

Folk 267: Food and Culture

**MARCH 10: NEWTON'S
"THE JELL-O SYNDROME"**

Newton's "The Jello-O Syndrome"

What did *you* think of it?



Her point

- ◎ In many respects, Jell-O is the quintessential 20th century American food
- ◎ Yet Jell-O is unaddressed by most food scholars and folklorists in particular
- ◎ This despite the ubiquity of Jell-O in popular and vernacular cookbooks
 - Crossed all regional and ethnic lines

Her point (cont.)

⦿ Jell-O

- is a common food at cultural festivals
- holds a place in nostalgic reminiscence
- is part of childlore
- has entered jokelore
- has entered popular and elite fiction
- has attained a symbolic status
 - both ingenuous and ironic

Building from Lloyd

- Lloyd mentioned the “associations and identities” of foodways as a cause of its ongoing place in the food repertoire
- “Jell-O’s appeal lay in its emotional connotations rather than its cost or versatility” (Young & Rubicam report)

Originally aimed at “The Housewife”

- Jell-O would please the family, make her a better wife and mother, allow her to exercise kitchen creativity
- Invention is tied with wholesomeness, purity, and domesticity
 - (Ian reads part of Don DeLillo’s “Sputnik,” excerpted from *Underworld*)
- By 1990s, aimed at children

Children's folklore

- ⦿ Not “folklore *for* children,” but the folk culture that children share amongst themselves
 - e.g. playing with food (typically an activity met with disapproval, but taught by older children to younger)
- ⦿ Later, associations with Jell-O and its eating techniques become opportunities for reflection
 - As treat, as indulgence, as play, as metonym for departed family member

Personal experience narratives and family lore

- ⦿ Jell-O takes on an ambivalent meaning
- ⦿ Associations with embarrassment, lack of sophistication, non-cosmopolitan, rural (“hick”) Mid-West
- ⦿ Family narratives recount older generation’s acceptance and pride in Jell-O as cause for social discomfort by younger
 - Similar to ethnic language jokes among second-generation immigrant populations

Food Contamination Narratives

- ⦿ As symbol of innocence, juxtaposition with the sexual (as marital aid, “jello wrestling”) is commonplace
- ⦿ Also parallels the appeal of Jell-O shots, with the adultness of drinking with the childishness of Jell-O
- ⦿ “Since Jell-O is strongly associated with purity, even a kind of secular sacrality, deliberate adulteration of it is a powerful symbolic statement.”

Jokelore

- ◎ Both its (amusing) physical attributes and the ambivalence of its meaning allows for in-group humour (esoteric) and *blasons populaires* (exoteric)
 - The Lutheran example
 - Garrison Keillor
 - The aforementioned “embarrassing” personal experience narratives that are told as humorous anecdotes
- ◎ The “scientific” examples (including those from the following section on “Performance”)

Conclusions

- ⦿ There are complex responses to foods that arise to cultural prominence, as illustrated by Jell-O
- ⦿ Although one traces examples to more deliberate constructs (like “elite” literature), there are also more spontaneous ones like personal experience narratives
 - i.e. “lore” is created
- ⦿ As always, paying attention to the lore provides insight into the cultural relevance of certain phenomena, attitudes, etc.

Go away now.

- Next class, we begin Tye's *Baking as Biography*
- Chapter 1: "A Life in Recipes"

