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“Life-changing bacon”: transgression as desire in contemporary American tastes

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ABSTRACT

This essay considers how Americans attribute moral qualities to pigs and pork. I explore the ways that producers and consumers of pasture-raised pigs understand their interests in—and especially appetite for—pork in terms of moral values. At once a source of economic distinction, ecological commitment, and culinary indulgence, the pork from pasture-raised (or “heritage breed”, or “outdoor raised”) pigs is, in many ways, simultaneously a contemporary icon of excess and restraint. This convergence of contrasting values is even more amplified in bacon, the now ubiquitous food, flavor, and substance that is, for many, the quintessence of pork. This contemporary American infatuation with all-things bacon is an expression of both an enduring history of moralization (long associated with pigs and pork); as well as a very specific conjuncture of political economic and sociological forces. The *longue durée* and the current moment combine to put bacon on our plates with the distinctive pride of place it now enjoys. In this paper I suggest that the implications of this contemporary American taste for bacon, and the ways this taste have informed a consuming public knowledgeable about and desirous of this pork product, embody wider changes in American food politics and values.

KEYWORDS

Anthropology; semiotics; bacon; morality; values

As objects of both moral revulsion and approbation, few animals can compete with the pig. Achieving its greatest notoriety in Leviticus as swine that “divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet . . . cheweth not the cud” (Leviticus 11:7), the pig is reviled in kashrut, or Jewish dietary laws. These moral claims apply not only to the flesh (not to be eaten), but to the animal as a whole (not to be touched) each of which is טמא ta-mé “unclean.” Pigs fare little better in the New Testament. They make their only appearance in the Gospels¹ when Christ visits the country of Gadarenes. Here, he performs an exorcism on a half-crazed, demon-possessed outcast (the poor man was “dwelling among the tombs”), only to allow the offending devils to enter into a nearby herd of swine. They meet their ignominious end when they rush headlong into the sea and are drowned (Mark 5:1–14). The sacrifice of the lamb of God, and his Eucharistic meal, may have instantiated a “new covenant” (Feeley-Harnik 1994), but it did little to enhance the reputation of the already-infamous pig. Of course, porcine creatures are by no means universally abhorred. Across the South and Western Pacific, and perhaps most

especially in Melanesia, pigs are treated with tremendous esteem. Not only prized for their flesh, and intimately identified with the men who raise them (Rappaport 1968; Weiner 1976), pigs in much of Melanesia evoke powerful moral sentiments. As Munn notes, illness on Gawa is often attributed to witches, whose intense and evil jealousy is incited by their desire to consume pigs. In such instances, families may kill and distribute the pig(s) presumed to be the object of the witch's malevolent appetite, in the hopes of assuaging his or her hunger. If this offering does not sate the witch, the afflicted patient may end up consumed. Indeed, Gawans say that the pig of the witch is people; thus "[in] effect, the pig is a substitute for the person" (Munn 1992, 224). Far from unclean, or worthy of a demonic demise, Melanesian pigs are attributed with vital attributes of personhood (indeed, pigs are regularly personified; but people are equally porcinated by the nefarious witch). These attributes of personhood put them at the very center of social and cultural processes of productive, creative action. These pigs also demonstrate that the same delectability they epitomize can also give rise to destructive, ravenous craving if it is left unchecked. In both instances—the Melanesian alpha to the omega of Leviticus—swine are privileged vehicles for the attribution of moral conditions, conditions that are present in the bodies of the living beasts, as well as their (sometimes succulent, sometimes abominable, usually both) flesh.

This essay considers how contemporary Americans attribute moral qualities to pigs and pork. More specifically, I explore the ways that producers and consumers of pasture-raised pigs (that is, farmers, chefs, and customers of the meat they offer) understand their interests in—and especially appetite for—such pork in terms of moral values. Such values motivate these multiple actors to pursue the oft-challenging undertaking of raising, slaughtering, processing, or purchasing such “niche-market” pork. At once a source of economic distinction, ecological commitment, and culinary indulgence, the pork from pasture-raised (or “heritage breed”, or “outdoor raised”) pigs is, in many ways, simultaneously a contemporary icon of excess and restraint. This convergence of contrasting values is even more amplified in bacon, the now-ubiquitous food, flavor, and substance that is, for many, the quintessence of pork. This contemporary American infatuation with all things bacon is, I will argue, an expression of both an enduring history of moralization, as Americans are heirs to that very legacy of taboo and abomination decried in Leviticus (albeit, quite evidently, in a transformed way); as well as a very specific conjuncture of political economic and sociological forces that have been much discussed and debated in American popular culture. The *longue durée* and the current moment combine to put bacon on our plates with the distinctive pride of place it now enjoys. In this paper, I suggest that the implications of this contemporary American taste for bacon, and the ways this taste have informed a consuming public knowledgeable about and desirous of this pork product, embody wider changes in American food politics and values.

In arguing for the moral evaluations embodied by bacon, I am never far from a concern with the sensuous, gustatory character of bacon. As Adam Gopnik puts it in his recent rumination on matters alimentary, “We have mouth taste and moral taste” (Gopnik 2011, 96), and we inevitably make judgments about one in the guise of the other. In order to keep these perspectives in frame simultaneously, I draw on an approach to meaning, or signification, that derives from the work of Peirce (1932). In particular, Peirce's discussion of “qualisigns” has received a good deal of attention in certain

anthropological quarters (Munn 1992, Keane 2003; Meneley 2008; Manning 2012; Fehérváry 2013), as a way of bridging the divide between the conceptual and material dimensions of signifying practices. Qualities, in Peirce's terms, are primary experiences, feelings, or immediate sensory characteristics (e.g., softness, brightness, warmth) that have the potential to convey significance, and so to serve as *qualisigns*, across the different material forms in which similar qualities are embodied. Thus, the "fattiness" of bacon, for example, has the potential to suggest unctuousness of character, smugness, and immoderation, but also the potential to suggest humility, sincerity, and modesty.

As Nicholas Harkness notes, a critical feature of Nancy Munn's use of *qualisigns* in her ground-breaking study of value production in Gawa is her insight that

a culturally meaningful quality such as "buoyancy" or "lightness" (*gagaabala*) could be experienced via any number of objects of sensory experience, e.g. the wetness and expansiveness of the sea, the slipperiness of fish, the fluttering motion of birds, the lightness of the heated and driedwood of a canoe, or the quickness of a brilliantly-adorned dancing body. (Harkness 2013, 14)

In this way, as Harkness demonstrates in his own study of Korean *soju*, a privileged quality—such as "fatness," "funkiness," or (in Harkness's own case) "softness"—can operate as a valued potentiality that is experienced across multiple activities and sensory experiences, occasionally at the same time (Harkness 2013, 26). In this way, social relations, gustatory pleasures, bodily anxiety (e.g., guilt about "fatty foods"), and political economic structures—in short, "mouth taste and moral taste"—can be ramified across a system of values and embedded in concrete substances.

This last point is especially relevant because "quality" also connotes an evaluative *ranking* of phenomena. Everyday uses of "quality" suggest hierarchical differences and preferences. Indeed, this kind of usage is widespread in the American food scene that is the focus of my research. Here, niche-market goods such as artisanal cheese, biodynamic wines, or pastured pork, are extolled as foodstuffs that bear "quality" and "character", a term, that, like "quality," suggests both a perceptual feature and an intrinsic ranking. To "have character" or be a "quality product" is not simply to be perceptible, but to be (in some way) preferable. Thus, the idea of "quality" is useful for attending to the material, meaningful, evaluative dimensions of food practices and discourses—including contemporary tastes for ever-popular bacon.

Bacon quality

What is bacon? And how are the qualities it presents recognized and embodied in bacon? Bacon has a complex etymological, culinary, and agricultural history. The word itself derives from the proto-Germanic term for "back" and made its way through French into Middle English by the 12th century to refer to any meat from the back and sides of a pig; it was not until the 14th century that bacon began to refer to the cured meat from the "side" of the pig (Ayto 1994, 14–15). But pork had been cured in Europe for many centuries. Romans of the second century BCE cooked with cured and dried—as well as pickled—cuts from both the shoulder and ham (Wilson 1991; 74; though the evidence suggests they did not cure the

sides of pork, which today we would recognize as bacon; Dalby 1998; 218). Bacon was “the mainstay of the European peasant diet for centuries,” writes Shephard (2006, 68–69)

William Ellis, one of many sixteenth and seventeenth-century English rural gentlemen who produced books on agricultural and domestic improvements, wrote in 1750 that “Where there is Bread and Bacon enough, there is no Want In the Northern Parts of England, thousands of families eat little other Meat than Bacon; and indeed, in the southern parts, more than ever live on Bacon, or Pickled Pork.”

Most often, bacon was used as a flavoring to add richness to porridges (or pottages) of beans and pulses, taken as a main meal (Wilson 1991, 202; Shephard 2006, 69).

Although bacon initially referred to back and side meats, other cuts of pork, as in the Roman example, have been (and continue to be) prepared as bacon. British bacon characteristically combines meat from the back and the sides of the pig, what an American butcher would call the “loin” (the tender muscle that runs along the animal’s spine) and the “belly” (the fat-streaked tissue from the pig’s abdomen), which are then cured and smoked. Italian bacon can be made from either the belly, as *pancetta*, or the jowl of the pig, as *guanciale*. Neither preparation is traditionally smoked, but each is more heavily spiced than most bacons of Anglo-Saxon origin. Across the American South, fat back, cured and often (though not always) smoked from the fat cap under the skin along the pig’s loin, is still prepared and eaten much like bacon. Today, of course, gastronomic enthusiasts are making bacon from any number of animal products, from lamb flap pancetta, to turkey bacon, to say nothing of Bac-Os® “made with the goodness of soy” (Betty Crocker). Of course, not all of these products are bacon; but it is remarkable to note the ways that products with such distinct cultural histories as *pancetta*, *guanciale*, fatback, and *lardo* (Cavanaugh 2005) are enjoying a bit of a Slow Food renaissance. I would suggest that, while they are clearly *not* all bacon, they are all substances that “bundle” (Keane 2003; Meneley 2008) the qualities of fatty, rich, cured, indulgence. In this way, they allow “bacon” to operate as a kind of conventional sign of these qualities (Harkness 2013,15), one that is increasingly pervasive in diverse culinary cultures.

Most of these applications further imply that bacon is a way of *economizing*. The preservation process allows fresh pork not only to be used over an extended period of time, but also to be consumed in ever-smaller incremental portions (like rashers, strips, or cubes). In each of these ways, bacon differs from roasts, chops, and cuts typically braised (e.g., shoulders, ribs, shanks) that are consumed as soon as they are cooked. Moreover, for most of its culinary history bacon has been eaten as a condiment, or flavoring for some other food—a pot of beans, a vegetable stew—which allows the meat to be “stretched” to accommodate the demands of a communal meal. Such economizing undoubtedly contributes to bacon’s reputation for humble, immediate gastronomic satisfaction. But this unpretentious history begs the question: how could this commonplace food, rendered into the family pottage that sustained peasants “for centuries” become a contemporary icon of indulgence and extravagance, porcine gilt for the culinary lily? And how might these contrasting moral characteristics—the modest and the extravagant—relate to the history of pork as transgressive flesh? How, we might further ask, have contemporary American publics developed a taste for the transgressive?

My contention is that the privileging of bacon, its availability to inspire tastes both epicurean and plebeian, relates to the specific qualities embodied in the very material of bacon itself. In particular, the sensuous qualities of fat—itsself both a substance and a qualitative attribute (as in “fatty bacon,” about which see much more below)—are especially available for signification, for “bundling” (Keane 2003) into diverse and complex culinary signs. It is not often noted, for example, that Leviticus itself, so often mined for anthropological evidence about the nature and character of food prohibitions, and ritual pollution more generally, is replete with references to fat. For example, in virtually every instance in Leviticus where the “sons of Aaron” are conjoined from eating *blood*, and charged with its proper ritual segregation from the flesh of animals meant to be eaten, they are similarly told how to dispose of the animal’s *fat*, and in very specific ways (e.g., Leviticus 3: 7–11 “And he shall offer of the sacrifice of the peace offering an offering made by fire unto the LORD; the fat thereof, and the whole rump”). Indeed, Leviticus (3: 17) commands, “It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.”²

This contrast between “flesh” and “fat,” I would argue, persists in its importance. It remains vital, not only to those who keep Kosher, but also to Jews and Christians³ today who find themselves either drawn to or perhaps averse to the temptations of bacon (there must be a few contrarians out there). It will certainly come as no shock to note that bacon is a fatty meat. Indeed, we might call it a fatty flesh, interweaving edible and inedible forms in a single strip of meat. This quality is not arbitrary. Indeed, it is necessary to the ways that bacon is consumed. As the brief history of bacon already described notes, bacon is a mode of economizing, preserving fresh pork and stretching family meals. And both of these attributes depend upon fat. It is the fat content of pork bellies that allows them to be salted and desiccated without drying out completely rendering an inedible, tough, leathery food. Further, the fat in bacon allows the preserved meat—and the substance of the fat itself—to flavor other foods, to melt into a pot of legumes and disperse a savory character to the totality of the dish. What my revisionist view of the Abominations of Leviticus also reveals is that the sanction on eating meat with blood rendered moot by Christ’s lifting this prohibition with the Eucharist (Feeley-Harnik 1994) must also have entailed permission to consume fat with flesh; how else could bacon (quite aside from its now-permitted porcine source) have been the staple meat of European diets for so many years? Jews seem to have gotten over this as well as any brisket maker could tell you.

Transgression in history

But the fact that the prohibitions of Leviticus were transformed under Christianity does not mean that they became irrelevant (and not just because of the New Testament’s persistent misgivings about pigs). Indeed, the anomalous character of swine (Douglas 1966; Soler 1997), and certainly fatty pig parts persists even to this day, and—my ethnographic evidence suggests—can even be found among avid eaters of well-larded pork products. My ethnographic accounts demonstrate that the qualities of fatty pork to which I have already alluded, and their once-prohibited, now-permitted (but certainly not for all eaters) character in contemporary American cuisines, situate this fat laden flesh within a regime of signification which continues to make pork—and especially

bacon—a *transgressive* food. Like other transgressions, eating pork need not be strictly prohibited, or carry any overt social sanction in order to evoke feelings of impropriety, anxiety, or (reciprocally) creativity, and even human freedom (Stallybrass and White 1986; Graeber 2001, 1997). The ways in which many people who eat pork talk about it, its desirable features, and the effects of these features on them routinely indicate just such a concern with transgression, a furtive taste that relates both to the long history of prohibitions surrounding pigs and to the concrete qualities embodied in pork itself.

“I suspect that we feel a rather special guilt about our pigs,” writes Leach (Leach 1964, 52):

After all, sheep provide wool, cows provide milk, chickens provide eggs, but we rear pigs for the sole purpose of killing and eating them, and this is rather a shameful thing, a shame which quickly attaches to the pig itself. Besides which, under English rural conditions, the pig in his backyard pigsty was, until very recently, much more nearly a member of the household than any of the other edible animals. Pigs, like dogs, were fed from the leftovers of their human masters’ kitchens. To kill and eat such a commensal associate is sacrilege indeed!

Call this the “Babe the Pig” hypothesis, as Leach’s observation is precisely the realization that forms the existential crisis that motivates Babe to take up sheep herding. Indeed, the “special guilt” Leach speaks of is typical of the ways that human characters feel about pigs, from King-Smith’s Babe (1985) to E.B. White’s (1952) humble yet radiant Wilbur, in all manner of popular porcine representation. Let us consider, for a moment, the ways that Leach describes this “special” feeling, and look at their wider distribution in our understanding and eating of pigs. Not only leaving us “guilty,” the raising of pigs for the purpose of consuming their flesh is “shameful” and, indeed, a “sacrilege.” Leach sounds less like he is explicating taboo than he is invoking it. His account is less a quirky trope than it is a widespread feature of our ambivalent attitudes toward consuming pigs. In this regard, consider these pictorial examples. If you were to drive anywhere in the southern United States, from Texas to Virginia (and a great many other regions, as well), you would undoubtedly come across barbecue shacks, fast food joints, and homespun diners sporting signs like these (Figures 1–4).



Figure 1. The iconography of barbecue.



Figure 2. The iconography of barbecue.



Figure 3. The Iconography of barbecue.

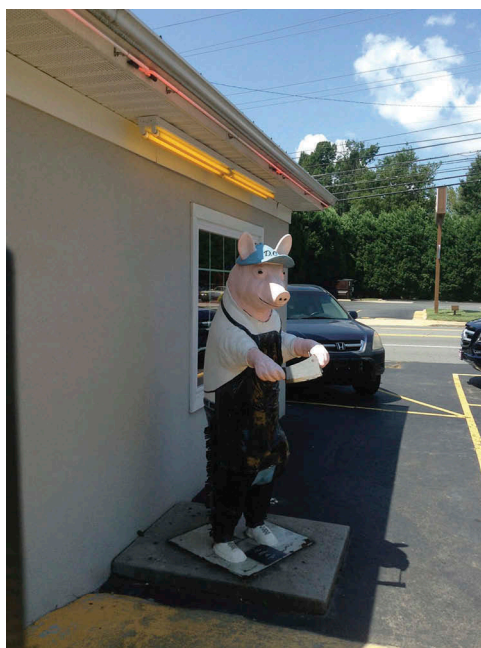


Figure 4. The Iconography of barbecue.

Pigs, it seems, are not just represented as cute and friendly creatures helping to promote the sale of animal products (a no-less widespread feature of advertising everywhere); rather, they appear as happy consumers of pork. It is as though the fact

that pigs are raised exclusively for the purpose of eating them is a part of the life of pigs themselves; even they find their own flesh irresistible! Such joyful cannibalistic depictions⁴ are plainly transgressive. They overtly elicit a prohibition—cannibalism—in order to flout it directly, thereby simultaneously invoking and undermining an absolute proscription. In this way, as well, the transgressions depend upon the implicit assumption that eating pork is problematic, and so this problematic character has to be overcome in the inventive reimagining of the pig. It is as though the prohibitions of Leviticus are not simply *dispensed* with but subject to a kind of transposition in practice and discourse. In this way, the formerly excluded is permitted inclusion in the American diet, but only by means of an awareness and invocation of a tabooed past that colors our current appreciation of the pig.

These kinds of transgressions, and especially the feelings they evoke, seem plainly rooted (to use an apt porcine *synecdoche*) in the long history of prohibitions (including the Christian *lifting* of these interdictions) that surround the pig. A creature so long both vilified and devoured cannot be consumed without some discomfort. In these cannibalistic images, the pig is powerfully personified, if only to show how very inhuman the pig can be. This is a paradox that, in turn, renders the *inedible* (now, because human-like, our “commensal associate”) pig eminently *edible* again.⁵ Call it a new form of atonement. Yet, it is important to note that the “special guilt” that Leach describes is less frequently associated with feelings of dread, or regret (which we might expect from those who feel guilty) than it is with a sense of the subversive and humorous. Again, it is a longstanding anthropological insight that violations of sociocultural prohibitions, like these food taboos, are at the heart of such ritual modes of subversion as carnival and masquerade (Turner 1967; Bakhtin 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986; Gluckman 1954; Leach 1961). And it is no surprise to find the pig at the center of such amusing contraventions.

Let me offer one more (brief) example of the connections between longstanding prohibitions and contemporary practices relating to the transgressive, and especially the ribald character of pigs, pork, and (in particular) bacon, before turning to my own ethnographic work. It is often noted that practices of taboo entail prohibitions not only on food, but also on sexual practice (Leach 1961; Douglas 1966; Lambek 1992). It is striking, for example, that the prohibited character of diet as detailed in Leviticus forms a kind of template for articulating sexual conduct, as well. Stallybrass and White point out that pigs have been associated with sexuality—and in particular with female genitalia—for centuries across Europe (1986 44ff). They attribute this symbolic connection to the ambivalence of the pig, and the way both celebration and revulsion can be signaled through such porcine associations. In the present day, these associations persist in a host of representations. Consider the “bacon bikini” image: (https://funnyjunk.com/funny_pictures/253498/Bacon#ba7fdf_358939), or the books entitled *Seduced by Bacon: Recipes & Lore about America’s Favorite Indulgence* (Pruess & Lape 2010) or *Sex and Bacon: Why I Love Things That Are Very, Very Bad For Me* (Lewis 2008). Or the comments of a customer who, in describing the taste of the pork she buys at my local farmers’ market, said “Better than sex! Need I say more?” Such accounts and images draw explicitly on the subversive character of pork (and bacon in particular). John T. Edge, of the Southern Foodways Alliance, writes, “Bacon is a sort of 21st century tattoo, a marker that declares the wearer to be a badass, un beholden to

convention” (http://www.salon.com/2008/07/07/bacon_mania/). But my point is slightly different. The “badass” character of bacon and these sexualized images *depend upon* the assumption that eating pork is prohibited and make the pleasures of bacon as forbidden as those of lust. In this way, the connections that Leviticus makes between illicit foods and illicit sexual conduct are logically inverted. If we follow Douglas and hold that the categorical attribution of “cleanliness” in Jewish thought and practice is a boundary maintenance device, then the consumption of pork, and its apotheosis, bacon, offers a privileged vehicle through which to assert that all heretofore sanctified boundaries can be overcome. This is not, then, a means of dismissing the significance of convention and constraint, but a means of transgressing them (transgressions that, it goes without saying, have become highly conventionalized today.)

Why bacon now?

Since late 2008, I have been doing ethnographic research on pasture-raised pork and the networks forged through it in central North Carolina (or, the Piedmont). My field research has been multisited, and multiform. I have done actual field-work with pig farmers across the region; interned in the prep kitchen of a leading Slow Food restaurant that regularly features “local pork” on its menus; and sell pork chops, bratwurst, and of course bacon (to name only the best sellers) at the Carrboro farmers’ market each week. In the course of this work (the results of which are detailed in Weiss 2016), I found that the motivations for people interested in local (also called pasture-raised) pork were many and varied. Some chefs wanted to support local economies, and assure themselves of access to a wide array of fresh ingredients. Some consumers would ask—or tell me—about the health benefits of such meat as opposed to industrially produced pork. Still other customers, chefs and household cooks alike, would consciously invoke ideological commitments to family farms and describe their taste for such pork in terms of their opposition (typically) to the environmental degradations of industrial meat production. At other times, support for “local meats” was proffered largely as a marketing device, as chefs would feature the names and images of the farms and farmers they work with as a means of recruiting clientele. What interests me most in this discussion is the way that bacon, in particular, lent itself to a wide range of values—from deliciousness to activism to niche-marketing—all of which can be shown to be embodied, not just in pork, but in a taste for bacon more specifically.

For example, one of the chefs I worked with said that what first drew him to pasture-raised pork was the fact that he was “looking for a pig with some fat on it” (Weiss 2016, 1–2). This predilection for fatty pork, which was widespread among chefs and connoisseurs, who frequently noted that fat carries the flavor of the meat, made bacon a preferred cut for such customers. As I have noted elsewhere, as well, pork belly (which is cured in order to produce bacon) is routinely contrasted with lean (and generally pricier) pork loin (Weiss 2016: 199–201). These are more than just different cuts of meat; they are each icons of different methods of production. That is to say that industrial pig production has focused on maximizing the profitability of each pig, and hence on producing larger, longer, leaner loins that can yield the highest price per pound. In contrast, bellies exemplify the concern with whole-animal utilization that is characteristic of “local meat” production, where a commitment to the life of the entire animal (rather than its maximization as a commodity) is routinely reported. In this way, buying and eating bacon can, for some, be a kind of

shorthand for affirming the values of animal welfare, ecological commitment, and “local” economies that dominate the production and sale of pasture-raised pork.

In this regard, it is especially interesting to note that at least a significant percentage of the regular customers for pork in the markets in central North Carolina that I know best describe themselves as former vegetarians and vegans who have come to “local meat” because it provides a way to affirm their commitments to animal welfare and/or their opposition to industrial livestock production, while supporting farmers who adhere to these same values. Berlin Reed, who participated in a butchery program at the first Carolina Meat Conference in 2011,⁶ describes himself as a “militant vegan punk” who took up whole-animal butchery as a way of putting these same values into practice (Reed, nd <http://softskull.com/dd-product/the-ethical-butcher/>). In addition, many mothers who shop for pastured pork have told me that they are vegetarians or vegans, but that they want to feed their children healthy food, and see local meat as a viable option for their kids to try. Often times, they are completely unfamiliar with different cuts of meat, or how to cook pork. And in these cases, they will often ask for bacon, as it is a familiar product that is (they assume) easy to cook. It is no surprise to find that this kind of interest in consuming bacon is expressed in precisely the same transgressive and humorous terms that I described with reference to the iconography of barbecue; these consumers describe bacon as their “gateway drug,” a point of entry into a world of illicit pleasures that lures them away from the virtues of their herbivorous lifestyles. One woman from Greensboro, NC who routinely bought 8–10 lbs of bacon (at \$11 per pound) from the Carrboro farmers market described this pork as “life-changing bacon,” a reference to the fact that her vegan diet had been fundamentally altered by her encounter with this food.

Part of what makes bacon desirable in these kinds of life histories is the fact that it is apparently accessible and familiar even for consumers who are unfamiliar with most forms of meat. But this assumption has to be modified somewhat. When we consider the bacon that is derived from pasture-raised pork, pigs “with some fat on [them]” as my chef friend put it, it turns out that the familiarity of bacon is a little less obvious. In fact, the bacon that I typically sold at a prominent farmers’ market in central North Carolina was derived from a “heritage breed” of pig that was renowned for its ability to put on an store fat. **Figure 5** (The Ossabaw Island Hog) has a complicated history (Weiss 2016, 72–77) that entails the colonial importation of pigs from Spain, their environmental mischief on the Sea Island off the coast of Georgia, and their revitalization through a breeding program that used them as an animal model for metabolic disorders (owing to their capacity for storing fat). The bacon from these pigs is certainly delicious, but it is also remarkably fatty. And this makes the bacon a challenge to cook (**Figure 6**).

Whenever I sold this bacon to a market customer, I would ask them if they had prepared it before. And if they had not, I would tell them that they had to cook it over a relatively low heat (or better yet, bake it in the oven) because high heat would cause the fat to render out too quickly, and it could even catch on fire in the pan. Nonetheless, as an especially fatty cut of pork that exemplifies the different kind of pig that is being raised in the pasture-raised alternative system to industrial livestock production, some customers are willing to invest (and the costs are two to three times higher than the price of bacon from a grocery store) in a product that both affirms their ideological



Figure 5. The Ossabaw Island Hog.

commitments and surrenders to what they themselves describe as a kind of transgressive indulgence.

This practice of educating customers in how to properly consume a “new” product like pasture-raised pork is a widespread feature of this “local food” movement. Elsewhere, I have described a process of “cultivating discernment” (Weiss 2016, Chapter 2) as one that is essential to generating a taste for local food. Restaurants often feature innovative dishes on their menus that they know will not sell, but they will



Figure 6. Ossabaw bacon.

offer them regularly because, I was told, “We want to educate our customers.” This may be to educate them to recognize distinctive dishes, or it may be a form of demonstrating the restaurant staff’s commitments to “local foods”, and thus “branding” themselves as an establishment that makes certain ethical commitments in its enterprise. In either case, the specific qualities of this kind of pork—its fattiness, its connection to underutilized parts of the animal (as opposed to chops and hams)—provide a vehicle for the expression of moral claims and values, values that are self-consciously promoted through a process of “educating” consumers. In this way, a taste for newfangled bacon is made public. As I have argued elsewhere (Weiss 2016; 231; see also Cavanaugh 2005; 150 for similar points), such specific qualities—fattiness, “economizing”, utilization—permit the *reevaluation* of bacon from what was once a food of economizing and hardship to a product that can now be experienced as indulgent and extravagant, even as it is “good” for the animals, the land, and the community.

Of course, a taste for bacon is by no means limited to this kind of artisanally produced cured meat derived from heritage breed pigs. But it is worth specifying the kinds of values and qualities embedded in such pork in order to clarify the contemporary interest in bacon more broadly. For example, I should point out that the cured bacon sold in farmers’ markets in the Piedmont is almost always sold to individual consumers and home cooks. In contrast, the many restaurants in the area that also purchase pork from farmers’ markets are much more interested in purchasing whole bellies than in buying bacon. The chefs will then either cure their own bacon or prepare other pork belly dishes for their diners. Pork-belly dishes are enormously popular at higher-end restaurants in central NC, as they are in much of the country (as one farmer told me, “I could make a fortune if I could breed a pig with four bellies”). But, at the same time, they are the kinds of dishes that require a restaurant to “educate” their clientele. Many chefs do like the challenge of turning a tough, fatty slab of belly into a tender and unctuous dish, loaded with flavor (and generally still dripping with fat). And the dedication to utilizing this cut of meat, which, until relatively recently, would have been bypassed in favor of loins and chops as cuts that would be featured at restaurants, shows a commitment to whole-animal cooking, and therefore support of the farmers and the welfare of the animals raised in alternative, pastured systems. However, such dishes are typically not what the dining public at large prefers. Yes, some consumers who follow food trends are taken with the prospects of a delicious pork belly confit, or David Chang’s pork belly buns at his now global Momofuku restaurants. But the chefs I spoke with across central North Carolina generally claimed that these kinds of pork dishes were not big sellers; they were found on menus, but—again—for the effect they had in cultivating a discerning public, as well as demonstrating one’s commitments to local farmers.

Bacon may be made from pork belly, but it is clearly not the same thing. Part of this difference has to do with the context and performance of the product. Pork belly is, for example, generally the main ingredient in a dish (as in the aforementioned pork belly buns), while bacon is typically an accompaniment to breakfast, or garnish to a sandwich. Moreover, bacon has become generalized as a flavor that now seems suitable to almost every dish, from the baconnise condiment to maple bacon donuts, to bacon as the medium for roasting every vegetable imaginable. This ubiquity takes us beyond the realm of artisanal foodstuffs and the virtues of alternative livestock husbandry to a taste

for bacon as a way of amplifying the flavor of almost any dish. If we consider the Peircian qualities that distinguish bacon from pork belly, we can see that bacon is pork belly that has been transformed and elaborated in a variety of directions. Bacon is not only cured, to add a fermented, “funky,” salty intensity, but also smoked, which adds what chefs and customers typically describe as “complexity” to the belly. All of these are forms of intensification that add depth and immediacy to the taste of bacon; there is nothing nuanced or subtle about the taste of bacon. Thus, farmers’ market customers could say of our Ossabaw bacon, “It knocked me out,” or “That stuff is murder.” Moreover, bacon is frequently cured with sugar, or sweeteners such as honey, molasses, or sorghum. This sweetness complements and extends what many chefs described to me as the “natural sweetness” of pork as a meat. This quality also accounts for the range of anomalous desserts—from butter pecan bacon ice cream, to chocolate-covered bacon, to maple bacon shortbread cookies and donuts—to which bacon is now regularly added. There are, of course, no comparable desserts featuring free-range chicken or grass-fed beef. Only bacon is able to inject a boost of flavor into all of these dishes, because the process of producing bacon is the amplification of a totality of flavor itself—smoky, sweet, salty, fatty, crispy⁷—which thereby strengthens and exaggerates the taste of whatever it is added to. This very much recalls Edge’s assertion that bacon is a marker of the “badass,” a kind of assertive in-your-face attitude that challenges the niceties of a nutritional snack. Adding bacon to what was once thought of as a dour vegetable like Brussels sprouts, or equally to a small-batch regionally sourced chocolate bar, further carries with it the very Rabelaisian humor that Bakhtin and, following him, Stallybrass and White identify with the grotesque and carnivalesque. In this way, as well, the transgressive is tied to the indulgent.

Conclusions

This last point, and the generalized ubiquity of bacon as an ingredient and flavor in all manner of dishes, is vital, I think, for seeing how “mouth tastes” and “moral tastes” work together, and why pork and bacon in particular can be privileged vehicles of this symbolic, material, and embodied process. The ethnographic and historical evidence I have presented suggest that pigs and pork lend themselves to all manner of moralizing claims. Here I have emphasized the transgressive character of pork in general, a characteristic that is generalized and exaggerated in the contemporary forms of a taste for bacon. This transgression, linked to such classic anthropological themes as cannibalism, sexual license, and the overflowing of bodily and social boundaries, is available in the iconography, lore, and even the everyday encounter with delectable, fatty, concentrated bacon flavor. With respect to the artisanal pork products and pasture-raised pigs that are the focus of my ethnography, the availability of bacon for expressing moral values permits consumers of these meats to assert their commitments to the values of an alternative food system. These commitments emphasize the totality of the animals’ life, the welfare of the pig, and the well-being of the local economies and ecologies that husband and market these animals. Such values are equally grasped as transgressive in so far as they are explicitly embraced by advocates of these foods as challenges to the conventional modes of production and consumption that dominate American livestock production.

It is not surprising, then, to find that bacon works, for many of these consumers, to challenge but extend the food politics of veganism and vegetarianism, as well. Bacon is not just oppositional; in these cases, it is ribald and subversive. The bacon mania that has gripped more widespread forms of consumption does not embrace these same virtues, of course. But it does offer a challenge to the conventional food system in an analogous way in so far as it directly and clearly rejects—indeed, openly mocks—the kind of “nutrition policy” that is, in fact, promoted by the same agro-industrial complex that pastured-pork consumers object to (Nestle 2013). In all of these ways, if for a wide array of diverse motivations, pork, and bacon in particular, offers a means of flouting the conventional wisdom. Discourses of progress (e.g., cheap industrial meat), restraint, nutrition, and austerity are all flouted by bacon.

There is one final, but critical, point to note. If, as I have argued here, this taste for bacon can be seen as exemplifying a counterpolitics meant to undermine conventionality (even as it takes the form of a mass produced, commodified foodstuff) and make transgressive claims, then this tells us something unsettling about our politics today. In effect, these subversive, transgressive assertions are being expressed as a kind of “ethical consumption,” a way of making moral claims through the purchases we make and the products we (quite literally) consume. Seeing bacon mania as a kind of ethical practice then (a challenge to the conventions of industrial production and/or the food politics of nutrition) also reveals the serious limits of political action today. In effect, ethical consumption creates a very limited field for collective mobilization, one that imagines personal restraint as the horizon of political action. As Paige West notes of similar “politics” in the world of fair trade coffee (2012, 244),

“ethical consumption” makes individuals seem and feel responsible for both the conditions of production and the ecological and social justice consequences of these conditions of production. Based on this logic ... the organizations behind the forced structural adjustment programs ... that resulted in drastic economic changes ... are all let off the hook.

Given such an atomistic understanding of effective action, it is not surprising to find that indulgence can—quite sensibly—be presented as a virtue. We might hope, though, that the subversive potential implicit in the porcine form can translate into more socially engaging forms of actions so that “politics of the personal” might redound to our collective well-being.

Notes

1. Or at least the synoptic gospels—the idiosyncratic John makes no reference to this episode, or to pigs in any form.
2. It is difficult to know with any certainty what specific qualities the children of Israel might have attributed to fat. But note that neither blood nor fat is part of a discrete organ, muscle, or limb of a beast, but pervades the body; fat is “upon the inwards” and “by the flanks” and “above the liver.” It is tempting to see this uncontained pervasion of the living body as a qualisign that makes fat iconic of divinity itself, a pervasive life-giving potential that is not (and should never be) tangibly fixed in discrete objects.
3. The significance of bacon and the qualifications of fat—let alone bacon—outside of the historical context of “the West” are far beyond the scope of this paper. Certainly in North America, any number of bacon’s consumers and producers are not heirs to the legacy of

this “moral taste”. Nonetheless, the ways in which bacon is not merely “represented” but prepared, sold, and consumed across a wide swathe of the North American public is restrained by this “heritage”.

4. Parodied, in a kind of metacommentary, in this commercial that received national airplay in the US in 2009: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-c4MNWLtSS8>.
5. Stallybrass and White’s (1986, 44–59) discussion of the pig demonstrates the innumerable ways that pigs have been grasped as “almost but not quite” human in European popular culture. In their view, this makes the pig an especially apt subject and object for ambivalent depictions of the grotesque and hybrid that allow “low” and “high” social strata to be juxtaposed and challenged.
6. Run by the Center for Environmental Farming Systems in Goldsboro, a research center dedicated to sustainable and organic agriculture.
7. “The single word ‘crispy’ sells more food than a barrage of adjectives describing the ingredients or cooking techniques on a menu” (Batali 2002, 162).

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