlands, Belgium, Canada, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and Colombia, as well as a handful of individual American states including Washington State, California, Oregon, Colorado, Montana, Vermont, New Jersey and Maine. My own interest in euthanasia and medically assisted dying is rooted in the passing of the Canadian law in 2016, as mandated by the Supreme Court, which found that parts of the Criminal Code that prohibited MAID were unconstitutional (Carter, Rogerson, and Grace 2018). Since then, a considerable amount of media attention has looked at the experiences of those undergoing MAID in America as well as in other countries. The legacy of social and religious stigma traditionally associated with suicide, coupled with questions around the role played by medical practitioners and the existential dread associated with death, make voluntary assisted dying particularly compelling to media as well as public debate.

This, I contend, goes a long way towards explaining the rise in coverage and interest in the social practices, both formal and inter-personal, that have arisen in conjunction with medically assisted dying of which one such phenomenon is the living wake or pre-funeral gathering/celebration (or what I call “death meals”). The role played by food in these gatherings are consistently given a prominent place in news coverage – which is not unexpected given the import of food in most human rituals, gatherings and celebrations (Civitello 2011; Douglas and Gross 1981).

There is a vast body of relevant literature applicable to this research including work done by Mary Douglas who, in the 1970s and 1980s, developed a robust accounting of different kinds of meals, including celebratory ones, as coded sites of social interaction that produce meaning not unlike languages. She draws attention to the significance of chosen foods and what they communicate about inclusion, boundaries, belonging and hierarchy. Meals of conviviality, in this context, are constitutive of bonded social relationships (Douglas 1997, 2002).

Bourdieu’s (2013) work in this area is relevant with respect to how cultural capital is deployed at these parties which range from elaborate multi-staged events, to intimate, short gatherings of friends and family for special meals. In most cases, however, it is the eating with others, what Sobal and Nelson call the social phenomenon of commensality, that is significant (Sobal and Nelson 2003). What is most interesting, however, is the prestige and social honour sought by the performance of good taste in food choice, music, venue, and “entertainment” that are then seen as a final act of posterity (Bourdieu 1977). Carole Counihan’s (2009) chapter “Come Out of Your Grief: Death and Commensality” makes the important connection of food and rituals post-death using the town of Antonito, Colorado as a case study and drawing on ethnographic vignettes demonstrating the ways in which forms of commensality are expressed.

Margaret Visser's work in this area focusing on the symbolic and material importance of how one eats and with whom is also germane. Visser's study of "conspicuous competence" compliments Bourdieu's thesis in demonstrating how food choice can display both socioeconomic success and taste through the lens of cosmopolitanism and omnivorousness (Julier 2013; Visser 1989). Also of note is Jeffrey Sobal's research which examines the power of food by exploring how eating and nutritional transformations are co-constituted with and by larger social changes (i.e. industrialisation and globalisation) (Sobal 1999). Meiselman's study of "the meal" which uses an interdisciplinary model to think about how meals function as a product, service, sensory experience, pathology, and sociological artefact, amongst several others, is also relevant (Meiselman 2008).

Finally, the love, care, and comfort associated with food and meals constitutes a further area of theoretically significant research applicable to assisted dying and death meals. Here, meals serve as a kind of sociomaterial practice in which the provision of pleasurable food for others (Belk 2009), as Stollmeijer, Harbers and Mol (1999) maintain, centres friendship, attenuates power differentials, and binds the giver and the receiver into a relationship; wherein "the intention of the meal is to give refreshment to both body and soul in a feeling of kinship (i.e., commensality)" (Sidenvall, Nydahl, and Fjellström 2000, 406). While not directly relevant, I would be remiss if I did not mention the work of scholars that study the cross-cultural intersection of folklore, funerals, and food including Helen Frisby (2019), Jacqueline Thursby (2006), and Patricia Lysaght (2003).

In the next section, I engage in the media framing analysis of select newspaper coverage of a number of English language stories that focus on death meals held prior to assisted deaths and which engage in a discussion of food. Methodological issues associated with sampling and the deployment of framing analysis are also reviewed.

Methodology

As I stated in the introduction, this research grew out of related work I had been doing on MAID, gender, and marginalization in which I had found increasing media coverage of food in stories of individuals undergoing assisted dying as it relates to their use of living wakes, death meals, or goodbye gatherings of friends and family. Searches of the Nexus database over the past five years, and news.google.com to ensure nothing had been missed, given the short time these services have been available in the US and Canada, of major English language publications identified thirteen articles of note from the US (*Newsweek*, *Vox*, *San Diego Reader*, *New York Times*, *ORILLIAMATTERS.COM*), UK (*Mirror*, *Mail Online*, *BBC*), Canada (*CBC News*, *The Chronicle Herald*), South Africa (*IOL*), and Ireland (*The Journal*). Searches were conducted using a purposive sampling strategy consisting of pre-chosen keywords around assisted dying (specifically: medically assisted dying, physician assisted dying, MAID, euthanasia) and food (food, meal, final meal, party, gathering, wake, living

wake). To ensure the articles reflected deep engagement with the subject matter at a hand, I required that they be over 200 words and be situated in a newspaper that reaches a wide audience (consistent with the definition of an urban area: 10,000+). Exceptions were made for digital outlets that met the criteria of audience if the article raised issues of particular import (only two met this bar: Vox, ORILLIAMATTERS.COM).

In each of the media texts I discuss below, death, food, and meals were mentioned. Potential limitations of this project include: its relatively small sample size, which is a result of the short time MAID and assisted dying has been available in Canada and the US; difficulty in extrapolating generalisable results – which I contend remain sociologically significant despite this due to the critical, analytical, and in-depth insights that have been generated; and the complexities associated with ethnic, religious, and cultural differences in food practices and rituals around death and dying which, given the small sample size and ethnic homogeneity of the individuals written about, could not be addressed. Cann’s volume, *Dying to Eat: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Food, Death, and the Afterlife* will provide much needed context when more ethnically culturally diverse data is available (Cann 2018). Finally, a larger project extending media analysis to the Dutch, Flemish, and French languages and work that accounts for cultural differences will, in the future, serve to strengthen and extend the conclusions reached in this piece.

In analysing the articles, I employed a framing technique to make sense of events, thematize social values and assumptions, and take stock of culturally significant mores in ways that make complex phenomenon digestible for a general public (Sniderman and Theriault, 2004; Simon and Xenos 2000). The central assumptions underlying framing analysis include that:

News is a representation of the world mediated via the journalist. Like every discourse, it constructively patterns that of which it speaks. Differences in expression carry ideological distinctions and thus differences in representation. The content of news stories therefore represents ideas, beliefs, values, theories, and ideology. The major role of news language as discourse is to supply the categories imposed by the journalist on the event itself (Qing 2000, 666).

In the context of these stories, frames, or “frame typologies” were identified using Alozie’s method of framing analysis which consists of multiple iterative readings of an article, supplemented by notes, a second, in-depth reading to identify central frames and themes, followed by a comprehensive interpretation of the texts (Alozie 2005, 66). These frames had to be descriptive, persistent, shared, organising (of information), and reflective of themes that identified “the signifying elements that might be used by audience members” (Pan and Kosicki 1993, 58; Reese 2007; Tuchman, 1978). The frames identified in my application of this approach include that of abundance, family,

food choice, and comfort, which are examined in turn with additional insights about cultural capital and gender norms.

Analysis

Plenty/Abundance

Each article covering death meals communicates a rich site of meaning in which food acts as a storehouse of meaning and memory. They range in levels of directness, writing style, and objectives which makes it all the more significant that each article contains some discussion of food. For example, in *The Journal* piece documenting UK businessman Jeffrey Spector's death meal, it was remarked, quite simply, that "Jeffrey Spector (54) enjoyed a final meal with his wife and three daughters last Thursday before travelling to the Dignitas centre in Zurich, Switzerland to take his own life" (Brennan 2015).

Coverage of the same story, by *The Daily Mirror*, adds more detail with a picture of the Spector family before his death gathered around a large table filled with food and drink. The article describes the gathering as follows: "Every face around the table had a smile for the camera, the wine was flowing and the dishes were full – but this was no ordinary family dinner party. This was Jeffrey Spector's last, and he and everyone around the table knew it" (Retter 2015). A BBC story about a Marieke Vervoort, a Paralympian, makes a similar observation about her death meal in which, the article states, she had stocked her fridge full of sparkling wine and invited friends and family to a restaurant meal where "sizzling beef and the shrimp tagliatelle" was on the menu (Oldroyd 2019). This frame of plenty, generous portions, and abundance is an important feature in many of the articles which is in keeping with scholarly work noting that meals which mark special occasions are traditionally celebrated communally and tend to "use common plates and bowls," as is the case in this image, wherein there is no "my" or "your" plate with my or your portion...rather "our food." These shared communal meals, as Cappellini and Parsons argue, indicate that "choice and abundance" are an important feature with "larger quantities of food" being cooked and served (Cappellini and Parsons 2012, 15).

Simone Cinotto highlights the significance of food and feasting in countries where abundance plays an important role in confirming family relations and which "marked all the occasions that redefined the place of individuals within family and community – including death" (Cinotto 2013, 55). This frame of plenty is echoed in another article written up for *The San Diego Reader* in which the final meal for a patient's living wake is described as consisting of "the woman's favourite foods, including Chinese food, donuts, Jewish deli, and In-N-Out Burger" (Anderson 2018). This frame is also alluded to by the husband of a woman with terminal cancer who, the author of the article writes: "On the evening before her death...[her] husband prepared a lobster feast." "We had wanted to do a lobster dinner, because Gail loved lobster," said Keven Ferry,

Gail's husband..." (Owen 2019). Historically, feasting has acted as a way to solidify relations of conviviality and nurturance with food choice and portions serving as an indicator of individual and societal prosperity, caring, and social wealth (Malaguzzi 2008).

Aspects of this caring, hospitality, and togetherness are discernible in these articles through their descriptions of the abundance of the shared death meals. I now turn to the analysis of the family frame which was also deployed consistently in each of the pieces.

Family

A particularly compelling article written for *Vox* details the death of a rather young woman by the name of Betsy who has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), often called Lou Gehrig's disease. It introduces a further set of significant frames and symbolically rich insights made manifest by an analysis of her living wake and death meal. In this case, it is the symbolic role played by the family in the context of eating and sharing that is significant. It is important to note that the "family," in this context, is defined broadly as encompassing both kin and relations of close friendship. While the family frame overlaps with plenty/abundance, the focus here is on the significance of the institution as it intersects with food and death.

The *Vox* piece emphasizes the import of family generally and the significance of the family partaking in a final meal in particular. The author of the article highlights the significance of her (Betsy – who is also her friend) being "surrounded by devoted family and friends" who have gathered for a final set of ceremonies including a final meal (Pantera 2016). Even in those articles that do not enter into an especially detailed discussion of food (which thus differentiates it from the abundance frame above), the mentioning of a final meal remains socially significant and speaks to the importance of food as a marker of family cohesion. This is particularly the case in *The Journal* and *The Daily Mirror* articles about Jeffrey Spector's final meal with loved ones (Brennan 2015; Retter 2015). It is also echoed in an article for the *CBCNews* about a woman, Marisa, undergoing assisted dying. The author writes:

While she was sick, Marisa was not always up to seeing visitors. But once choosing to pursue assisted dying, she decided to host a goodbye get together with family. That decision kind of freed her and so she decided just to invite everybody, and everyone would come and have a supper and everybody would eat together. She wanted everybody to have a good time, the author recalls (MacArthur 2017).

The *CBC* article makes reference to the sister of this patient (Marisa) whose final request was that "everyone would come and have supper and everyone would eat together" (MacArthur 2017). In each of these cases, the death meal with kin and friends is a final opportunity to "do family" in the form of a meal, accompanied by the telling of stories and sharing of memories (Trees and Dean 2018). The power of the family

meal to sustain connections and strengthen social order is both reinforced and eclipsed by death meals as they are a simultaneously “rich areas [sic] for the production and sustainability of family life” (O’Hara *et al.* 2012, 130), but are also tinged with a kind of finality indicative of funeral and funeral meals whose purpose, as Van Gennepe (2013) argues, “is to reunite the surviving members of the group with each other, in the same way that a chain which has been broken by the disappearance of one of its links must be rejoined” (Thomson and Hassenkamp 2008, 1788). Notably, in these instances the ‘linking member’ is present. The frame of food choice, to which I turn to next, adds a further layer of complexity to the frames discussed thus far.

Food Choice

Food choice is another discursive frame used in all of the articles wherein choice can reflect identity as well as a host of other kinds of meanings related to food events, the significance of utensils, nationalism, and cultural trust (Jones 2007). For example, the *Vox* article, again, written by a friend and attendee, begins with the following passage:

I reviewed what I knew would happen: At 4 pm, we would have tamales. From 5 to 7 pm we would drink cocktails while picking out Betsy’s souvenirs from her remaining belongings – “everything must go.” Around 7, Betsy would don a ceremonial Japanese robe and go up the hill by her house. There we would gather as she took a Jell-O-based concoction of pentobarbital and morphine, a barbiturate similar to what Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland took at the time of their accidental deaths. Old Hollywood style (Pantera 2016).

In this passage, we can think specifically about the communicative and symbolic significance of the choice of tamales and its role in Betsy’s farewell gathering and death meal. The selection of tamales, given that she is not Latinx, is interesting on a number of levels – first and foremost with respect to how the choice to consume ethnic food in largely white gatherings has been read, albeit speculatively, as a way in which to confirm one’s self as “cosmopolitan” and interested in “a quest for authentic experience” (Lu and Fine 1995, 539).

Visser’s conspicuous competence thesis builds on this – particularly with respect to Julier’s explanation of how the serving of ethnic and/or regional food, as well as the cooking of it, “is itself the most important demonstration of socioeconomic success” and good taste (Julier 2013, 88). Tamales, as a point of background, are a traditional Mexican dish dating back to 5000 BC wherein a corn dough is wrapped around a filling consisting of a mixture of meat, cheese, and/or vegetables and served with salsa or mole sauce. They are often referred to as the quintessential Mexican comfort food (Azar *et al.* 2013). It is also significant that, historically, tamales are considered to be offering foods presented to the graves of departed loved ones during The Day of the Dead (Cunningham 2013).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that Betsy lives in the wealthy town of Ojai, is a renowned sculpturer and appears to be quite socio-economically well off. The party itself is an interesting postmodern pastiche of high, low, and ethnically diverse cultural forms with, as the article relates, “Betsy donning a Donna Karen dress followed by a Japanese kimono, travelling from place to place in a Tesla Model X with ‘Falcon wing’ doors, serving cocktails, incorporating a Rebirth ceremony and, the night before, dining on pizza while watching a Jordorowsky movie” (Pantera 2016).

Another article for the *Irish Times*, a syndicated long read from the *New York Times*, tells the story of John Shields’ death meal, at his Irish wake with him in attendance:

On one end were bottles of a local Shiraz with “Rebellion: On Your Own Terms” on the label. On the other was a chocolate hazelnut cake Shields had requested. It came from a virtuous bakery, even by Victoria’s hippie standards – grain bought locally and ground in-house. The foil to Swiss Chalet [a popular American chain restaurant], it captured the opposite extremes of Shields’ personality (Anon 2017).

Generally, the communication of personal taste, as it is related to food choice, works in tandem with structural factors in which the food served and activities engaged in are illuminative of the individual, their family, and their socio-economic position. The significance of the scale of this celebratory ethos, and the communication of personal taste, is mirrored in other accounts including the *San Diego Reader* piece which describes a patient in her 90s who had “two days of remembrances and farewells” with family, and a woman whose fête included a catered dinner and a “a stand-up comedian to emcee the party, introducing loved ones to deliver eulogies” (Anderson 2018). A final example worth noting is a commentary written for *The Globe and Mail*, a national Canadian newspaper, in which the couple availing themselves of an assisted death is described as having an intimate dinner with immediate family a few days before, followed by a final meal in which they, “dressed in caftans, drank champagne and nibbled on a last supper of hors d’oeuvre of lobster, salmon and filet” (Grant 2018). This menu is consistent with a held meaning that certain foods, like lobster and filet, communicate high levels of culinary capital grounded in authenticity, affluence, and taste (Jurafsky *et al.* 2018).

I would emphasize, however, that this analysis of food choice does not aim to attribute desire, on the part of these individuals, to communicate cultural or culinary capital as a *purely* intentional act per se. What I do argue is that the desire to communicate self through food remains significant and the meaning of the food choices people make exist within particular social contexts and taste cultures that carry meanings about class position, affluence, and, in today’s culture, “wokeness” (Buerkle 2019; Fine, Heasman, and Wright 2002).

Comfort Food

A further frame of significance is that of comfort food, or food as comfort, which is relayed in a number of these media texts including that about John Shields whose story was originally written up in *The New York Times* in which the mainstay of his Irish Wake, in addition to the cake mentioned earlier, consisted of ‘booze’: “Mr. Shields” the author writes, “wanted his last supper to be one he so often enjoyed on Friday nights when he was a young Catholic priest – rotisserie chicken legs with gravy” (Porter 2017).

Oddly enough, the phrase “comfort food” first came into common parlance in 1966 in an article for the *Palm Beach Post* in which the authors criticized the tendency for Americans, and particularly American children, to turn to food for comfort leading to higher rates of childhood obesity (Romm 2015). More recent and very relevant work using a structural approach includes Julie Locher *et al.*'s (2005) empirical study of American undergraduate students with respect to their relationship to comfort food which is broken down by nostalgic foods, indulgence foods, convenience foods and physical comfort foods. The meaning of comfort food has since morphed from its early roots to now signify those foods that people find pleasurable both psychologically and physiologically and that fulfil particular needs including, as Katz argues, “nostalgia, indulgence, convenience, and physical satisfaction” (Katz as cited by Owen and Long 2017, 4). As Duruz (2001, 22) argues, comfort foods work to “fix place,” revive memories, and act “as a comforting symbol of who we are, were, and want to be.”

These characteristics are present in descriptions of most of the foods served and consumed at the death meals. Whether it is Swiss Chalet chicken, tamales, lobster, or “Chinese food, donuts, Jewish deli, and In-N-Out Burger” (Anderson 2018), one thing these foods have in common is the fact that they all represent gustatory choices aimed at reviving warm memories coupled with permitted alimentary excess, fulfilled physiological satiety, emotional relief, and sensory satisfaction.

The connection made in the Shields’ article between roast chicken and his youth is evocative of the relation between food and nostalgic comfort which, as Stern argues, establishes the smell, taste, and experience of food as a “storehouse of meaning” which “sacralizes commonplace food items – revives good times” (Stern 1992, 50). Feelings of past harmony, belonging, and an ethic of care, however sanitized, are thus revived (Louv 1985). The tamales likely played a similar role for Betsy as well as for Shields with respect to his special bottle of Scotch which was opened and shared with friends just prior to taking the prescribed medications. Next, in the final section on gender, I take a slightly different tack demonstrating the role gender plays in death meals.

Gender

A final, more implicit factor of note has to do with the impact, or lack thereof, of gender norms on food choice as expressed in these articles. There is a considerable amount of existing literature on the differences between men and women with respect to food

choice wherein, for men, food is seen as a source of power and a driver of performance. As such, men have been traditionally characterized as meat eaters, expected and even encouraged, to consume copious portions, and to do so in rough and informal settings (Adams 2015; Ruby and Heine 2011).

Women, on the other hand, are traditionally socialized to choose more ‘feminine’ foods, like vegetables and salads, curtail portions in light of concerns around weight and health, and eat in more structured settings (Cairns and Johnston 2015; Cronin *et al.* 2014). As Coffey argues, the fear of “fatness” and excess are significant factors shaping women’s food choice – sometimes to a degree that can become dangerous (Coffey 2016).

Conspicuously, with respect to the food choices amongst men and women undergoing an assisted death, death meals seem to reflect much less of a discernible gendered difference with female patients also indulging in masculine coded foods. Whether it is Betsy’s pizza and tamales (Pantera 2016), Marieke Vervoort’s “sizzling beef and shrimp tagliatelle” (Oldroyd 2019) or the female patient cited in *The San Diego Reader* who chose “Chinese food, donuts and In-N-Out Burger” (Anderson 2018), each of these choices conflict with accepted literature around gender and food choice. In an article not yet cited (in *The Chronicle Herald*), the author calls attention to the planned final meal of an elderly woman which was comprised of an “indulgent menu of lobster tails dipped in drawn butter...followed by eggs Benedict and lobster again...” (DeMont 2018). Again, these are far from the characteristically controlled and health conscious food choices reflected in the literature. The most ready-at-hand interpretation of this abandonment of normalized alimentary behaviours is that a final meal is just that – a final meal in which considerations of control, nutrition, expected bodily comportment, and managed desire are superfluous. While this might be an appealing reading at first sight, in that women feel free to disregard these expectations, it is also telling that it takes such an extreme set of circumstances for this to occur.

Conclusion

Overall, what I have aimed to do in this article is offer a preliminary analysis of a novel yet increasingly significant social event or ritual (i.e. the death meal) through the lens of media representation. The framing devices through which food is discussed by each of the news articles have highlighted the foodways of these gatherings as embodying values of abundance, family/network solidarity, personality, and feelings of comfort – with an additional coda on gender. What unites each of these frames is what they say about the powerful symbolic and cultural role food plays in social life above and beyond its responsibility for physical reproduction. As Joan Smith argues, food is an intrinsically social artefact in that it has the power to “stimulate imagination and memory as well as those senses— taste, smell, sight...” She goes on to note that “the

most powerful writing about food rarely addresses the qualities of a particular dish or meal alone; it almost always contains elements of nostalgia for other times, places and companions, and of anticipation of future pleasures” (Smith 1996, 334).

While my own interest in these pre-funeral parties and death meals have to do with how the media frames food and its relationship to issues of family, comfort, personality, and gender, there are other avenues of analysis within the context of these events worth probing. These include, but are not limited to, a more detailed, data-intensive, and geographically diverse study of the media frames discussed here, a more in-depth analysis of race and gender, as well as a more comprehensive discussion of cultural/culinary capital. The latter is especially pressing in light of the rise of companies offering end of life parties which is likely to give rise to an entirely new zone of commodification and consumerism. While assisted dying remains a procedure only available in a handful of countries and states and is accessible to small numbers of relatively privileged individuals, the foods that are growing around it makes it a rich source of symbolic meaning worth further study.

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