

Bust a Rhyme: A New Poetics of Food Journaling

Kate Browne

In this article, Browne explores her initial experiences learning to write food journals for weight loss and discovers a way to repurpose the genre for disordered eating recovery through subversion. Using poetry and a generous helping of radical politics, Browne then conducts a writing experiment intended to challenge prescriptive and limiting genre conventions.

“Mabye we’ll have french toset.”

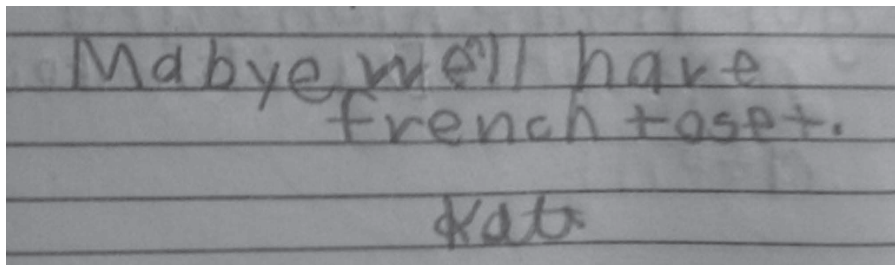


Figure 1. First foray into food journaling.

In a diary entry written on August 24, 1992, I speculated a breakfast possibility while staying at my aunt and grandma’s house for the weekend. At nine years old, diary-keeping was a new writing activity for me. I don’t know how I learned that a diary is a place to document day-to-day thoughts and happenings, but I produced entries overrun with descriptions of classmates I had a crush on, musings about school, and the peskiness of my younger brother and sister. I wrote about food twice over the span of a year and only

as minor details that fit into the larger goal of recording events that reflect good times and family togetherness. In these early entries, writing about food was not substantially different from writing about anything else that happened in my life. Soon after that diary entry, though, a new kind of food journaling took over my world—food journaling for weight loss.

How I Learned to Food Journal

Soon after I turned ten, my pediatrician suggested to my parents that it would be in my best interest to lose weight. My parents, concerned for my well-being, enrolled me in the Weight Watchers™ program where one of the primary methods for accountability and nutrition-tracking comes in the form of food journaling.¹ What I did not know then but understand now is that food journaling for weight loss comprises one part of a complex system of assumptions and goals based on cultural and social constructions of weight loss as beneficial and healthy. Although I did not have a name for the process of learning how to write in this genre at the time, I now understand that I followed a process similar to learning a new genre using Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT).

I think of CHAT as an analytical tool that is useful when learning how to write in new genres and that can help writers understand how and why they might choose to write in frequently used genres. I felt confident in my knowledge of what a diary was and the practice of keeping one, but the genre of food journaling, though based on daily diary-keeping, has a slightly different set of practices that can be determined and analyzed using CHAT. At its most basic, CHAT argues that writers engage with and are influenced by an infinite number of factors that determine how, why, when, where, and to whom a writer writes. At nine years old, I knew that writing a birthday card to a friend was different than my spelling homework—which was not the same as writing in my diary—but I did not know why. After learning about CHAT, I can now reflect on more specific issues of representation, production, distribution, and ecology that are present in writing—an analysis I didn't have the knowledge to conduct when I first learned to write in different genres. I set out on a writing experiment to find out if CHAT could help me look differently at how I learned to write a food journal as a child and, in turn, give me some ideas on how to use food journaling to fit my needs as an adult.

Weight Watchers™ promotes the use of food journaling for tracking nutrition and weight loss accountability. First, food is broken down into units similar to those used for scientific data. With food journaling, if I wanted to write about French toast, it would have an arbitrary numeric value assigned to its nutritional content.² Entries are generally written in list form with columns or checkboxes. At minimum, the food journal contains information about the

date of the entry, food eaten, and numerical value of the writer's choice. Taken objectively, food journaling is very similar to collecting scientific data. Collected over time, the data proves or disproves hypotheses. Trends in dieting for weight loss include public sharing of part of or the entire food journal. Each week, I presented a small, trifold pamphlet to one of the Weight Watchers™ leaders as a record of my weight loss journey for the week. If I lost very little or gained, I would also be expected to present my food journal for the previous week to the leader so she could review it to see where I went wrong. Therefore, the food journal as a genre is not something I kept for personal data collecting or to record simple memories, like a diary; rather, it served as a site of judgment to determine the failure or success of my weight loss efforts. Based on this socialization, I often falsified my journal by adding additional servings of water or vegetables or by not writing about a piece of birthday cake I ate that week. The act of keeping the journal (as in writing daily and recording every meal) also became a socialized experience. Other members were praised for keeping their journals for an entire week or through a holiday season no matter what was written, though honesty was encouraged to maintain accountability. Weight Watchers™ even gave out small star stickers for encouragement—the equivalent of a writing merit badge.

Later, during my teenage years, I repeated lessons learned from Weight Watchers™ during doctor appointments. Because my initial attempts at

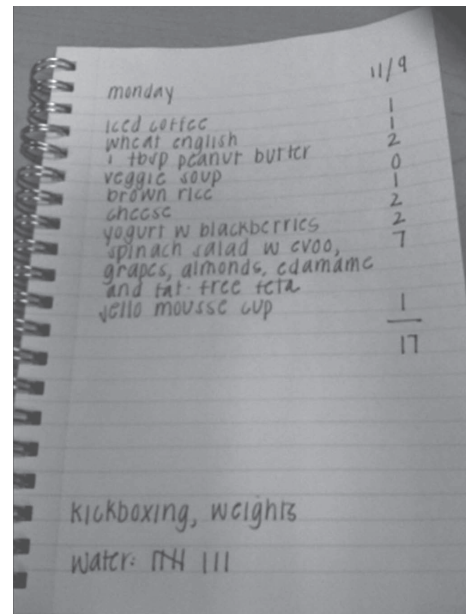


Figure 2. Sample of a traditional food journal, based on Weight Watchers Points™ Program, via <http://healthygirltips.blogspot.com>.

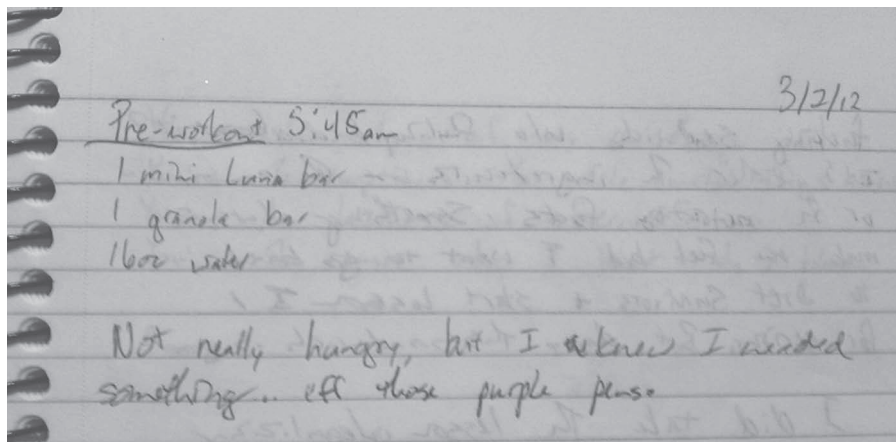


Figure 3. Author's attempt at post-Weight Watchers™ food journaling.

weight loss were unsuccessful, and I was still experiencing bullying at school, my physician again suggested weight loss as the answer. She, too, suggested food journaling as a tool for weight loss and instructed me to keep one for her review at my monthly appointment. Again, I wrote the date of my entry, then a breakdown of breakfast, lunch, and dinner (no snacks allowed). Under each meal category, I would write the food item along with its serving size and calorie content. At the bottom of the category, I would total the calories. I followed my doctor's instructions carefully for the first month. When she reviewed my journal, she noted that pretzels were too high in sodium and carbohydrates (I hadn't been tracking those nutrition categories), and she said I should abstain from eating cookies entirely. The second month and every month thereafter, I falsified my food journal to include only what I believed my doctor wanted. Because I was taking the prescription fen-phen (or fenfluramine/phentermine), an anti-obesity drug treatment, I lost weight no matter what I ate. Keeping the food journal had no effect on my weight loss, nor did it curb the binge eating habit I had developed in response to severe emotional trauma.

In the post-adolescent years that followed, no one person monitored my food journal activities, although I frequently engaged in food journaling for weight loss. All of my attempts were based on the conventions of the genre as they had been described to me and as I had been practicing them for many years. At some point, I began keeping a personal blog. I had seen other bloggers post their food journals on blogs dedicated to weight loss. I felt inspired by the weight loss success stories posted by these bloggers and wondered if public accountability through a blog would finally be the answer to correcting a lifetime of personal weight loss failures. Instead of a blog or pen and paper journal, I used Excel spreadsheets and apps, such as MyFitnessPal™ and SparkPeople™, to track the same kinds of information I had tracked in the past, though I experimented with the data I included in the journal.³ Sometimes I included a daily weigh-in or a progress chart or advanced meal planning. Other times, I simply followed the trends and examples of bloggers I considered successful. Each time I started a new diet, I started a new journal, vowing that I would be successful this time. When the diet failed, I closed the blog to start fresh. Food journaling this way—the way I'd learned and always done—was comfortable. I knew exactly what to write and how to judge the relative success or failure of my production. If I did experience a failure, the blame lay with me and my lazy, undisciplined habits. The first rule of weight loss has always been that if a weight loss plan fails, it's not the plan's fault.⁴ Despite writing in my last blog project about being happy playing roller derby and succeeding in my fitness goals, I still felt like a failure.

Your Food Diary For: ◀ Friday August 12, 2011 ▶ 📅

Breakfast	Calories	Carbs	Fat	Fiber	Protein	Calcium	
General Mills - Cinnamon Toast Crunch, 0.75 cup	130	25	3	2	1	10	⊖
Milk - Reduced fat, 2% milkfat, 0.5 cup	61	6	2	0	4	14	⊖
Add Food Quick Tools	191	31	5	2	5	24	
Lunch							
Amy's - Bean & Cheese Burrito, 8 oz	310	46	9	7	11	10	⊖
Add Food Quick Tools	310	46	9	7	11	10	
Dinner							
Mrs. T's Pierogies - Potato & Cheese Mini Pierogies, 1 container (28 pierogies ea.)	560	108	8	4	16	8	⊖
Pork - Cured, bacon, cooked, pan-fried, 1 slice cooked	42	0	3	0	3	0	⊖
Add Food Quick Tools	602	108	11	4	19	8	
Snacks							
Albertson's - Traditional Chicken & Wild Rice Soup, 1 container (2 cup (245g) ea.)	240	38	4	6	12	4	⊖
Dole - Diced Peaches In Light Syrup; 4 Pack, 1 container	80	20	0	0	0	0	⊖
Sargento - Light String Cheese, 1 Piece	50	1	3	0	6	15	⊖
Add Food Quick Tools	370	59	7	6	18	19	
Totals	1,473	244	32	19	53	61	
Your Daily Goal	2,460	338	82	28	92	100	
Remaining	987	94	50	9	39	39	
	Calories	Carbs	Fat	Fiber	Protein	Calcium	

Figure 4. Author's digital food journal on MyFitnessPal.com™.

How I Un-Learned to Food Journal

My first radical notion about food journaling started during a running workout. I ran an uninterrupted mile for the first time ever, and I felt pretty great about it. Weight loss no longer seemed to be a requirement for happiness or fitness. As if I were in an infomercial right before the life-changing product reveal, I thought: “there’s got to be a better way!” I set out to learn more about food journaling, weight loss, and if I could keep being happy without either one. Like many researchers in the 21st century, I turned to Google and the Internet to begin my search.

No results found for "food journaling without weight loss".

Figure 5. Google results, December 2012.

I was surprised to find very few resources about food journaling without a weight loss focus. Even when I specified that I didn’t want weight loss results in my search, I still encountered “how-to” guides that explicitly taught how to keep a food journal for weight loss. While I did not find exactly what I was looking for, I did come across some interesting information about weight loss

and eating disorders. For instance, 81% of ten-year-olds admit to dieting, binge eating, or a fear of getting fat.⁵ Also, 91% of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to control their weight through dieting, and 22% of those women claimed they dieted “often” or “always.” 95% of all dieters, regardless of age or gender, will regain their lost weight within 5 years.⁶ Given these results, I’m clearly not the only ten-year-old, woman, or college student to learn how to diet. If food journaling is a common tool of weight loss, it stands to reason that many people are learning the genre using the techniques and criteria I described.

I had a good idea of how people learn to food journal based on my experience and reading about similar experiences on other weight loss blogs. The next thing I wanted to learn is if people use food journaling in disordered eating recovery. Disordered eating affects at least five million people in the United States and is used to describe a wide range of irregular eating behaviors but does not fit a specific eating disorder diagnosis. It is also the diagnosis given to me by my therapist. She suggested that I begin including moods or feelings related to the food items in my food journal to uncover emotional eating triggers. She also suggested I read *The Diet Survivor’s Handbook*.⁷ In this book, eating disorder recovery counselors Judith Matz and Ellen Frankel advocate the use of a 1 to 10 scale to indicate fullness, in addition to recording food eaten. Unfortunately, when I tried this method, I quickly found myself back in the same pattern: religiously record food intake for two or three days, stop recording, self-loathe, re-devote, repeat. Back to the drawing board.

How I Learned to Un-Crazy My Food Journal

At this point in my food journaling life, I started feeling desperate. Would I ever recover from disordered eating and have a truly healthy relationship with food? I found the answer in genre subversion—intentionally writing against genre conventions to make a statement. Using a CHAT analysis of the food journal, I identified a few places where I could use the genre itself to disrupt or subvert the original intent of a food journal. Given my unsuccessful past attempts to work within the genre to find a new way, I knew I had to completely shatter my ideas of what a food journal is supposed to do. So I started with what I “know” about a food journal:

- Not a narrative—usually contains lists, checkboxes, columns, or rows.
- Food items are listed in a descriptive, basic way (examples: “apple” or “McDonald’s chicken nuggets”).

- Numerical data includes nutrition information (calories, at minimum) with totals as well as date and/or time.
- Optional attributes include exercise completed and/or emotions before or after consumption.
- Can be electronic or pen/paper.
- Consistency is key—you must write multiple times per day every day.
- “Good” food journals lead to weight loss and “bad” food journals lead to weight gain.

Subversion has always been attractive to me as a tool of resistance and social change: shortly before embarking on this experiment, I had begun to read more about the fat activism movement through blogs and websites, which challenges popular ideas of health and fitness in relation to intentional weight loss. But even though information about subverting stigma through fashion, sexuality, and visibility is plentiful, I could not find any information about rebellion through personal writing. I attribute this, in part, to ideas in fat activism that what or how much someone eats is strictly private information; therefore, no discussion on conventional food journaling would be needed. However, I found an article by Lesley Kinzel helpful when identifying areas of subversion.⁸ Kinzel acknowledges that some people would like to keep a food journal for reasons other than dieting, and suggests that keeping a food journal that is “non crazymaking” can be a helpful goal for those recovering from disordered eating. My favorite advice centers on developing a poetic relationship with food journaling as a way to break free from the shame and self-recrimination of food journaling for dieting.

I chose two specific ways of subverting the food journal genre. First, I would write poetry because I am not a poet, and writing poetry is not very comfortable for me. I would be unable to fall back into writing patterns of the past because my knowledge of how to write poetry is so limited. Second, I would start a blog for this poetic food journal. It may seem incongruous to my goal of subversion because I admit to having kept food journal blogs in the past, but the subversion comes from intent. Online food journals are intended for accountability and judgment of food choices. I challenged myself to write poems about “bad” or “unhealthy” foods because I would normally expect readers to judge this choice, but it was important to me to experiment with an authenticity about food and writing that had been missing from my literate life for a very long time.

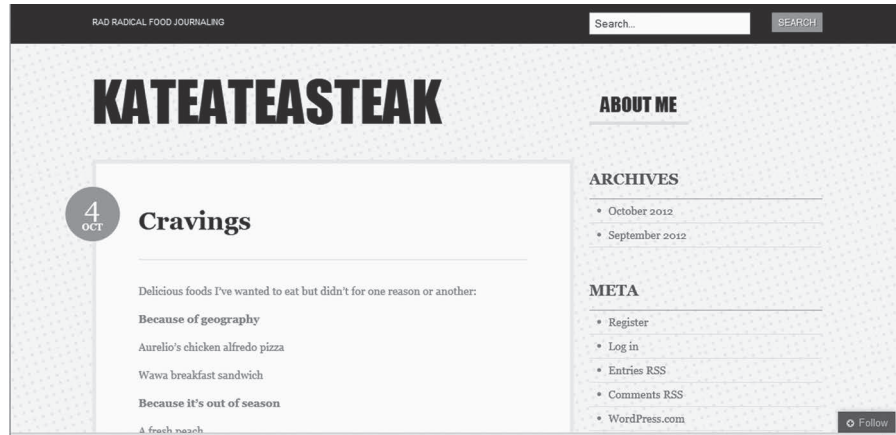


Figure 6. kateateasteak.wordpress.com.

I decided to name my blog “kateateasteak” because I can’t resist delicious word play and also for the upfront assertion that I eat steak. As much as food is the primary focus of food journaling, not all foods are considered equal, so I embraced steak as a symbol for intentional indulgence. I wrote poetry in several styles—from English sonnet to haiku—and on several food topics—from mac n’ cheese to coffee. At first, I tried to write a poem for every meal, which turned out to be a mistake because daily writing is an arbitrary mark of a “good” traditional food journaling and, thus, was not necessarily a requirement for success in my genre subversion venture. So eventually I only wrote when the mood struck me. That turned out to be less often than I expected. I wrote thirteen entries in September 2012 and one in October 2012.

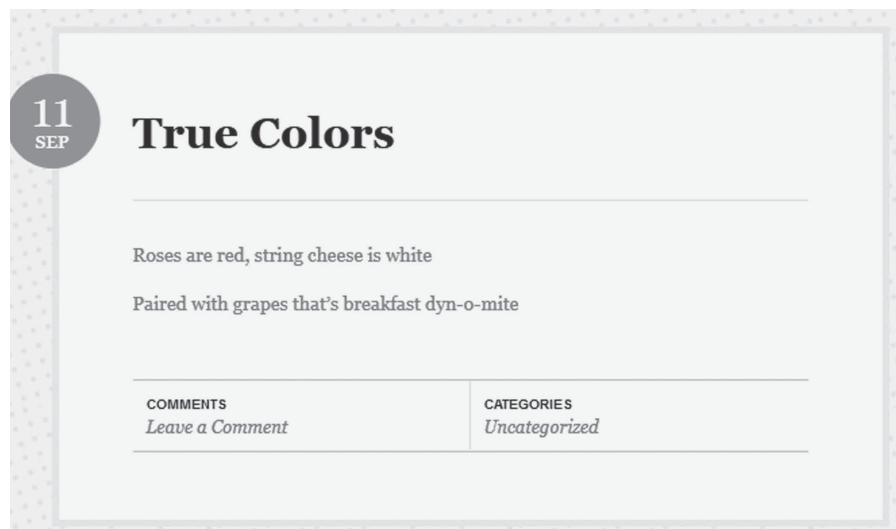


Figure 7. Sample poem from kateateasteak.wordpress.com.

My process of writing also changed. My first poems were based on what I actually ate. Later the poems reflected something amusing or unusual I found about the food—if only to play with rhymes. For the first time in a long time, writing about food reflected my personality. I did not feel shame when I wrote about fruit snacks, nor did I feel shame when I didn't write. No matter the content or the frequency of the posts, writing a poetic food journal functioned only in the ways I determined necessary.



Figure 8. Sample poem from katecateasteak.wordpress.com.

Ultimately, I gave up the poetic food journal project because I had learned what I needed to from it. I learned that food journaling does not have to be caught up in weight loss or psychological disorders; instead, understanding the genre can help the writer customize the journal to his or her nutritional or emotional needs rather than conforming to a rigid set of diet rules. Now, freed from the constraints of the genre, success in food journaling no longer needs to be about “doing it right.” I do continue to write food journals, but the activity is no longer tied to weight loss, recrimination, or judgment.

I do believe that food journaling with open-ended genre conventions can be a useful tool in a number of practical applications. Allergy testing and certain medical conditions rely on tracking food intake to determine symptom patterns. Athletes also use food journaling to track how their choices affect performance. An approach that combines the poetic food journal with the traditional one helps me with disordered eating recovery and nutritional data collection—the best of both worlds. I believe my subversion was successful not because every choice I made was a good one, but because through trial and error I made up a flexible genre that worked for me without the burden of considering what others told me were the conventions for a good food journal.

The End?

Excising one's personal demons on the Internet is uncomfortable work at times, but I invite you to kateateasteak.wordpress.com to see all fifteen poetry entries. As a bonus, I've included some additional entries on my history with trauma and disordered eating that did not make the final cut of this article but that I hope will be useful to anyone else struggling with similar issues. I know you're out there, and now you know I'm out there, too. May you always have French toast if you want it and forever question the "right" way to write.

Endnotes

1. WEIGHT WATCHERS is the trade name and the registered trademark and service mark of Weight Watchers International.
2. In the Weight Watchers™ plan, the value comes in the form of Points™ or relative units based on a patented and trademarked algorithm, but the more common unit for weight loss is the calorie. Depending on nutritional need or focus of the specific weight loss program, calculated units may also include fat or fiber grams, sodium milligrams, or grams of cholesterol.
3. MyFitnessPal.com and the MyFitnessPal logo (collectively, the "MyFitnessPal Marks") are trademarks or registered trademarks of MyFitnessPal, LLC (<http://www.myfitnesspal.com>). SPARKPEOPLE is a registered trademark of SparkPeople, Inc. (<http://www.sparkpeople.com>).
4. Similar to the logic of "guns don't kill people, people kill people."
5. Sacker, Ira M., and Marc A. Zimmer. *Dying to be Thin: Understanding and Defeating Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia—A Practical, Lifesaving Guide*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1987.
6. National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc. (ANAD). "Eating Disorder Statistics." N.d. 16 Feb. 2013. <http://www.anad.org/get-information/about-eating-disorders/eating-disorders-statistics/>.
7. Frankel, Ellen, and Judith Matz. *The Diet Survivor's Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance, and Self-Care*. Chicago: Sourcebooks, 2006.
8. Kinzel, Lesley. "How To: Keep a Non-Crazymaking Food Journal." XOJane.com. 24 Jul. 2012. <http://www.xojane.com/healthy/how-keep-non-crazymaking-food-journal>.



Kate Browne is a PhD student specializing in American women's life writing because her mother said she'd be a writer someday even though she played a nurse in the preschool graduation pageant. She's also the type of person who would follow the signs to "See the Egress" just to be sure she didn't miss anything.

