

## **Chowing DownEast: A Collection of Essays Exploring Food, Family and History** **Ellie Sapat, 2020**

In my sophomore year, I wrote an essay on vanilla which inspired my work this summer. I have worked to create a collection of essays centered around foods that are specifically important to me, but also have interesting historical backgrounds. Like I did in my original essay on vanilla, I was hoping to tease out the tensions in my life through focusing on a specific food, and parallel those tensions with the intricacies of that food's historical or cultural impact. As I have grown up in Maine, the foods I wanted to focus on in my writing this summer were also strongly connected to my experiences in New England. And so, I also spent this summer reflecting on my expectations for this place I've known my whole life, and how they are starting to shift. I did this by being more mindful and examining how I usually spend a summer in Maine. Similarly, I wanted to explore my relationship to making and eating food, and devoted time to practice and improve my cooking and baking skills. These experiences helped ground me and often even lent themselves as material that I wrote about.

My goal was to produce three essay drafts, as well as gather experiences, notes, and research for other potential essays to develop into an honors project in my senior year. This summer, I devoted my time to writing about doughnuts, tomatoes, and blueberries, and have also worked on pieces about lobsters, cookbooks, and cooking abroad. After writing my first draft on doughnuts, I realized that rather than my focus being primarily on the food itself, I was using food as a vehicle to explore my own personal relationships. This revelation has helped me to reorient my focus and rework my writing. Writing on doughnuts, I reexamined my childhood traditions of eating doughnuts with family, and how tradition and innovation often can go hand in hand in times of change and personal loss. Writing about tomatoes, I found myself reflecting on my relationship with my sister, and exploring how it feels to see someone grow up and mature. Finally, in writing about blueberries, I explored my (and my family's) connection to Maine, and what it might mean to leave the state behind in the future.

While I immensely enjoyed having unstructured free time to work on a project I am passionate about, I found it more difficult than I anticipated to solely focus on writing this summer. As a student I am much more used to fitting writing in around other activities and commitments, so this summer was a great learning experience for how to create a set of expectations to push myself. Having goals outside of writing, like baking and cooking, exploring the Maine coast, and introducing my non-Mainer friends to New England traditions, also helped me better connect to my writing and sense of purpose with this project.

In order to write about food, I also read about food. From Laurie Colwin, author of *Home Cooking*, I learned about how confidence and authority can make readers feel comfortable and well cared for, even nostalgic for food and experiences they had never perceived. M.F.K Fisher, the classic food writer, made me stop to consider how rhapsodizing about food can be multi-dimensional, and draw readers into your viewpoint without realizing it. Reading Ruth Reichel's memoirs about her life with food provided wonderful examples of how to intertwine perceptions of family with experiences in the kitchen and dining room, and inspired me to be more introspective with what I was choosing to write about. Anthologies of food writing gave me tidbits and insights into many different cuisines, times, issues, and methods to discuss in the realm of eating and drinking. These stories and authors endlessly energized and influenced me, which helped me not get writers block; through their many different styles and observations, I was able to find a new perspective, idea, story with which to keep pushing my writing forward.

This summer was invaluable to me. I have undoubtedly generated a lot of ideas and material for this collection, and now better understand what it will take to complete it. I am so thankful for this opportunity, and am very excited to continue working on this collection, using what I've created as a starting point for my senior honors project in the fall.

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