Anti-Intellectualism and Natural Food: The Shared Language of Industry and Activists in America since 1830

Abstract: This article uses the concept of “anti-intellectualism” to explain surprising overlaps in rhetoric between American food activists and the manufacturers they criticize. It shows anti-intellectual elements in the language of, in turn: Sylvester Graham, an influential lecturer during the 1830s; the Natural Food Company, maker of Shredded Wheat and an advocate for “natural food” in the early 1900s; and Michael Pollan, a leading figure in contemporary American food politics. These activists and manufacturers have spoken in an anti-intellectual style about nature and food, arguing that certain forms of knowledge and evidence are more natural than others. Each has favored similar ways of understanding nature, rejecting professionalized expertise for tradition, intuition, and the wisdom of more “natural” peoples. While disagreeing on the proper structure of food production and distribution, activists and manufacturers have both sought authority to tell people how to live by evoking similar visions of the American past. This shared ideal romanticizes a time in which women did more work at home, immigrants and indigenous people were even more marginalized, and custom and tradition more fully guided people’s food choices. With different polices and intentions, manufacturers and activists belong to the same lineage of food discourse and have both furthered an American tradition of anti-intellectualism.

Keywords: natural food, science, anti-intellectualism, expertise, advertising, breakfast cereal

To paraphrase an old saying: the history of food does not repeat itself, but it rhymes.1 The verse, though, is often dissonant. Here is Michael Pollan (2008: 148), the foremost American critic of processed, packaged food: “Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food.” Rhyming, a century earlier, is an advertisement by the Natural Food Company, maker of Shredded Wheat breakfast cereal: “Your great-grandfather was a hale and rugged man because his staff of life was natural food” (Natural Food Company 1903: 5). The dissonance: The Natural Food Company ranked among the leaders of the breakfast cereal industry, which helped invent and popularize the industrially produced food Pollan criticizes. Industrial food producers and their critics have shared a rhetorical style, even as many of their beliefs have been at odds.

How to reconcile this? It would seem easy to charge industrial companies use the language of industrial foods’ proponents and critics, we should have seen similarities. Many manufacturers and critics belong to the same lineage of food discourse. They have fought for the authority to tell people how to live by evoking a shared ideal of the American past.

To explain the confluence between these opposed groups, I use historian Richard Hofstadter’s concept of “anti-intellectualism.” The term existed when Hofstadter published Anti-Intellectualism in American Life in 1963, but his work gave the term greater analytical heft. Hofstadter used “anti-intellectualism” to describe a rhetorical style that prevailed politics and culture throughout American history. Hofstadter did not define this style precisely, instead describing it as a “complex of traits” that had in common “a resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it” (7). Anti-intellectualism often manifested
as suspicion of professionalized expertise, especially that of individuals in universities and governments who claimed to know how Americans should live. Those speaking in the anti-intellectual style often favored what Hofstadter called “primitivism.” That is: “a demand to recover the powers of ‘nature’ in man; with it one may be close to Nature or to God—the difference is not always wholly clear. But in it there is a persistent preference for the ‘wisdom’ of intuition, which is deemed to be natural or God-given, over rationality, which is cultivated and artificial” (48). This interest in primitivism reached throughout American society, and has featured in the anti-intellectual discourse endemic in discussion about food.

Applied to food, the anti-intellectual style often appears as reverence for intuition and nature. Food activists and marketers have charged scientists, doctors, and those in their thrall with trying to understand food abstractly rather than using the knowledge that Nature gives us. Nature here—with the “n” sometimes capitalized to reflect its agency—refers to the material environment, but also to qualities that are “innate.” The people I examine have distinguished between knowledge that people must learn and that which seems to be available by inheritance: religion, culture, and intuition. In this understanding, science appears artificial while tradition seems instinctual. When people speak about food in the anti-intellectual style, they assess food’s healthfulness by this natural evidence—evidence that, they often insist, people would notice if only they were not overthinking. “Most of what we need to know about how to eat we already know,” Pollan (2008: 13) argues, “or once did until we allowed the nutrition experts and the advertisers to shake our confidence in common sense, tradition, the testimony of our senses, and the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers.”

The consequence of this anti-intellectual pursuit of harmony with Nature is that critics and proponents of the industrial food supply have fought about the mechanics, even the ethics, of food production while promoting a shared view of food as a means of pursuing it for themselves.

It is perhaps odd to speak of anti-intellectualism today, even as many have done so to describe the United States’ current political moment. The term can be pejorative, and scholars should know better than to rely on easy dichotomies of scientific versus ignorant or rational versus superstitious. Experts have offered bad advice, and people discovering their own bodily needs have deepened our understanding of health and the environment (Nash 2006; Freidberg 2016). What I describe, though, is not resistance to science or an enveloping “anti-intellectual” identity but a style of communication. That style has been pervasive, linking people with little else in common. Hofstadter believed that anti-intellectualism had been sustained primarily by three disparate groups: anti-elite populists, anti-science religionists, and practical-minded businesspeople (Hofstadter 1963; Rigney 1991; Ratner-Rosenhagen 2009). I do not analyze the same groups, but I do see rhetorical overlap between businesspeople, religious reformers, and critics of industry. Across cultural and historical contexts, anti-intellectualism persisted, changing form but staying identifiable. Being the only interpreter of what Nature wants has been a useful ethos for offering advice about food, selling it, or both. Understanding the anti-intellectualism of diverse groups over time lets us probe the fractured cohesion of food discourse, and understand more precisely how it changes and stays the same.

The rhyming rhetoric of American food reform has drawn attention from many scholars (Engs 2001; Haydu 2011; Levenstein 2012; Biltekoff 2013). In this journal, historians have described generations of white-bread-fearing, purity-conscious, history-minded activists. Rachel Laudan (2001) called them “culinary luddites.” Chin Jou (2017), who is also interested in the attention to great-grandmothers’ preferences, coined “food nostalgics.” The nuanced historical work that describes these activists has missed, though, the confluence between American food reformers and the industries they criticize.

Historians who have written about this link tend to explain it as either co-optation or fraud. Food studies scholar Warren Belasco (2007), for instance, argues that the food industry of the 1980s made healthy products only to capture wealthy consumers interested in the counterculture’s food politics. Historians of earlier movements portray marketing of “natural food” as appropriation of authentic reform—a transition, say, from pacifists protecting animals to vain and gullible health addicts buying vegetarian convenience food (e.g., Vileisis 2008; Shprintzen 2013). Other scholars condemn both activists and businesspeople as deceptive cranks (e.g., Levenstein 1988: 33–34; Young 1961). Charlotte Biltekoff offers the closest analysis to my own of the overlap between industry and its critics. She argues that activists such as Michael Pollan and Alice Waters protested consumerism but sustained its values by blaming individuals for their own poor health. The modern food movement’s argument that people should be in touch
with their instincts makes, according to Biltekoff (2013: 88–92, 107), contested ideas about how to eat seem “natural”; it buries, in her memorable phrase, “the empirical in the ethical.” My use of anti-intellectualism to study food rhetoric builds on Biltekoff by analyzing an intellectual connection between food critics and industry that has persisted, with variations, over time.

“Less to Do with Books Than with Living Bodies”: Early Natural Food Activism

Consider one of the most prominent food reformers of the 1830s: Sylvester Graham. Like many histories of health reform start with Graham (e.g., Whorton 1982; Yager 2010), probably because many of his ideas—including opposition to meat, white bread, and artificial fertilizer—resemble those of today’s food activists. Graham lectured about vegetarianism and health in an auspicious moment for anti-intellectual rhetoric. During the so-called Jacksonian era in U.S. history, many Americans questioned monopolies on knowledge and authority. Some, inspired by new German approaches to health, fought to repeal medical licensing laws and introduced alternative therapies including homeopathy and water cures (Whorton 2002). Graham, to be sure, attracted contempt and mockery; his lectures to all-female audiences even drew rioters (Haynes 2015: 45–46). In this milieu, though, Graham also gained a following as he spurned many doctors and theologians for his own brand of empirical theology.

Graham spoke in the name of science and was conversant with modern theories of physiology (Nissenbaum 1980; Haydu 2011: 470). In many of his lectures, though, Graham stressed his own observations and obscured his sources. Historians have interpreted this decision differently. Stephen Nissenbaum (1980: 21) argues that Graham’s facade of self-learning distanced the lecturer from science, bolstering his “self-image as a kind of romantic ‘natural’ who was able to perceive the true nature of things precisely because he had not been corrupted by the artifices of modern civilization—artifices that might include formal book-learning.” Adam Shprintzen (2013: 19), on the other hand, argues that Graham’s “specious claim” enhanced his scientific credentials, emphasizing Graham’s adherence to “rational science rather than loyalty to a mere philosophy.” This disagreement illustrates the importance of distinguishing an anti-intellectual style from opposition to science. Romantic or rationalist, both or neither, Graham claimed a unique right, based on his own intuition, to interpret and speak for Nature.

Graham cultivated an ethos based on innate skill rather than acquired knowledge. As Graham explained in the preface to one of his most important published works, Lectures on the Science of Human Life: “The idea has very frequently been advanced, that my whole theory… has been founded on the opinions of Pythagoras and others. …But nothing is farther from the truth than this.” Graham admitted to having read Pythagoras, but he insisted that the ancient vegetarian had “never made the slightest impression.” Graham ([1839] 1849: ii–iv) drew instead from his own “observations and reflections” and the “natural turn of [his] mind.” He had “had much less to do with books than with living bodies” (ibid.). Practical knowledge gained without training, particularly Graham’s, was best.

Graham’s approach to knowledge manifested as a natural theology that prized his observations over knowledge gained by means other than personal experience.7 Graham based his arguments against killing animals on observations of animals and people that indicated humans could not digest meat. Critics attacked Graham as both anti-science and as too scientific, claiming that he ignored the Bible’s apparent sanctioning of meat-eating (Graham 1859: iii–iv; Shprintzen 2013: 27). In volumes published only partially before his death, Graham defended his scientific and religious credentials. He argued that his science accorded with scripture and should influence how people read written revelation. Graham had seen evidence that the human body processed meat poorly and had deduced that eating meat therefore violated God’s will. If theologians thought the Bible condoned something that nature so clearly despised, they were wrong.

“The God of the Bible and the God of Nature,” Graham (1859: 1) explained, “is one and the same Being.” “Every law of Nature,” therefore, “is as truly the law of God, and when accurately ascertained, is as truly obligatory in all its bearings upon man as any law or word of Revelation.” Since God’s and Nature’s laws were the same, and since God was a consistent God “of order,” interpretations of scripture that violated natural law could not be correct (2). According to Graham, people should turn to nature first and written revelation second; they must seek the “revelations of God in the volume of Nature” (100). Whoever had the right to interpret nature, then, to “accurately ascertain” its laws, could understand revelation. As someone innately attuned to Nature’s workings and not reliant on texts or formal education, Graham had argued that the right to speak for Nature was his.

In addition to his study of the material world, Graham developed a theory of natural law based on his own interpretation of history and on what he considered other natural phenomena—the wisdom of women and indigenous people. Graham urged that a plain diet was best because indigenous New Zealanders thrived on simple food and had once used it to rehabilitate European merchants sick from decadent
eating (Graham [1839] 1849: 136–43). Graham also invoked the wisdom and safety he considered inherent to female domesticity. At the beginnings of New England’s transition to an industrial economy, Graham criticized what he saw as his generation’s tendency to buy bread from commercial bakers rather than eat loaves made by wives and mothers fulfilling what he thought to be their natural role (Nissenbaum 1980: 18–20; Whorton 1982: 47–48; Shprintzen 2013: 24). In both contentions, Graham kept, and anticipated, good company. Over the nineteenth century, many Americans became fearful of something that they called “overcivilization”—a softness brought on by the comforts of urban living. They came to value what they saw as the innocent, nurturing naturalness of indigenous peoples and women, even as they used those supposed virtues to justify oppression and imperialism (Kolodny 1975: 4; Merchant [1989] 2010; Jacobson 2000: 111–34; Lears 2009).

Graham’s thinking had many facets, but much of his rhetoric used an anti-intellectual style that bolstered his own authority to interpret nature. Graham proclaimed himself less a teacher than a prophet: his entitlement to speak was based on his communion with nature and innate understanding of physiology. Graham insisted that real knowledge was intuitive; his skepticism was essential to his authority. Graham did not sell food, but the coarse flour he prescribed appeared in stores, boardinghouses, and vegetarian restaurants across the country as “Graham flour” and “Graham bread.” His recipes, his ideas, and the anti-intellectual tradition he followed, continued.

How the Breakfast Cereal Industry Made Nature

Graham was anti-trade: he believed that commercial bakers would inevitably produce unnatural bread (Nissenbaum 1980: xi). Nonetheless, multiple historians have drawn a line from the vegetarian minister to one of the world’s most important originators of processed, mass-distributed food: the breakfast cereal industry (e.g., Carson 1957; Nissenbaum 1980; Wilson 2014). The connection is more convoluted than some of these historians have allowed, but much links the anti-capitalist minister and this massive industry. As breakfast cereal companies grew and gained influence during the 1890s and early 1900s, they channeled Graham’s dietary advice and his approach to understanding nature.

Unlike Graham, cereal manufacturers lived in a time when many Americans considered expertise and science fashionable. Historians have called this period the Progressive Era because dominant reformers and government officials believed in progress and subscribed to scientism—a faith in science, rationality, and efficiency. Many health advocates worked closely with industrialists, who seemed well positioned to harness technology for social good. Even those who remained skeptical of industrial food production, such as health writers William Allen and Horace Fletcher, had more faith than Graham that it could be reformed (Whorton 1982: 165–72). Domestic scientists promoted habits of healthy eating while making peace with, and even endorsing, major manufacturers (Shapiro 1986). Technocratic expertise suited both middle-class reformers and industrialists.

So, too, did an ethos based on opposing Progressive rationalism. Anti-modernist artists and thinkers rejected what they perceived as intellectuals’ detachment from “real life” and businessmen eschewed academic teachings as ungrounded in “practicality” (Lears 1981; Hofstadter 1965). Many people turned to nature for escape from modern pressures (Schmitt 1969; Cronon 1996). Some of the most widely spread anti-intellectual literature arrived as back-to-nature advocacy from the country’s food advertisers, especially the breakfast cereal companies (Lears 1981; Vileisis 2008). These manufacturers argued, like Graham, that they alone had the innate ability to restore society’s connection to nature and God.

As manufacturers in an era overwhelmed with heavy industry, breakfast cereal manufacturers’ anti-intellectual style reconciled technology and nature more explicitly than had Graham. In an industrial world, cereal companies argued, connecting to nature could come from diet—putting nature into your body rather than the other way around. They criticized civilization while justifying certain uses of new technology, chemistry, and domestic science. Although cereal manufacturers warned against changing nature, they also claimed that civilization thus far had degraded nature so that only someone with the right knowledge could repair it. The right knowledge, in this case, was how to build an industrial food factory, and that someone was the breakfast cereal manufacturer. Breakfast cereal nature-writers supplemented Graham’s God of order with the orderly factory, arguing that only industrial production could make natural food. In so doing, they equated the newest technology with the ancient wisdom of Nature.

This messaging was, with nuances, consistent across cereal companies between the 1890s and late 1910s. Here, I use as a particularly illustrative case study Henry Drushel Perky’s Natural Food Company, maker of Shredded Wheat. Perky demeaned professional medicine and education in favor of what he considered innate intelligence. At the same time, Perky offered his own form of “natural education.” He did so formally by helping to run the Oread, a domestic science and agriculture school whose practical-minded motto was “we learn to do by doing” (Oread Institute 1906). Perky also
educated Americans about nature through his advertising for Shredded Wheat. He believed that people should know nature innately, but assumed that they no longer could, and set out to teach them himself.

Declaring that nobody understands nature while teaching about it presents an obvious tension: where did Henry Perky’s knowledge come from? Perky reconciled this paradox, as had many reformers and preachers, with a conversion narrative. Perky (1901b: 11–12) had once been ill, but in his moment of weakness he understood the fallacies of modern living: “The doctors came to me and they said ‘You have got only two days to live.’ I said: ‘Bah!’ … I told the doctors to go to thunder. I would not have any of their medicine.” As his health declined, one adoring profile explained, Perky became “thoughtful, for he was not too ill to get into that state.” Perky’s thinking was practical, not indulgently intellectual: “for him to think was to act” (Niagara Falls Gazette 1900: 5). To “act” meant designing a whole-wheat diet, through which Perky recovered. Yet making this diet took hard work, and once again, “Mr. Perky began to think, and then he acted. His acute mental powers turned, this time, into the channel of invention.” (Ibid.). Perky developed a technique for shredding wheat and sold the food he made as one of the first nationally-distributed breakfast cereals. Discovering natural food and eating it allowed Perky to recover his health and start a successful business. With his invention, his commercial abilities, and now his vitality, Perky could help the rest of the country.

Perky’s advertising outlined the principles derived from his personal trial and rejected the expert knowledge that might contradict them. In an edition of The Vital Question, the Natural Food Company’s widely distributed promotional cookbook, Perky ridiculed the “age of scientific enlightenment,” writing that scientific inquiry hid rather than revealed the workings of nature. He referenced Romanticists, quoting vegetarian poet Percy Bysshe Shelley’s writing on natural food in the introduction to his own (Perky 1902a: 1). “The structure of man,” Perky wrote, is “so wonderful and intricate as to baffle the constant efforts of science.” A multiplication of “doctors, medicines, and remedial agencies” in the nineteenth century had caused disease, not health. Perky (1897: 5) believed that what he called “unnatural conditions” engulfed the country. Unnatural conditions caused debilitating ailments and child mortality. Perky blamed these conditions on the acquired education of the intellectual class, and instead celebrated “intelligence.” Intelligence, wrote Perky, “is God-given. It comes through living in harmony with nature.” It was, in other words, innate (Ibid.).

Perky’s ability to position himself, due to bodily experience, as an interpreter of Nature meant that he could define how to live harmoniously with the natural world. In this case, that meant using industrial technology to create and sell his food. In 1903, Perky moved the company to an enormous factory at Niagara Falls, then one of the most potent symbols of nature in American culture (Berton 1992; Nye 1994; McGreevy 1994; Irwin 1996). The Natural Food Company presented its factory as part of the landscape, adding to the Falls’ grandeur both by the factory’s beauty and the fact that this automated plant made Niagara more natural. The company portrayed its conveyor belts, air ventilation systems, and copious plumbing as part of the natural order, particularly in contrast to Niagara Falls’ smoky mill district (Irwin 1996: 189). Perky appealed to fears about unsanitary air and supposedly insalubrious immigrants. Immigrants made up much of the workforce in large food operations around the country, worrying many middle-class consumers who saw their food purchases as a weakness in their anti-disease defenses. To calm such concerns, Perky and other manufacturers boasted a product “untouched by human hands” (Natural Food Company 1916: Part III, 2; Atlanta Constitution 1895; Bobrow-Strain 2002). Escaping undesirable people and environments, Perky’s automatic factory production could be natural.

Perky also alluded to similar romanticized past and traditional practices as had Graham. Natural Food Company advertising suggested that its factory production resembled the mortar-and-pestle food preparation of American Indians (Natural Food Company 1900; Irwin 1996: 183). Perky also associated his food with female wisdom to make it appear more natural. His interest in domestic science seems odd: how could a man who ridiculed education align with domestic scientists, who believed strongly in expertise and formal study (Shapiro 1986)? Aligning with domestic scientists, though, publicly linked Perky’s company with the day’s most important female food reformers. Laura Shapiro (1986: 13) has argued that the increased relocation of labor outside the home during the Progressive Era led to a sanctification of women’s domestic work. Perky took full advantage of this belief as he advocated domestic science. He advertised mainly female employees and the machinery that handled production. Domestic science education added to female knowledge, but it did so by embellishing their “natural” domestic wisdom. That wisdom helped make Shredded Wheat natural.

Perky also alluded to the naturalness of women when he put images of deified female bodies in his advertisements. In one advertisement, a Shredded Wheat biscuit, half open, contains a female allegorical figure with a banner that reads “natural food.” “Natural food” describes the Shredded Wheat biscuit, but also the divine representation of femininity inside. To eat natural food was to consume God and the sacred female body.
In the Progressive Era, disparaging medicine and education while hailing certain definitions of science as necessary did not present a contradiction. Nature and God gave the recipe for perfect food; scientific innovation let Henry Perky manufacture it. The breakfast cereal industry was one of the largest advertisers of the early twentieth century and one of the originators of mass-produced packaged, branded food. Perky’s advertisements and those of other companies served to millions of readers depictions of nature that used anti-intellectualism as authority. This messaging portrayed industrial food, and the body that consumed it, as natural; it helped make the industrial city a site of nature and industry itself nature’s largest manufacturer.

“On the Authority of Tradition and Common Sense”: Natural Food Activism Today

Across later decades of the twentieth century, the reputation of industry and technocrats varied. Especially after World War II, though, both became more powerful and entrenched. Interest
in “natural food” persisted, gaining more adherents once the environmentalist counterculture started to promote organic food in the 1960s (Belasco [1989] 2007). The cereal industry did not advertise “natural food” as much as they had at the turn of the twentieth century, but cereal companies and other manufacturers never stopped making “natural” pitches. In the past decade, “natural food” has once again become mainstream, often promoted in an anti-intellectual style by activists and manufacturers.

In the contemporary United States, food reformers use similar anti-intellectual tropes to Graham and Perky. Michael Pollan, for instance, helped popularize concern over industrially produced food and has become an unofficial representative of modern food reform. He plays a similar foundational role for writings on modern food activism as Graham does in the histories of older reformers (e.g., Bitlekoff 2013: 86, 2016: 46; Garcia 2016: 656; Jou 2017: 20). Pollan has devoted some of his most influential food writing to encouraging deference to tradition over what he considers the wrong kind of science: “nutritionism.”

Pollan’s 2008 “eater’s manifesto” blames scientific investigation for corrupting traditional food wisdom. “Instead of food,” Pollan (2008: jacket) writes, “we’re consuming ‘edible foodlike substances’—no longer the products of nature but of food science.” Rather than trust the results of scientific inquiry, Pollan encourages a return to “traditional” foods that people ate for generations, apparently without incident, such as tomatoes and olive oil—a reverence for lived experience, inherited tradition, and the longevity of recipes that historians and scientists have called simplistic and that Slate’s Daniel Engber has named “nutritional Darwinism” (Pollan 2008: McClements et al. 2011; Smith-Howard 2014: 11; Engber 2008). Pollan’s evidence for food’s healthfulness often comes down to how long people have eaten it and what consumers know about it: preferably a great deal about some of a foodstuff’s social functions, but little about its nutritional, microscopic components.

For Pollan, in fact, the presence of expert knowledge indicates wrongheadedness about food. Recall his belief that “most of what we need to know about how to eat we [knew] until we allowed the nutrition experts and the advertisers to shake our confidence in common sense, tradition, the testimony of our senses, and the wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers” (2008: 13). Pollan, in the anti-intellectual tradition, reaches in a world he believes degraded for the lost knowledge of the intuitive body. He offers no conversion experience or other credentials to explain how he can speak, as he claims, “on the authority of tradition and common sense” (ibid.). He asserts nonetheless, as did Graham and Perky before him, the ability to explain that which cannot be studied to people too out of touch with nature to discover it for themselves.

Pollan has helped shape a modern discourse about whether the food we eat is natural. Advocates for “natural food” in this conversation have, akin to Graham’s and Perky’s assertions about food’s naturalness, often expressed a preference for sensing what nature wants. Consumer Reports is one organization that has featured this kind of rhetoric, in its “Take Part” campaign advocating mandatory labeling for foods with genetically modified organisms (GMOS). Consumer Reports conducts independent testing and tries to broaden lay understandings of chemistry and health. Yet, in the case of food, Consumer Reports, while at times appealing to scientific study, has denigrated scientific understanding that it considers inaccessible to ordinary people. One promotional video for the organization’s anti-GMO campaign, for example, features a man pretending to interrogate a bottle of sweet tea labeled “all natural.” “I see right through you,” he yells at the bottle, debunking its naturalness ingredient by ingredient. He finds the presence of high fructose corn syrup and aspartame outrageous, though he does not explain why these might not be natural besides an infuriated, rhetorical, “Does that sound natural?” The most offensive ingredient is one he cannot pronounce. As the interrogator struggles to name this ingredient, he rejects the sweet tea’s claim to naturalness: “I can’t even say this stuff! What is this, chemistry class?” (Know Your Labels: Sweet Tea 2014). The video uses hyperbole for humor, but the message is clear: chemistry and food do not mix.

The disparagement of chemistry by Consumer Reports echoes Pollan’s (2008: 150) instruction not to eat anything you cannot pronounce. It also has longer roots. Progressives such as Henry Perky discussed food components and invisible nutrients, but many of their contemporaries still feared food’s hidden ingredients. Chemist J. W. Dodgson (1919: 46) warned English grocers in 1919 that to many, “the mere mention of chemicals in connection with the contents of a grocer’s shop seems to suggest a somewhat suspicious intrusion.” Dodgson objected to this attitude for the same reason as many chemists today: “to the chemist, all things are ‘chemicals’” (ibid.; Schwartz 2007: 7–8). Chemists’ objections aside, fear of chemicals and the “if you can’t say it, don’t eat it” idea influence many farm-to-table advocates, and can be found in cookbooks, health columns, nutrition blogs, and restaurant copy (e.g., Hari 2014; Collado 2014; Simmons and Morrow 2015; Gourmet Garden 2015; Labib 2015; “What Does Clean Eating Mean?” 2016). The prescription to avoid the unpronounceable suggests that simple means familiar and familiar means better. In encouraging consumers to avoid anything they did not learn how
to say as children, it argues that a certain type of knowledge portends danger. It is a retreat away from complexity and an argument against expertise: a directive to trust your instincts, or at least what food writers tell you your instincts should be, rather than reasoning, research, scientific authority, or federal regulators. Food writers’ suspicion of the unpronounceable recalls ridicule of presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson’s “teacup words” in the 1950s, when critics argued that Stevenson’s vocabulary and education disqualified him for office (Hobstader 1963: 227). Needless complex words can deceive, but in anti-intellectual rhetoric complexity itself is enough to damn.

This reaction against complicated words stems from an anti-intellectual thread in modern food activism. So, too, does the dismissal of formal education found, for instance, in the work of Vani Hari. Hari, who blogs to millions of readers as “The Food Babe,” has been attacked as anti-scientific by many (Rubin 2015; Migala 2015; d’Entremont 2015). Hari, though, defends her work as science: “Apparently,” she writes in a rebuttal to her detractors, “science that people don’t like—that conflicts with their paid positions or sources of funding—can just be written off as pseudo-science.” Hari, akin to Graham and Perky, invokes the importance of bodily knowledge over formal learning: “I know with my own body, that eliminating food additives was one of the best decisions I ever made. . . . Others without a PhD [Hari has a bachelor’s degree in computer science] have also conducted the same experiments, using their bodies and personal experience, and have come to a similar conclusion” (Hari 2014; Rubin 2015). According to Hari, not only is an educational pedigree unnecessary to understand food, but it might cause conflicts of interest and a reliance on chemistry jargon. Professionalized expertise, nature, and health are incompatible.

As did Graham and Perky, modern food activists see a natural ideal fulfilled through tradition and domesticity. As Graham highlighted the beneficial effects of indigenous diets on Europeans, Pollan (2008: 85–87) offered the inverse story, in which diabetic Australian Aborigines lost both weight and blood-sugar after just a seven-week “reversion to [their] traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle.” As Graham wanted the loving wife to bake bread rather than the public baker, Pollan objects to the shift in mindset that has depicted kitchen work as drudgery rather than love, substituting commercial food for that made with the “wisdom of our mothers and grandmothers” (2008: 13; Suh 2016). Pollan is speaking in a different political context than Graham and Perky. He wants men to cook, too, acknowledges sexism in food production, and is not urging a world in which women do nothing but cook for their families. And yet, Pollan speaks in a style that, despite generations of feminism and indigenous advocacy, still romanticizes and attaches moral value to women’s domestic work and to a certain vision of traditional lifestyles.

Companies, meanwhile, continue to invoke nature by way of history, traditional wisdom, and “primitivism.” Menus feature “ancient grains” and “heirloom” vegetables; Nature’s Path cereal boxes have shown indigenous women grinding grains; Kellogg’s-owned Kashi has claimed that its founders knew “intuitively” that “real food” could change the world (Kadish 2004; Kashi 2016). Although lawsuits challenging marketing food as “natural” have discouraged some manufacturers from using the phrase, more than ten percent of new food products made “natural” claims in 2015 and most consumers across countries prefer to buy “natural foods” (Watson 2016; Rock 2016; Ciccatelli 2016; Román, Sánchez-Siles, and Siegrist 2017). It is easy to see industry rhetoric as mere co-optation if we see it as new, but the plea for, debate about, and attempt to sell “natural” food through anti-intellectual reasoning has existed for centuries. From Sylvester Graham, through the Natural Food Company, to Michael Pollan, anti-intellectualism has been an important ideological and rhetorical force in the food movement and industry.

Many factors make anti-intellectualism a tempting mode of argument: professionalized experts have delivered horrors in the name of science and progress. Moreover, allowing intuition, inherited tradition, and personal experience to count as evidence can help democratize knowledge creation. Experts’ focus on population-level studies has limited the efficacy of their dietary advice, and the search for alternative epistemologies has yielded important benefits for many people (Freidberg 2016). Still, we should not confuse fights for authority with rejection of it. Invoking tradition and nature are the means to power, not its alternative.

Anti-intellectualism in American life is an accent: a mode of speaking that people can use to say anything they like. It is almost always an appeal for trust. “Nature” says nothing except as humans claim to hear it; “tradition” refers to any number of practices, sometimes contradictory and often of recent vintage (e.g., Hobshawn 1983; Laudan 2001). Appeals to either tradition or nature justify power, arguing that something is good because of age or inevitability rather than its specific qualities. Arguments based on tradition and nature are also unfalsifiable: it is hard, not to mention delicate, to dispute what someone believes to be timeless wisdom, the natural order, or the sensations of their own body. As a result, the anti-intellectual style that is so useful for activists also makes producers and their advertisers more persuasive. The desire to claim authority over how Americans should live is common to both, as is a culture of food discourse. The modern
business of natural food is not co-opting reform; it is carrying on a sacred American tradition.

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NOTES
1. The provenance of the phrase likely dates to the 1970s, although it is often misattributed to Mark Twain (O’Toole 2014). Thank you to Professor James Colgrove for drawing my attention to it.
2. The attraction to “primitivism” is also well documented, for instance, in Matthew Frye Jacobson’s (2000) description of certain Americans’ attraction to “barbarian virtues.”
3. Some food writers have directly linked Donald Trump’s nostalgic rhetoric and that of the food movement, including Kevin Senapathy in Forbes (2016) and Chin Jou in Gastronomica (2017).
4. For an overview on differences between Grahamites and counterculture organics advocates see Haydu (2011).
7. “Natural theology” posited that God’s will could be both reasoned and discovered in material nature. For more on the Jacksonians working to unite scripture and science see Whorton (1982: 32–33). Mark Stoll (2015) considers the impact of natural theology and other religious approaches to nature on American environmentalism. Topham (2010) offers a concise explanation of natural theology.
8. Shprintzen (2013: 27) also observes: “to his followers, Graham was a prophet who gave practical advice for improved health, spirit, and intellect.”
9. Nissenbaum (1980: 4) argued that Graham’s ideas “were adopted, directly and virtually intact, by the Seventeenth-Day Adventists, and on a more secular level, they ultimately led to the rise of the modern American breakfast cereal industry.” Nissenbaum overstates the point, but Graham did influence the Christian physiology and social hygiene movements that in turn affected cereal branding. Brian C. Wilson (2014) offers an excellent overview of John Harvey Kellogg’s influences.
10. James C. Whorton (1982: 9) has described the conversion experience as part of the “standard biography” of health reformers, in which they must live sinfully before, on the edge of death, recanting and spreading the word of their salvation and their “hygienic truth.” Jackson Lees (1994: 143) notes the prominent use of “standard accounts of conversion experience” by patent-medicine salesmen during the nineteenth century. He describes these as drawing “directly on evangelical culture: the cries of the converted testified to the soul’s deliverance from suffering. In the patent medicine literature … suffering was caused not by sin but by constipation, catarrh, bilious liver, seminal losses, or the ubiquitous ‘tired feeling.’” My work builds on Lees’s and Whorton’s writing by tracing a direct link between Protestant lecturers and food sales that appealed to nature.
11. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenberg (2009: 42) argues that “the notion that [America] was … either unburdened by or ill-suited for intellectual rigor took on particular form in the romantic imagination.”
12. Through the concepts of technological utopianism (Segal [1985] 2005) and the industrial sublime (Nye 1994: 128), historians have described this as a time in which Americans were drawn to the replacement of nature by technology and the factory. While this element is visible in the presentation of breakfast cereal factories, manufacturers also referenced ideas that historians have noticed for earlier eras, in which technology was presented as enhancing nature’s potential, making it even more natural than if left to its own devices (e.g., Marx 1964: 157–65).
13. Other companies, cereal and otherwise, pledged products untouched by human hands. See, for example, Egg-O-See Cereal Company (1906) and Times (1908: 12).
14. Reconciling science and religion was common to many reformers in the early twentieth century. See, for instance, Shapiro (1986) and Tomes (1998).
15. Pollan popularized the term “nutritionism,” generally credited to Gyorgi Scrinis. Gastronomica has had an earlier productive forum about “nutritionism” and “other ways of knowing food.” See Mudry et al. (2014).

REFERENCES
Carson, Gerald. 1957. Conifeke Crusade: From the Pulpit to the Breakfast Table. New York: Reinheart.


Know Your Labels: Sweet Tea. 2014. www.youtube.com/watch?v=16NLgKThh5c&feature=youtube_gdata_player


