



# **#PandemicFoodPorn: Resilience and Precarity During COVID-19**

By Rahul Mitra

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I'm generally too distracted or impatient to be a good cook, so that “quick and easy” recipes or improvisations are what I generally do, although I'm an utter foodie. I am the younger son of a middle-class Bengali family, who had a fairly unconventional upbringing in some ways (owing to my maternal grandmother's Anglo-Indian heritage, for instance, we celebrated Christmas with a big turkey spread), while being all-too traditional in others—as with so many other Indian male children, I was never taught how to cook, nor valued the labor of cooking, although I love(d) to eat. In my late 30s now, living in the US, not only do I have profound admiration for those who are excellent cooks, recognizing their meticulous work, attention to detail, and keen senses, I have also become acutely aware of the ways food connects people and communicates our thoughts, feelings, ideas, desires, and selves...

Especially now, during my quarantine at home, while the COVID-19 pandemic rages on.

My first #PandemicFoodPorn Facebook post was on March 24, 2020, because I wanted to share the amazing meal my husband had cooked for dinner—a flank of steak, with caramelized onions, corn, and broccoli, and homemade corn bread. By this

time, I'd been quarantining for about two weeks, as the first cases of COVID in the Detroit area, where I live, began registering. I was fortunate to be on sabbatical from my day job as a university professor during this time, so that I didn't have to head out anywhere to teach classes. Although my husband Ian asked the staff at his small interior design company to work from home, he still headed into the deserted office most days, since his equipment, samples and order records were all there – and he's never been one for “the cloud,” in any case.

March 2020 was rough. I felt incredibly isolated from everyone for the first two weeks, so that my sleeping/waking hours were entirely overturned, my work productivity nosedived, and I moped around the house in my flannel robe binge-watching Netflix, Amazon Prime, PBS, HBO... Just as I started to surface from my ennui, thanks in no small part to Ian's help and support, I realized that he was flailing as well, with seemingly no end to Michigan's shelter-in-place orders, which made things incredibly uncertain for most small businesses. He had always been an amazing cook, but now he began to spend more time reading recipes online, watching cooking shows on TV, experimenting with different flavors and ingredients, and produced some incredibly mouth-watering dishes, desserts and cocktails. Food, it became clear, was healing us.

And that's how my posting pictures and updates of food, labeling them #PandemicFoodPorn, happened. I'd read a news article about how a new genre of porn had emerged, centered around dystopian fantasies in the midst of the pandemic—“pandemic porn”—and so I thought to myself, *why the hell not?* Almost two

months after my quarantine began, as I scroll through Facebook today, I realize that my #PandemicFoodPorn posts constitute a veritable “Dear Diary” in the time of COVID-19, and a few things in particular come to mind.

In [my academic research](#), I study [resilience](#) at the social-ecological level—how communities are able to “bounce back” from environmental disruptions by enacting systemic learning that helps them adapt. Now, Ian and I, stressed out as we were, both for our health and “sudden” financial precarity, were trying to be resilient. For Ian, “making” the food (not just “cooking” it)—going through recipes online, late-night culinary shows on Amazon Prime, Netflix and PBS, spending around 3 hours gathering, sorting, and preparing ingredients (instead of his 30-40 minutes pre-Pandemic)—was a communicative act of cultivating resilience. For me, watching him cook, staying up with him during those late-night shows, photographing pictures of the food as if for a Martha Stewart cookbook, posting them online with glowing reviews, and responding to comments from friends was resilience as well—both to connect with the larger world “out there,” the friends and family who were suddenly now restricted to names and hyperlinks on smartphone apps, and to pull us closer together as a couple during this storm.

Second, I am reminded of the role identity affirmation plays in shaping resilience, both individually and at the collective level. As Ian and I discussed menu options for the evening, we would joke about this or that “signature” dish—his “secret” salad dressing, or the way he “specially” char-grilled his burgers, and the few “Indian-ish” foods that I cook moderately well, like the sausage curry inspired by the Anglo-Indian side of my

family and trips to Goa with college friends. I began to share our #PandemicFoodPorn pictures with my brother (in Melbourne) and parents (in Kolkata) on Whatsapp, and they replied with pictures of their own—“misal pav” and other Mumbai-style street food from my brother’s partner, and goofy emojis with drooling tongues from my mother (who can’t cook either, by the way). Ian and I shared stories about the food we had grown up eating, but also experimented with and re-combined with food from different cultures, like putting North Indian “keema” in tacos with chopped onions, cilantro and freshly squeezed lime from our indoor tree.

Finally, I am reminded of the different ways privilege plays out, shaping our experiences of/with food, identity and resilience during this pandemic. With my parents locked down in their Kolkata apartment, without their daily helper to come cook for them, my mother has scrambled to whip up basic foods like “dal”, rice and vegetables, while relying on the kindness of their neighbors who drop by prepared dishes now and then. But that hardship pales in comparison to what must surely be experienced now by the millions of Indian domestic helpers, daily wage laborers, construction workers and rural migrants, left stranded and jobless by the pandemic and its economic shutdown. Privilege plays out here in Michigan, as well. While I remain ensconced in the northern suburb of Royal Oak, [the city of Detroit—only 20 minutes away—has been hard-hit by COVID-19](#), which has disproportionately impacted older, Brown and Black folk. My work on urban water affordability and small business development has brought me in contact with so many amazing people on the ground, like my friend S, who is a civil rights activist and water warrior, and delivers cases of bottled water to

vulnerable residents whose water had been shut off by the city for being unable to pay their bills. When I saw on Facebook that S was on a ventilator in the hospital with COVID, I texted her husband M to inquire how she was doing. M sounded wan and tired. They were hoping for the best, he said; he had tested positive as well, but was self-quarantining at home because his symptoms were relatively minor. When I asked how I could help, he replied, “You know, I haven’t really been eating for about a week, since I’ve lost my appetite, but now I’m sort of craving tuna. Do you have any spare cans at home?”

I chuckled/choked up, and an hour later dropped off a brown paper bag with six cans of tuna and eight butter croissants from a grocery dash, on his front porch. A couple of days later, when we learned that M’s ventilator was removed and she would be soon returning home, things seemed to be turning around for the better at last.

The thing with resilience, though, is that you never know when you need it. That same day, I received news my friend C, who was a volunteer nurse at the Detroit Medical Center, had succumbed to the virus. I don’t think Ian and I had dinner that evening.

