

Welcome to Flavortown: Guy Fieri's Populist American Food Culture

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Described as a “dude chef,” the “rock ’n’ roll comfort food king,” and “a supernova of kitsch,” Guy Fieri transformed food television when he won the reality show *Next Food Network Star* in 2006. Beyond his several television programs—most notably the Emmy-nominated *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* (2007 to present) but also *Guy's Big Bite* (2006 to present) and *Guy's Grocery Games* (2013 to present), among others—Fieri's food empire now includes restaurants, cookbooks, rock ’n’ roll gastro-tours, food products, and cooking equipment. With an estimated net worth as high as \$10 million, he is routinely included on lists of top-earning chefs.¹ Infamous for his catchphrases, sense-stunning food, bleached-blond spiked hairstyle, casual wardrobe, and copious, garish jewelry, Fieri has for more than a decade been the target of considerable media attention, both complimentary and derogatory. As Julia Moskin wrote in the *New York Times*, Fieri “has brought a new element of rowdy, mass-market entertainment to American food television. . . . He has a Sarah Palin-like ability to reach Americans who feel left behind by the nation's cultural (or, in his case, culinary) elite.”²

Guy Fieri constructs his populist brand of gastronomic entertainment in part through cultural tropes often presented as uniquely “American.” Fieri posits his own definition of America, one espoused on his programs, especially *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and its accompanying cookbooks. The program asks, “What is American food?”—a polemic inquiry that encapsulates the

myths, tensions, and paradoxes that make up American identity. A close study of Guy Fieri and the definitions of America and American food that he proffers on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* illuminates some of the motivations behind the most recent rise of populist sentiment in the United States.

Defining Guy Fieri's Populism: "Welcome to Flavortown, USA"

An imagined location, Flavortown, USA, proves challenging to define, even for Fieri himself. In his first cookbook—*Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives: An All-American Road Trip . . . with Recipes!*, published in 2008—Fieri welcomes readers to “take a trip to Flavortown,” a place that he created, one populated by the flavors, ingredients, dishes, restaurants, people, and feelings showcased on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*.³ Fieri frames Flavortown as a destination, a place not all around us but one that we must travel to visit. Emphasizing this distance, Fieri’s definitions of Flavortown often mention means of travel with phrases like “We’ve got a conductor on the train going to Flavortown” and “Me and the number-one bus driver goin’ to Flavortown.”⁴ Fieri hails his viewers, “All aboard!”

Revealing the slippery and at times contradictory meaning of Flavortown, Fieri has also described Flavortown in the language of recent food trends and values, using phrases like “food revolution” and “scratch-made, home-made, farm-to-table, knowing what’s really in front of you.”⁵ Fieri also emphasized the intangible (and even fanciful) qualities of Flavortown as “a state of mind” in a February 2017 interview in which he likened Flavortown to Willy Wonka’s chocolate stream and *The Matrix* saying, “You can only get down with Flavortown if you believe in Flavortown.”⁶ While a nebulous concept, place, and community, Flavortown overlaps in interesting and often inconsistent ways with the America that Fieri constructs, an idea of the nation that speaks directly to the rise of populism in our current historical moment.

Although widely invoked as a political buzzword, particularly in recent years in the United States, populism is a notoriously vague, often misunderstood, and hotly contested term.⁷ Numerous scholars have sought to define and clarify populism.⁸ For example, political theorist Margaret Canovan defined populism in modern democratic societies as “an appeal to ‘the people’ against both the established structure of power and the dominant ideas and values of the society,” such as “individualism, internationalism, multiculturalism, permissiveness and belief in progress.”⁹ Within such a framework, appeals are simple and direct, and “the people” are considered ordinary, decent, and associated with what Paul Taggart called “the heartland”; the people are the binary opposite of “the elite.”¹⁰ In his history of populism in the United States, Michael Kazin concedes that these divisions obscure race and gender, but he further asserts that conflict between the powerless us and the powerful them “involved debates about the meaning of Americanism itself,” which holds “rule by the

common people” as “the core ideal of American democracy.”¹¹ Discussing the targets of populist politics, Canovan writes, “Populist animus is directed not just at the political and economic establishments but also at opinion-formers in the academy and the media,” seeking in each case to divide rather than unify.¹²

While not exactly a charismatic leader, Guy Fieri and his food media empire express and manipulate the basic tenets of populism. Fieri presents himself as a people’s celebrity chef and a champion of “mom-and-pop” restaurants despite his own considerable wealth, privilege, and status. Recognizing his audience’s stake in an us-versus-them debate, Fieri’s food media empire exploits this divide as he positions himself and his viewers against the culinary elite who dominate food media and dictate hegemonic definitions of “good food” and “good taste.” Communicating his populism through food, Fieri emphasizes the supposed divisions between pretentious foodies and ordinary eaters, haute cuisine and greasy burgers, fine-dining restaurants and diners, drive-ins, and dives. In doing so, Fieri’s food media empire may appear to resist dominant definitions of “good food,” but as Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco demonstrate in their work defining culinary capital, such exercises in gastronomic resistance may in fact “celebrate and refram[e] the terms through which culinary capital is attained.”¹³ In the case of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, this dual pursuit of populist resonance and culinary capital is also imagined as a nationalist project of defining America and American food.

Filmed as segments of one, long, all-American road trip, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* charts a path to Flavortown as Fieri visits primarily small, locally owned restaurants where chefs, cooks, and owners prepare their specialty dishes for the camera and Food Network’s national audience. At each location, Fieri observes the cooking process, asks questions, points out notable facts, cracks a few jokes, and, at the end of the segment, takes a bite (or two or three) of the prepared dish and gives his copious and enthusiastic compliments to the chef. Throughout the program, Fieri invokes a nationalist theme, which the show’s three tie-in cookbooks assert textually from cover to cover. With recipes for Cap’n Crunch French Toast, American Chop Suey, and BBQ Bologna Sandwiches, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives: An All-American Road Trip . . . with Recipes!* “takes you on a tour of America’s most colorful diners, drive-ins, and dives.”¹⁴ The cookbook presents the restaurants—and their related personalities and stories—as not just “good food” but also as “all-American” and distinctly American “treasures.” In the cookbook, Fieri goes further, as the introduction reads,

The show is about capturing Americana, and it embodies what the food business is in the United States. Some of the greatest chains originally started as mom-and-pop restaurants. I’m a small-restaurant owner myself; I know their marketing budgets are small. So, to have a chance to recognize these family institutions, these cultural epicenters, is unbelievable. I’m

more honored to be in their presence. They say thank you so much for coming, and I say thank you so much for existing, because this is what America is about, the opportunity and the cultural bridges.¹⁵

Fieri's second *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* cookbook, published in 2009, further extended such claims, proclaiming itself "a road map to road food that's earned its culinary citizenship in Flavortown."¹⁶ In such ways, Fieri explicitly frames *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* in terms of conscribed national identity and a multicultural American dream, rooted in notions of business culture and growth.

Furthermore, each of these cookbooks—and the many episodes of the program, which run back-to-back on Food Network for hours at a time—articulate definitions of America and American food that depend on claims to the "authentic." In studies of food, authenticity emerges as a concept with significant cultural value but one that is nevertheless constructed, contingent, and variable.¹⁷ Framed as a quest for American cuisine and a showcase of American food businesses, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* manipulates the cultural valiance of authenticity within Fieri's populist construction as a chef of and for the people. Within this framing, "the people" made up of a mass media audience—one partly imagined and partly actual viewers—who are presented as real, ordinary, and good, if at times overlooked by "the elite." This imagined audience and the theme of authenticity appear repeatedly as Fieri's cross-country road trip defines America through four key themes: 1) the value of rebellious freedom, expressed through food, tattoos, and rock music; 2) nostalgic American symbols and spaces, like the open road and the diner; 3) democratic notions of taste; and 4) a complicated multiculturalism.

Rebellious Freedom: "Cookin' It, Livin' It, Lovin' It"

Guy Fieri's notion of America capitalizes on the concept of freedom, presenting it as a cornerstone American value and attribute.¹⁸ Notably, Fieri's conception of freedom emphasizes ease, frankness, boldness, and a lack of restriction more so than consideration for political rights or liberation from the constraining power of another.¹⁹ Fieri's culinary approach purposefully plays free and loose with the rules of cuisine, breaking convention and embracing hybridity. For example, episode 6 of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*' fourteenth season features one of Fieri's own restaurants, Johnny Garlic's, in Santa Rosa, California, which exemplifies his culinary style.²⁰ Customers describe the restaurant's cuisine with phrases like "It's a very unique menu" and "They always have something different from the norm." Although Fieri's own ethnic heritage is part of the formula, Italian cuisine is by no means centralized at Johnny Garlic's, as one diner describes the fare as "a mixture of so many different cuisines," further elucidated as "Asian blended with Mexican blended with Italian

blended with Cajun.” On *Next Food Network Star*, the program on which Fieri achieved his fame, he defined his “culinary point of view” in similar ways as “the gauntlet of food. My culinary point of view is kinda off the hook and out of bounds.”²¹

While cuisine is a form of cultural expression unto itself, Fieri communicates freedom through other arts as well, including tattoos, which have a unique resonance in the professional food world. Compared to other industries, professional chefs commonly have multiple tattoos, which serve as markers of non-conformity to mainstream labor norms, unruly self-expression, and individuality, linked to the food they create.²² While Fieri is unexceptional for having more than a dozen tattoos and using them to exhibit his identity and food views, he uniquely commodified tattoo culture within his culinary brand. In this regard, Fieri’s story mirrors popular perceptions of tattoo tycoon Ed Hardy, known for his role in mainstreaming, elevating, and then commodifying U.S. tattoo culture, glitter and all. As a result, scholar Margot Mifflin argues that “hating Ed Hardy became a national pastime.”²³ Guy Fieri’s visual presentation is implicated in this Hardy hatred, as Fieri adopted Hardy-esque aesthetics wholesale in his own personal style. Fieri also incorporated such aesthetics into his cookbook *Guy Fieri Food* (2011) and his line of culinary products. Fieri-branded knives boast silver details reminiscent of flame decals, while Fieri-branded spatulas feature tattoo flash designs—scrolls that read “Cookin’ It, Livin’ It, Lovin’ It,” traditional koi fish, and a pig wearing a top hat.²⁴ While once nonconformist symbols of rebellion, Fieri’s tattoos—on his body, printed in his cookbook, and branded into his cookware—become ambivalent representations of both working-class resistance and corporate capitalism, of self-expression and mass production.

Guy Fieri also emphasizes notions of freedom through rock music and musical metaphors, which he uses to describe his persona, his audience, and his food. Fieri writes in one of his cookbooks, “All I wanted was to be a great dad and a chef . . . okay, maybe I wanted to be a rock star, but I can’t play a thing, so that wasn’t going to happen.”²⁵ Indeed, the Fieri brand co-opts rock music as another way to construct an “out-of-bounds” culinary persona, though one that reinforces the histories and contemporary representations of whiteness among both rock stars and celebrity chefs.²⁶ Fieri routinely plays air guitar with kitchen tools and makes rock hand gestures toward the camera. Fieri also mentions musicians throughout *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, like his “buddy” Sammy Hagar, and features guest appearances from Kid Rock, Gene Simmons of KISS, and Steve Harwell from Smash Mouth. In addition, when Fieri took a national food tour through dozens of cities at 5,000-seat venues in 2011 and 2012, the press dubbed it “rock ’n’ roll meets culinary,” as it included a rock sound track (with bands like Lynyrd Skynyrd and Mötley Crüe), pyrotechnic-like flame tricks, and a T-shirt cannon—elements rarely featured in cooking demonstrations.²⁷ Mentioning and featuring these various musicians serves to further establish Fieri’s “rocker” brand as an out-of-bounds celebrity chef.

Guy Fieri also employs “rock ’n’ roll” as a cultural synonym for authenticity, applying it to his audience. In *Guy Fieri Food*, Fieri recounts conducting a cooking demo at the South Beach Food and Wine Festival, which he describes as “a multiday, sophisticated affair, where people spend hundreds on tickets to watch demos and meet chefs, wineglass in hand.”²⁸ Invoking musical metaphor and class-based distinctions between elite gastronomes and his readers and viewers, Fieri describes his fans as “rock ’n’ roll,” that is, as authentic and genuine without artifice or pretention, compared to the “sophisticated,” wine-sipping crowd at the festival.

Fieri also uses rock music metaphor to explain his approach to food and why he believes it is so often critiqued. When discussing how some criticize his food as unhealthy, he says, “If you are AC/DC, you don’t get credit for slow songs. And if you are doing a show about food with a dude with crazy blond hair and tattoos who drives a hot rod, of course everyone is going to think everything you eat is deep-fried.”²⁹ In this way, Fieri aligns himself with a rock star persona while also using such a comparison to argue that he cooks and promotes healthy food, at least sometimes. When discussing the criticism he has received from other chefs, he states, “It’s like music. Do classical musicians say that rock is wrong?”³⁰ In these various ways, Fieri uses music to emphasize the differences in technique and genre between rock and classical music to discuss the differences between his own food and haute cuisine. Fieri argues that each has and deserves their own rightful place, especially in Flavortown, where a sense of rebellious freedom rules.

American Symbols and Spaces: “Take a Trip to Flavortown”

As part of its cross-country road trip, the program *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* presents specific symbols and spaces as American, often in nostalgic ways. First, the show repeatedly invokes American-made car culture as part of its definition of a free, expressive, and individualistic America and as part of Fieri’s populist appeal.³¹ Fieri sets out with the top down to discover all-American food, a search based on the trope of freely traveling the open road by car—a journey to discover the nation and the self, immortalized in American novels and films, such as Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* and *Easy Rider*.³² On *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, Fieri drives in and out of most episodes in a vintage 1967 red Chevrolet Camaro convertible.³³ A historic “muscle car,” Fieri’s Camaro establishes his all-American, white, heteronormative masculinity within the first seconds of each episode. Fieri’s celebration of classic automobiles as integral to American roadside foodways occurs within a paradoxical context, however, as the American auto industry continues to struggle economically and American car culture shows signs of decline.³⁴ Even as American car culture transforms—or perhaps because of it—*Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* emphasizes a nostalgic

automobility as a significant component of Flavortown and is part of the populism that the program and its host endorse and construct.

Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives also endorses nostalgic notions of small towns and “Main Street.” Fieri invites viewers to seek out the food, people, and feelings of Flavortown—not of Flavorcity, Flavorland, or Flavorworld. Furthermore, “Main Street” is a cultural construct that American studies scholar Miles Orvell argues is “associated with small-town culture and mores, with traditionalism, with conservative social values, and against the values of the city.”³⁵ Such depictions (and dichotomies) characterize Flavortown and the America depicted on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, though in ways more nostalgic than real.³⁶ Furthermore, this imagined Main Street community excludes members along the lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality.³⁷ Yet it retains an ambivalent appeal—or as English and American studies scholar Hua Hsu concedes in his *New Yorker* article “The Accidental American Genius of Guy Fieri,” “At its best, his show skims across an America that still works for me as an idea: mom-and-pop restaurants, local specialties, food as community and comfort.”³⁸

These nostalgic, comforting, small-town feelings resonate strongly within the diner especially as both a material and a metaphorical space. While diners are held up as archetypal American food establishments, restaurants and diners have been significant historical sites of resistance and transformation.³⁹ Historian Andrew Hurley argues that diners were a space where working-class Americans “rearticulated their aspirations and frustrations in the language of consumption,” particularly as dining out grew into an even more potent ritual demonstrating American class standing.⁴⁰ Through menu offerings, physical spaces, price points, and service norms, diners continue to symbolically communicate these “American” values and these class-based tensions surrounding dining access and food-based aspiration. Fieri reinforces the symbolic meaning of diners on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*. His cookbooks define a diner: “To fit the category, a diner does not have to be in a stainless-steel car. Diners have to be a home away from home, a place where people feel really comfortable, where the food is memorable. This is why we go, to feel part of the FAMILY.”⁴¹ Emphasizing family, home, and comfort food off the beaten path, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* highlights diners from across America, like A1 Diner in Gardiner, Maine; Standard Diner in Albuquerque, New Mexico; and Marietta Diner in Marietta, Georgia. Through American symbols and spaces—like the diner, the open road, American-made automobiles, small towns, and Main Street—Fieri and *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* construct a populist, nostalgic vision of America.

Democratic Taste: “Never Pretentious, Nothing Fancy”

In addition to notions of “freedom” and “American” symbols and spaces, Fieri’s American cuisine is decidedly rooted in his conception of democratic taste as accessible and unpretentious. With his loudmouth demeanor, supremely

casual appearance, and deliciously greasy food, Guy Fieri intentionally adopts and endorses what some would mark as lowbrow. In this way, Fieri's definition of "good food" thwarts that of mainstream food culture, which American studies scholar S. Margot Finn summarizes as gourmet, healthy, natural, and ethnically diverse.⁴² Building on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Finn argues that class anxiety, rooted in increasing income inequality and its attending correlations with various types of capital, shapes such definitions of good food.⁴³ The food that Fieri cooks and promotes is intimately implicated in these socioeconomic trends. Presenting himself as an everyman, even as he has acquired significant wealth as a Food Network star, Fieri is adored by fans but reviled by his critics. They ridicule him for so enthusiastically promoting what they perceive to be cheap, unhealthy, and lowbrow food.⁴⁴

Class tensions fuel both Fieri's fame and his polarizing status as critics squabble over the constructed differentiations between high and low culture, the authentic and the fabricated, the artisan crafted and the mass-produced.⁴⁵ For example, *The Daily Beast* rebukes Fieri as "The Trailer Park Gourmet," while in *Salon*, Farsh Askari castigates Fieri for destroying the Food Network by "gorging himself and ranting like an imbecile on fire."⁴⁶ In his *GQ* profile, Drew Magary writes (less derisively) that Fieri rarely dines out, preferring to cook at home or eat at one of his restaurants: "He is his own ideal customer—a man in love with his own middlebrow food."⁴⁷ On the other hand, Fieri's food and persona resonate strongly with his audience. While not a monolithic group, Fieri's audience includes fans historically excluded or ignored by the Food Network and food media more broadly. For the *New York Times*, Julia Moskin interviewed New Jersey residents who attended Fieri's culinary tour. They commented, "You feel like he has that same background just like you do, never pretentious, nothing fancy" and "He's the only one who never talks down to anybody."⁴⁸ Fieri performs this unpretentiousness through both food and language. Fieri wrote in his first cookbook, "See, I have a fiduciary responsibility (that's a big word for me by the way) to eat everything," carefully playing the part of the plainspoken (but omnivorous) common man.⁴⁹

This sort of populism also forms a cornerstone of Fieri's take on American cuisine, or, as Moskin put it, "Mr. Fieri's cheerful embrace of taste at the expense of tradition is an example of what makes him so popular, and of why other chefs tend to dismiss him."⁵⁰ Fieri's food opposes tradition and culinary rules. The food he cooks and promotes combines ingredients, techniques, and flavors in his own exuberant approach to fusion cuisine, tailored to appeal to the most mainstream of gastronomic desires. Fieri celebrates such tastes, while other chefs, such as Alice Waters or Jamie Oliver, endeavor to elevate, educate, or mold them. Instead, Fieri meets his audience where they are, making remarks like "A lot of people who like sushi don't really like raw fish or seaweed. So I make what they do like."⁵¹ For these eaters, he makes "The Jack Ass Roll" using tapioca paper instead of seaweed nori, using barbecued chicken instead of

raw fish, and adding in avocado and spicy chili mayo for a California twist on a Japanese tradition.

Fieri's approach to sushi demonstrates his populist resonance, which embraces "ordinary" tastes as it resists trends that have gained momentum in the past few decades.⁵² Some have considered the mainstreaming of sushi consumption in the United States post-1970 as an indicator of America developing a more robust culinary culture.⁵³ In his article "How Sushi Went Global," Theodore Bestor writes, "From an exotic, almost unpalatable ethnic specialty, then to haute cuisine of the most rarefied sort, sushi has become not just cool, but popular."⁵⁴ Speaking of our current food moment, *Food & Wine* further declares, "America has become a sushi nation . . . a nation of sushi connoisseurs, able to discuss the difference between o-toro and chu-toro."⁵⁵ Fieri's popularity makes it clear that is not the case—at least not quite. While sashimi lovers and many food writers discount consumers disinterested in or disgusted by raw fish, Fieri provides these eaters a voice, assuring them they too have good taste.⁵⁶ By speaking to and for this audience—and directly contradicting culinary experts, food writers, and foodies—Fieri exerts his populist power through provocatively named and decidedly not raw sushi.

Beyond championing such individual tastes, Fieri sees himself as a missionary-like ambassador for a particular segment of food businesses, writing, "Hopefully my industry will say I carried the torch for the mom-and-pop joints. Helping rebuild American culture, one funky joint at a time."⁵⁷ On *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, Fieri promotes affordable comfort food from across America rather than the fare that typically characterizes fine dining. Fieri writes in *More Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* that what he "digs" about doing the show is that "I get to shine a light on a real group of people—not the high-end joints with the seventy-five-dollar filet and such-and-such."⁵⁸ Similar to how he describes the fans who attended his gastro-tours as "real" compared to the festival-attending sophisticates, Fieri frames the food businesses featured on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* as authentic and real, contrasted against disingenuous, high-end restaurants.

Similarly, Fieri presents himself as a people's champion, saying, "There are people using real culinary techniques in small towns. I'm carrying the torch for mom and pops. Who else is doing that?"⁵⁹ Almost in response, Jeremy Repanich withheld criticism of Fieri in his *Playboy* article after he interviewed 100 of the restaurant owners featured on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, finding that nearly every one "has seen an increase in their business, many of them benefiting from a more than 30 percent improvement. I also found that while leaders of the artisanal food movement snobbily dismiss Fieri, they fail to recognize that Guy has become a champion of restaurants who operate with the ethos foodies hold so dear."⁶⁰

For example, Fieri takes the *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* audience out for handmade noodles with chicken at Frank's Noodle House, an unassuming Portland, Oregon, restaurant. Fieri learns from Frank how to make hand-pulled

noodles, which involves kneading, preparing, and resting the dough for hours before skillfully pulling and bouncing it into long, slender noodles, ready to be boiled. The chicken for the dish marinates for thirty minutes before Frank combines it with the noodles, vegetables, and sauce—what Fieri describes as “a rocket ship to Flavortown.”⁶¹ Taking his camera crew into Frank’s small kitchen, Fieri demonstrates the significant skill, time, and effort that goes into making a takeout dish that can reach the eater in mere minutes and costs only \$12.95.⁶² As part of his populist persona, Fieri presents himself as an advocate for lesser-known and less acknowledged—or even derided—people, foods, and places, all of which he incorporates into his definition of an authentic American cuisine defined by democratic taste.

Multiculturalism: “This is the American Dream”

Finally, Fieri’s definition of America incorporates a complicated and ambivalent multiculturalism. Multicultural theorists typically reject the “melting pot” ideal, a metaphor often used to describe American food culture but one that demands the assimilation of minority groups into the dominant culture. Instead, multiculturalism “favors an ideal in which members of minority groups can maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices” as part of cultural integration.⁶³ Emphasizing the unique and the universal, the funky and the familiar, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* endorses an America and an American food culture that is distinctively diverse rather than assimilated and melted down. In her defense of Guy Fieri in *Lucky Peach*, Julia Turshen picks up on this theme as she writes, “When it comes to visibility and inclusiveness, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* succeeds. . . . Food allows the show to highlight inclusivity without being *about* inclusivity.”⁶⁴ *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* attempts to represent a multicultural America in the ways that it depicts ethnicity, race, immigration, and citizenship status as well as region, space, and place in relation to “authentic” American food culture.

Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives features chefs, restaurant owners, and cuisines from all over the world. As but one example, a season 13 episode featured all family-run restaurants with varied specialties: hand-pulled noodles in Vancouver, barbecued fish tacos in Virginia Beach, and Cuban sandwiches in Brooklyn.⁶⁵ While the emphasis on a nostalgic notion of family sanitizes and universalizes the program’s attempted multiculturalism, it nevertheless endorses America and American food culture as culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse. Episodes repeat this emphasis, purposefully promoting restaurants and foods that take a hybrid or unique approach. Fieri frames Creole classics in Los Angeles; Hapa ramen in Lahaina, Hawaii; and vegan meats and cheeses in Minneapolis as just as American as the grilled cheese sandwiches, hot dogs, and burgers he promotes on other episodes.⁶⁶ The *More Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* cookbook also includes stereotypical American dream narratives, like the Tune-Up Café in Santa Fe, New Mexico—where El Salvadorian owner Jesus

Rivera serves up beef pupusa and banana leaf tacos alongside “comfort food, like stuffed French toast, and Southwestern favorites like chiles rellenos”—which Fieri describes as “the American dream.”⁶⁷ In another episode dedicated to “southern staples” in season 13, Fieri presents three different versions of American southern fare, served up in Vancouver, Charleston, and New York City.⁶⁸ Southern food proves a demonstrative episode theme for Fieri, as he demonstrates how the South can be reimagined and reconfigured in geographies throughout North America, though notably in an effort to construct an “America” of Fieri’s own design.⁶⁹ Capitalizing on the cultural salience of such stories, Fieri weaves immigrant and family narratives into his definition of multicultural American food, presenting each restaurant and every dish as a unique and distinct citizen of Flavortown, USA. These narratives in some ways mirror Fieri’s own Italian American heritage, though his ethnicity goes largely unmarked within his programs and cookbooks, demonstrating the prominence of a universalized, white Americanness within the Fieri brand, even as it endorses multiculturalism.

In addition to promoting American food as ethnically and racially diverse, prepared by American-born and immigrant cooks alike, Fieri also draws attention to food businesses located in geographies across the United States, not just those on (what tend to be framed as) the “elite” coasts or in “hot” food cities. In “A Q&A with ‘Guido’ Fieri” in *More Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, Fieri reinforces this focus on diverse and often overlooked places and spaces as he names Salt Lake City, Phoenix, and Cleveland among his favorite food cities.⁷⁰ While many episodes of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* feature eateries in California or New York, the program visits restaurants in nearly every state, often advocating for restaurants squirreled away in strip malls, nestled next to railroad tracks, or based near industrial parks—eateries with unassuming storefronts and humble interiors.⁷¹

Despite these various attempts to depict a multicultural American food culture, *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* nevertheless engages in “culinary colonialism.”⁷² The program presents American foodways made from “the best places you’ve never heard of” that viewers can “discover” in thirty-minute segments and then visit (and consume) for themselves.⁷³ Like the hosts of other food travel programs, Fieri employs imperialist language when he describes the show’s production, saying, for example, “I feel like we’re astronauts exploring a new world.”⁷⁴ While Fieri presents *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* as an “All-American road trip,” he also refers to it as a “quest” and a “search,” an exploratory mission to discover, map, and codify food, people, and places. Such distinctions reify assumptions that cast white, Western, well-financed men as explorers and immigrants, people of color, and women as those to be explored. Fieri tells food stories from his own position of power to a mostly white audience who exist within environments of both relative permanence and safety. The notion of hybridity that Fieri highlights and endorses enacts imbalances of power as

it engages cuisines and peoples that are constantly subject to alteration, appropriation, and erasure.

Compared to international culinary travel shows—like Bourdain’s *No Reservations* (2005–2012) and *Parts Unknown* (2013–2018), Huang’s *Huang’s World* (2016–present), or Zimmern’s *Bizarre Foods* (2006–present)—*Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* turns the focus of culinary conquest inward, giving it a domestic energy. *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* infuses gastronomic exploration with populist sentiment as it invites viewers to discover (or rediscover) what the program presents as “real,” “authentic,” “good,” and “American” food. The program claims this food in the name of Flavortown, which aspires to inclusivity. Despite this, the program marks certain cuisines, ingredients, techniques, flavors, cooks, and eaters as Other. Yet this act of marking is enacted within a contradictory process that endeavors to include all of these aspects and people as part of a diverse and inclusive America. It is this ambiguously multicultural definition of American food that Guy Fieri pays tribute to on the menu at Guy’s American Kitchen and Bar.

Conclusion: Guy Fieri’s America, Alive (for a Moment) in Times Square

Guy Fieri’s all-American road trip culminated in one of his most significant restaurant ventures, Guy’s American Kitchen and Bar on 44th Street in New York City, which opened in the autumn of 2012 and closed at the end of 2017 without explanation from Fieri. At the restaurant, a giant, flashing “Guy Fieri’s” sign, visible for more than a block, beckoned eaters from Times Square toward Flavortown—no longer an imagined place but an actual restaurant. Here visitors could observe, feel, and even taste the American themes that Fieri promotes on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*. The “Our Story” section of the Guy’s American Kitchen and Bar website (whose URL was aptly www.guysamerican.com) further positioned the restaurant as the material culmination of *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, drawing on American tropes and notions of small, hometown community:

There’s nothing like authentic. Nothing beats the real thing. Cars can’t fake fast, guitars can’t fake rock and roll, and no one can fake the feel-good flavors of American cuisine. Guy Fieri is one of the hottest celebrity chefs on the scene. In Guy’s Food Network series, *Diners, Drive Ins, and Dives*, he tastes his way across the backroads of America gathering eclectic and savory inspiration along the way. This first-hand knowledge of American comfort food gone wild fuels the menu at Guy’s American Kitchen & Bar. This dynamic restaurant features Guy’s signature style of cooking, big on flavor and short on boundaries. Guy Fieri packs classic

American cuisine with unexpected flavor; food done right and sometimes in a way you never thought possible. Simply put, Guy's American Kitchen & Bar allows hometown favorites and culinary expertise to satisfy the bold flavor cravings of visitors, fans and insatiable New Yorkers.⁷⁵

References to food “gone wild” and “short on boundaries” emphasized the freedom of expression that Fieri employs to define America and American food. Multiple references—to fast cars, guitars, rock and roll, the backroads of America, comfort food, classic American cuisine, and hometown favorites—all positioned the fare at Guy's American Kitchen and Bar as emblematic of Americanness, at least as defined by Fieri and his own standards of authenticity and realness.

From the menus to the decor, Guy's American Kitchen and Bar invoked classic tropes of America, overtly presented in a red, white, and blue color palette. The restaurant facade, menus, and drink coasters boasted a Fieri-branded seal: a bald eagle with wings spread wide, its head emblazoned with the stars and stripes of the American flag. The three-story restaurant seated an epic 500 guests, physically embodying the notion of “American” abundance. The various seating areas also connoted the virile masculinity of the West, with mounted antlers, leather seats, and rustic hardwood floors. Throughout the restaurant, classic American symbols—rock music, car culture, vintage posters for ketchup and Levi's denim, and the American flag—invoked a nostalgic (and reductionist) sense of the nation.

Guy's American Kitchen and Bar also communicated Americanness through the menu and its food items, which can be read and interpreted as a distinct narrative, similar to a cookbook.⁷⁶ Dishes were conceptually linked to *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* and a particular configuration of American cuisine that is culturally accessible, hybrid, and distinctive. On the restaurant's website, the menu was described as follows:

The menu at Guy's American Kitchen & Bar reflects his signature style of authentic and surprising flavors. Guy has traveled over 150,000 miles across America's backroads in *Diners, Drive-ins and Dives* in search of the best regional fare: Guy knows American food to the core. The dishes are crafted with the heart and soul of hometown favorites and infused with Guy's big, daring flavors. You will find beloved comfort food with a spin only Guy could have envisioned. Hope you're hungry, because Guy's imagination knows no boundaries.⁷⁷

This description captures all four themes of Fieri's America: 1) freedom of expression with “big, daring flavors” that are crafted with “heart and soul”;

2) American symbols and spaces, such as “backroads” and “hometowns”; 3) democratic taste for “beloved comfort food”; and 4) a multicultural cuisine that emphasizes regional variation and makes claims to be “authentic and surprising.” The appetizers alone offered fusion mash-ups that Fieri presents as wholly American: Guy-talian Nachos, Sashimi Tacos, Chipotle BBQ Pork Soft Tacos, and California Egg Rolls. With such a menu, Fieri literally set out to bring Flavortown to life, a climactic moment in the road trip’s narrative.

When I dined at Guy’s American Kitchen and Bar in December 2016, I walked throughout the sprawling restaurant, taking in table after table of families and couples—all visiting Flavortown for the chance to “live it” and “love it.” I observed the restaurant’s “vintage Americana roadhouse flare” at a cheery holiday party that had reserved the entire downstairs space. At the muscle car bar, a crowd of men in suits enjoyed a rowdy happy hour. When pressed, our server shared that many of the patrons he waited on were fans of Guy Fieri and *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives* who dined at the restaurant based on its proximity to the theater district as well as to make a specific pilgrimage to Flavortown. They hoped to catch a glimpse of Guy Fieri in the flesh or that their server might have met him and could attest to his “realness”—to affirm that Guy Fieri truly embraces their food views and them. The notions of authenticity on which Fieri built Flavortown now shape how his fans imagine and interact with his mediated persona.

Created on *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*, immortalized in the notion of Flavortown, and made material at Guy’s American Kitchen and Bar, Guy Fieri’s definitions of America and American food maintain his populist gastronomic brand. Fieri’s brand draws from a common set of tropes and symbols often deployed on political stages, applying them to his food media empire. The small-town and the mom-and-pop restaurant define Fieri’s America. These twin icons are meant to embody the identities and struggles of “ordinary” spaces, places, and people left outside of food media’s purview. Fieri’s America embraces conservative social values, emphasizing, for example, family and food spaces associated with it, like the diner. Invoking values like freedom and abundance, Fieri’s America and foodways depend heavily on the nostalgic resonance of long-standing American symbols like the flag, the bald eagle, American-made cars, and the open road. At the same time, Fieri’s American cuisine endorses chefs who break the traditional rules of cuisine, applauding culinary innovation—the funkier, the better—and promoting all kinds of hybridity. Fieri resists what are perceived as the elitist values of the city and the coasts, instead promoting a definition of good food that shuns pretension. Fieri’s populist persona speaks directly to eaters who oppose culinary elites and who experience a sense of disenfranchisement regarding their own sociocultural status. Through the language of food, Guy Fieri’s expansive food media empire provides a method for considering the most recent rise of populist sentiment in the United States, what motivates it, and what feeds it.

Notes

I extend sincere thanks to Susan Smulyan, Richard Meckel, and Deborah Weinstein for their comments on this work when it existed within the pages of my dissertation. I also thank the Brown University Gender and Sexuality Studies Graduate Colloquium, Diana Garvin, the anonymous reviewers, the *American Studies* editors, and, most especially, guest editor Lauren Rabinovitz for their helpful comments on this article.

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