

Food Anthropology with Katherine Spiers

Ologies Podcast

November 13, 2018

Oooooohhh hey. It's your old Pop Dad here just flipping pancakes in a flannel robe, Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*. So listen my birdies, I know it's been dark: we had a voting episode, we had an apocalypse episode. But you know what? We're alive, the world is full of people dancing at bat mitzvahs, and there's frogs, and surprise parties, and there's the smell of tiger lilies, and there are coyotes howling right now. There's that feeling of going through a car wash on a Sunday. We're still alive. People wanna fix things. Sadness doesn't get shit done. Sometimes, we just have to take a breather and just enjoy the moment.

So, I present you an episode that is harvest as fuck about feasts. FEASTS! But first, eat this: my thanks. Thank you to everyone who supports on Patreon. As little as 25 cents an episode gets you into that club. Thank you to everyone who clothes your bodies in *OlogiesMerch.com* items. Also, if you didn't know this, rating and subscribing to your favorite podcasts: it keeps them up in the charts so other people can see it. Also, if you've been listening to this podcast, you know that I creep your reviews. I read all of them. They make me so happy. This week, I want to thank Unforest for the review that said:

Delightful and occasionally horrifying, and the horrifying parts are the most delightful.

Okay, so Food Anthropology. The word food seems to derive from so many languages and 'anthro' is Greek for 'human being', so Food Anthropology is the study of how human beings chow down.

This week's guest is a food historian. I met her over a decade ago when we were both staff writers at the *LA Times*. She covered food and then she moved up the ranks to be the *LA Weekly* Food Editor before she jumped into the podcast realm. She has this really, really amazing food history podcast called *Smart Mouth*. I love it so much. She invites a guest to talk about the history of their favorite food. I was on talking lobster rolls and your buddy, *Ologies* editor Steven Ray Morris, was her guest to discuss his undying allegiance to corn dogs.

I texted her last week and I asked: "Holy shit, can we talk about feasts for a Food Anthropology episode?" Right away, she was like, "Hell yeah." The next day, I was there. I spent part of my birthday in her living room with her dog, Matilda, discussing winter gorging.

Just pop that top button on your trousers. Get comfy. Tuck a napkin into your collar and get ready for a buffet of information with *Smart Mouth* podcast host and Food Anthropologist, Katherine Spiers.

Alie Ward: Do you know how microphones work? Have you done a podcast before?

Katherine Spiers: No, I don't. What is a podcast? [*Alie and Katherine laugh*]

Alie: I'm not actually sure.

Katherine: [*laughs*] Well, this will be fun.

Alie: Okay. First question: Are you a Culinary Anthropologist or a Food Anthropologist? How would you describe what you do?

Katherine: Oh, I love this question mainly because whatever I am, I'm self-styled. [*Alie and Katherine laugh*] I get to make it up on my own. I go with Food Anthropologist because

I have a big thing about not being fancy for no reason, and culinary is a little bit of a fancy word.

Alie: It's a little over the top. So, tell me a little bit about your background with food, because I've known you for a long time. You are so knowledgeable. I ask you all the time: where should I go eat, what is this food? Where did this start with you?

Katherine: I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be a person who told other people where to spend their money. [*Alie laughs*] [*cash register sound*] I always knew that was very important to me. So as a little kid, actually, my grandma got me a subscription to *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine.

Alie: Are you kidding me?

Katherine: Yeah, I was a subscriber to that starting when I was, like, eight years old. I don't know what to tell ya.

Alie: [*laughs*] That's amazing.

Katherine: Yeah, and she had been a travel agent; that was my dad's mom. And my mom's parents are extremely fancy people and they started taking me to Europe when I was, like, 12 years old.

Alie: Damn! Were they in the mob? [*Katherine snickers then she and Alie laugh*] I'm just going to leave that. [*Katherine laughs*] So, you got a taste for luxury at a young age. Does that fuck with your mind forever?

Katherine: Oh, absolutely.

Alie: Okay.

Aside: Katherine says that, essentially, part of being part of her grandparents' entourage was an extremely privileged way to see the world, but it also helped her to learn early on that just because something is expensive, or touted as good, it doesn't mean that it really is.

Also, we don't always stay in the same socioeconomic bracket that we're raised in. People who grow up "comfortable," shall we say, don't always lead that life as adults.

Alie: Now, in terms of your career, have you been able to, obviously, maintain that level of luxury? No? At what point did you come down from that fiscal high?

Katherine: I'm a journalist. I make \$4 a year. So, that's actually a big part of the conversation around lifestyle journalism and food journalism. It's like, "All these people out here, they're just doing it to get free stuff." It's like, "Well, we don't get paid for anything," which is why you've got this issue of people who are like, "I'm a food writer because my spouse is a doctor," or what have you. So, it's a really limited group of people who can be food writers and that is a big part of why I am changing direction in terms of not just trying to write for a publication anymore; because that doesn't pay the bills and I'm 36 years old and I'm as broke as I've ever been and it's ridiculous.

Aside: When Katherine and I worked together at the *LA Times*, they charged us for parking and for coffee. The coffee was not free. Even the creamers cost 15 cents each. And then our budget got slashed and they discontinued our water cooler. So, we had to bring gallons of water to work to keep under our desks in case we got thirsty. One day, our old boss asked me if she could have a glass of water and I was like, "Oh! The person who stopped giving us water would like some water, hmm?" Anyway, journalism. It's

very less glitzy in real life, kids.

Alie: What did you study in college?

Katherine: Religious Studies.

Alie: Really? Why?

Katherine: Well, I'll tell you why. It's because I started interning at the *Seattle Times* when I was in high school and there was one woman in particular, an editor, who was like, "Just don't major in journalism because then you'll know how to write a cover story but you won't know anything about the world." And I thought that was such an interesting point and I think I still do.

Aside: Katherine applied to UC Santa Barbara figuring she wanted to major in history.

Katherine: But they had Religious Studies and I was like, "That seems like history, but like, more specific." So I checked the box, I got in, and then I found out that it was, like, the best Religious Studies program in the country. And I was like, "Well, I'll be danged!"
[*Katherine and Alie laugh*]

Alie: "Hot damn! How'd I land here?!"

Katherine: Yeah, exactly! [*laughs*] So, that worked out really well, and I actually think it fits in perfectly with knowing about food because any time you're talking about culture and history, smashing them together, people eat [*slowed down, deep*] a lot.

Alie: Just yesterday I found myself eating a thing! Well, we all eat, clearly. But not all of us necessarily have a palate or the ability to describe it or the interest to go research it. At what point did you realize, "Okay, Religious Studies major, but I think journalism is more my thing, specifically food."?

Katherine: Well, I think it actually started with wanting to be a travel writer, but for me the coolest thing about traveling is eating. [*laughs*] So I was like, "Well okay, food." I don't remember when I became aware of the fact that you could learn about culture by learning about food. One thing I can think of is, a year or two after I moved to Los Angeles, after college... This would've been like, 2005. This was the era when Hollywood had gotten "cool" again and we were clubbing, and Paris Hilton was a thing, and it was all very flashy. [*Paris Hilton, "That's hot."*]

Alie: You're talking to someone that went weekly to a Steve Aoki DJ night. You need not remind me.

Katherine: [*laughs*] Yeah, I'm so sorry. That was a weird time.

Alie: It was.

Katherine: But all the restaurants were opening in Hollywood on Hollywood Boulevard, and all the servers were wearing tube tops, and they were serving finger-foody type stuff, and everyone was serving popcorn shrimp.

Alie: Really?

Katherine: Yeah, they weren't calling it that. They were calling it fried rock shrimp. It's friggin' popcorn shrimp! And I remember specifically being like, "I'm seeing so many restaurants do this. They'll call themselves different things and say that they have a different style of food, but they're all serving ding-dang popcorn shrimp. What is that?"

And I think I was like, “Oh, you can figure out a culture by just looking at menus.” And honestly, one of my favorite activities just in my own personal time is just looking at old menus. Both the Los Angeles Public Library and the New York Public Library, and I’m sure others, are doing a really good job of cataloging old menus.

Alie: Holy shit! How old are we talking?

Katherine: Back to the 1800s.

Alie: No! What did they eat back then?! Was it all mutton?

Katherine: So much turtle soup. Just left and right turtle soup.

Alie: No! Where did they get all these goddamn turtles?

Katherine: Well, we don’t know anymore because they ate them all, so they don’t exist. *[laughs]*

Alie: What is a turtle soup? Is it actually a turtle soup or is it, like, a mincemeat pie that’s actually made out of something else?

Katherine: Real-ass turtle.

Alie: Really? I wonder what that tastes like. I wonder when we stopped eating it.

Katherine: I honestly think it was when we killed them all. People used to eat beaver tail. You can’t do that anymore because there just aren’t enough to eat.

Alie: Oh my god.

Aside: I looked this up and turtles, holy shit, I am so sorry. In the Southern United States and then, oddly, in Philadelphia, this was very a popular food. It’s dark brown, it contains friggin’ turtles, and it’s said to taste a lot like gravy, which is how I imagine all food tasted 100 years ago. I just feel like everything was gravy. So, turtle soup was made usually from snapping turtles, and according to one 1881 recipe I just gagged and cried through, it recommends:

[old time snobbery voice] Procure a fine, lively, fat turtle, weighing about 120 pounds, as their fat is not liable to be impregnated with that disagreeable, strong flavor objected to in fish of larger size.

First off, a turtle is a not a fish, old dead person! Also, taking breeding adults out of the population led to them being in peril, so in many parts of the country, this sad, endangered gravy bowl is illegal.

On the topic of researching, Katherine served up a steaming hot tip that when you Wikipedia something, just go straight to the cited articles. They’re juicer and the citations are there for a reason. She also relies on academic papers for her research, even if she has to sometimes pay for access, which sucks, or beg a grad student friend to get the info from behind a paywall. Like, “Hey! Psst... hey, can you score me a PDF dude? C’mon, man!”

Alie: What are you looking for when you are researching an episode or writing an article? Are you looking for basics? Are you looking for the derivation of a dish, where it went? What’s your jam when you’re looking something up?

Katherine: I think it depends on the audience. The way I do *Smart Mouth*, the podcast, is that as often as I can I’ll ask a person to tell me ahead of time, I’ll be like, “Just hit me with some of your favorite foods, just whatever is at the top of your head.” And then I read

through them and either I know off the bat or I research which one's gonna have the most interesting backstory. Sometimes people are too general, people have said things like...

Alie: "Anything fried!"

Katherine: Yeah, exactly. *[laughs]* If you actually get a little bit more specific and you say something like enchiladas, then we can go into why those are rolled in a casserole pan and why they have sauce on them. Tex-Mex is fascinating because I didn't know that a bunch of German Jews had moved to Texas in the 1800s. *[laughs]*

Alie: Really?

Katherine: Yeah.

Aside: I went down a very deep hole looking up flour tortillas versus corn tortillas and their history. Anyway, Tex-Mex... it's a fusion.

Katherine: And the reason why it uses a lot of packaged food was because of the railroad expansion into Texas.

Alie: *[soft, high pitched]* Whaaaaaat? I just got actual goose bumps being like, "Oh my god, every food has some crazy backstory."

Katherine: Exactly.

Alie: Like a character on a soap opera. Dun, dun, dun... *[soap opera organ and a gasp]* Now, let's talk about feasts. And also seasonal food trends because, I mean, we eat differently in the springtime, in the winter, in the summer. Let's talk about winter feasts. Do you love them? Do you hate them? Are you over them? Do you anticipate them?

Katherine: I love them in the abstract. I live in Los Angeles where there is no such thing as seasons anymore.

Alie: Right, or eating.

Katherine: *[laughs]* Yeah, right. It's stupid to be like, "Oooh! I can't wait to fill up on these mashed potatoes," because it's 67 degrees out. Come on!

Alie: Why do you think, from an anthropological point of view, we just want to hunker down and just get a little roly-poly and have insulin comas in the winter?

Katherine: Because we need the warmth and the calories, and also, it's boring because it's dark out.

Alie: Okay. *[Alie and Katherine laugh]* *[nasal voice]* "I'm bored! Let's eat!"

Katherine: Yeah, exactly. You want to eat and also you don't mind sleeping more. We are bears, essentially, we follow the bear lifestyle. *[laughs]*

Alie: I mean, in the wild, our lipid stores are our bank accounts.

Katherine: Yes! Yeah!

Alie: I feel like when you see a ba-donk-a-donk bear, that bear is wealthy with fats. Which, I suppose, in the winter we do need that. When it comes to feasting in the winter, what was it like historically in any part of the world you can think of? Did we eat things we put in the root cellar in the summer or did we just find what was available? Where was the food coming from?

Katherine: So, your point about lipids being wealth actually applies to humanity too. And in whatever this age is that we're living in now, and everyone's supposed to be skinny, we're all messed up.

Aside: So, historically, being 'plump as a partridge' was a compliment in America until about the 1840s when this Presbyterian minister/diet guru named Sylvester said that moral women should follow a plain, abstinent diet devoid of spices and indulgences, lest it lead to civil disorder, aka being able to kick the ass of the patriarchy, is what I'm assuming.

This man, Sylvester Graham, advocated for eating vegetables and his special biscuits, which was the start of the graham cracker industry. I hope he is watching from a cosmic afterlife pod as little girls learn to start their own fires, roast marshmallows on them, and then squash them between his health food, licking indulgences off of charred, sharpened sticks and forming bonds that will topple their oppressors.

Also, it's good to note that despite America's appreciation of food, hunger is still a big fucking issue. And 1 in 6 Americans are what are called "food insecure," meaning that hunger is an issue.

So, I looked this up and Action Against Hunger USA is rated pretty high on CharityWatch.org, in case you're looking to make a donation, or you can always get involved in your community, or help out a family that might need it; invite some folks to your feasts this season. And if you're having a big meal with family and friends, even if your relatives are telling you the same stories that you've heard for years, just take a sec to appreciate that you can all dine together, that you have the resources to even eat. Biologically, that's a very, very lucky thing.

Katherine: If you're having a feast in the winter, that means you can afford sugar and salt. You are out-of-control wealthy. *[laughs]* There's different kinds of feasting, and we like to think of feasting as being, like, celebrations, and "We're all in this together and we're all celebrating and we're all having a good time." But humans being what they are, historically, a lot of feasts are an opportunity to show off, basically to stunt on your neighbors.

Alie: No! *[clip from The Real Housewives: Carole, "Is she coming? Is she coming?" Tinsley, "Honestly, I hope she comes. She better come! I tried to like, give her a nice party..."]*

Katherine: And part of it could be as simple... depending on the era that you're in and the place that you live, sometimes it is as simple as being like, "Oh, I'm sorry you hadn't seen this fruit in six months? Yeah, I've got it. Whatever. Yeah, it's preserved, but I've still got it and you don't!" Because it means, again, you have the ingredients to do it. You have the time when you're not out just trying to do subsistence farming to preserve things for later. You have time to plan ahead. Being able to plan ahead is also another rich person thing. Still, to this day.

Alie: So, did peasants not have winter feasts?

Katherine: Harder to. Part of the mixture of like, celebration and stunting on people is that lots of times, the lord of the manor would throw a feast for the serfs, and that was partly to be like "Thank you!" but also to be like, "See how great I am to you? Don't defect to another farm because I've got the best feasts in town."

Alie: My god, that's like the epitome of "weird flex, but okay."

Katherine: *[laughs]* Yes! Totally.

Alie: I was hoping, going into this, it'd be like, "Feasts: It's a time we all love each other," but it's really like, "Feasts: It's a time when you roar your Lamborghini past a bunch of people waiting to get into a club."

Katherine: *[laughs]* I mean, I think it probably really depends on your view of human nature. *[laughs]* And where I'm coming from is, "everyone's an asshole."

Aside: So, this is really a matter of if your goblet of mulled wine – or I guess if you're sitting at the kids' table, your juice glass of flat Martinelli's cider – is half empty or half full.

Katherine: No, but sometimes people are nice to each other, especially with religious feasts. It's interesting that the oldest evidence of feasts that we have actually comes from art rather than archeology.

Alie: Oh, because I guess... It's not like, chicken bones in a casserole dish wouldn't preserve, I guess?

Katherine: *[laughs]* Yeah, that could well be it. Feasts often come from offerings to the gods as well. It's like a party but also an offering. So they have basically, like, pottery shards from ancient China and Sumeria, which is Iraq now. One through-line that you'll see in them is alcohol. And I actually think this is part of stunting too – maybe not stunting to the god – but being like, "Yo, we spent months on this. It was taking up space for months and we're giving it to you." Because anything that's fermented is like, a thing that we had to at least have in the back of our minds.

Alie: It's kind of like how people are like, "Oh, my tablescape is impeccable!" And you're like, "Well congratulations that you didn't have to work overtime to afford health insurance, but you have time to tablescape? *[Katherine laughs]* That's great. Because I have two jobs."

Katherine: Yes! I mean, it's just like... People talk about Instagram, and how people are 'Doing it for the 'gram' and we kind of always have been. It's just that now there's just this one app that we can blame.

Alie: Or Pinterest. We can blame Pinterest.

Katherine: Okay. Yeah, yeah, I like that too.

Alie: But what is it about American feasting? Because I feel like in today's day and age, the holidays mean a lot of gatherings. You know, there's the office holiday party. There's the one with your relatives. When did we start that tradition?

Katherine: Well, I think that one thing that is at least semi-unique about American culture is how self-punishing we are. *[Katherine and Alie laugh]* Whereas, for instance, Nepal and areas around there, they party a lot. Like, "Here's a feast day, here's a celebration, let's do it. Don't go to school today. We're celebrating this thing that happened, or this god, or whatever." And Catholicism, feast days, they were pretty common but sort of fell out of favor. I would argue that at least in America, part of not celebrating every Saint's feast day, well, it's because our cultural background is Protestant, which was a reaction against Catholicism. Catholics were always thought of just like, "Maybe you could tone it down with the partying, maybe get a job."

Alie: Really?

Katherine: Yes. It was too celebratory. There was too much richness in the food and the clothes and the Pope.

Aside: The notion that the Pope is a flashy ne'er-do-well, like someone's drunk cousin who wears Prada but lives off credit cards, is one that will never leave me.

Katherine: Protestantism was partly a reaction to Catholicism and how decadent it was. This was like, "Hey, we got to tighten up on these feast days." So, you come over to America and not only were the first European colonizers... They were going back to subsistence living. They had to figure out how to farm new foods and live with this new climate and all this kind of stuff. So, between that and also being like, "Stop partying," I think that on the rare occasion that we let ourselves live it up a little, we *really* go for it.

Alie: Oh my god! Wait, this is making so much sense because Americans take the least vacation days. We're the most obsessed with wealth and McMansions, I feel like, but not actually living our lives when we're alive.

Katherine: Yeah, yeah, we do that! *[laughs]*

Alie: Oh my god. Okay. So, what's the history of American holiday season feasting?

Katherine: So... Where to even start with this one... First, prefacing by the fact that we are talking about Northwestern European traditions coming over to America and starting in New England and spreading out from there.

So, when the Pilgrims came and landed at Plymouth Rock... *[laughs]* Racism is so interesting because the American public school system is inherently white supremacist, but they also invented the lie that Native Americans and Pilgrims came together to celebrate the first Thanksgiving. That's probably a lot to unpack.

Aside: It is a lot to unpack and I wanted to do a little digging here. Now, first off, thank you to everyone on Native Twitter, everyone using that hashtag, for stepping in when I asked your thoughts about Thanksgiving. And specifically, to the amazing poet, writer, and designer Kenzie Allen – and I'll link her Twitter in the show notes – she's of Oneida heritage in Wisconsin, and she sent me her thoughts and she also pointed me toward some really good resources on this.

One publication, *Indian Country Today*, had a great article and interview from a few years back with Ramona Peters. She's the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Officer. She said, in regard to the famed 1621 Inaugural Thanksgiving feast:

It was made up. It was Abraham Lincoln who used the theme of Pilgrims and Indians eating happily together because he was trying to calm things down during the Civil War when people were divided. It was like a nice unity story for public relations. It's kind of genius, in a way, to get people to sit down and eat dinner together, because families were divided during the Civil War.

Ramona Peters continues:

You've probably heard the story of how Squanto assisted in their planting of corn? So, this was their first successful harvest and they were celebrating that harvest and planning a day of their own Thanksgiving. And it's kind of like what some nations do when they celebrate by shooting guns in the air. So, this is what was going on over there at Plymouth. They were shooting guns and cannons as a celebration, which

alerted us (she's meaning the Wampanoag tribe) because we didn't know who they were shooting at. So, Massasoit gathered up some 90 warriors and showed up at Plymouth prepared to engage, if that was what was happening, if they were taking any of our people. It was a fact-finding mission.

So, that is how, she said, the first Thanksgiving started. Of course, we have spun it into a tidier narrative of Pilgrims and Native Americans getting along, but it was not quite that sweet. In this article Ramona Peters was asked if she'll celebrate Thanksgiving anyway and she said:

As a concept, a heartfelt Thanksgiving is very important to me as a person. It's important that we give thanks. For me, it's a state of being. You want to live in a state of thanksgiving, meaning that you use the creativity that the Creator gave you. You use your talents. You find out what those are, and you cultivate them and that gives thanks in action.

So, that was a great article in *Indian Country Today*, and there are other wonderful first-person experiences. Smithsonian's AmericanIndian.si.edu has some great articles as well. So, thank you to my new Twitter friend Kenzie Allen for those. I asked her if she'll celebrate and she said:

For me, Thanksgiving can be a day to love and honor family and to remind myself of the Creator's gifts. For others, it still represents a painful warping of our histories. It's important for each of us to start doing the work of unlearning harmful and biased narratives and to appreciate the resilience and strength of Native peoples surviving hundreds of years of genocide.

So, you may not be celebrating traditional American Thanksgiving. Perhaps you don't live in the United States. Perhaps it's not a holiday that you celebrate. But in general, especially during the cold winter months, appreciating your family and your life: not a bad idea. But getting back to the food history:

Katherine: I think the way that we've been able to wiggle in the lie that Native Americans were there is that most of the foods at this feast would've been foods that were familiar to Europeans except for corn. And they did have corn, but it was something... It was like the only thing that when Europeans showed up, they were like, "What the fuck is this? [Alie laughs] And what does one do with it?" And they had to be taught by the locals. Actually, the first Thanksgiving was nothing like the Thanksgivings that we have now except for that...

Aside: Ooooh, this is gonna be big! What stayed the same? [drumroll]

Katherine: ... it did have squashes.

Aside: Oh, okay. Squashes.

Alie: What else was on ye old menu?

Katherine: So much meat. Basically, any kind of meat you could get, which was turkey – wild turkeys, which don't look like the turkeys that we eat now, but it is the same animal. And then, venison and seafood! Actually, even to this day, seafood is a bigger part of the New England Thanksgiving menu than it is anywhere else in the country.

Alie: What? They get seafood?

Katherine: Yeah. Oysters and mussels are a big part of it.

Alie: Really? What are they doing with them?

Katherine: Sometimes just eating them like normal people, but sometimes... ugh, oyster stuffing.
[splat]

Alie: A quick barf break for Katherine Spiers. [Katherine laughs] You're not a fan of oyster stuffing?

Katherine: I will admit I've never had it. It's one of those things that I'm like, "I am good. Thank you." [laughs]

Alie: Hard pass. Is it oysters in the stuffing? Is that the whole deal?

Katherine: Yeah.

Alie: That sounds kinda good!

Katherine: Well, okay. You are a big ol' seafood person.

Alie: Yeah. [clip from *Islands in the Stream: Thomas Hudson, "I love the sea and would not be anywhere else. She's is my home, my religion."*] You could say I'm randy for oysters. I talked to the Oceanologist who said they clean the water and you can find good farmed ones, and I was like, "Killer. It's on." I don't mind that, but... You're saying the first Thanksgivings: more meat, deer, turkeys, oysters, mussels...

Katherine: And all the other poultries they could find. Whichever ones they could find and shoot before they flew away. They were like, "Yes, let's do some of this." And I think you can sort of see how things change for people in the changing Thanksgiving menu because for one thing, again, they didn't have a lot of herbs and spices back then because those were wildly expensive. They hadn't figured out how to use the new ones. They hadn't figured out how to grow the ones they brought from Europe.

Roasted flesh just tastes good on its own. You don't have to do a lot with it the way that you do have to do with side dishes that need a lot of different ingredients. And again, it's survival food. They had an abundance of meat, which is rare, but they weren't like, coming up with new recipes.

Alie: Right. They were like, "It's not alive! It's not wiggling. Let's eat it!"

Katherine: Exactly. The idea of having flavored food: I think as Northern Europeans started traveling the globe, they were like, "What in the hell?! This tastes good! Taste? Is that even a word?" [laughs]

Alie: So sad. They're like, "More boiled potatoes?"

Aside: Potatoes, by the by, are not Irish by any means. They're from South America originally and then the Spanish were like, "Oh, heck! These are delish," brought 'em to Europe, all of Europe was on board. Then, Europeans brought them back to North America so that they could eventually evolve into frozen tater tots that we pour from a bag into a vat of boiling oil. Which I love and will dip into really anything. Like, including a ramekin of paint. It's still good.

Alie: And now when did, let's say, the Thanksgiving feast become a widespread American phenomenon and what's changed just in the last, at least, decade of us getting hip to the fact that it's all apocryphal?

Katherine: Okay. So, Thanksgiving, for a long time, was really only celebrated in New England. Basically, the people whose grandparents were there.

Alie: Oh my god. It's like Woodstock or something. Jesus.

Katherine: *[laughs]* Exactly. I really think it was until around probably just after the Civil War that the rest of the country got into the idea. You can still, to this day, see regional differences in what people consider necessary for Thanksgiving dinner.

Alie: Oh my god. Is this going to be all about green bean casserole?

Katherine: It's largely about green bean casserole. *[laughs]*

Alie: Where does that come from? Who did that?

Katherine: Okay. There's so many different ways to talk about Thanksgiving. There's a very specific woman who invented green bean casserole. Did you know she actually passed away a couple of weeks ago?

Alie: Oh nooooo!

Katherine: Yeah! She was in the news! But she actually contributed soooo much to American culinary culture and culture at large.

Aside: Her name: Dorcas Reilly. And she died just a few weeks ago, you guys, in late October of 2018, at the age of 92. She created so many recipes for Campbell's Soup. I read that apparently she said she didn't even remember making this one up.

Campbell's estimates that 40% of all cream of mushroom soup that they sell is used to make green bean casserole. I myself have never had it, I'll be honest. I've only seen it in the wild, like, once or twice, and like a wild animal it scares me. It seems to be a dish consisting of withered beans, bonded by whale jizz and then topped with fried worms. I don't understand it. I sincerely apologize if I just ruined your life. You should know that I was scared of canned oysters for many decades and now I eat them over the sink like someone who's running from the law. So don't trust my opinions.

Katherine: There was a phenomenon that started around 1900 and lasted probably until the '80s, and that is: food companies, the ones that sell packaged food, processed food, writing their own recipes in-house and sending them out both as recipe booklets, but also sending them to newspapers to be published in the newspapers. And the recipes could be good, bad, indifferent, but it was mainly about selling the products that these companies made. So green bean casserole was invented by this food scientist who worked for a food company as a way to use cream of mushroom soup. *[clip from Bishop Bullwinkle song: "Hell naw!"]*

Alie: Wow!

Katherine: Yeah. And I think... People always talk about the cream of mushroom soup, but the packaged fried onions, that you buy from the can? It must have been a way to sell those as well because I don't know what else those are used for.

Alie: I've never heard of another use other than like, packing peanuts? *[Katherine laughs]* Like, attic insulation? Have you ever had green bean casserole?

Katherine: I've tried it but, this is actually one of the things that speaks to regionalism in America. Green bean casserole was invented for Campbell's, the soup company, and they're not located in the South, but it is a dish that took off more in the South. I grew up in Seattle, so my experience with Thanksgiving is very different than someone who grew up in, like, Georgia or something. The dishes are different.

Alie: What are some other dishes that are pretty regional? Are some people like, “We’re a canned, smooth cranberry sauce state,” and others are like, chunky, and others are like, “We make it on the stove,”?

Katherine: That one, I think, isn’t regional necessarily.

Aside: Cranberries, side note, are native to the Northeast United States. They get their name because the plants look like cranes. They were originally called craneberries, y’all!

PS: they don’t grow in a bog. I just found that out. They grow on vines on the ground and then the field is flooded to form a bog, just so the berries float and can be harvested. So most of the time, they’re not in a bog. Apparently, Ocean Spray is like, “We know, we know, our commercials confuse people.”

Now according to Smithsonian, Americans eat over 5 million gallons of cranberry sauce just during the holiday season. Now, this started being sold in 1914 thanks to a former lawyer who bought a bog and made a business out of it. He’s like, “Kids! We bought a bog.” His name? Marcus Urann. I mean, it’s uncanny. It’s *uncranny*, you guys. At the time, he probably didn’t realize just how many *uranny* tract infections he would help. But that’s like a whole ‘nother ology.

Katherine: What is regional is sweet potato casserole. That’s another Southern one. That is another company-created recipe. It was a marshmallow company, I think it was called Angelus, and they hired a woman who wrote a cooking magazine in the 1920s to find out how to convince people to use marshmallows more. That was one of her inventions.

Alie: Did feasting like this really take off – you said after the Civil War – but, after the turn of the century, 1900s, industrial era? When did we see an explosion in this kind of eating?

Katherine: So it wasn’t until the 1930s that petitions to make it a national holiday really picked up.

Alie: Oh! Oh!! Okay. They’re like, “Let’s close these banks! Let’s eat some goddamn potatoes!”

Katherine: Exactly! It had just been a New England thing and then the rest of the country kind of caught on, and more people wanted to do it and make it an all-day thing. It was Franklin Roosevelt who had to make the decision of which day to place it.

Alie: How did they decide?

Katherine: It was such a huge fight. [*boxing bell*] And one year, there were two Thanksgivings.

Alie: [*whispered*] Stop it!

Katherine: Yeah, because they couldn’t decide. Roosevelt had said fourth Thursday in November, and then the Republican majority Congress got together with the Business Leaders Association of America, or whatever it was, and they’re like, “No, make it the third one,” because they wanted people to be able to shop for Christmas and feel okay about it for longer.

Alie: Really??

Katherine: Yeah. So there was one year where it hadn’t been voted on yet, so there were two. I don’t know how people figured out which one to do or if it was just total chaos, but then Roosevelt’s idea eventually won out. But in the 1930s, there was a lot of madness around where to place Thanksgiving. [*clip from Gary Jules song Mad World: “When people run in circles it’s a very, very mad world.”*]

Aside: Thanksgiving, being a little bitch since 1621.

Alie: Well, I imagine, given your passion for food, and food writing, and food culture, and food history, the idea of an autumnal feast and a gathering is something to look forward to, but how do you think we should be celebrating it?

Katherine: Well, one thing that I think is really great is, since America is a melting pot of people, people from all over the world adding their twists to it. Chinese Americans will often do barbecued pork instead of turkey, for instance. Or Thanksgiving food having nothing to do with the traditional feast, but for people, wherever they came from in the world, wherever their ancestors came from being like, “Oh, this is a feast day. We’re going to cook our favorite food or our traditional food from the country where our great-grandparents were born,” or whatever. And I think that that actually is so much more meaningful.

Alie: So maybe letting Thanksgiving and letting the feast holidays morph from our traditions, which aren’t even really that traditional, they’re less than a hundred years old, so like, come the fuck on. There are bottles of wine that are older than our Thanksgiving traditions. But letting it still be about gathering... How do you feel about the gratitude aspect of the Thanksgiving holiday? Did your family sit around and be like, “What are we grateful for?” or was your family like, “Pass the Jell-O, watch the game. Don’t talk to me about feelings.”

Katherine: Man. So, I think my family has a strong distrust of earnestness. [*Alie laughs*] So the *idea* of people saying what they’re grateful for and meaning it and doing it in front of other people? Oh god, no, thank you. [*laughs*]

Alie: [*laughing*] Your face is just like the disgust emoji. Just like the “Oh god, no!”

My family too, you know, once or twice I think I’ve been to other people’s Thanksgivings and like, they’ll sit around and be like, “I’m grateful for this and that.” My family is really funny and amazing and wonderful, but that’s not our vibe. And I always felt like, “Well shit, if we’re gonna eat this much butter, we should also get some therapy out of it.” [*Katherine laughs*] I don’t know where... I don’t know what the divide is. Maybe it’s not a West Coast thing. Maybe it’s a New England thing?

Katherine: Oh my god, maybe.

Alie: I have no idea.

Katherine: I feel like I’ve been witness to it a few times and that’s why I know how uncomfortable I am with it. I mean, it’s the kind of thing I can guess I would not be into, but to be there when it happens... And also, it is therapy for some people, but for other people like me, I feel like it’s torture. Like, “What are you grateful for?” “Oh my god, um... rainbows! Next please! [*Alie laughs*] Don’t make me do this! We’re not having a moment!”

Alie: But what if... Okay, I did a short episode called Grateful-ology is Not a Word, last year I put it out. It was just a quick one, but it was about an institute at UC Berkeley that studies gratitude and what effects that has from a neurobiological level. And it was like, “Yeah, it does help.” I was like, “Fuck!” We know from Oprah that we all should have gratitude journals.

Aside: Stay tuned for next week’s episode about gratitude. There’s science behind it, okay? And also, I’m grateful for you. I really am.

Alie: What's been your favorite feast that you've ever attended?

Katherine: Maybe not every year, but most years for the past 10 years I've been going to a Friendsgiving.

Alie: Oh, I was going to ask about this! Who coined that? Which sitcom coined it?

Katherine: I know, right?

Alie: Was it a *Will & Grace* term? Where did it come from?

Katherine: It seems like it would be. It's kind of flip and funny, but also people know what it means instantly...

Aside: No one fully agrees on the first use of the word, but it's rumored to derive from the American sitcom *Friends* [*Friends theme*], although it was never uttered on the show itself. Now, the first written forms popped up on Twitter around 2005 and then in 2011, Bailey's Irish Cream may have made it pandemic. They were encouraging 20-somethings to toast Friendsgiving and then hashtag it. Also, my spellcheck didn't even bother to red-underline it, so Friendsgiving is officially a word. It's woven into the fabric of our holiday vocabulary and we all love it. [*clip from Friends: Monica, "You said you love me, I can't believe this!"*]

Katherine: ... even if they've never heard it before and... You know, nothing is ever in a vacuum. It's absolutely because people move to different cities now. People used to have holidays with their biological families instead of their families of choice, which is another term that you hear so much more now just because people move a lot more and much further distances. So, I think it's cool to hang out with people that you're hanging out with on purpose. [*clip from The Simpsons: Ralph, "You choo...choo... choose me?"*]

Yeah, exactly! But the other fun thing about a Friendsgiving is that you get to sample dishes from Thanksgivings around the country because you've got people from all over the country. So, for instance: corn pudding. I had never had that before.

Alie: Never heard of it.

Katherine: Oh! It is my favorite thing. It's so good!

Alie: Is it a corn bread but with more milk?

Katherine: Basically yeah. It's kind of in between cornbread and a soufflé. It's so good. It's the definition of comfort food because it's starch based, it's sugary, and it's salty. It's perfection.

Alie: So it hits every dopamine receptor you've got.

Katherine: Yeah. [*laughs*] Your eyes start twitching when you eat it for sure.

Alie: If only it were just in the shape of a dick. [*Katherine laughs*] You're like, "Every dopamine receptor is firing right now!" Is there a holiday dish that if someone brings it to a potluck, you're like, "Get out! Why did you do that?"

Katherine: Okay, well, there's different reasons for saying, "Get out," right? Here's the thing that's the most contentious item that you could put on a Thanksgiving table...

Alie: I'm all ears.

Katherine: ... Salad.

Alie: Really???

Katherine: People have *OPINIONS* about salad at Thanksgiving. [*clip from R.E.M. song: "It's the end of the world as we know it..."*] I will clarify that I'm talking about green salad, a leaf-based salad.

Alie: Okay. Like a spring mix with a balsamic?

Katherine: [*laughs*] Yes! Exactly! And it's one of those things that's sort of like... Because American culture, when we party, we go for it. We're like, "Fuck your salad," because we associate it with health. Honestly, you could put out an entire roast pig, but if the base is lettuces, you're like, "It's healthy! Get out of here!"

Alie: We're like, "This is the season we are supposed to be getting robust."

Katherine: Yeah, exactly.

Alie: Like, "Save that for Coachella season."

Katherine: Yes. I also think it's not a special dish, and there's so many dishes that we only eat on Thanksgiving and so we want to fill the table. I mean basically... God, last year, at Thanksgiving, I took a picture which to me is the funniest picture ever. It was the spread of food; everything was in a casserole dish and everything was beige, [*Alie laughs*] and I was like, "U-S-A! U-S-A!!" [*laughs*]

Alie: Just starch. Just baked starch.

Katherine: Yes. And that's a difference too. The way that Thanksgiving has evolved is that it used to be that eating meat was the fancy thing. But as America became more industrialized and wealthier, you see the addition of ingredients, like *every* dairy product. That's something that only rich people can do.

Alie: I never thought of it that way.

Katherine: Yeah. So you move away from meat being the special dish to all the things that, like, take time and energy, or you have to buy, that you can't make yourself, being the star of the show. Like for instance, mashed potatoes, which are my favorite thing ever, and I only eat them on Thanksgiving. I think it's one of those things where if I allowed myself to just eat mashed potatoes, it would be the *only* thing and I would get gout, like, within two days. [*Alie and Katherine laugh*]

Alie: I ate them the day before yesterday. I eat them at every opportunity I can. If there were a vending machine in the airport that just spouted out mashed potatoes with like, no vessel, I would just get it in my hands.

Katherine: Do you cook them yourself or do you sample restaurant mashed potatoes?

Alie: Thank you for asking. When I was in college, I used to just get the powdered flakes.

Katherine: Oh, Alie!

Alie: I don't care. I'll fuck with anything, man. I'll throw some sour cream in there. I don't care. I'll put some margarine in. But when I'm at a restaurant, if mashed potatoes come with whatever entrée, I will get that entrée no matter what else is on the plate.

Katherine: That is hilarious. I feel like I have a similar ordering method.

Alie: It's so good.

Katherine: That's probably because, like, I'm not a vegetarian, but the idea of a big hunk of meat oftentimes for me, I'm like, "Ugh! Yuck!"

Alie: Yeah, it's a lot.

Katherine: "What are the sides?" [*laughs*]

Alie: And then they're like, "Mashed potatoes," and you're like... it could be a Converse sneaker seared on both sides, but there's a side of mashed potatoes and I'm like, "I'll have that, sir!"

Katherine: Yes, yes.

Aside: I asked Katherine if she watches *Game of Thrones* for the FEASTS... [*clip from Game of Thrones: Benjen Stark: "You're at a feast."*] [*record scratch*] ... and she said, "Nah." But that did get us on the topic of excess.

Katherine: There've been different cultures that have been super into feasting and do it up big when they do it. But for me personally, the most disgusting, over the top, way-too-decadent-to-be-fun one is Tudor England. And that is because of one thing that I read once which has stuck with me as being like, "Nah, Nah, y'all are [*slow and low pitch*] sick fucks."

They would skin peacocks but they wouldn't take the feathers out first. They would skin it with the feathers still in so that they could cook the bird and then replace the skin with the feathers still on, so it would still be all those beautiful colors on the table.

Alie: Nooooo!

Katherine: It's disgusting! It's like super disgusting! There's something about that in particular...

Aside: So, a weird, pleasant effect of recording and editing this episode: I feel like I've barely had an appetite for meat since I started this episode. So, vegetarianism, I'm developing a stronger and stronger crush on you.

Alie: Why, when we think of cartoon feasts, do we see a pig with an apple in its mouth?

Katherine: I think for maximum upsetting-ness.

Alie: Okay. I always wondered what that was. It was always like, "Oh, this means we're feasting." You're like, "Get that thing out of there."

Katherine: Well it is that sort of like, English thing, which I think in our heads where an animal is presented whole on the table, and if we're talking about a European cultural influence, that's what we think of for fancy. But if you think about Asian food, foods that are served family style obviously lend themselves more to feasting.

Alie: That's a good point.

Katherine: Which I think might be part of the reason why so many people who don't celebrate Christmas now do Chinese food. Because you still got that same vibe and it's even more communal because everyone's sharing from the same dishes, which we tend to do on Thanksgiving. Same idea.

Alie: Because the idea of having a lazy Susan and a bunch of dishes at a round table where you can see everyone, that lends itself to not only the eating experience but also the sharing of plates.

Katherine: Absolutely.

Alie: And I feel like in Western culture we don't really have that. Which sucks.

Katherine: There's more separation.

Alie: How is it for you, as someone who's a journalist of all these different cultures, to kind of visit into them and then maybe spread their stories? Do you ever have to really figure out a way to navigate it where you're being very thorough and very respectful while also being like, "I'm a tourist in this and I'm just relaying the info"?

Katherine: It's really hard and I feel nervous all the time. I'm always worried about messing it up and disrespecting people or like, "Columbusing," which is such a great term. For anyone who doesn't know it, people started using it, I don't even think five years ago, but it spread. 'Columbusing' being when a white person goes into a community of people of color and is like, "I discovered this food!"

Alie: Oh my god. Okay. Yeah.

Katherine: I think it's such a perfect term.

Aside: Okay, a little history on this. In 2015, Brenda Salinas had an NPR piece all about this, brought the term into the mainstream. But a year or so before, *College Humor* explored the topic in a video that induces rightful cringes and brings awareness to this. [clip from *College Humor* video "Columbusing: "Oh yes, sorry. I didn't discover it, I Columbus-ed it." "You what?" "I Columbus-ed it. I discovered it for white people."]

Katherine: But I do think it's good that we're trying to be more thoughtful about these things and I'm sure that if I read articles from 10 years ago, I'd be like, "Oi yoi yoi yoi!"

Alie: I'd never heard that term, 'Columbusing', which is a great term.

Katherine: I think it's great, yeah.

Alie: Especially in the context of Thanksgiving.

Katherine: Yes, yes.

Alie: Do you have a favorite movie about or involving a feast?

Katherine: I think that mine is *Big Night*. It came out in like, 1996.

Alie: Ohhhh, I remember this.

Katherine: Stars Stanley Tucci as a guy who can cook. [clip from *Big Night: Secondo*, "Risotto is rice, so it is a starch and it doesn't go really with pasta."]

Alie: Are Italians pretty good at feasting?

Katherine: Yeah. Well, life is a feast.

Alie: It really is. I mean, I'm Italian. We used to have spaghetti in place of turkey for Christmas dinner.

Katherine: I love stuff like that. I LOVE stuff like that. And why not?! If you don't like turkey, don't kill it and waste it, you know? I shouldn't act as though Italy really is just all party all the time, but certainly speaking, generally in terms of culture, Italian culture is much more laid back than American culture is. And they're not afraid of a good time. And that's something we say as a joke, but I do think Americans are afraid of a good time.

Alie: Yeah, I think that we are too. And then we get so sad because we don't have a good time that we just kind of go off and we're lunatics a little bit. We need to just have more fun,

more consistently so that we're not like a dog that's been in a tiny apartment for three days.

Katherine: Yeah, like bachelor and bachelorette parties being these three-day bacchanals where half the people go to jail. It's like, "You know, if you just had a glass of wine with dinner for the rest of the year..." [*laughs*]

Alie: "You wouldn't need to do this, Becca! I wouldn't be bailing you out, Rachel!" [*Katherine laughs*] Oh my god. Okay. Can I ask you questions from Patrons?

Katherine: Yes!

Alie: Okay. So many questions.

Katherine: I'm excited and nervous.

Alie: I'm going to just roll through them kind of in the order received, because we got a ton. Ready? Mae Merrill wants to know: What's the first feast in recorded history?

Katherine: Oh my goodness. So, as with a lot of food things, there's no first. The idea of being like, "Let's get together and have dinner!" is totally universal. There's some of the references to it in art in China and present-day Iraq, but then archeologists are always finding evidence, especially Native American cultures in North and South America, just like, "Look at all these bones and pottery shards. Someone partied." [*DJ airhorn*]

Alie: It's like finding those Mickey's wide-mouth bottles in a park.

Katherine: That's exactly what it is.

Alie: "Oh, someone had a fun time! Good for these kids!"

Katherine: "Oooh, a condom!" [*laughs*]

Alie: [*mutters*] Do not drink Mickey's, kids. Chris Brewer wants to know: Favorite entrée besides turkey at Thanksgiving? Also, a little presumptuous, thinking that turkey is your favorite.

Katherine: Well, okay, but entrée: that's hard because I would argue... and I think I'm wrong, or I think there are some people, like Italian Americans, who will do turkey, pork, chicken, beef, but for me growing up, it was turkey and then all the sides. But I will say I much prefer sides. If someone was like, we're having a vegetarian thanksgiving, I'd be like, "Yeaahhhhh, let's do this! Dairy products, right? Yeaahhhhh!"

Alie: So entrée... you're really more of a sides chick. Sides chick! That extra 's' makes all the difference.

Katherine: Okay, what if you give yourself a double portion of mashed potatoes. That makes it an entrée, right?

Alie: Yes, it does.

Katherine: Okay, so mashed potatoes.

Alie: Okay. Double mash. Jennifer Buz, who's also an Archeologist who studies Mars – she's been on the podcast – wants to know about Roman feasts and vomitoriums: Are they really a thing – or were they – and how awesome were they?

Katherine: Okay, so this is one of those things that's too awesome, so... it's not real. Feasts were a thing, but the idea of... So a vomitorium, which first of all isn't even Latin, so that's our

first clue... [laughs]

Aside: I looked this up and she is correct. So, if over drinks at your local watering hole, someone tries to argue about this li'l slice of history, you tell them, "Nope! It was a myth!" and walk away. Because it's not worth getting into a barfight over it. A barf-ight. A *barf-ight*. Get it? Anyway...

Katherine: I mean there's just no way that everyone had the energy to be living like that. Right?

Alie: Yeah. That sounds really taxing.

Katherine: Yeah, I think so. Although it is true that the fanciest food you could possibly eat is literal shit 24 hours later. So, that's another reason where I'm like, "Everyone calm down about food." I love talking about it. I love knowing about it, studying it, but it's not that big of a deal. [laughs]

Alie: Everything will be poo.

Katherine: [laughs] Yes!

Alie: Vincent wants to know: Why do traditions vary so much from country to country about what foods are feast foods and are there any feast foods that are just seen all over the world and no matter what the local culture is?

Katherine: So, it's the issue of abundance, which is going to change based on the flora and fauna of wherever it is that you are. Starches, traditionally – well, just the plain starches, like plain rice, plain noodles – are never going to be a feast food because those are the easy things to get. It's when you start being like, "I've got this potato, but I *also* have two pounds of butter." That's what makes something a feast food. It's items that are scarce. Fruit, for instance, is considered very special. Any dairy product is considered very special. Meat used to be considered very special, but because of industrialization it's not as much anymore. So, these things will also change. As the culture changes, so do the considerations of, like what is special or fancy.

Alie: So, it's the rarity.

Katherine: Yeah. Always the rarity.

Alie: And now, Sarah wants to know: How has Instagram changed food? Is it prettier now?

Katherine: Yes, it is absolutely prettier, and restaurants, at the beginning, would pretend like they didn't care. You actually can see it. I think, for me, the place where it's more obvious is restaurant design. Restaurants have bigger windows now and they have plainer tabletops and walls with pops of color. So, they're thinking about what will be a good background.

Alie: Oh my god!

Katherine: Yeah. And then you'll also see on the plates – and in more casual places, on the piece of tissue paper that they put on the plate – will now be stamped with the logo and the name of the restaurant on it.

Alie: Oh my god! Like watermarking it!

Katherine: 1,000% watermarking it. And I remember doing a story about this for the radio, probably four years ago, and it being really hard for anyone to say yes to my thesis. But now I see articles all the time where people were like, "Well, okay. So we had to get this

designer for the restaurant who has done all these Instagram-successful restaurants.” So there’s that. And then also, I think you see it more in junk food things. You know that rainbow food trend where they were making everything pink and purple? That wouldn’t have happened without Instagram.

Alie: Yeah, no. No one’s like, “I really need a witch’s brew Frappuccino.” It’s purely just to take a picture of it. No one wants that in their body.

Katherine: No, no, absolutely not. And that’s always the thing that you hear, like charcoal ice cream, you know the black ice cream. Everyone I know who’s eaten it has been like, “Ugh, that’s disgusting!” *[laughs]*

Alie: “It looks cool.” Oh my god, the most punk rock ice cream cone. Nicole Sos wants to know: Why have so many holidays come to revolve around foods and feasts: Thanksgiving, Passover, Hanukkah, Christmas? So, in a sense, why the holidays? Is it gathering? Is it winter?

Katherine: Yeah, it’s gathering, it’s community, but it’s also, “We saved up for this,” which was a lot more obvious pre-industrialization where it’s like, “We have one pig and we’re not going to eat it until this holiday.” And now, it’s less romantic. It’s just like, “Well I have to literally save my pennies until November.” Yeah. Lots of times if you think about it too much, it’s not fun anymore. So, it’s best to keep it light and breezy. *[laughs]*

Alie: Just skim the top. Let’s not get into anything too deep.

Katherine: Yes, but it is your one or two times a year celebration where you spend all of your money and people travel because also traveling has always been a huge pain in the ass.

Alie: But yeah, it is... I mean, there’s a reason why it’s called Black Friday. Everyone makes a bunch of money – out of the red into the black. It’s just end-of-the-year consumerism. Getting them to buy macaroni before the year is over, you know. Sarah wants to know: Can it be a feast if no alcohol is served?

Katherine: Well, depends on who you ask, naturally. And I would say yes, however, because feasts are meant to celebrate abundance in all forms, alcohol is one of those forms. And that’s another reason why... not directly, but just as an anecdote, those of us who are lucky to get Thanksgiving off also get the Friday off. Offices give you Thanksgiving and the day after. And they’re not going to say it, but I mean, why would you give the day after except for to get over your hangover? Honestly. So, it is about going buck wild. That’s what feasts are. It’s like, these are my finest things that I can give you. So you give it to the gods and you also give it to the humans you’re trying to impress.

Alie: Huh! So if you don’t feel like shit the next day you didn’t do it right?

Katherine: Exactly!

Alie: Okay. So maybe if you are not a drinker, you could just eat a bunch of gluten, or if you’re lactose intolerant, just make sure you eat a ton of lactose. Just as long as you feel like garbage next day, you did it right.

Katherine: That’s it!

Alie: “I need like 10 kombuchas to counteract this!” Emu Attack wants to know: What is the strangest dish that you’ve seen at a feast. Either an ancient feast you may have studied or researched or modern day. I guess the peacock one, we got that.

Katherine: Well, turducken, too.

Alie: Oh god, that's... so extra.

Katherine: It's so very extra. But it's the same thing as the peacock thing. It's just like, "Settle down! Don't show off how you killed animals."

Alie: Yeah. Becca Decker wants to know: What are the psychological effects of sharing a meal with others versus eating alone? Is there any evidence that food strengthens social bonds, do you think?

Katherine: Yeah, it's a reason to come together. And I don't really know how to answer the first part of her question. But I do know that for the second part, people have been researching more and more in the recent years, loneliness as a social phenomenon and what that does to you. And so many studies have shown that people who self-report as lonely die younger. Yeah, it's really horrifying. Again, as soon as you start really looking into something, anything, it's depressing.

Aside: So I looked into this and one recently published study out of Korea found that eating alone is associated with metabolic syndromes like diabetes and heart disease. Apparently, when dining alone, meal timing is irregular, fewer fresh fruits and veggies turn up on the plate. Then I started reading into how families separate, and more and more people live alone in old age, and then I realized I hadn't had lunch yet and I live alone, and then I got sad. So I stopped reading! Okay!

Katherine: So if you're eating with another human... I dunno, it's not like everyone loves the people that they eat meals with, but maybe before you start throwing plates at each other, at least there's a conversation. I'm making my life sound a lot more dramatic than it is! *[laughs]*

Alie: You're just like, "Before you set fire to your tablescape and storm out..." There's always, you know like, the din of the football game is annoying, or someone says something political or you're like, "Oh, you're just going to leave your plate and I'm going to clean it up? Okay." You know what I mean? But there's always also hugs when you get in the house, usually.

Katherine: Community is so important in whichever way that you find it.

Alie: Marisa Brewer wants to know: Why do some cultures fixate on food more than others? Like in France, lunches are two hours long and food is very important, but in the US food breaks are not even taken seriously.

Katherine: So, I actually think this totally goes back to what we were talking about earlier about feast days and how Americans can't just relax. We are totally Calvinistic in our society. Even if no one even knows what that means anymore...

Aside: Here let me read the dictionary for us both. Calvinistic: marked by strong emphasis on the depravity of humankind. In other words...

Katherine: We do not believe in having a nice time. France is like, "You only have one life. Enjoy it. Eat a lunch." *[laughs]*

Alie: Yeah. *[French accent]* "Have a snail!"

Katherine: *[laughs]* Yeah! We're just a very punishing society and it's one of those things where there's so many different elements to it, as with any cultural history or cultural study.

Alie: I feel like we're really getting to the root of why America is a little fuuucked.

Katherine: No, it's absolutely because the people who founded this country, not all of them, but a lot of people who got here first were like, "Well, God sent us here to make something of ourselves, and if you don't do that, you have failed *God!*" Which is really intense.

Alie: While also doing things that are very much sins in God's eyes like killing people and stealing things.

Katherine: Eh, ya know.

Alie: Anna Thompson had a great question: I don't know if you're going to know this but, the history of potlucks.

Katherine: Well, so the term is an American Indian term.

Alie: It is?

Katherine: Well, it's potlatch... What's that word for when you take a word and then you pronounce it...

Alie: Portmanteau?

Katherine: No...

Alie: Bastardization?

Katherine: Yeah, let's just go with that! [*laughs*] I know this because I grew up in the Pacific Northwest, which is where potlatches originate. So, it's a community gathering. I mean, it's really just like any other kind of feast, but instead of the more European or East Asian tradition of people going to someone's house so that that person can be like, "Behold my riches and you may partake of them," the Native American tradition is more like, "We're coming together, we're friends."

Alie: Oh, okay. You were a Religious Studies major. Paula Herrera wants to know: Is the Last Supper considered a historical feast or just theological? Like, assuming it did actually happen, would they have eaten anything other than bread and wine?

Katherine: Oh god. This is actually so funny because I happen to know that Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, painted in the 1490s – it's really muddied now by years of existing and also bad restorations – but the food items depicted on the table in his painting of the Last Supper are oranges and eels. [*clip from the song The Little Mermaid: "Poor unfortunate souls!"*]

Alie: [*high pitched*] What the fuck? Where'd they get those eels?

Katherine: Well... the Mediterranean. It's one of those things where between when Jesus was bopping around in the 1400s Italy, I don't know how much food would have changed that much. So, they would have had oranges and eels in Jesus's time. It's one of those things where I don't know, I'm sure somebody knows, but I don't know how much Da Vinci was taking liberties.

Aside: Not sure, but I did dig up that one of the reasons the meal depicted was pescatarian could have been because Da Vinci himself was a vegetarian because he loved animals so much. Leonardo da Vinci, the first maybe-vegan influencer. I find this cute and inspiring.

Alie: Tina Rautio wants to know: Who was the first person to deep fry a whole turkey? I'm going to look into it.

Katherine: *[laughs]* I'm pretty sure that's Southern.

Aside: The story goes that in the 1930s a Cajun Chef witnessed a deep-fried turkey and was like, "Yep, that's gonna happen more. I'm gonna start that."

Katherine: Whether it was done by a famous chef or just drunk people? Because it's so dangerous! Don't undertake it lightheartedly. I'm going to say something and everyone listening is going to be like, "Yeah, duh," except for that people don't think about it. Don't do it indoors. It *has* to be done outside. And have your fire extinguisher ready. Things can go very, very wrong. Apparently, it's delicious. Clearly, that's why people keep doing it. But don't hurt yourself.

Alie: It's not worth it.

Katherine: It's not!

Alie: I did visit Ron Popeil's kitchen and did some testing of his new turkey deep fryer. He told me that he used to like turkey and now that he has tested 300 turkeys, he hates it. He takes one bite, determines whether or not it's working right, and then takes the rest of the turkey to the fire station and is like, "Ladies! Gents! Turkey!" And then he just goes back to the kitchen and keeps iterating.

Katherine: Yeah. I get that.

Alie: Todd McLaren wants to know: What are some popular vegetarian feast main dishes other than the ones that mimic meats, like tofurky? What about like, a stuffed portobello or like a...?

Katherine: Yeah, I've heard some vegetarians joke about how mushrooms are the meat for vegetarians. I think mushrooms are really delicious. I think stuffed portobello is a really good idea. Lots of times it just has to do with the seasoning that you put on tofu or tempeh that makes it delicious. The reason why tofu was used as a meat substitute was a Chinese Buddhist thing, where they would actually form the tofu into the shape of the animal and season it with the seasonings that you would use for that animal.

I feel like when you try and say like, "This is going to be a vegetarian main," you end up with abominations like lentil loaf. Whereas, why not just – to my earlier point – just have more mashed potatoes?

But actually, a lot of people include lasagna on the Thanksgiving table, which is sort of like a vegetarian option as a main dish because I think it's considered to be a little heartier than your average side dish.

Alie: Oh! So, maybe think about what your options at a wedding would be if you clicked the vegetarian.

Katherine: Yeah. Try and make it tastier, but yes. *[laughs]*

Alie: A good wedding.

Katherine: Yeah. A real expensive wedding.

Alie: Alysia Mansfield wants to know: What is the significance of the cornucopia as a centerpiece?

Katherine: *[laughs]* This is just back to showing off.

Alie: Flossing. People can't stop flossing.

Katherine: Yes. I can't remember where the shape of the cornucopia came from though. Like, why it's important.

Alie: Athena Balistreri wants to know: Is there a difference between a feast and a banquet, from a historical sense?

Katherine: Interesting!

Alie: I don't know!

Katherine: Well, I think a feast can be any gathering of people with food. A banquet, there's a candelabra. That's the difference.

Alie: *[laughs]* The only difference! "We've one candelabra, I proclaim this a banquet!" My last two questions I always ask: What is, other than food turning into poo, the shittiest thing about your job?

Katherine: People misunderstanding what it is a lot of times. I'm not a restaurant critic and that actually is a different job title because it's a different thing. I think it is actually my task to approach food in a slightly different way. And they're kind of merging together a little bit more. I think that restaurant critics do consider context a lot more than they used to. But I feel like whether or not a food item tastes good is of minimal importance. It's complicated, but it's not just going to restaurants and it's not glamorous at all. It's just like a regular job where you have to be at the computer all day. Also, people will sometimes forget manners when they're asking me things like, "Which restaurant should I go to for my engagement party?" And then they don't invite me to the engagement party. You wouldn't tell someone, "You're not invited to my thing!" Or people I haven't spoken to in three years will text me and be like, *[dude-bro voice]* "Hey, I want to take my girlfriend out for pasta." I don't give a fuck. I don't know why you're texting me about this. *[Katherine and Alie laugh]*

Alie: Oh, can you imagine if you're a car mechanic and someone's like, "Hey, I haven't seen you in a couple of years, I'm coming over. Could you do an oil change?" Like, "Are you kidding me? We went on two Tinder dates. Who are you?" *[Katherine laughs]* What do you love about your job the most? What's the best thing about being a Food Anthropologist?

Katherine: I like finding out new stuff all the time and I think it's been such a way in for me to understand more about the way that the world works, which is really cool. It's so easy for us to be kneejerk and be like, "Why did that person do that thing?" But if you know why, you can empathize a little bit more. To the point where, actually, I think I'm too empathetic. I can see other people's points of view constantly and it's exhausting. *[laughs]*

Alie: It's a good problem to have.

Katherine: It is.

Alie: Do you have any advice for anyone, as the holiday season approaches, how to make their feast times better?

Katherine: You can prep so much food that you think you can't prep. Make all your desserts ahead of time. You can even make your mashed potatoes ahead of time. All you gotta do when you reheat them is add more dairy. So, that's kind of the secret. Make things ahead of time, reheat them and add more dairy. *[laughs]*

Alie: It's a magic formula. That's just math, right?

Katherine: Yes, exactly. It's been studied. Harvard did a whole thing. *[laughs]*

Alie: I think *A Beautiful Mind* was about adding dairy, wasn't it?

Katherine: Yes, that's exactly what it was. Everyone should see that movie.

Alie: Really good film. Stephen Hawking did a whole paper about, "Just add some buttermilk."

Katherine: Yeah, exactly.

Alie: Well, thank you for being here.

Katherine: Thank you so much! This was so much fun!

Alie: If I have a Friendsgiving, you're definitely invited.

Katherine: Oh, thanks!

Alie: But not to my birthday. *[Alie and Katherine laugh]* Just kidding!

So go have a feast however big or small you see fit. Hug your loved ones, take stock of all that you have, maybe learn some true history and feed others if you can. And ask smart people stupid questions over the table because their stories are aces. Once again, Katherine Spiers. Her podcast is called *Smart Mouth*, it's truly excellent. She owns the brand-new podcast network TableCakes, so check out the array of shows she's cultivated at Tablecakes.com. She is [@KatherineSpiers](https://twitter.com/KatherineSpiers) on [Twitter](https://twitter.com), [@Katherine_Spiers](https://www.instagram.com/Katherine_Spiers) on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com).

We are @Ologies on [Twitter](https://twitter.com) and [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com). I'm [@AlieWard](https://twitter.com/AlieWard) on [both](https://www.instagram.com). Every Saturday I'm on *Innovation Nation* on CBS. I host *Did I Mention Invention?* every Saturday on the CW and I explain science on the brand-new Netflix show *Brainchild*, which is streaming now. No swearing. No whale jizz. You're welcome. Shirts and hats and pins and totes are at OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you Shannon Feltus and Boni Dutch for managing all that. Thank you, Erin Talbert and Hannah Lipow for adminning the excellent collection of humans on the Ologies Podcast [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com) group. The theme song was written and performed by Nick Thorburn. And Steven Ray "Corndog" Morris of *The Purrrcast* and *See Jurassic Right* stitches together all these edits for me each week, and I am SO grateful for that.

Each week, I tell a secret and this week my secret is that: one year, I stayed in LA and I didn't see my folks for Thanksgiving. I went to a Friendsgiving because I had to work, and these friends of friends deep-fried a turkey on their very sparse November front lawn and I think I had maybe, like, half a glass of wine. But I threw up for most of the night and I am now terrified of deep-fried turkey. I think maybe it just wasn't cooked all the way. Anyway, it was real bad. When Ron Popeil was like, "Try some!" I did it for science and because, you know, it's Ron Popeil man. Anyway, it was pretty good.

Okay. Berbye!

Transcribed by Mara Spensieri, Toronto, ON, Canada – a feast (and eel!) lover.

Some links which may be of use:

[Very Disturbing Turtle Soup Recipe](#)

[The man who doesn't want you to indulge, ladies](#)

[Action Against Hunger - USA](#)

[Interesting info regarding the Jewish immigration to Mexico](#)

[Thanksgiving Day is also a National Day of Mourning](#)

[Craneberry Sauce, if you're old school](#)

[The Godfather of bogs](#)

[Friendsgiving origins](#)

[You love a turkey head](#)

[Columbusing origins](#)

[Brenda Salinas NPR article on Columbusing](#)

[Aaaand.. the College Humor video on Columbusing](#)

[Potato history is fun](#)

[The oddly one-scene trailer for "Big Night"](#)

[Vomit myths!](#)

[Eating alone, now more depressing than ever!](#)

For comments and inquiries on this or other transcripts, please contact OlogiteEmily@gmail.com