

Clear-up
on Aisle 5

Amy Barnes



Clean-up On Aisle 5

Amy Barnes

Published by Daily Drunk Press

Clean-up On Aisle 5 © Amy Barnes

Cover art by: Pexels

All Rights Reserved.

Advance Praise

Proust had madeleines; Amy Barnes has powdered donuts with raspberry jelly filling. The food reviews in *Clean-Up On Aisle 5* are a journey through memories, senses, and America in all its mass-produced, fast-food-filled glory. Fair warning: I ordered four pints of Jeni's ice cream after reading Amy's review of Jeni's Strawberry Pretzel Pie ice cream.

- Janine Annett, author of *I Am "Why Do I Need Venmo?" Years Old: Adventures in Aging*.

"She is damn good, and that's the long, thin, wide and short of it. She goes to places with ideas and words while the rest of us are left standing around with our hands in our pockets wondering what just happened. I love Amy and her writing, and you will soon, too."

- Jessica Delfino author of *Dumb Jokes for Smart Folks*

Barnes writes about dreams and processed foods, and I am here for it. Barnes intertwines reviews of junk food and storytelling to create something unique: a journey through corn syrup and memory, through the self and snacks. Barnes isn't eating simply because she's hungry. She wants to know more. These essays are aware that we're constantly in conversation with advertising, desire, and our past. After you read this collection, you're going to feel inspired to try that new weird potato chip flavor and listen to the stories it tells you.

- MM Carrigan, Editor of Taco Bell Quarterly

Table of Contents

- Herr's Grilled Cheese and Tomato Soup Flavored Cheese Curls -
 - Powdered Donuts with Raspberry Jelly Filling -
 - McDonald's Shamrock Shake -
 - Aldi Schnitzel, Spaetzle, and Bienenstich Almond Cake -
- Keebler Cookies & Creme Whoopsy! Fudge Stripes Cookies -
 - First Watch Millionaire Bacon -
 - Hostess Limited-Edition Peppermint Twinkies -
 - Fudder Pucker (Powdered Sugar) -
 - Mrs. Thinsters' Cookie Thins Cake Batter -
 - Twix and Snickers Eggs -
- All-Natural 100% Veggies Sweet Corn Crunch Dried Kernels Sprinkled With Sea Salt -
 - Green Maraschino Cherries -
- Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream White House Chocolate Chip -
 - Better Get a Butter Turkey -
 - Herr's Pumpkin Spice Flavored Snack Balls -
 - Jeni's Strawberry Pretzel Pie -
 - Trader Joe's Organic Carrots of Many Colors -
 - The Curd of Cheese -
 - Where's The Bell Beefer -
- Boar's Head Bold MarBleu Marbled Blue Monterey Jack Cheese -
 - Trader Joe's Almond Windmill Cookies -
- Wine-and-Cheesing: Want Some Wine in that Cheese? -
 - P.F. Chang's Red Lantern and Fire & Ice -

Herr's Grilled Cheese and Tomato Soup Flavored Cheese Curls (McSweeney's)

Cracker Barrel WAS my safe space. Crackers in barrels, not boxes. Maple sugar leaf candy hugging all-American striped candy sticks in a completely platonic, summer penpal kind of way. My idyllic dream ended when I saw something high above the cashier's register. Hidden from view by Cracker Barrel's version of the convenience store block-the-naked-bits-on-magazines cardboard; I could only see the top of the bag.

I asked the cashier if I could see what was up there with the equally naughty buck-eye balls that were also out of the reach of children. She gasped. Two apron-clad Cracker Barrel gim-gack gift wrappers dropped their respective gim-gacks and gee-gaws. One of the more grandmotherly Cracker Barrel greeters covered up the eyes of the random child next to her. I repeated the request and the cashier put on winter gloves to bring the contraband down to me.

When I saw the title, I knew I was in uncharted territory. Herr's Grilled Cheese & Tomato Soup Flavored Cheese Curls. These were like the bad boy cousin of the Lay's Million Dollar chip flavor contest sent to die in chip reject rocking chair hell. As the Gaither band played in the background in a frantic attempt to save my soul, I gazed upon the devil's cheese curls, too naughty for Lay's. Too flammable to sit next to Trudeau's maple flavored gift to the rednecks.

These are the goose-stepping kind of chips that you think poke you in the grocery store aisle like a naughty child but you aren't sure because it may have been an actual toddler. It's not enough that they screw with the traditional potato chip formula; they start with a base of (gasp) cheese curls.

I recently toured a Golden Flake Factory (and had been waiting for my next chip spy mission for a while). I saw the carnage of cheese curl making. Factory workers doomed to a life of cheese. On their clothes. Up their noses. Down their pants.

In the very creases of their skin. The tour guide told us to not reveal any of the Golden Flake secrets as we left the factory. As I held the Herr's curls in my hands, I felt a pang of guilt that I was betraying my country.

I asked myself if I should allow these chips to enter my mouth? And yet, I was drawn in by the lure of grilled cheese and tomato soup infused in a soup, as one often is after consuming a pound of lard and enough hot chocolate to fill a manmade lake. Trudeau's maple leaves mocked me from around the corner as I veered into Germanic snack territory. Would the cheese curls taste like the childhood favorite but cold and cheese curl-y? Would the Golden Flake people find me in the parking lot and throw me into their delivery van on the way to interrogation?

I took a bite. It was a cruel joke. Tomato flavored packing peanut covered in Cheeto dust. Not worth risking my life or my country.

The cashier had already put up another bag of Herr's folly to tempt the next person. As I licked my maple leaf candy (because who can turn down Trudeau even in a Cracker Barrel) out into the parking lot, I thought I felt a poke at my butt. I looked back. The Herr's bag was gone from its forbidden food perch. I zigzagged the maze of ceramic pigs and Christmas tree ornaments like I was navigating a maze of laser lights.

The Gaithers were singing some gospel/coded message version of Auf Weidersen, Good Night. As I came up for air in the parking lot just past the rocking chairs and the checkerboards; I made sure I had licked off the last bits of tomato cheese dust from my lips. In case the Golden Flake people were indeed watching and lying in wait to spirit away my traitorous self.

Powdered Donuts with Raspberry Jelly Filling (McSweeney's)

There is open carnage at Wal-Mart. During a recent trip to Sam Walton's haven for pajama-clad shoppers, I discovered an oddity of my childhood in the Midwest: the powdered donut with raspberry jelly filling.

After years of scouring Ebay for the "pastry" and yet still not buying because they were \$12 a box plus shipping, I saw them on the bottom shelf next to the multi-grain bread in some attempt at calorie equalization. Since they have been off the shelves for thirty-five years plus, they are a new food to the Deep South.

I'd thought the dream was over because the gooey original of my childhood was a Hostess product. Many years ago in a donut-induced craving fit, I called Hostess and was told they couldn't ship cross country due to the fragile nature of the donuts. I guess interstate trips were okay if the donuts had a trained psychologist on board the transit truck.

The donuts themselves are a bit of a mysterious anomaly. With an innocent white powdered sugar outside, shoppers may not initially know that a dark center of raspberry jelly awaits them. I silently dared the lady with a baby and two toddlers loose in her cart to buy a box if nothing else but to get them on auto reorder to give me future fixes. I also secretly wanted her to get the surprise jelly bomb of confusion. She didn't pick up the battered box and I knew they were mine. I took them home and whispered sweet nothings so they wouldn't have a mental breakdown in the car.

When I got home, I opened the box with the fervor of Carrie Bradshaw addressing a pair of Manolos. The first bite was the expected powdered mess. And then the bloodshed began with that familiar glop of raspberry jelly. And it was over in a huge caloric sugar rush. I shut the box lid as I had consumed contraband.

My kids asked if they could have a donut and I told them they were mommy food. And it was. I was only able to eat one donut before the expiration date that fell on the following day.

The fragility factor was definitely there. The remaining five donuts were hard white pellets by morning.

The next time I went to WalMart, I saw they had added chocolate frosted donuts with raspberry filling to the shelf. The dark, dark donut exteriors beckoned for a minute but it was a little too Kim Kardashian for me. In the neatly organized donut and bread aisle, the white powdered donuts were oddly scattered. The confused shoppers must have taken a look and then discarded these donut oddities. Or in my warped WalMart brain, I imagined some kind of donut gang war for shelf dominance.

I will stick with my mentally unstable white powdered donuts but the craving has lessened. The love affair I had with them when I was five is not the same as in my forties. I realize the laws of retail reordering and offer a thank you for this one-time offering by the donut trucking gods. Something old has been made new again. But only for a moment before each white powdered donut with raspberry filling is deflowered anew.

McDonald's Shamrock Shake (McSweeney's)

My Irish ancestors arrived in the United States in the 1920s. They promptly met up with the Sicilian side of my family and a carb-filled history was born. At Ellis Island, the Irish surname went from McYoung to Young, a stroke of the pen removing the Irish “Mc” forever, while the Sicilian name stayed the same but was mispronounced for the next century. In tribute to their immigration path, I have officially sworn I will never go paleo or carb-free or just plain potato-free. Celebrating my Irish and Italian heritage means I eat pasta and potatoes in all forms from mashed to fried to covered in slowly-simmered sauces.

While I am always on the lookout for potatoes, around mid-February I start frequenting the fast food joint that keeps their “Mc” and also loves potatoes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. From hashbrowns to French fries, McDonald's serves up my starchy favorites in ways that would probably make my Irish ancestors turn over in their graves. And for one mint-filled month, I call on the patron saint of St. Patrick to guide me to McDonald's and the Shamrock Shake.

The Shamrock Shake was the ultimate frozen treat of my childhood. Back then, the shakes were just green (vibrant St. Patrick's Day green). Much like fountain drinks at McDonald's taste differently somehow, the flavor of an '80s Shamrock Shake was like a leprechaun; it was really just vanilla tinted Irish-Catholic green. Although, it would probably have been too confusing to have a Shamrock Shake that was tinted Protestant orange.

There was a decade or two when Shamrock shakes weren't on the McDonald's menu at all. I lamented the loss of my childhood favorite (and cursed the Hamburglar for stealing them). I also called out to St. Patrick to bring back the Shamrock Shake. I may have even buried a St. Joseph statue in my small town McDonald's parking lot.

I had brief moments of hope: the McRib did come back. But I slowly began to accept the Shamrock Shake might be gone

forever when I read the last restaurant serving the McPizza had shut down their pizza ovens. I cried when they stopped serving the snack-sized servings of Hamburglar cookies. The death of the salad with a separate dressing cup and the McDLT just further chopped off the “Mc” for me. The restaurant signs might as well have just been flashing “Donald’s,” cut short by a misguided marketing executive. Ironically, my ancestors were the immigrant-to-hate du jour when they arrived. Losing the McPizza and the Shamrock Shake was akin to a fast food slam against both of my ancestral families.

I tried making a Shamrock Shake at home. It was an abject failure. Every St. Patrick’s Day, I yelled into the drive-thru speaker asking if they had Shamrock Shakes and somehow ended up with a hamburger patty and nothing else. The drive-thru workers had never seen or heard of a Shamrock Shake. They tried offering me strawberry or vanilla or chocolate shakes before I left the drive-thru empty-handed.

And then one day, I saw the sign: the Shamrock Shake was back. Like the green-tinged Statue of Liberty beckoning the hungry, the nostalgic and the Irish and not-so-Irish. The image of a tall plastic cup of green milkshake standing as a drive-thru sentinel thrilled me like a King Cake or a piece of Friday Lenten fish. It was if I had made it from Palm Sunday to Easter without drinking, cussing, or eating chocolate. I was finally being rewarded by St. Patrick for my shake devotion.

However much I was thrilled to return to the shake of my youth and faintly my ancestors, there is something culturally-sanitized about the Shamrock Shake. The pale (now “vanilla mint”) green shake is tinted in a way that is more Miami Vice linen suit than vibrant Irish green. It is like the Queer Eye guys of 2019 designed a milkshake for a new generation of shake aficionados, pastel and just-mint enough, but not quite a McDonald’s food from the heydays when creepy characters haunted the PlayPlace.

It wasn’t enough the Shamrock Shake came back from wherever the McRib (which sounds oddly like some Irish skeleton still covered in peat) was hidden. This year, McDonald’s

has teched-up the process of finding Shamrock Shakes with a locator app. While that only works if their perpetually-broken ice cream machines are operating, there is something very pot-of-gold leprechaun-ish about dropping in my zip code to find a Shamrock Shake at the end of the app rainbow.

The first Shamrock sip is still as magical as it was in my childhood. However, I only take a few sips before passing it to my kids though who still have the magical, lucky metabolism to drink 800 calories in one sitting. I know the Shamrock Shake could disappear with a poof at any moment.

For one glorious month in the Spring, I know the golden arches will guide me to a smooth, mint Shamrock Shake. As I gleefully tell my friends and family about the new Shamrock Shake locator app, I whisper a blessing with the “Mc” intact: May the Shamrock Shake rise up to meet you and may the ice cream machine always be clean. And then I go bury a St. Joseph statue in the McDonald’s parking lot just in case.

Aldi Schnitzel, Spaetzle, and Bienenstich Almond Cake (McSweeney's)

I've been to a German Aldi store. It's not your typical tourist destination but I felt inexplicably drawn to the red-haired Trader Joe's cousin in another country. It's like the motherland for low-priced food and carts that keep quarters captive in their mouth until you share with the next shopper.

Some of the food in a German Aldi is the same as in the States — potato chips, milk, cheese, eggs, bread — albeit with German subtitles. Stores in America and Germany are both laid out in the same soldier-straight rows with a barebones approach, overworked cashiers, and mostly store-brand products. I brought German Aldi chocolate back in my suitcase when everyone else brought back cognac and wine.

I recently went to my local stateside Aldi to get my list of grocery staples. The Aldi stores in the United States do have occasional rogue German foods scattered through the stores. Packages of bratwurst by the hot dogs. German mustard next to the generic dayglo version. However, on this visit, the store was quieter than usual. No elevator music. Only a few scattered shoppers without squeaky carts. No screaming toddlers.

And then, I heard faint music playing. The song was oddly familiar as it echoed through the aisles. Maybe a polka. Maybe a Sound of Music anthem. I found myself being drawn through the store like I was on Guy's German Grocery Games searching for sauerkraut (aisle 2). I imagined the ghostly steps of lederhosen-clad cashiers and big bosomed German sample ladies as I was in that mountaintop German Aldi. Was I going to enter some kind of grocery store trapdoor or was this just a Small World limited time exhibit in a suburban grocery store?

I got my answer when my invisible, magic German guide led me to the frozen food case. I was face to face with the motherland, hinterland. Envisioned by what must have been a very drunk

Aldi marketing department. While one simple German offering would have been enough, Aldi went overboard by providing an entire meal in the freezer case. In case I didn't know these were German foods (rather than Tennessee offerings), each package was emblazoned with a banner stating the foods were "Imported from Germany" with a German flag in a circle waving at me like it was a royal Aldi trademark.

A rather sad Pork Schnitzel started the international meal offerings. Described as an "uncooked pork loin" with a "delicious saltine cracker breading," the schnitzel seemed like an afterthought in the line-up. It promised to taste like German shoe leather with a dry crust that would keep me from whistling doe-a-deer-a-female-deer. Even though I knew I wouldn't be able to whistle in German, I threw some schnitzel in my cart because honestly, when could I ever say I had thrown a schnitzel?

Aldi must have also known a dry schnitzel wouldn't cut it (romantically or for dinner). The next frozen option tried really hard to be equally German-ly traditional and yet not quite: garlic sage, mushroom, or cheese spaetzle. I was beginning to think there was a German grandmother held hostage in the back of the Aldi making odd spaetzle for an American market. All the while a group of marketing execs was writing all the German words they knew up on a whiteboard. Except they thought the following terms were German: sage and butter sauce, mozzarella cheese, and a mix of mushrooms and sheathed wood tufts (which just sounds dirty, not German). The final straw in the German-ish side department was the "Artichoke & Cheese" and "Spinach & Ricotta Strudel" labeled as delicious puff pastries. It was like Greece, Italy, and Germany had a threesome and then a food baby was born in the Aldi aisles.

In this international freezer case, Aldi saved the best for last. Dessert, German style: Bienenstich Almond Cake, Deutsche Kuche (with a very German umlaut), and Caramel Apple Strudel. The marketing team was really shooting for broke with these dessert descriptions and images. While all the packaging was flying a German flag of authenticity and a tiny German castle in the upper

left-hand corner, the desserts obviously had food stylists in the German packing plant/photography staging area. A glass jar of honey with rustic raffia, burlap, and almonds in and out of their shells and a smear of some kind of white cream decorated the box. No German beer. Just a notation to let shoppers know the desserts were “enlarged to show texture.”

“A delicious traditional German golden cake filled with vanilla flavored cream, topped with caramelized flaked almonds”

I couldn't resist any of these hybrid, frozen German offerings. I still wanted to check the back room to see if there was a German grandma there or maybe just the marketing team playing German copy bingo. By the time I checked out and got my German food-in-a-box home, it was dinner time. I turned my kitchen into a dry schnitzel, fake spaetzle, and almost-German almond cake wonderland. As Aldi took over my dining table, I could swear I heard small children singing “It's a Small World.” I couldn't quite convince my husband to wear his lederhosen (at least not for dinner). The kids did do a fair rendition of “Auf Wiedersehen, Goodnight” before asking for hamburgers and fries because they were still starving after two bites of Germany, compliments of Aldi.

Keebler Cookies & Creme Whoopsy! Fudge Stripes Cookies (McSweeney's)

The political climate has definitely driven me to emotionally stress eat. In times of stress, I don't turn to Mother Mary — at least not for food. She is only good for some great '60s music and fervent, rosary-driven prayers. As I run my fingers down those beads (rainbow bedroom curtain or rosary — take your pick), I truly find comfort in cookies. All kinds. The kinds with names that make me giggle like a snickerdoodle. The old favorites that are simple and filled with chocolate chips. The oatmeal raisin ones that masquerade as cookies but are actually just breakfast cookies. The ones that have a name that begins with “M” that I still can't get straight: which one is the macaroon, the macaron, or the Macron? All very tasty cookies, especially that last one.

In my cookie-led haze, I've also begun binge-watching *The Twilight Zone* and *The Great British Baking Show* (still mad that the American version couldn't even stay on because one of the judges had sticky fingers). Somehow, those shows seem like a fitting duo of people being tortured: some with odd short stories and others with obscure British recipes and soggy bottoms. They all kind of blur together in a haze of sugar and theme music.

One of the creepiest *Twilight Zone* episodes was apparently a crossover event with the baking shows of their times; the main character is eating gingerbread men that are akin to voodoo dolls. In quick screen flashes, we see the direct Psycho-like bloody results of what happens when you bite the head off a gingerbread man (something I haven't been able to do since).

All of which brings me to Keebler Cookies & Creme Whoopsy! Fudge Stripes Cookies. I have been waiting for a message of some kind to come through all of the cookies I've been eating — like Jesus on a Pecan Sandie or a big “checkmate” on a Chessman shortbread. All I have been getting is the message that I'm gaining 15 pounds from eating cookies. Until now. There was talk Jeff Sessions resembled the Keebler elf and has his own bakery. We might joke about but in actuality, Ben Israel, Duff

Goldman and Buddy Valastro run all bakeries. With the release of the Keebler Cookies & Creme Whoopsy! Fudge Stripe Cookies, I wonder if Jeff Sessions may finally be sending out a message. A distress call? Maybe. A reiteration of his beliefs that white and black people shouldn't coexist even in striped cookies? Perhaps.

That “whoopsy” in the middle may also just be some misguided attempt by Keebler to be weird-funny like the Twix “right” and “left” Twix bar commercial saga. However, the image on the outside of the container has a panicked elf holding onto his hat as he looks at the mostly white #fullyfudged cookies (that is seriously the Keebler “hashtag”).

Did Sessions break out of the White House to visit Keebler and talk to the world through cookies? Is this a Sessions cookie message that he is sorry? With a whimsical “Whoopsy”. Somehow that's how I see him finally apologizing as he bounces in his court seat. “Whoopsy. I didn't mean to do bad things or say bad things or not admit anything bad”. Or is he sending some trapped-in-a-fortune-cookie-writing-factory-style message to the cookie buying populace—”You are #fullyfudged just like me”?

What do these cookies taste like? A little bit like a fudged-over America. A big mess. Whoopsy-d out. Too sweetly civil when they don't really have to be. The white fudge wins for some reason. Again. Where is all the chocolate colored fudge, Keebler? The color of most normal fudge. Who eats white fudge? We eat brown fudge. And the occasional peanut butter tan fudge.

I take a bite of the first one out of the package. Somewhere, somehow, someone feels that all Twilight Zone American Baking Show-Style. Jeff Sessions gets his wings. Rod Serling rolls over in his grave. I gain another three pounds. And we are all still #fullyfudged.

First Watch Millionaire Bacon (McSweeney's)

I recently found out synesthesia is the savant-like ability to see numbers as colors. That doesn't seem particularly useful to me. Now if I had that skill while eating, that might be cool. What foods taste expensive? What foods taste cheap? What foods do we pretend taste awesome only because they cost so much and we feel compelled to act like they are worth the money?

When I think about what makes someone a millionaire or what millionaires might eat, my mind goes to things like caviar or truffles. Or to the obscure, expensive things Alton Brown adds into Chopped mystery baskets along with white bread and gummy bears (the foods of the peasants).

These are the rich people's foods that gave Robin Leach his distinctive accent; as a kid, I was convinced his throat was coated with gold leaf to make him sound like that. I also imagined he only ate expensive foods and not at normal people restaurants like McDonald's or Chilis or The Cheesecake Factory.

This brings me to First Watch: The Daytime Cafe's Millionaire Bacon. First Watch only serves breakfast and lunch. It is a place where ladies (and gentlemen and millennials) brunch. Millennial ladies that eat avocado toast and call it yummy when we all know it looks like smushed-up peas on dried-out bread and has the matching texture of baby food but is expensive because avocados are not cheap. First Watch already had bacon on their menu. I say there can never be too much bacon. Too much smushed-up avocado, yes. There can be too much avocado. When I eat avocado, I only see sad babies that aren't getting fruit.

One day, the uber-brunch-y First Watch must have been visited by the illustrious Robin Leach (he's not dead but I had to check Wikipedia to make sure — who knew?) I imagine there is a clause in his contract; any time a food is named after a millionaire, he is summoned. Millionaire chocolate candies by Pangburn. Leach approved. Mushed-up avocado on organic, gluten-free toast — not Leach approved. He must have also questioned the

turkey sausage and quinoa-everything but since they were First Watch-priced and not Waffle House-priced; they were allowed to stay.

I imagine he moved on to the latest (now permanent menu item) on the First Watch menu. Just as a hangry aside, I am still mad at First Watch for not making the Cinnamon Roll Waffle With Cinnamon Sugar Syrup a permanent menu item too. An Eggo covered in Pillsbury Cinnamon Roll white frosting at home just isn't the same.

Back to the magical, millionaire bacon. Featured on the menu board, menu, and at each table are these tempting words. Take a moment and think about them. Imagine the bacon. Imagine Robin Leach sitting at your table speaking in dulcet tones about:

“Millionaire Bacon: Four slices of our signature hardwood smoked bacon baked with brown sugar black pepper cayenne and a maple sugar drizzle.”

The menu also suggests it is a shareable item. I know Robin Leach wouldn't suggest sharing. Unless it's Grey Poupon from their limo, Millionaires aren't sharers. So no sharing of Millionaire Bacon. Ever.

I sat down with another lady who also brunches to... brunch. I secretly sent up a prayer to one of the dead popes that had tons of money that she wouldn't order avocado toast. I pushed the Millionaire Bacon placard into a suggestive position. My ploy worked. I am not a millionaire so I offered to break the cardinal rich-people rule and share the bacon. She agreed and thankfully ordered one of First Watch's other specialties: the carrot cake pancake as big as your head.

When the Millionaire bacon came, it looked non-assuming. Just four strips of very sticky looking bacon on a rectangular plate. When I tried to pick up a piece, my food synesthesia kicked in. And yet I didn't hear Robin Leach as I expected. Instead, I heard the '80s Def Leppard classic in my head.

“Pour some sugar on me
Ooh, in the name of love
It’s hot, sticky sweet”

The Millionaire Bacon couldn’t be eaten with your fingers because of the overwhelming coating of the maple sugar “drizzle” which wasn’t really a drizzle as much as it was half a bottle of Aunt Jemima saturating the four pieces of bacon. Trying to cut the bacon merely got my knife stuck. I finally gave up and picked it up with my fingers, pinky extended in case Robin was lurking. The bacon was somehow spicy enough to make my eyes water and sweet enough to overtake the giant carrot cake pancake flavor. Note to self: don’t rub your eyes after touching cayenne covered bacon.

Someone had paid for our brunch when we tried to pay. I could swear I heard Robin Leach laughing a Millionaire bacon flavored laugh as he swiped his American Express card. My friend and I finally ended our struggle to eat our way through our expensive, super-sticky meat course. I pondered: Is Millionaire Bacon really for millionaires? As the bacon was many times stickier than a Tootsie Pop, the world may never know.

Hostess Limited-Edition Peppermint Twinkies (McSweeney's)

I spent my childhood with perpetually bright red kneecaps and elbows. I was klutzy and my mother had the magic of Mercurochrome. The dangers of red dye just weren't on '70s mom radar. The hot dogs of the '70s and '80s were barely indistinguishable from the medicine. Bright red. Scary red. Radioactive red.

I thought artificial red was all behind me. These days, both Mercurochrome and bright red hot dogs have been banned by the FDA. But I was wrong thinking the red was completely gone; a secret red food spy has returned, and at Walmart, of course. For whatever reason, most of the oddly-colored throwback foods seem to end up on Walmart's shelves. It's like aisle 5 is the bastion of weird, limited-edition snacks.

Enter Hostess Limited-Edition Peppermint Twinkies. Wedged in next to Flaming Hot Cheetos simply because they are both radioactive red.

Even on the outside of the box, it was clear Hostess had created something akin to devil's food in a box; the very opposite of innocent pale Twinkies. The label showed bright red copycat Twinkies, with its signature white cream interior and cake exterior, both as red as '70s snappy hot dogs. It was clear the "Limited-Edition" referred to some radioactive half-life that meant the Twinkies could survive a nuclear winter in a bunker.

Just like all other Walmart food oddities, I couldn't resist buying the glowing red cakes and threw them in the cart. I then braved the parking lot of a Scary Walmart (for weird snacks are only available at the scariest of Walmarts), locked the car doors, and opened the box. On the surface, each Twinkie just looked like a red version of the classic vanilla flavored ones. I bit into one and found familiar white cream under the artificial, cake exterior. The peppermint flavor was as artificial as the red with the cream making it all like a weird, reverse, squishy candy cane. I knew instinctively the red cake crumbs would stay on my lips

like Flaming Cheetos so I had wipes ready to hide the evidence.

One bite was enough. Not simply because it tasted as red as it looked, but because some suspicious characters were circling my car, which had to be glowing like a cop car. I had a passing thought that the ultra-red Twinkies were some kind of homing beacon. When I held my hand around one of the cupcakes, I swear it glowed in my hands like a Girl Scout camping flashlight. Note to self: give the rest of the box to our Troop leader.

I took the rest of the Twinkies home and tried rubbing them on my kids' knees when they fell off their bikes onto the asphalt. I figured if the Twinkies weren't actually edible, maybe they could serve a medicinal purpose. My kids didn't appreciate that. The red kneecaps or the actual taste of the cakes themselves.

Weeks later, my favorite white T-shirt still looks like a crime scene. And Hostess seems to have taken a few notes from their Christmas Mercurochrome-hued Twinkies by introducing a new Valentine's Day cake version: Hostess Cupcakes Chocolate Covered Strawberry Valentine's Day cupcakes. The exterior is deceptively traditionally chocolate. However, they haven't learned completely. The interior of the traditional chocolate cupcakes appears to be white cream mixed with radioactive red. Maybe I can use the Valentine's Day cupcake interiors as zit cream?

Fudder Pucker (Powdered Sugar) (McSweeney's)

Pucker up. Fudder Pucker up that is. As a parent, apparently it wasn't enough my kids learned the "F" word from playing Minecraft and Growtopia with 45-year-old men living in their mom's basement. I truly thought the baking mix I purchased on sale after Christmas would be safe from any potential cuss-word exposure. I was wrong. My first clue should have been Whoopie Pie on the label. Spelled Woopie Pie. Apparently the dry ingredients were getting busy in the package while they waited for unsuspecting shoppers. I heard a plaintive whisper.

"If the box is rocking, don't put us on the conveyor belt."

When I opened the box, the first thing that popped out was a bag of white powder labeled: FUDDER PUCKER. Immediately it became a chant in the kitchen because it was just so fun to say. It was also fun to giggle at the quick obvious letter switch that was just waiting to be said.

Our baking session ended as I pondered the white bag of powder. Had the Swedish chef used me as a baking mule? Was he going to appear at my door sing-songing, "Give me the Fudder Pucker and no-von gets hurt?" I went to the only safe place to figure out the mystery: Google. A quick search netted a translation from Fudder Pucker to "powdered sugar." We were safe. The children and I didn't need to run for the hills while the Gestapo chased us and our neighbors sang "Auf Weidersen-Good Night."

I still have no idea why a suburban K-Mart was selling contraband powdered sugar at 75% off after Christmas. And the middle-aged Minecraft players have now been dissed in another language. By an eleven year old. You Fudder Pucker, you.

Mrs. Thinster's Cookie Thins Cake Batter (McSweeney's)

We get it, Mrs. Thinster: you're thin. Your cookies are thin. Your packaging is thin. Even your packaging's font is thin (so thin I can hardly read the high-calorie content without my reading glasses). Once we get your thin little cookies in our mouths, we might guess that we too will become thin. Alas, these thin little cookies are like Seinfeld fro-yo: four of them equals a whopping 260 calories. For 260 calories, I'd rather eat a piece of actual cake, or spoonfuls of salmonella-laden real cake batter.

Sadly, the extra attention made to thinning these cookies has come at the sacrifice of flavor. A cloying sweetness permeates through each bite. Texture is also hard to come by, as the company's marketing team had to magnify the packaging photo and note that the cookies are "enlarged to show texture."

Perhaps that is the true secret of these "thin" cookies: you just *look* at them. No eating. Just looking. Mrs. Thinsters cookies are the sad gluten-free, peanut-free, GMO-free cookies that kids at the allergy birthday party table in the adjacent building from the fun party eat while the rest of the party-goers gorge themselves on real cake with blue frosting.

Mrs. Thinster appears on the packaging as a young thin cookie-snapper, but I can't help but lisp a little when reading off the packaging copy: MRS. SPINSTERS COOKIE SHINS SHAKE FATTER. The marketing team had to stop her from calling the cookies by that name even as she chanted "thin is in" to the 46 cats that accompanied her to the Mrs. Thinster factory.

When I tossed the package in the trash, I couldn't tell if the rustle I heard was the almost-full bag hitting the bottom, or the sound of Mrs. Thinster shins flapping as she runs laps around the cookie display to the tune of some Richard Simmons' Sweat in to the Oldies song.

Whatever, keep on running, Mrs. Thinster; I'll be on my couch eating Girl Scout Thin Mints. Now those are "thin" cookies that get it right.

Twix and Snickers Eggs (McSweeney's)

In the religious/candy section of Dollar General (a full three months before Easter), I found the holy grail of long shelf life Easter candy. Nestled in a cheap display basket, Twix Eggs and Snickers Eggs flanked leftover clearance Christmas candy canes as some near-heretical cashier joke. Like Mary Magdalene looking for Last Supper party favors, I scooped up two of each.

It was to be only a cruel joke. Each Egg set me back \$.85 and only offered half the size of a non-themed Twix or Snickers. These were obviously cult candy bars luring me in with a fake claim to offer something special, something worthy of a kid's Easter basket. Their Moonies-style exteriors were definitely brightly colored and appealing. Yet, I may have bought them only because I felt sorry for Kate Gosselin's twins or Khloe Kardashian's love life, as they stared down upon the candies from the magazine rack above, looking all doe-eyed and scandalized. Perhaps Jesus would have prayed for Tori Spelling's cheating husband instead of buying chocolate.

Not being a holy Messiah myself, I was more than tempted by the oval-shaped chocolate/caramel/cookie and chocolate/nougat/nuts. The half-size may have been better for me, for these were not communion wafers by any means. Each two-bite Egg set me back 160 calories. While I could eat the contraband Eggs in my car with the heater running, it would be hard to jog around the building and burn off those calories.

And yet as I wolfed down the Twix and Snickers eggs, I found myself not only looking for something more substantial; I also felt that the Egg format was missing something that the rectangular bars offered. Some holy wonder and healing of my psychological need to read tabloids with a child's innocence while stuffing knock-off candy into a paper bag so no carline mommies would see me. It was like sending my money into some late night televangelist and only getting back a note thanking me for my contribution to their Hawaii Mission Fund. All I really received was a Dollar General receipt for \$1.92 with a THANK YOU

FOR SHOPPING at the bottom, and two extra hip pounds.

I was also left with a sudden urge to buy some grape juice at the convenience store across the street and drink it out of the bottle until I had purple stains around my lips. Instead I said a quick confessional to the trash can as I dropped off the empty wrappers. The instant communion with my hips make the Twix Egg and Snickers Egg something that should be limited to Easter, like a sorry backslider visiting the corner church for penance.

All-Natural 100% Veggies Sweet Corn Crunch Dried Kernels Sprinkled With Sea Salt (McSweeney's)

I am a city girl. Now. During my 70s summer in the Midwest, I was a country girl. Back then we “vacationed” to a real farm and not a \$4,000-a-week yuppy kid summer camp experience with free-range chickens and sustainable meals prepared by Wolfgang Puck. A tween boy drove my sister and I around a Kansas farm in a truck that was older than his dad. I stepped in pig poop. And horse poop. Dog poop. Chicken poop. Lots and lots of poop.

After the requisite feeding of the animals in the poop, we should have all cleaned up before our next farm-related fun: the dry feed corn silo. We did not.

The dry feed corn silo was a wonderland. We climbed the long and rusty metal ladder to the top and shimmied in through the equally rusty submarine-style entry at the top. And then we jumped. Like kids into the first uber-cold swimming pool water. Into dry corn. Poop-covered pants, shoes and all. And slid down probably 40 or 50 feet to the bottom. Screaming and giggling. I now know as an adult that was a very, very, very dangerous thing to do.

My mother was always sitting on the front porch of the farmhouse drinking tea unaware or didn't care that she might lose both of her daughter's to dried corn. It was the 70s. The poetic justice of all that farm poop returning to the animals on their feed aside, the three of us could have died. It was far more dangerous than the 11-year-old driving a stick shift truck at 50 miles an hour through the farm.

However, there is nothing quite like the smell and feel of dried corn on a hot Kansas summer afternoon. The corn dust on your clothes. In your hair. The smell of that corn sucks into your lungs (in much the way that a big mouthful of that same corn might also kill you). You are instantly drowning and sliding on the best roller coaster ever. 35 years later, I thought I would never live that experience again. There is no way in hell that I

would willingly climb that ladder and take that plunge now.

Get ready all you fellow city slickers; farm summers are here again for everyone! I have found the suburb, middle-aged version of the death-drop farm silo corn:

All-Natural 100% Veggies Sweet Corn Crunch Dried Kernels Sprinkled with Sea Salt.

Apparently, the company thinks their product is not good enough on its own and so they include ALL of the following information on the bag: Non-GMO Project, Sensible Foods Crunch Dried Kernels, Corn, sea salt and nothing else (trademark), meets USDA “Smart Snacks in School” Guidelines, packed in a facility free from peanuts, gluten, dairy and eggs, vegan, gluten free, non GMO, low fat, no additives, no sugar added, no preservatives, kosher certified, Perfect topping: salads, soups, salsas, excellent addition to stews, casseroles, pizza or tacos, A delicious ingredient for baking or trail mix, tasty snack right out of the bag, satisfy corn cravings 100% sweet corn and nothing else, picked at peak of ripeness, lightly dusted with sea salt, crunch dried, ideal for any eating occasion, resealable, perfectly amazing on the go snack anytime, anywhere, Office, enjoy with a movie, or refuel on a hike, Best by 08/03/2017

Seriously, just say:

“Our dried corn is a Kansas farm summer. Minus death by dry-corn-drowning and farm animal poop.”

This stuff is city-girl nostalgia crack in an industrial-sized warehouse store bag. I do eat it on salads and on-the-go and maybe even on top of my green eggs and ham. Maybe not on tacos or stews (really stew—what marketing writer adds in stews?) but you have to draw the line somewhere. You’ve just avoided death by silo and can buy this remarkably simple product at Costco. Costco. Costco! Just take it up the register and pull out your Costco membership card and say, “I’d like one bag of summer corn.” No, don’t say that. They might think you are crazy and might take away your bag of ½ eaten corn. Because now you will have to open the bag in the store and eat it before you pay for

it and you will be standing there with a Volkswagen-sized tub of ice cream melting while eating dried corn out of the bag and weeping that you need to have backyard chickens (home chicken coop — aisle 6).

Just put the bag-o-corn on the conveyor belt and pray that all the loose corn doesn't roll back down and drown the toddler perched screaming, covered in poop in the next cart down.

Proof positive that you CAN put the country (corn) into a city girl all over again.

Green Maraschino Cherries (McSweeney's)

My husband once made an off-hand positive reference to a maraschino cherry topping his milkshake. Ergo, every Christmas, he gets a keg-sized jar of maraschino cherries from my warehouse-club-loving mom. Recently, I was watching Food Network's Chopped and saw a food item that struck fear in my heart for future holidays: GREEN maraschino cherries.

I hoped these cherries were the Ted Allen version of maraschino cherries, destined for a fruit-filled cocktail. But it was not to be. The chefs manipulated those green cherries into sauces for chicken and pork and a "vinaigrette" for authentically green lettuce. I swore I saw a chef taste one and puke behind his station.

My house is not the Chopped kitchen and our cherry usage is usually relegated to desserts or the occasional sticky-fingered jar grab at midnight. I could only imagine the green dye and sugar involved in creating these seemingly radioactive cherries. Before my mom could procure an industrial-size jar of the juicy boogers, I got a small gourmet-size jar to see how the other half of the maraschino cherries lived. Next to the standard red cherries from Christmas '08, it was like a two-pack of NyQuil — both nasty flavors but without any medicinal qualities, or the mind-numbing alcohol content.

As I used my never-before-used wedding pickle fork in the mini jar of green orbs, the obligatory sticky syrup swirled like a tide pool or Ninja Turtle cesspool (I wasn't sure which). I put the stem-less green fruit in my mouth wondering if I would turn into the Incredible Hulk from the obviously modified scientific oddity in my mouth.

Instead, it was as if I had inhaled the taste of a thousand green cherry Iced drinks. My teeth, tongue, and mouth felt and looked green. I was momentarily tempted to drink a little of the green liquid like I was in the midst of a late night coughing fit trip to the medicine cabinet. I needed to hide this contraband toxic

waste from warehouse club buyers and my mother. My sugar rush allowed me to utter the only three appropriate words for green maraschino cherries in my green-tinged reality host voice: You Are Chopped.

Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream White House Chocolate Chip (The Daily Drunk)

Amy Carter is the first presidential kid I remember. I read news stories that she ate Baskin Robbins Bubble Gum ice cream, saving the frozen-hard gumballs like me. I imagined her dad ate peanut butter swirl after they used tiny pink spoons to try as many flavors as the Secret Service would let them. While Baskin Robbins was special, the truly memorable ice cream was at only one place: Farrell's Ice Cream Parlor. In my 6-year-old mind, that was the place where presidents held inaugurations and medal ceremonies with drums and singing and barrels of Farrell's ice cream.

Farrell's is sadly no more. The last time I went was with my grandfather, a staunch Republican long haul trucker chain smoker. He would have called Biden the devil but secretly enjoyed the "malarkeys" and "chips of the old blocks." Since Farrell's is gone, the special ice cream place for my kids *and* our new president is Jeni's Splendid ice cream. There are metal spoons instead of pink plastic and lavender and honey and biscuits and peach jam instead of rock hard rainbow bubble gum. The friendly ice cream servers and waffle cone makers may not have drums but they do have endless patience and magic flavors.

While I never ran into President Carter in Baskin Robbins or Farrells, I like to think he went there with men in black suits hovering behind him and his daughter. President Biden has definitely been to Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream. There are press pictures of him and now an ice cream created for him too: Jeni's Splendid Ice Cream White House Chocolate Chip. The ice cream legend goes that he wanted chocolate chip ice cream when he stopped at a Columbus Jeni's but that wasn't an available flavor. Jeni's created a chocolate chip version on the spot and now White House Chocolate Chip for everyone.

My grandfather would approve. Of the ice cream. Not the president. We'd eat some together in mismatched bowls, perched on kitchen stools. He'd label it chocolate chip. I'd read the

descriptions that kind of say that too: mimics a double scoop of chocolate chip on a waffle cone, featuring chocolate two ways, with crunchy chocolate flakes and chocolate-covered waffle cone pieces, all wrapped in a sweet and velvety vanilla bean cream. Somehow, I'm guessing President Biden calls it just chocolate chip too. That might be enough to raise his approval rating one grandpa point.

Made to celebrate the inauguration, this is a chip off the Biden block ice cream that won't be around forever. Jeni's Ice Cream in my grandpa's freezer? Guessing never in the Harvest Gold, not-Pelosi fridge. Jeni's Ice Cream White House Chocolate Chip in the White House freezers for staffers and President and VP and grandchildren? I imagine rows of Jeni's labels lined up waiting for midnight ice cream runs. And that's no malarkey, just great ice cream.

Better Get a Butter Turkey (The Daily Drunk)

Somewhere in Italy, an artist carves beautiful women and buildings from an unfamiliar medium. The environment is chilly and he rubs his hands to keep them warm. Bits of butter flake away and then his creation is clear ... a bird, a magnificent butter turkey. He looks at the butter turkey and labels it: good.

There are foods and then there are *Thanksgiving* foods. Turkeys worthy of burning the porch off the side of your house. Can-shaped cranberry sauce that is more *plop* sound than food. Mashed potatoes with lumps from slapping your mama slathered in gravy with lumps from slapping your grandma. Rolls that double as pillows. Hints of green pretending to be veggies but that really are just little leafy plates for bacon. Pie, pie and more pie. And then there is the ... butter.

Somewhere between Wisconsin and Nascar exists Keller's Creamery, a magical place where butter turkeys roam and the ghost of Michaelangelo carves butter into buxom Renaissance turkey sculptures. Since 1906, no turkeys have been harmed in the making of turkey butter sculptures. Think about it, for over 100 years you could have had a shaped butter sculpture on your table. And not a Great British Bake Off melted face turkey celebrity sculpture, a real sculpture with a waddle, beak and feathered back.

The label for this butter turkey masterpiece is simple, yet extols the butter turkey's virtues: Keller's Butter Sculpture, Turkey Shaped Salted Butter. Keller the Butter Sculpturer of the World doesn't want his handiwork ruined so he encourages shoppers to it "keep refrigerated." When you cut it open to spread butter on your Thanksgiving feast, everyone can watch it quickly morph from butter bird to just butter like those cakes that look like objects but are really just cake. This is butter that just happens to look like a turkey but is really only butter: half a pound of butter, 8 servings, 100 calories per serving. If you're counting

Thanksgiving calories, that's 1 tablespoon of butter or enough for one spoonful of mashed potatoes.

The marketing department goes full on nostalgia to sell this butter bird:

“Family and friends will love Keller’s Creamery Turkey Shaped Butter at your Thanksgiving Dinner. Use the butter as a tasty, creamy accompaniment on bread rolls and many other Thanksgiving dishes.”

If you miss out on a Thanksgiving butter sculpture or are still bitter there wasn't room in the wedding budget for his and her ice sculptures, Keller also sells “Bunny Shaped Salted Butter” and “Keller’s Creamery Christmas Tree Shaped Salted Butter.” Rumor has it Paula Deen is on the waiting list to be made into her own butter-shaped Thanksgiving action figure. National Butter Day is May 1st. Watch the refrigerated section! And for now, enjoy a little butter turkey with your big turkey. Happy Thanksgiving!

Herr's Pumpkin Spice Flavored Snack Balls (The Daily Drunk)

I connect odd snacks with stain lab commercials; one stain combined with another to create a new stain obliterated by the detergent. With snacks, the obliteration is common sense that often turns out good, but mostly icky. Hello, “booger” Jelly Belly. There has to be a snack science lab somewhere with experiments on snacks we know and love. Perhaps in an abandoned nuclear bunker, scientists create evil Oreo flavors. Cackling laughter emanates during the Lay's flavor creation contest. Smells snake out of windows like samples during Costco Happy Hour.

Those snack scientists must dream of naming the often-sinister snack creations they're assigned. Chips combined with Jell-o. Gum mixed with cookies. Diabolical concoctions worthy of Mary Shelley, if she dreamed in single serve chip metaphors. Mostly rejected -- but occasionally a stroke of snack brilliance or madness. They toil in their subterranean lab like trapped fortune cookie writers with only a brainstorming whiteboard and Expo markers for brief creative highs.

Around Easter when all autumnal snack products are created from rejected black jelly beans, they make a whiteboard list worthy of the Halloween holiday.

Pumpkin spice. Orange. Dust. Aliens. Leaves. Snack. Corn. Balls. Chips. Balls. Balls. Balls.

Scientist #3 loves saying “balls”. The other scientists put up with him because of his “special” brownies and freakishly, lovely Victorian script. He also created a break room ball pit for them from snack ball rejects. Scientist #1 loves pumpkin spice; even her hair is pumpkin spice-colored. Her pumpkin spice snack seniority level means she invented the concept but receives no royalties and has cursed the Starbucks pumpkin spice latte forever.

Huddled over smashed pumpkins and corn chips, the snack scientists wait for lightning to strike. And then. One. Ball. Drops. After months of experiments, a styrofoam-textured, slightly

orange-hued snack ball drops from the magical snack Rube Goldberg track. Scientist #1 examines the ball for viability.

Pumpkin spice. Check.

Corn chip dog paw smell. Check.

Styrofoam feel. Check.

Gluten free. Check.

Monster DNA. Check.

Shaped like a monstrous ball. Check.

Perfect for Halloween party balls. Check.

She puts it in her mouth.

Tastes like Starbucks anything. Check.

Feels like styrofoam peanuts. Check.

Mildly addictive. Check.

Crunchy enough to make sounds but not break teeth. Check.

Faintly corn, faintly cinnamon stick. Check.

The scientists gather as she spits the ball into the snack experiment bucket. They can't tell if her grimace means *yes* or *no*. They never see the success or failure of their snack creations, but sometimes find their experimental snacks in a Big Lots clearance bin. They cheer when she indicates a single pumpkin spice corn ball will be sent to the marketing department.

The marketing scientist creates the Herr's Pumpkin Spice Flavored Snack Balls packaging. An homage to fall. Leaves. Cinnamon sticks. Cloves. And balls. Balls. Balls. Lots of balls. It is the perfect zen of pumpkin spice and balls; ready for wine o'clock thirty book clubs AND for Monday Night Football. A snack-focused photograph on the bag making the snack-size pumpkin balls half the size of the pumpkin image.

As I stare at the packaging in an interstate Cracker Barrel snack graveyard, I'm suddenly frightened of choking on giant balls that look more asteroid, than snack.

As a consumer, I must do my duty and taste test the pumpkin spice balls, a scientific memorial to these brave men and women who are only allowed out on the solstice holidays. I'm also SWH

(shopping while hungry) and anything looks good. The taste of corn and pumpkin and scientific ingenuity fills my mouth. I wipe my hands on my shirt to test for Cheetos-level residue. Nothing.

Will I buy these Frankensteinian snacks again? I think one giant bite of *crunchy and sweet* corn balls may be enough. As I leave the land of impulse-buy rocking chairs and Oak Ridge Boy CDs, I imagine the snack scientists jumping in their Herr's snack ball pit to relax before they move to Hostess Christmas Cupcakes. On the whiteboard, Scientist #1 erases all but the last word remnants of ... The Herr Project and Scientist #3 rocks in the lab corner, whispering *balls*.

Jeni's Strawberry Pretzel Pie (McSweeney's)

Dolly Parton's Tennessee house is five minutes from mine. There are tour buses parked out front most days. My son always thought she was sending his Imagination Library books directly from her house to him. Knowing her altruism, he may not have been wrong. I didn't correct him as he waved and yelled "thank you for the books" out the window when we drove past her house and the buses and occasionally her coming or going, blonde halo hair shining on Tennessee afternoons. When he turned six and the books stopped coming, it was a sad day but replaced by another book reward: his own Pizza Hut personal pan pizza gift certificates. Frank Carney is no Dolly Parton but it did soften the loss a bit.

Dolly is now gifting again to adults and kids. When Jeni's Ice Cream announced they were partnering with Dolly to create an ice cream, there was debate if it would be banana or Moderna flavored. Turns out the Dolly flavor is a quintessential Southern potluck favorite: Strawberry Pretzel Pie. Try saying that without smiling or wondering how in the heck Strawberry + Pretzel + Pie + Ice Cream works. Southerners know. Grandmas know the secret to fruit and salty sticks and pie melding together. It works in the same way Dolly tied up her boss while singing or created a theme park named after herself or wrote "I will always love you" AND Jolene in an afternoon or wore a cold-shoulder shirt to get her million dollar vaccine shot.

Strawberry Pretzel Pie is as big flavored and big hearted as Dolly herself, sweet and salty and sassy and Southern with "lipstick red strawberry sauce." I have been hankering (Southern word for wanting something really bad/precursor to being hangry) for my grandma's strawberry pretzel pie and crushing Rold Gold pretzels in a bag as a topping for cut-up strawberries just doesn't cut it. Or taste that good. Or serve as dessert for my kids (gag, Mom.) Jeni and Dolly Parton's Strawberry Pretzel Pie arrives right on time. It doesn't have to be eaten 9-5 but I can eat it from 9-5 and 5-9 because I can order it online and have it delivered to my porch in dry ice in all it's pink Parton prettiness. It's a little bit

country - all right a lot country - layers of salty pretzel streusel, tangy cream ice cream and a red strawberry sauce that makes you want to smack your mama, but NOT Dolly. No one smacks Dolly. On the first cold bite of summer sweetness, I thought I might burst out into song but instead just kept eating it thinking "I will always love this" in my mind. A little bit blush and not at all bashful, it's a favorite of Jolene and Jolene's arch enemy; Truvy; and maybe even Ouiser. When I closed my eyes, I was back in a church basement spooning cream corn and strawberry pretzel casserole onto my paper plate.

Dolly recently turned down the state of Tennessee adding a bust (the joke is built-in) of her at the Capitol before she was dead and didn't even ask Moderna to rename the vaccine after her. It feels fitting that she didn't turn down Miss Jeni when she came calling with dairy and strawberry and pretzel pieces. While tourists and locals alike will add this Jeni/Dolly Parton partnership ice cream duet to their scoop shop visits, in true Dolly form, she took it one step and many books forward: sales of the flavor benefit the Imagination Library that sent books to my kids until they turned five. And she's been doing that a long time. I'm ordering pints of Strawberry Pretzel Pie to send to my Imagination Library-loving son at college. When he got his vaccines, I always offered up ice cream as a reward. I know what I'll be getting after my second shot, a big ol' scoop of Strawberry Pretzel Pie.

Trader Joe's Organic Carrots of Many Colors

Donny Osmond twirling and singing in a many-colored velvet coat. A warbling Dolly Parton enrobed in patchwork. Listen to the Trader Joe's front-of-the-store bell and you can almost hear a tenor-voiced Joseph advertising their latest "healthy" snacks. I generally don't like Styrofoam-texture dried veggies. However summoned by a Trader Joe's Instagram post, I danced Broadway-extra style through their crowded-even-on-a-Sunday aisles for dried carrots. Snapping my fingers in the wine aisle. Jazz hands in cosmetics. I finally saw them: Trader Joe's Organic Carrots of Many Colors.

I looked at the packaging through contact lenses AND reading glasses (hence my constant bad-eyes search for carrots, dehydrated or fresh). Little arrows pointed at the carrots in case anyone got confused between packaging and product and ate the bag unopened. The only contents were 1.4 ounces of dried organic rainbow (albeit a small one of purple, orange and beige) carrots and sea salt. And unlike most snacks and vain Technicolor Joseph's desert-dried hair, no oil. An entire bag of carrots of many colors also isn't many calories: just 140. All with a healthy dose of 20% daily potassium and 15% Vitamin A.

To balance the dried carrot taste, I impulse bought a llama-themed \$.99 chocolate advent calendar. Trader Joe's Organic Carrots of Many Colors are as if Donny and Dolly had a snack baby. A little salty, a little sweet. Crispy and crunchy. Moneysaving as tickets to Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat start at over \$100. A bag of TJ's dried organic rainbow carrots is only \$3, a true Off-Broadway bargain.

The Curd of Cheese (The Dot)

I don't think my mom and dad intentionally moved me away from my Midwestern childhood foods. They may not have known that Kansas was a quirky microcosm of German immigrants and farmers and Creole culture. They were more worried about me finding new friends or a school or a job. However, in one fell-swoop-cross-country move from the Midwest to the South, I lost my childhood food favorites: German cabbage and ground beef-filled bierocks, steamed hamburger sandwiches, French potato pie, peanut butter Amish pie and most egregious of all, the cheese curd. A simple, humble food. Squeaky. More locally-created and sustainable (as long as there are cows, there is milk) than most current trends. It wasn't a complete food loss; the south held other regional delicacies like sweet tea and grits and even a potential replacement cheese, pimento. But I was heartbroken at that Mason-Dixon line. No cheese curds. If I had known the dearth of true cheese that lay ahead, I might have requested a long grounding or a spanking instead of a move. It was too late. The South held out her cheese to me and I cried.

As a Midwesterner by birth, I just need to know where my cheese comes from. And that place has to be from cows. American cows. Gary Larson Farside cows standing in a field eating grass. Not goats. Not llamas. Not alpacas. Not a piece of tofu. Not nut milk disguised as cheese. Not French frou frou cheese that has aged in a cottage for thirty years. Thinking about it, I also really don't like cheese that isn't beige or yellow. Pepper jack is allowed because I know what the red and green spots are. They are peppers. I don't like soft cheese that smells like feet. I hate cheese balls covered in nuts.

Wine cheese that is pink is just not natural and may have come from drunk unicorns. My idea of a cheese plate is basic cheese with some Ritz crackers. If there has to be a cutesy chalkboard sign to describe or justify the presence of the cheese, it is just not right. It is just not cheese. I'm also not a fun companion at eclectic farmers' markets where the cheese has been created in someone's bathtub or on an organic suburban farm. I guess I am

some kind of reverse cheese snob. If a cheese will melt over pasta or between two slices of bread — — I'm in.

That Midwestern upbringing gives cows only two purposes: become steak and make milk to make cheese. The cheese I grew up with was basic with a little room for international options: cheddar, swiss, American and gouda. I lived in a state where German immigrants served up bierocks (yeasty dough pockets with ground beef and cabbage and American cheese) and French immigrants brought in etouffee, gumbo and cheesy potato pie. Eating gouda and swiss cheese were therefore okay because they were beige. And recognizable. And came from the cheese-making people that made the farming community home. As a bonus, none of those cheeses required special identification signs either.

However, when cheese comes to shove (and I would shove for cheese), my favorite and probably most down-to-earth cheese was always the most humble: cheese curds. Cheese curds are kind of the ugly stepsister of sliced, wedged, grated and wheels of cheese. For the uninitiated, the cheese curd is like cottage cheese turned cheese but bigger. Chewy. Squeaky. Lumpy. Bumpy. Not smooth at all. Not gratable. Available in standard cheese issue yellow or white versions only. When I see descriptions of new restaurants focusing on sensory experiences, the cheese curd really should be on their menu. Every sense is used when consuming the cheese curd. I can close my eyes as an adult and still hear, smell, taste, feel, see this cheese of my youth.

I had assumed as an idealistic, naive kid that I would always have cheese curds available. I assumed every state had this cheese staple. I was wrong. When I went looking for cheese curds south of the Mason-Dixon Line, I was sadly disappointed. No one even knew what the heck a cheese curd was. And I got a lot of odd looks when my flat Midwesterner accent confused my new Southern friends into thinking I was looking for cheese "turds". I wasn't going to give up though. I searched for my cheese of choice for years. I even considered paying exorbitant shipping fees to have them sent (in cold packs) to my new home. As much as I wanted cheese curds, I couldn't quite justify paying ten times the cost to

ship them across the country. Even though I knew I would have to encounter dreaded exotic cheeses, I decided to head to the only place I could think might have my beloved cheese curds: Trader Joe's. I went there with the look of a cheese addict going to meet her dealer.

There were no cheese curds.

I asked the very helpful staff why not. They told me they couldn't get quality cheese curds and if Trader Joe's can't get quality, they don't introduce it into their stores. Apparently, the lumpy-bumpy cheese is very fragile. It doesn't travel well from the Midwest to the South. Their special local Trader Joe's cheese supplier doesn't supply cheese curds. It was an odd feeling as I left that my basic cheese was somehow suddenly too trendy even for Trader Joe's. At least the staff knew what I was looking for. Somehow I felt as I might now see cheese curds on pricey cheese plates in the near future (the horror!)

I left disappointed with my Trader Joe's consolation prizes: mini peanut butter cups and pumpkin butter. I was too sad to even eat them in the parking lot. I did have a brainstorm that perhaps the next organic market might have cheese curds. I went across the street to Whole Foods. And it was as if a heavenly light and angelic music directed me to the cheese aisle. My old cheesy friend was alive and well in Tennessee. The Whole Foods cashier must have thought I was nuts as I slapped the bag of curds up on the counter. I did eat the cheese curds in the parking lot. The entire bag. Like a naughty child with a stolen bag of candy. I expected the sensory overload. And instead it was just — cheese. Which is fine. There's nothing wrong with that. But I expected more. Like some kind of cheese nirvana in my mouth. I didn't know if it was one of those "loved it as a kid, hate it as an adult" things or if Whole Foods had gotten some of the not-quality cheese curds that Trader Joe's refused to sell. As I sat there with my sad, guilty empty cheese bag, I turned it over to find the cheese had been made within an hour of my childhood hometown and then shipped halfway across the country. It was like a childhood friend had sent me a letter. A cheese missive. I

decided to keep trying to find my elusive childhood cheese curd.

And I did. I tried fried cheese curds at Zaxbys. And I went back to Whole Foods again. And then one day, I had another cheese serendipity. An epiphany. At Target of all places. I know Target can tell from my purchases when I'm pregnant. From the amount of sweat pants and cheese I buy, they probably think I'm pregnant all the time. On this day, the imaginary computer formulas got it right. There were cheese curds in the deli. I was convinced the Target inventory robots had read my mind and ordered cheese curds just for me. The price label beneath them only said "cheese". But I knew what it was. It was my childhood in a bag. For \$2.99.

And, on that glorious day, in the place that probably really thinks I am pregnant (or cheese-crazy), I found the 70s again. I found that Midwestern, fold-of-the-map childhood that I thought was gone forever. I almost forgave my parents for their treacherous act thirty years earlier. When I paid for the half-eaten bag of cheese curds with a guilty smile, I blamed it on my kids. Who weren't even with me. Cheese curds can do that. Cheese plates with mysterious bits and pieces of cheese can't. They leave you feeling hungry and confused and wondering why you are on a date with a dude that likes cheese plates. The moral is you can take the Midwest out of a girl, but you can't take out the cheese curds. Unless you try and snatch them out of my Target cart. But I wouldn't suggest doing that. Midwestern/Southern girls are strong from all that cheese curd calcium.

Where's The Bell Beefer (Taco Bell Quarterly)

I don't think my mom and dad intentionally moved me away fWhere's the Bell Beefer? Where's the Bell Beefer? There are urban legends. And then there are urban fast food legends. According to one of the most famous fast food legends, Bob in the 1970s Taco Bell ordering department accidentally ordered up a year's worth of buns instead of taco shells. It is hard to understand the horror of this nonrefundable order which led to Bob getting demoted to grease trap cleaner at the Detroit store. Faced with never-ending piles of buns, Taco Bell did what it had to do: they created a new menu item and used those same no-expiration-date buns for the next two decades.

For a few years in the 70s and 80s, Wendy's and Taco Bell also played menu switcheroo. My Midwest Wendy's had old timey catalog pages pressed under clear-ish laminate tabletops. The black and white tables were an odd Wild West compliment to the all-you-can-eat salad bar precursor to their current Taco Salad: piles of tortilla chips, questionable ground beef, shredded lettuce, cheese and sour cream. You didn't really have to make nachos because the short-lived Mexican smorgasbord was basically instant nachos anytime a customer served themselves. Around the same time the Wendy's burger-heavy menu was getting a Mexican makeover, Taco Bell had been trying their hardest for some unknown, implausible reason to get a burger update. They hadn't quite gotten the message to stick with what they knew like: don't make a McPizza because the ovens cost a zillion dollars and are harder to maintain than a shake machine. Bob's bun error was the perfect timing to push the Taco Burger idea.

However, it was a little like putting lipstick on a sombrero. Taco Bell was just a little ahead of their time. Taco burgers exist on all kinds of yuppie boutique hamburger restaurants with Angus beef and locally, sustainably sourced veggies. Before a little old lady asked "where the beef" was, Taco Bell introduced their Bell Beefer. Even the name sounded kind of like puke or a rodeo clown's nickname. The visual image of the eponymous Taco Bell

bell covered in ground beef was a little odd and unappetizing. Who had thrown the beef? 117 Quasimodo? A toddler mad because Taco Bell had no creepy McDonald's Playland? Who let the dogs out? Who wrote the book of love? The world may never know.

Even with a name that was off-brand marketing and potentially led to its demise, the Bell Beefer itself was actually good. The combo of pre-pink-goo seasoned taco meat matched well with the soft bun. While it was billed as a sloppy Joe substitute, it was more of a Sloppy Jose. Taco Bell even went with two versions to keep with the burger theme and compete with Wendy's long before truffle or ghost pepper burgers. The regular offering featured taco meat, diced onions, shredded lettuce and a mild border sauce while for just a little bit more, you could get the Supreme version with grated cheese and diced tomatoes. And just like the music of The Supremes, the Supreme Bell Beefer was all melty goodness that fed your soul, all for around a buck.

Those ordered-by-Bob buns? They are quite possibly the reason the Bell Beefer slipped in and out of the Taco Bell menu. A Taco Bell franchisee would find a pack of buns in the back and the Bell Beefer would return for a week or a month with the same fanfare as the McRib. And then one day, all the buns were gone; taco shells and tortillas and chips were the standard again. Occasionally, someone in front of me at Taco Bell requests a Bell Beefer. My mouth waters and I think of my childhood love affair with the briefly popular taco burger. And then it all gets ruined because the diner continues . . . but hold the bun, I can't have gluten. The cashier is confused and asks the manager (who has worked there for thirty years/moved in because Taco Bell is his apartment): "What is a Bell Beefer?" The manager smiles and I imagine a cartoon bubble with a Mexican hamburger popping up next to his face before he responds. "Just put some taco meat on a plate and top it with cheese." It isn't the Bell Beefer I knew but it is the Bell Beefer we've got. However, I still don't order a Bell Beefer because I prefer to confuse and torture the cashier further by asking him for an Enchirito.

Boar's Head Bold MarBleu Marbled Blue Monterey Jack Cheese (McSweeney's)

I am a late-to-the-party *Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* binge watcher and honestly don't see what the fuss is about. It seems more than a little contrived. There is one Maisel scene that does ring true sixty-plus years later: Midge arrives in desperate need of deli items to feed the rabbi. Instead of patiently waiting (because Mrs. Maisel waits for nothing — not even a viable comedy career), she prances ahead of everyone announcing her supreme need for meat. She then ups the deli rudeness ante like she's adding to her comedy set. She asks to look at the meat. Touch the meat. Would have tried the meat if it had been cooked. I fumed while watching her flounce past irritated deli-goers, fumed for those unnamed extras forced to wait in line while an entitled TV shopper cut in front of them.

I'm not a stand-up '50s comedienne nor do I play one on TV. I have been privy to rude deli shoppers that act like they will wet their pants or miss a surprise Pope's birthday party if they don't get their deli selections immediately. Truth is they probably forgot to buy lunch meat on a Sunday afternoon and don't want anyone to see them in sweatpants with their hair dry-shampooed into a Hello Kitty ponytail holder while desperately trying to keep their toddler out of the grape buffet. I've been that woman. I know the mom urgency of not wanting to send your kid to school with stale fortune cookies and a Weight Watchers protein shake. To avoid that, I now order my deli meat and cheese through a handy-dandy app. My perfectly-sliced Boar's Head Honey Maple Turkey waits for me in the refrigerator case away from any line.

Recently, I forgot to order ahead and took my chances in a 2019 suburban grocery store deli. All for a Boar's Head cheese from their Bold line. I was feeling bold. No sweat pants. Hair brushed. Kids at home. The line looked safe enough. Polite enough. A dad with a baby strapped to his chest and a toddler doing Cirque Du Soleil moves in the cart. A mom in scrubs with Lean Cuisines in

her cart and 12-hour shift circles under her eyes. There are no red ticket machines anymore where you take a number and pray you won't be in the bread aisle when your number is called. It is all a "No, YOU go first" middle-class politeness.

Boar's Head bills their Bold products as an around the world trip with mouth-watering commercials. Since I'm not going to Europe anytime soon, I needed that bold around-the-world cheese. I politely jockeyed for line position with deli counter meat cutter number two, a bearded gentleman with a hairnet on his head and chin hair. Harried dad was being helped by a woman who looked like she cut her teeth in a school lunchroom while yuppie-bearded cheese dude finished up with tired doctor mom.

The plan was to order my Boar's Head Bold MarBleu Marbled Blue Monterey Jack Cheese and exit. I had even practiced saying the mouthful of a redundant cheese name to avoid confusion. I'd say "thinly sliced please" and refuse to try any other new flavors for I had tried this cheese before. I knew what it tastes like: creamy and distinctive as described. I also know what vanilla ice cream tastes like and don't hold up a Baskin-Robbins line to figure out what vanilla I want either.

And then it happened. She appeared. Mrs. Maisel time traveled into the Publix deli wearing a carefully-ironed Anthropologie dress and macrame wedge shoes with a more-expensive-than-my-car purse. She breezed past me and the rest of the line as if we were invisible on her bakery-to-deli counter journey. I wondered if all time travelers were rude. And then I heard her speak her funniest punchline of the Sunday 6:00 PM grocery hour show.

"What kind of turkey do you have?"

The deli counter cashier dutifully named off ALL her options (because he was a Boar's Head specialist and that's the Boar's Head way) even as the deli line community gave a collective sigh. She proceeded to request different slice levels and cheese options and samples. Samples of everything. Each one presented on plastic deli paper as if she was the queen of the suburbs even though he'd do that for anyone.

While Miss Marvelous Cut-In-Line meandered through deli products to entertain her Baptist minister (the 2019 equivalent of the rabbi comes to dinner), I read the deli counter Boar's Head recipe book. Turns out, the lady line-cutter was just exploring the Boar's Head flavor voyage and I could do the same thing myself.

My cheese of choice was "inspired by the rich tradition of European bleu cheese." And "just the aroma of Boar's Head Bold MarBleu Marbled Blue Monterey Jack Cheese will send your senses on a flavor voyage." It was international food porn right there in my suburban deli. But that wasn't all. Boar's Head planned a-Boar's-Head with complimentary wine and beer options.

In Europe, Bleu Cheese is classically accompanied by celery, pears, and Port wine or Barleywine, a highly fermented British beer of Greek origin.

For a moment, I was transported to a country where people didn't cut in line and if they did; they were French and probably drunk, so it is expected and no one cares. The best note in the Boar's Head brochure: my bold cheese could be "sliced without crumbling." I could quickly order a big hunk of cheese without having it sliced and move on. That was a Martha Stewart-level good thing. Meanwhile, my ice cream was melting while Midge took her international deli case sample tour. I wanted to politely tell her Boar's Head Bold means GO Bold. Make a bold choice and GO. Instead, she chose the Boar's Head Stay and Sample option.

As the European sampling excursion continued, the line grew. 2019 Mrs. Maisel finally settled on "plain turkey, sliced with cheddar, sliced". There was an audible groan as she chose the most vanilla of all deli items. Even the baby, who just wanted his own turkey sample and had formed a full set of teeth while waiting, looked irritated but relieved.

The deli counter manager and I exchanged pained looks but

he didn't bring out the Boar's Head ram device I imagined was behind the counter for difficult customers: a big beam with a huge Boar's Head to break down castle doors and push pushy shoppers to the seafood counter,

It was finally my turn. My stomach growled and I asked for a now-hypocritical sample. He gave me a huge piece of cheese to tide me over until the free cookies at the bakery counter, where my fellow deli shoppers gathered like piranhas.

Mrs. Maisel was gone, transported to another time or another aisle in her magic car grocery cart. There was no child there. She had also selfishly grabbed the closest cart leaving tired dad with a wonky squeaky cart with no built-in wheel for his somersaulting toddler. I contemplated finding her in the organic food aisle but only had a basket and no cart to accidentally ram into her heels.

Instead, I went in search of Barleywine AND port to go with my cheese. Who needed bread or meat or pears or celery? I had my Bold cheese. And it was Bold. With a capital B. Just like the line-cutter.

Trader Joe's Almond Windmill Cookies (McSweeney's)

There are homonyms in the English language that just feel naughty. Even “homonym” itself can be easily misconstrued. Just saying “the damn dam” with a complete disregard or parental ability to identify the cuss word by pronunciation. Is it a “dike” or a “dyke” that Hans Brinker held his finger in to save his entire Dutch village from flooding? While I have seen a dam and a dyke on occasion (and have definitely said damn dam for fun), I have yet to see a dike of Hans Brinker legend.

Hans Brinker. A legendary lad with legendary silver skates. National hero. Early contestant on Ru Paul's Drag Race, Holland? Perhaps. What I do know is what Hans Brinker of the silver skates must have snacked on as he stood guard at the dike wall, one finger occupied with saving his village. It had to be Trader Joes' Windmill Cookies of course. Easy to stick in his knee-length skating pants' pockets. The perfect craft services snack for drag races or *Amazing Race Holland*.

The windmill cookie isn't a new cookie. Bakeries with authentic sound names like Voortman and De Ruijter have been making them for years. Cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg, cloves and always the ubiquitous almond slivers, presumably for quick protein on Dutch town-saving missions. Interestingly enough, Trader Joes chooses to eschew the Dutch references in their copy for these cookies. Instead they go with a wink and a nod to Quixotic windmill tilting. Windmill graphics on the container. Cervantes reference in the copy. Wrong country, Trader Joes. These are Hans Brinker cookies. He wore the damn dam silver skates for Pete's sake. Why can't Trader Joe's just identify with his country of origin instead of going the comedian J. Peterman route?

While I imagine that Hans' mom usually packed him some great windmill cookies in his skating pants' pockets, the Trader Joes' Almond Windmill Cookies do kind of just tilt at the windmill so to speak taste-wise. They are butter-y and shortbread-y as billed but they are pale, beige-y conservative cookies — crunchy

enough but kind of baking-contest-you-didn't-bake-these-quite-long-enough-to-get-good-color cookies. The Voortman version is dark and extra crunchy and full of almonds that break up their slightly spicy version. The Trader Joe's cookies are good and addictive in their own way like every cookie that sits in its plastic tub on a shelf just high enough that Hans Brinker (or any kid) can't quite reach them. The mini peanut butter cups are up there too on the naughty Trader Joe's shelf. I found myself wanting almonds (tasted but didn't see them), more spices and just maybe a little more Dutch in the Trader Joe's Almond Windmill cookies.

If I am going to spend 140 of my day's calories on 2 cookies, I want them to be worthy calories. Town-saving calories. Dutch cookies on steroids that can stand up to odd Cervantes references from across the ocean. The Trader Joe's version sadly would probably be crushed and forgotten in Hans Brinker's pocket and he would starve at the damn dam. Or the dyke's dike. The entire story might have ended entirely differently. Hans Brinker without an authentic windmill cookie. His mother, tired of baking, sends him out with his silver skates to save the town and he falls asleep due to hypoglycemia due to lack of sugary cookies.

I did read that smearing the Trader Joe's Almond Windmill Cookies with Trader Joe's Speculoos Butter as a sandwich cookie turns them into the sandwich cookie of your dreams. Perhaps that is how Holland was saved by Hans Brinker: with a dam/damn Trader Joe's Almond Windmill Cookie coated in Trader Joe's Speculoos Butter (which is actually dam/damn good all by itself). In all reality, the Almond Windmill cookie ascribed to Holland because of the eponymous windmills probably isn't eaten in Holland anymore than Chinese people eat Sweet and Sour Chicken. Tilt at Trader Joe's Almond Windmill Cookies by themselves as compared to say the TJ Cat or ABC cookies or a windmill cookie made by Moeder Brinker, not a chance.

Wine-and-Cheesing: Want Some Wine in that Cheese? (The Daily Drunk)

October is National Cheese Month, but don't get too excited. There's still no designated national holidays in October that get you a day off from work, and if you're working from home, a day off just means you're going to go wait in early voting lines (!) or hide from your kids in the laundry room crying, eating their Halloween candy while they don't learn how to read because you suck at distance learning.

I'm getting lazier as the pandemic progresses but do need to honor cheese in some way. Forget cheese plates: here's some Kraft slices on a paper plate; taking the plastic off makes them fancy. Charcuterie tray. Seriously? I took the plastic off the cheese, what does the universe want from me? Also, who really wants a plate of tiny bits of cheese and meats and crackers that have been arranged by someone else with potentially Covid-covered hands? That would be like having a snotty-nosed toddler make my lunch.

To be fair, October does have Halloween and Oktoberfest. That means king-sized candy bars taken/stolen from your/my kids to check them for razor blades plus pretzels and beer. Still not Thanksgiving's turkey and pumpkin pie but it's something. When I was a kid, the trendy version of today's book clubs (i.e. Tupperware parties) always had a table full of mysterious foods including pink cheese that looked like a drunk unicorn created it. I snuck a bite one time and it tasted oddly like a cheesy, candy circus peanut. My mom made me spit it out in her hand before showcasing the way Tupperware burped but I didn't fight her.

To honor the month in a new way, I present to you: today's boozy cheeses. Alcohol AND cheese. How can you lose? And what happens when you get cheese drunk? I imagine the talking Cheez-It wheel of cheese rolling out into the driveway until it lands all Long Duk Dong in my front yard. Note: these links are just so you can gaze upon their cheesy glory, no affiliate money to be made unless you buy a Tupperware pitcher and matching

glasses and then I think my mom gets \$.30 in perpetuity.

First up, we take a trip to the Big Island of Cheese (Wisconsin, not Hawaii) with Kaukauna's "new white cheddar cheese balls infused with Rose Wine." First off, white+rose=pink. I'm personally waiting to see when Rose Wine takes on Rose Nyland in a cheese v. cheesecake battle. In this case, white cheddar plus wine plus traditional cheese ball almonds make it look like a bleeding cheeseball, even though the packaging label shows a white cheese wedge. And it's spreadable, always a good quality in "cheeses."

A month of drunk October cheeses wouldn't be complete without some Oktoberfest-themed cheeses. I did an Amazon search to see what oddities are lurking with Prime shipping and found: New Bridge Spicy Beer Cheese. If you're going to name a beer cheese (even with all the beer burned off in the cheese-making), maybe you shouldn't give it a name that invites slurring. I tried saying it out loud stone-cold sober at 10:00 AM and ended up with Brew Nidge Bicy Seer Cheese. I also like cheeses that haven't been captured by a Big Lots food company. Give me Kraft. Give me Sargento. Give me Liberty. That last one's not a cheese company, just my wish for November.

For a more low-brow cheese when your inhibitions are low and the Tupperware-is-popping, behold pub-themed drunk cheese: Pub Cheese Spread White Cheddar. This is obviously a cheese named for SEO purposes. No one is going to call it that. This is "that cheese where no one knows my name, including me but it sure tastes good on crackers with this Budweiser, if you bring me that stupid tiny knife with a pumpkin on the end that we got for our wedding Tina, I'm going to scream."

Apparently, it's hard to make alcoholic cheese without them being spreadable. There's a really dirty punchline in there but I'm not going to go there. Also, the word "cheesemonger" sounds dirty too. Or maybe that's just a Whole Foods way of sounding fancy. Nope, still sounds dirty. If you're the kind of foodie that wants a cheese in every port, the Mercks Port Wine Natural Cheese Cheese Spread, 14 oz is the cheese for you. Available at Walmart

in the refrigerated Port of Mercks, this cheese can really spread it but for less than \$5, no one is buying that this is a “natural” cheese. Not even the tipsy Wisconsin Guernseys weaving around the milking barn that haven’t had Botox yet.

I have saved the “best” drunk cheese for last: Red-Wine Infused Cheese 1.1 pounds, \$29.95. This is some high brow stuff. Not spreadable. Not sold at Walmart. And it’s in my directed ads now constantly because I searched for it. For \$30, you get a half wheel of purple cheese with “red wine blended into the milk before aging.” I think that is called “wine milk before bed” in most circles. If you’re looking for even fancier cheeses, they also offer cheese infused with smoked paprika. Each one of these drunken cheeses has some stellar ad copy but this line stood out to me.

“This delightful purple cheese is the invention of the Alvarez Valera family in La Mancha.”

I’m now declaring October, “The month when the Alvarez Valera family in La Mancha adopts an American and lets her make drunk cheese instead of agonizing over the election.” The title needs some work. For now, I’m going to stick with “Cheese Month” but, if you kill my drunken cheeses, prepare to die.

P.F. Chang's Red Lantern and Fire & Ice (The Daily Drunk)

I have new friends during the pandemic, mysterious ones that use initials instead of telling me their real first and middle names. On a random Wednesday, P.F. of the Chang family sent me a promising email. P.F. loves to cook and introduce me to new cultures. I appreciate that in new friends especially when I'm stuck in my house and haven't seen P.F. in a long, long time.

To keep in touch, the email promised details on things that are "New to the Menu for Lunar New Year." P.F. must not remember I'm married with kids and tried to woo me with Lunar New Year options that felt a little aggressive and romantic at the same time. These new menu items also seem to overpromise: a Red Lantern cocktail made from Reyka Vodka, Solerno Liqueur, blood orange, pineapple and lemon, "served glowing." I already have everything to make that at home (minus the booze and fancy blood oranges.) Just yesterday, I snapped a glow stick open and stuck it in an easy peel mandarin orange. I haven't actually served anything truly glowing since the last time I tried to make toast and the fire trucks came.

At least the Red Lantern drink feels a little culturally inspired. The second menu item "Fire & Ice" is more like a hodgepodge of ingredients shoehorned into an *exciting* dessert: bread pudding and vanilla ice cream encased in chocolate, ignited with rum and served flaming. It is no Rainforest Cafe brownie dessert with a sparkler or Farrell's ice cream bucket with drum-playing servers.

From the email picture alone, I'm thinking my good buddy P.F. is going to be on Nailed It! and not Great British Bake-Off. The last email they sent me included a large spread of mostly dark brown foods; the Fire and Ice dessert appears to be another brown dessert from that artful series, except made to be enjoyed by the light of a Red Lantern.

Interestingly, only the non-alcoholic Fire and Ice dessert get an asterisk leading to an email note that says *Must be 21+ to order. The Red Lantern drink that gets you drunk and indicates

that your table may be a prostitute haven -- no warning label. Both items are available “for dine-in only.”

Because my friend wants me to get out and do new things, they followed up their descriptions and images of these exciting options with several P.S. reminders in all caps like they learned how to send emails from my mom: MAKE A RESERVATION, LEARN MORE, ORDER ONLINE. MAKE A RESERVATION. FIND A LOCATION. And then a quiet reminder that I opted in for our friendship. And booze. And hookers. And bread pudding for Chinese New Year's. At this point, P.F needs to just light some fortune cookies on fire in their parking lot and hand out red envelopes full of money (not on fire.) I think we've broken up now but if I get a nice email about lettuce wraps, we can be BFFs again. P.F. Chang: I still love you.

