

---

*SYLLABUS SPRING 2017*

**CSUS 463: Food Fight: Politics of Food**

Tuesday/Thursday 12:40-2:00 pm

223 Natural Resources Bldg.

---

<b>Instructor:</b>	Wynne Wright, Ph.D.
Office:	330B Natural Resources
Phone:	884-1372
E-mail:	<a href="mailto:wrightwy@anr.msu.edu">wrightwy@anr.msu.edu</a>
Office Hours:	Tuesday; Thursday 2-3:00 & by appointment

---

**Course Description**

Food has become politicized in ways we never dreamed and as our cultural perceptions of risk change, the result is often ‘food fights’. Whether it is politically conscious consumers, social movements, or policy makers, understanding political activity around food is crucial for sustainability. This class will examine both the “formal” politics and everyday forms of power, domination and resistance, as well as symbolic politics of food.

Our primary goal in this class will be to identify and analyze the ways that politics – broadly defined as the power to influence – shapes our food system. We begin with the premise that the production, distribution, retailing, and consumption of food involves power among different groups with divergent goals. Toward that end, we will focus on learning about how various groups seek to construct food as a problem and/or opportunity and how they attempt to influence what we eat. This means that even as we discuss a particular food issue as a political problem (e.g., nutrition, diet, school lunch, hunger, activism, localization, etc.) we will also work to understand how certain agrifood issues *become* political problems, in other words, we will examine *the process of politicizing*. This will explore how food problems gain our attention, and how people, policymakers, media and other institutions and social groups respond to food problems.

**Objective and Course Approach:**

The objectives in this course are to:

- 1) Understand the politics of food in the US.
- 2) Explore complex relationships between food and power
- 3) Understand how power as being used as a median to shape our consumption practices

We will rely upon a combination of methods to study food, agriculture, culture, and power in this course. I will frequently give ‘mini-lectures’ to clarify concepts and theories, but we will also rely heavily on discussion. I adhere to the school of thought that you get out of class what you put in it. Therefore I hope to design a safe and rewarding learning environment, but my primary is to help you think analytically about food politics. That includes peeling back the layers of hidden social and political relations and meanings to fully understand what we eat and why. From time to time we will have guest speakers, field trips, and participate in document analysis to help us achieve this objective. Keep in mind that your personal encounters with food (and

people) may not align with the empirical evidence that we discuss in class. Just because you(we) eat, this does not make us experts on food politics. This does not mean your insights are not valuable. Before you respond, ask yourself why a certain condition may be the case, how does your experience differ, why or what conditions might have given rise to set you and your experience apart from the empirical evidence? Openness and curiosity will help create a dynamic learning environment.

### **Required and Recommended Readings:**

All required readings are available in the following books and via a course Schoology website. A list of recommended readings will also be provided that I strongly urge you to try to read. Students should consult these readings when considering the entries for your annotated bibliography and conducting literature searches for the final class paper.

#### Required:

Nestle, Marion. 2007. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*.

Select Articles on-line via Schoology

### **COURSE EVALUATION**

Evaluation for this course will be determined on the following criteria. Each of the criteria is more fully elaborated upon below.

Activity	Value (ea) / Total Value		Date Due	Grading Scale	
Attendance/Participation	15%	15%		4.0	94-100%
Food & Meaning	5%	5%		3.5	88-93%
Food Document Analysis (2)	10%	20%		3.0	83-87%
Food Blogs (2)	10%	20%		2.5	78-82%
Food Ethnography (2)	15%	30%		2.0	73-77%
Film Analysis	10%	10%		1.5	68-72%
				1.0	60-67%
				0.0	<60%
Total =		100%			

#### **I. Attendance/Participation**

All students are expected to regularly attend class, be on time, to complete the assigned readings PRIOR to each class meeting, and to participate in class discussions. This means being prepared, mindfully engaging with the material, engaging in respectful dialogue with your peers and the instructor, sharing your thoughts/questions in class, and volunteering constructive answers/comments to others questions. Please do not use laptops during interactive class sessions (unless you are accessing an article), no cell phone usage will be permitted and no recording of class without my permission. Your attendance and engagement will make or break your experience in this course. Students who must miss class due to an excused absence must see me, with their excused absence, as early as possible. If you know you will need to miss in advance, please let me know as soon as possible. You are responsible for making up missed

work. Only unexcused absences will impede your grade. For each class missed pass three, five percent of your total grade will be deducted.

A Pedagogical Note. Please review materials on the course Schoology site. Here you will find the syllabus, some of the course readings, and miscellaneous materials developed to help you excel at the assignments. Note that there is a reading guideline sheet that will be useful in helping you learn to read critically social science scholarship. Use this handout as a tool to complete each assignment. We will review how to set up a Schoology account on day one.

## **II. Food Media: Document Analysis or Television**

Media can reveal a great deal about power. We will explore how groups come into conflict with each other through the analysis of symbolism and text in one of two forms: television or print media. You will select which path you prefer. We will begin by examining several food and farming magazines and newspaper food columns. I will bring in back copies of *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetite*, *Saveur*, *Food and Wine*, *Cooks*, and *Cooking Light*, and other agricultural magazines and we will examine the claims-making in these magazines. We will examine what the claims are, how they are made, how desire is constructed and how race, gender and social class are used to ‘sell’ these images. More detail will follow.

## **III. Food Blogs**

Students will examine food related blogs and write short papers about its contents as they speak to issues of power. Who writes it? What is the objective? How are claims framed to convince you to eat in certain ways? More details will follow.

## **IV. Food Ethnography**

Ethnography is a research method by which social scientists study the world around them. Ethnography employs “thick description” (meaning, embedded in context) to describe, analyze, and interpret some phenomena of our social world. Its purpose is to provide a coherent representation of human action, that is, to draw a conclusion through interpretation based on descriptive data the researcher has observed in the course of their investigation. Data that is collected during fieldwork gives us a window into how people generate and interpret social behavior and how they use language to share meaning. This semester you will engage in ethnographic fieldwork of some aspect of the agrifood system. You are required to complete two distinct food ethnographies by selecting to study a site where food is produced, prepared, consumed, or discussed (e.g., a farm, a farmer’s market, a local supermarket, the family dinner table, a food pantry, etc). Your task is to observe, write down your observations, and try to identify patterns of behavior in the details. You will be looking for any practices, valued objects, common language, set of values that distinguish the interaction of group participants that you are observing. After the field observations, you will write up your findings and submit a 5 page paper for grading. You will be required to complete one “practice’ ethnographic study to begin to get your feet wet and develop a feel for this type of qualitative research (there is no write up required for this portion). We will debrief in class and cover any anxieties or questions. Then you will be required to complete two full ethnographies spending at least 3 hours in the field for each site. More information will be provided to help you develop the skills to conduct

ethnographic research and understand its utility for comprehending the complexity of agrifood systems. These will account for 15% of your grade for each ethnography.

## **V. Food and Meaning**

What does food mean to you? Reflect on the place food has played in your life. Is there a particular food or custom that is very personal to you? Is there an experience or moment that food shaped your biography? What do this/these memories have to do with your everyday eating, or special occasion eating? Who played a role in shaping this memory? More detail will follow but you are expected to write a 2-3 page paper in response to these and other questions. Be prepared to share in class.

## **VI. Film Analysis**

Because of the popularity of food in the past few years a number of new films have been produced that explore the political and social aspects of food and agriculture. You will be expected to observe one of the films in a small group. *Essay Question:* Write an essay that critically evaluates the film in light of what you have learned in class this semester. Specifically, your tasks are to identify what you see as the film's two main strengths and weaknesses. Explicitly reference at least five course readings to support your arguments. Your paper must be 2-3 double spaced pages, coherently organized, proofread, typed in 12 point font, formatted with 1 inch margins and page numbers, printed in hard copy, stapled and submitted in class. This will be 10% of your final grade. Films are:

Fresh	Holy Cow	The Road to Wellville
Food, Inc	The Future of Food	Eat Drink Man Woman
A Place at the Table	Supersize Me	Like Water for Chocolate
King Corn	Babette's Feast	Mondovino
Thin	Harvest of Shame	The World According to Monsanto

## **COURSE AND UNIVERSITY POLICIES**

**Punctuality...**Please be sure to arrive at class on time. Come to see me as soon as possible if you anticipate that you will regularly be late. If you are consistently late, without having spoken to me, you will be counted absent. Email me if you know you will miss a class.

**Cell Phones...**Cell phone interruptions are detrimental to the learning of all. Turn them off or leave them at home.

**Class List Serve...**I will provide a list serve for this class to send out readings, announcements opportunities, etc. It is essential that students look at email daily to consult any messages I have posted.

**Late Work...**All written work that is not submitted on time will be penalized 10% for each day that it is late. Please save us both a lot of pain and suffering and turn your work in on time. Accommodations can be made for emergency situations but I must be contacted in advance to grant an extension (e.g., in cases of illness or death in the family).

**Grief Absence Request...** All students requesting approved absence due to grief must complete the Grief Absence Request Form found on the RO home page (<https://reg.msu.edu/>) under 'Student Services - Grief Absence Request Form.

**Disability Accommodations...** Any student who feels that she/he may need accommodations based on a disability should see me during the first two weeks of the term so appropriate and timely arrangements can be made.

**Academic Integrity...** To cultivate a productive and safe academic environment, we must all agree to practice academic integrity. I assume that you understand this means - conducting your own work without the influence of others via cheating or plagiarism. If you are not clear how to reference the work of others develop these skills immediately. I will uphold this practice and I expect all enrollees to do likewise. If not, I will abide by university policy and record failing grades for any infraction as well as report this to the proper university authority. For more information, see MSU Regulations, Ordinances and Policies Regarding Academic Honesty and Integrity at: <https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academic-integrity/>. MSU policy on plagiarism can be retrieved at: <https://www.msu.edu/unit/ombud/academicintegrity/plagiarism-policy.html>.

## **TENTATIVE TOPICS**

### **Readings list to be provided on first day of class**

Introduction and Overview  
Food and meaning  
Food, culture, and identity  
What is power?  
Food System Concentration  
Constructing Food as a Social Problem  
Food Wars  
The Role of Governments in Food & Agriculture  
The Politics of Farm Subsidies  
Nutrition and Health  
Politics in the School Cafeteria  
Food Security  
Alternative Food Politics  
The Food Movement and Social Activism