

WEEKEND

LOOKING Dinner in the FACE



be grateful for the food on your plate.

// BY HANA TILKSEW

My dad once told me a story about Sara Gizaw, a 20th century Ethiopian princess. I'm not sure whether it's true or just an urban legend, but the story goes that Sara was eating in the dining hall of Addis Ababa University when Emperor Haile Selassie entered. All students stood except Sara. Intrigued, the emperor approached her to ask why she remained seated. Sara responded that food ought to be esteemed even higher than a king. Haile Selassie was so impressed by this answer that he arranged a marriage between her and one of his sons, Prince Makonnen.

We'll never know if this is truly how Sara Gizaw came to marry Prince Makonnen, but this story stuck with me because it speaks to the old-world attitude that food is God's gift and should not be taken for granted. In contrast, reverence towards food seems nonexistent in modern America, most likely because we have so much access to

it. We're drowning in convenience store snacks and free bites at every professional and academic event. Globalization has made it possible to eat cheese made in France and seaweed shipped from Japan all from the comfort of my California home. Food is so ubiquitous for people in this country that not overeating sounds like a challenge.

For most of human history, even the most powerful people didn't have the abundance of food selection that we do. When I was a 12-year-old youth group attendee, I heard a priest say that, once upon a time, being a king meant you got the most meat and the biggest hut. There's truth to what Victoria Ratliff said in "The White Lotus": "No one in the history of the world has lived better than we have. Even the old kings and queens."

Last month, a first year told me, astonished, that he had seen someone eating alone in the dining hall without watching or reading something. The sight is an anomaly, but how many things can we really con-

sume at once? Our food, our shows, the reading we should have finished last night — we're trying to combine things that should be digested on their own and paid due respect. And does our food not deserve our respect? We must think so in theory, or else we wouldn't have compost bins set up in every dining hall on campus.

But respecting food isn't just about not wasting it. I remember being chewed out by my parents one Thanksgiving for goofing around at the table. To them, not taking a meal seriously — especially a meal that revolves around gratitude — was sacrilegious. Being properly grateful for food, which was once a luxury to our ancestors and is still a luxury in parts of the world — and in parts of this country — today, means taking food seriously. The only acceptable mid-meal stimulation was your company at the table. If you were eating alone, you were expected to put aside all distractions. It would be rude to your mashed potatoes if

you held your phone over them to catch up on unread texts.

For much of my life, I thought my parents' attitude was unnecessarily old-fashioned and provincial. But as someone who tends to scroll through dinner when I'm alone, I've realized how long it's been since I've truly tasted a meal. As a child, my taste buds consciously received flavors. Now, I'm more focused on the funny TikTok I just saw. More than once, I've left a meal and realized I'm actually still hungry, but in my doomscrolling stupor, I failed to notice I hadn't eaten enough to actually satisfy myself.

I'm setting a resolution this semester: Any time I am eating alone, or waiting for someone to meet me in the dining hall, I'm going to pay attention to my food. I'm going to see it, smell it, and taste it the way I once did before I had a smartphone. For the first time in years, I'm going to look my dinner in the face.

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