

# Dining with the Duttons: Food Values and Political Polarisation in the *Yellowstone* Cookbooks

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## Abstract

Since it premiered in June 2018, *Yellowstone* has become one of the most popular series on television. Because fandom and food go together, given the rise of popular culture cookbooks featuring main courses, sides, appetizers, desserts, and drinks from and inspired by beloved series, it is no surprise that two cookbooks were published recreating what the Duttons eat on *Yellowstone*. This article investigates the political ideology associated with the food in the two *Yellowstone* cookbooks. It draws on recent literature in the fields of sociology, psychology, marketing communications, and consumer culture that has explored the relationship between political affiliation and eating behaviours demonstrating that the polarisation of political ideology extends to consumers' preferences. It postulates that even though *Yellowstone* fans have been said to lean conservative and the series has been labelled as “red state” and “Republican,” the food in the cookbooks appeals to conservatives and liberals. The paper reviews current research on politics and food values, examines the paratextual relationship that exists between culinary and cinematic texts, and addresses nutrition, taste, and price in the corpus of analysis.

**Keywords:** food values; political polarisation; popular culture cookbooks; *Yellowstone*



## Introduction

Political polarisation, that is, the distance between the left and the right, has been on the rise in the United States since the 1970s (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008) and has increased apace dramatically after 2000 (Grumbach 2018). A few authors have linked this increase to a growth in economic inequality (Payne 2017; Pearlstein 2018) and racial and social divisions (Westwood and Peterson 2022). Others have connected polarisation to the escalation of digital media (Settle 2018; Sunstein 2017). Some scholars have associated it with the impact of partisan cable news networks (Duca and Saving 2017). Whatever the cause, polarisation is a defining component of United States politics today. “More than ever, Americans endorse their party’s stance across all issues” (Heltzel and Laurin 2020, 179), in all aspects of everyday life, from work to entertainment and consumption, with respect to occupations, hobbies, the films they watch, the grocery stores they shop at, brands of preference, restaurants they dine out at, what they drink, and the foods they eat.

Despite the influence of politics on diet and “the growing recognition of this relationship, scarce evidence exists regarding food value preferences across the political spectrum” (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023). Seeking to address this situation, Antonios Tiganis et al. investigate how differences in political ideology determine preferences for specific foods drawing on the food values model proposed by Jayson L. Lusk and Brian C. Briggeman (2009). According to this model, the physical attributes of an alimentary product are related to a set of underlying abstract values. Ultimately, it is these values that motivate purchasing decisions and enable marketers to develop advertising strategies, predict emerging trends, and improve business operations. On the understanding that “buying a particular product or product attribute is conceptualized as a means to obtain some desirable end state” (Lusk and Briggeman 2009, 186), food values are defined as the end-states, consequences, or benefits in either pleasure or utility, or both, expected by consumers. The advantage of using food values as a measurement tool is that, unlike preferences or choices, more susceptible to contextual influences and market developments, they are relatively stable across space and time. Additionally, they can explain food choices across a variety of products. Specifically, Lusk and Briggeman (2009) identified the food values of naturalness, taste, price, safety, convenience, nutrition or health, origin, fairness, tradition, appearance, and environmental impact.<sup>1</sup>

Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis (2023) adopted these values to measure conservatives’ and liberals’ preferences for food products. They administered an online best-worst scaling questionnaire to 637 consumers who chose from among a set of 11 statements (for the 11 food values) which item they preferred the most and which they preferred the least. The ideology of the participants was assessed by asking about their political self-identification on a range of 1 (being very left wing) to 7 (being very right

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1 Later researchers added other values such as animal welfare and novelty. See, for instance, Bazzani et al. (2018).

wing). Data were collected during November 2022 and analysed using a random utility theory framework.<sup>2</sup> Findings “demonstrate that political ideology is associated with heterogeneous consumer preferences regarding food values.” In principle, on average, safety (e.g., “the extent to which consumption of food does not lead to illness”) is the most important value to American consumers.<sup>3</sup> After safety, there is a group of three values that are close in importance: nutrition, taste, and price.<sup>4</sup>

Findings further reveal that political conservatism is positively related to tradition and convenience (e.g., the ease with which food is cooked and consumed) and is negatively related to environmental impact and price sensitivity. In general, conservative consumers infer quality based on price and “favor [*sic*] luxury products especially when the goal of maintaining status is activated” (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023). They also exhibit a predilection for preserving traditional consumption patterns, which is consistent with previous studies “indicating conservatives’ inclination towards local experience, balance, order, ... avoidance toward uncertainty” and avoidance of novel foods or neophobia (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023). In fact, for neophobia two specific motivations have been investigated: disgust or “disliked sensory characteristics” and the perception that new foods “come from the outside of one’s own culture or subculture, being introduced to one’s environment by social outgroups, such as immigrants” (Guidetti, Carraro, and Cavazza 2022). Additionally, individuals embracing conservative views place a high importance on convenience which, in turn, “is linked to support for genetically modified food ..., brand love for fast-food retailers,” and environmentally unfriendly eating habits such as eating a lot of red meat (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023). In this sense, it is relevant to highlight the number of studies showing that people endorsing a conservative ideology eat more meat, “are less likely to be vegetarian, and hold more negative attitudes toward vegetarians compared with people holding liberal views” (Guidetti, Carraro, and Cavazza 2022).

For its part, political liberalism is negatively related to price and taste, and is positively related to environmental impact, fairness, and nutritional content. With regard to price value, while liberals are price conscious, they are generally willing to pay a premium for organic food and for ensuring that all parties involved in the production of the food equally benefit from the process (read: fairness). As expected, consumers with high green consumption values display a strong preference for nutrition (or the amount and type of fat, protein, vitamins, etc.), naturalness (i.e., the extent to which food is produced without the use of modern technologies or pesticides), and origin (where the agricultural

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2 Although the empirical data collection took place in Greece, the findings reported by Tiganis et al. support “previous findings that consumer preferences for food values exhibit relative stability across various countries, such as the USA, Canada, China, Mexico, and Norway” (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023).

3 All definitions of values are taken from Lusk and Briggeman (2009).

4 There were some people in the sample who picked these issues as most important every time the issue appeared in one of the 11 best-worst questions. This does not mean, as we see in the observations that follow, that they rank high for all consumers.

commodities are grown). One interesting observation is that even though taste is found to rank high in average importance it is of low value for people concerned with the effect of food production on the environment. Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis (2023) do not delve into the value of taste for consumers on the right of the political spectrum, but Giovanna Piracci et al. (2023) provide evidence that those who tend to exhibit less preference for sustainable food products are more likely to care about the pleasure involved in food consumption and to assign utility to appearance. After all, there is no evidence that organically grown food tastes better than its conventional counterpart. Additionally, whereas sustainability principles are strongly aligned with self-transcendence and social benefit, the value of taste is strongly aligned with self-actualisation and private profitability.

It is clear from the above that some values reinforce each other while others are mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, people for whom tradition is important might not be concerned about unfamiliar food or nutrition; people for whom taste and appearance are important may not care about the environment; and people who are not concerned about price will likely want to consume luxury dishes but may not care about novelty and excitement. Extending this line of thinking, the present article investigates the polarising role of political ideology in the food contained in two of the cookbooks inspired by *Yellowstone*, a drama television series about “the enduring cowboys of the American West” (Guilbeau 2023, 11). It explores the correlation between politics and cooking using food values. To that end, the article follows prior research in interpreting political ideology as both party affiliation (membership in or identification with an organised political party) and political orientation (positioning oneself along a continuum of ideas and beliefs about governments, rules, and laws). Although there is variation in political orientation within parties (Schiffer 2000), “party identification and political orientation often overlap” (Garneau and Schwadel 2022, 2). Accordingly, I use the terms “conservative,” “Republican,” “right wing,” and “political right” interchangeably to describe individuals and groups who defend established institutions and promote the preservation of traditional values and customs. I apply the terms “liberal,” “Democrat,” “left wing,” and “political left” to people who support progressive reforms, and seek greater social and economic equality.<sup>5</sup>

For the sake of clarity in exposition, considering average priorities, food values are grouped into three categories: nutrition, taste, and price. The value of safety is excluded because, as a rule, cookbooks offer readers little advice about reducing food-safety risks (Levine, Chaifetz, and Chapman 2017). The nutrition value is interpreted more broadly,

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5 In the United States, the term “liberal” describes people on the left of the political spectrum (Bell and Stanley 2012, 17–112). On the connection between “liberal” and “left wing,” see Heit and Nicholson (2010). They examine liberalism and conservatism as the two major ideologies in the United States. They argue that in the American context conservatives are likely to be identified with Republicans and liberals with Democrats, even though “the liberal–conservative distinction might be weaker than the Democrat–Republican distinction because liberal and conservative are more like trait adjectives, whereas Democrat and Republican are more like richly structured categories” (2010, 1508).

acknowledging the positive role of food on individual health. The taste value is combined with appearance because visual features affect our perception of taste (Piqueras-Fiszman and Spence 2015). In this sense, research has shown that visual attributes create expectations for taste and that aesthetically pleasing dishes tend to be experienced as tastier than dishes without aesthetic appeal (Zellner et al. 2014). I relate each category to specific dishes: meat and vegetarian; organic and convenience; ordinary and luxury. As may already be apparent from the discussion above, a type of food is considered a luxury when it marks social distinction because it is uncommon or not-ordinary (Tiganis, Chrysochou, and Krystallis 2023; Van der Veen 2003). I postulate that even though *Yellowstone* fans have been said to lean conservative and the series has been labelled as “prestige TV for conservatives” (Horton 2022; Mathews 2018;), “red-state television” (Wanzo 2022), and “Republican” (Poniewozik 2022), recipes in these cookbooks appeal to conservatives and liberals. Before proceeding, it is worth briefly commenting on the cultural values of food, the intersections of food and television, and “popular culture cookbooks” (as the cookbooks that are spin-offs from a television series, films, video games or literature are commonly called). In what follows, I address how television cookbooks extend the food content of the original media text, focussing on the paratextual relation that exists between culinary and cinematic texts.

## Popular Culture Cookbooks as Paratexts

The cultural values of food have been amply explored by scholars in anthropology (Barthes 1973; Douglas 1984; Lévi-Strauss 1970, 1978), history (Mennell 1985), linguistics (Jurafsky 2014), literary criticism (Boyce and Fitzpatrick 2017), nutrition (Nestle 2013), philosophy (Heldke 1992), sociology (Bourdieu 1984), and women’s and gender studies (Counihan 1999). From the perspective of cultural studies, anthologies such as the *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies* (Albala 2013), *Food and Cultural Studies* (Ashley et al. 2004), *Food and Culture: A Reader* (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997), and *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture* (Lebesco and Naccarato 2017) have delved into how food practices shape individual and communal identities, power relations, and historical processes, highlighting that food is not merely sustenance but a main component of social organisation. From the area of media studies, notable researchers such as Peri Bradley (2016), Kathleen Collins (2009), and Sarah Murray (2013) have investigated the “meteoric rise in contemporary food television” (Murray 2013, 187) and its impact on the alimentary habits of audiences.

In the field of culinary arts, cookbooks have been analysed as objects of social inquiry (Appadurai 1988; Bower 1997; Curtin 1992; Floyd and Forster 2003; Symons 1998, 2000; Theophano 2002; Tobias 1998; Zafar 1999). In this respect, Douglas Brownlie, Paul Hewer, and Suzanne Horne, citing from Daniel Miller’s *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (1987), argue that cookbooks “represent culture because they are an integral part of that process of objectification by which we create ourselves as an industrial society, our identities, our social affiliations, our lived everyday practices” (Brownlie, Hewer, and Horne 2005, 8). Jessamyn Neuhaus corroborates this when

writing that “every cookbook, more or less consciously is a work of social history,” offering “vivid examples of what we might appropriately term a cultural text: recipes are loaded with meaning particular to their time and place” (1999, 536). Similarly, Jack Goody claims that cookbooks are related not only to structures of production and distribution, but “to the system of class or stratification and to its political ramifications” (1982, 37).

While relatively little has been written on popular culture cookbooks, recent contributions have investigated the developmental links between cookbooks and television (Geddes 2023), the repurposing of material from television cooking programmes to cookbooks (Bonner 2009), and how spin-off cookbooks reproduce the iconography of the original source, and “its ideology, which is both physically realized [*sic*] and incorporated in the recipes” (Borsy 2022, 211). Especially useful for the purposes at hand is Madison Magladry’s essay “Eat your Favourite TV Show: Politics and Play in Fan Cooking” (2018), in which she claims that popular culture cookbooks work as paratexts to the extent that “they invite physical embodiment of a once-peripheral element of the source text [and] make it present” (Magladry 2018, 115). Critical theorist Gérard Genette defines “paratexts” as the productions that accompany a literary text. He writes:

One does not always know if one should consider that they [paratexts] belong to the text or not, but in any case they surround it and prolong it, precisely in order to *present* it, in the usual sense of this verb, but also in its strongest meaning: to *make present*, to assure its presence in the world, its “reception” and its consumption. ... Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a *threshold* ... which offers to anyone and everyone the possibility either of entering or of turning back. (Genette 1991, 261, original italics)

Taking as point of departure the idea that television shows and cookbooks are texts, Magladry shows that the latter text extends the food details of the former text presenting readers with the opportunity of entering a beloved imaginary place via recreating what the characters eat. By doing so, fans can dine with their favourite characters at home, share in their struggles, and experience their feelings and thoughts. In the words of writer Swamini Narkar (2023): “When you’re eating what a character eats, you are in the most obvious way putting yourself in their shoes, giving the feeling that you, as the viewer, are truly part of the fictional universe.” Because food is “peripheral” to this fictional universe, cookbook authors build on the dishes already seen on-screen, further developing them, and including others of their own that relate to the show.

For cookbooks to “literally materialize the fantastical” (Magladry 2018, 117) and serve as thresholds to it, recipes are to be real, in the double sense of likely to be prepared or made for actual cooking and authentic, as according with the “original intended meaning and function” of the source text (Magladry 2018, 111). After all, “improbable recipes call into question the function of the recipes themselves” (Magladry 2018, 118); and, first and foremost, a cookbook is a technical manual. Just like any other paratext, whose

objective is to orient the reader to the kind of reading which the author considers the most “faithful” (Genette 1991, 267) and “pertinent” (Genette 1991, 262), cookbooks guide viewers to the kind of cooking that authors consider most genuine to the main text. Of course, there is not one single, legitimate interpretation of any text, and interpretations may be contradictory. Some texts may also lend themselves better to cookbooks because they contain more descriptions of food. Thus, to “fill in gaps in the [primary] narrative” authors of popular culture cookbooks “pore over every element—down to the props in recipe photos,” considering “climates and character motivations,” as well as historical contexts, settings, cultures, and timelines “so fans can feel fully immersed” (Priya 2021).

Fans of popular culture cookbooks are enthusiasts of popular culture and food. As a matter of fact, fandom and food go together in that both involve the vital components of consumption and identity. While highlighting “the broader importance of physical, bodily practices to the fannish experience,” Rebecca Williams underscores that “fans ... turn to consumables such as food and drink as a way of expressing their fandom” (2020, 230). Because of this intersection, given the current explosion of popular culture cookbooks featuring meals from and inspired by very successful series like *Game of Thrones*, *Orange Is the New Black*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Walking Dead*, among many others, it is little wonder that two cookbooks were published recreating what the Duttons eat on *Yellowstone*.<sup>6</sup>

## Corpus of Study

Since it premiered on 20 June 2018, *Yellowstone* has become one of the most popular series on television. According to Paramount Network Research, it averages five million viewers per episode (Bitette 2019). Co-created by Taylor Sheridan and John Linson, the series has been categorised as neo-Western, meaning that it adapts old Western motifs to contemporary settings. The basic theme of the genre is that “the encroaching sense of modernity [is] leaving the American Old West behind” (Benson 2019). Essentially, *Yellowstone* portrays the struggle of old school cowboy John Dutton, played by Kevin Costner, and of his family, owners of the largest ranch in Montana, to preserve their way of life and defend their land from outside developers and the bordering Broken Rock Indian Reservation.

According to Elisa Bordin (2014), in the neo-Western genre, the hegemonic masculinity of the cowboy is assuaged because of changes in male identity, the emancipation of ethnic and sexual minorities, and globalised capitalism. Nonetheless, “hats, horses, and guns” (Falconer 2009, 62) remain. One key generic convention Bordin does not approach is cowboy food. The “sovereign” role the cook, often nicknamed “cookie,”

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6 Recently, a third cookbook was released titled *The Unofficial Yellowstone Cookbook: Dutton-Style Dishes and Cowboy Cocktails to Keep Your Family at the Table* by Rachel Riesgraf and Allison Janse. At the time of writing this essay, the book is still unavailable and has not been included in the corpus.

played back in the days of cattle drives and the “supreme” power he wielded on the open range (Adams 1972, 5), accounts for the relevance of eating in classic films, and the number of cookbooks on the market inspired by the gustatory traditions of the Old West, with the favourite recipes of John Wayne, Roy Rogers, and Clint Eastwood, among other famous stars (Beck and Clark 1995). Thus, it is only appropriate that many important scenes in *Yellowstone* take place at the dining room table. Evidently, the desires of the palate change, and antiquated recipes are necessarily “adapted for the modern kitchen,” to today’s standards, in popular culture cookbooks (Chatzi 2022).

The corpus analysed in this study consists of two cookbooks ideally addressed to American home cooks that are fans of the series. The first cookbook, *Yellowstone: The Official Dutton Ranch Family Cookbook*, was released in September 2023, and is official merchandise of the show. Written by the actor who plays the Duttons’ personal cook, Gabriel “Gator” Guilbeau, who also happens to be a professional chef in real life who feeds the cast and crew of the show, it contains 60 dishes that spring from the five seasons of the show. The second cookbook, *The Unofficial Yellowstone Cookbook: Recipes Inspired by the Dutton Family Ranch*, was released in November 2023. Written by award-winning food photographer and recipe developer Jackie Alpers, it contains 70 recipes “that the Duttons, their pioneer forebears and their staff, would be proud to enjoy while chewing the fat” (Alpers 2023, 2). Being neither commissioned nor authorised by the producers, unofficial cookbooks “may better reflect the lived experiences of fans separate from the production of tie-in media whose purpose is to extend a franchise for economic reasons” (Magladry 2018, 112). Indeed, the *Yellowstone* television series is already extending the franchise with other consumer products, including a recent line of cowboy cuisine, available at the [eatyellowstone.com](http://eatyellowstone.com) webpage, which “invites you to savor [*sic*] the essence of the series and taste its flavors [*sic*] firsthand.” Aside from their purpose as merchandise produced to benefit from the success of the show, the common purpose of the cookbooks under analysis is to give any viewer/reader the chance to dine with the Duttons and “celebrate the tradition of the American Western and its modern flag-bearer, *Yellowstone*, in all their glory” (Alpers 2023, 2).<sup>7</sup> In the following section of this article, the values of nutrition, taste, and price embedded in the recipes contained in these texts are examined.

## Neo-Western Cuisine

### **Nutrition: Meat and Vegetarian Foods**

Considering how “adamant” Sheridan is “that things do not appear fake, [including] the cooking on the show” (Guilbeau 2023, 12), and that cowboys in the Old West ate meat “day in and day out” (Hughes 1974, 52), it is not surprising that a lot of meat is eaten on *Yellowstone*. Nor is it surprising that the menu in the cookbooks of the series is filled

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7 Although it is not the topic of this article, it is interesting to note that these cookbooks, written by male and female authors, have similar recipe lists, which opens the question of how the food contemporary cowboys eat conditions the new masculinity performed in neo-Westerns.

with meat dishes or that meat is an ingredient in starters, side dishes, and most main courses. Served at the “three meals daily [that] are crucial for the amount of hard work involved in” the cowboy world (Guilbeau 2023, 12), meat is used throughout these cookbooks in classic comfort dishes, like Rancher’s Chicken and Biscuit Dumplings (Guilbeau 2023, 82), Oregon Trail Dutch Oven Short Ribs (Alpers 2023, 105), and Cowboy Beef Chili (Guilbeau 2023, 45), which remind of the Midwest and Texas. Meat also features in traditional Louisiana Creole meals, such as Kickin’ Chicken Tenders (Guilbeau 2023, 68) and Cajun Chicken and Sausage Gumbo (Guilbeau 2023, 76). As it turns out, Sheridan, who “is a cowboy himself in real life (and owner of the famed 6666 Ranch in Texas)” (Guilbeau 2023, 33), has an “affinity for Southern foods, because that’s where he’s from” (Guilbeau 2023, 23). Importantly, Guilbeau’s family is from Louisiana, so he makes “a lot of Cajun food” off set and on set (Guilbeau 2023, 12). Some meat recipes—Jimmy’s Cowboy Beef Chili (Guilbeau 2023, 45), John’s Perfect Rib Eye Steak (46) and Jamie’s Smothered Chicken in Brown Mushroom Gravy (73)—carry the name of the characters in the series, and are plain good family meals, particularly appropriate for a show that “centers [*sic*] around family and reinforces the importance of gathering around a dinner table to discuss the day” (Alpers 2023, 2). Other recipes bring to memory the vaquero traditions of northern Mexico (like Longhorn Carne Asada Burritos, in Alpers 2023, 97, and Easy Green Pozole with Smoked Turkey or Pheasant, in Alpers 2023, 122); and “the largely Scotch-Irish settlers of the American West” (like Cara Dutton’s Irish Stout Pot Roast in Alpers 2023, 109). Occasionally meat is the base for a typical Native cuisine dish, like Cider-Braised Turkey Thighs (borrowed from *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen* by Sean Sherman, in Alpers 2023, 94), and Corn Masa and Sage Dumplings in Partridge Soup (Alpers 2023, 126).

The recipes are easy to make and understand. Ingredients in both cookbooks are listed in order of use to facilitate cooking. For the most part, instructions are straightforward, concise, and to the point, with short preparation and cooking times. Only larger tougher cuts of meat are braised low and slow. Each recipe begins with a story that describes flavour and aroma qualities, gives culinary advice, and contextualises the dish. Oftentimes it “speaks to the constant blending of cultures highlighted on *Yellowstone*, illustrating what makes the West so special” (Alpers 2023, 20), educating readers about the role of European immigrants and minority groups in the introduction of novel foods to America during the days of Westward expansion. In this sense, we learn that chicken fried steak, for instance, is not originally American, as is commonly believed, but was brought to Texas in the nineteenth century by German and Austrian immigrants “who were adapting their familiar schnitzel dishes” (Alpers 2023, 98). And that jerky was invented by the Indigenous people in the Andes mountains and had been a staple snack in South America long before the arrival of Spanish conquistadors (Alpers 2023, 49).

At another level, we learn from these cookbooks that cowboys ate meats (rattlesnakes) and animal parts (hooves, cheeks, testicles, hearts, brain, and liver) that are “virtually proscribed” in the United States today, as historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto writes in

“The American Dream Has No Time for Offal” (2021). “So repellent” are these to current prejudices that Americans would not sample them, he concludes (2021). From his idyllic evocation of a Europe that earlier generations of migrants rejected, and his nostalgia for offcuts and wild game meats, it is easy to infer that Fernández-Armesto is writing for a politically conservative publication, *The Spectator*. The truth is that, in the Old West, where men and women were stripped from “the garments of civilization,” to quote from *The Frontier in American History* by Frederick Jackson Turner (1921, 4), and their lives were “sharply precipitated by the wilderness into the simplicity of primitive [uncivilized] conditions” (1921, 9),<sup>8</sup> disgust was a luxury that few, if any, could afford. Thus, in this context, “for an especially Western experience” (Alpers 2023, 49), readers are dared to expand their culinary horizons, be “brave enough to eat like real cowboys” and put their guests to the test cooking such “adventurous Western delicacies” (Alpers 2023, 75) as Rattlesnake Sausage Chowder (Alpers 2023, 121), Mountain Oysters (Alpers 2023, 58), and Son-of-a-Bitch Stew (Alpers 2023, 125).

In the *Yellowstone* cookbooks, encounter with the “primitive conditions” is constructed as a natural experience where “natural” means “inherent in the very constitution of a person” or “innate; not acquired or assumed” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Specifically, what is innate is eating meat of all kinds, adventurous and not. Nowhere does this become clearer than when Guilbeau remembers the last evening of shooting for Season 3. After grilling rib-eyes all day, for a moment he looked “out at the Montana landscape as the sun was going down and it was spectacular.” Then he turned his “attention to the crew and cast” to realise that “just about everyone had a steak in their hands. Literally in their hands! Not a plate and not using a knife and fork—just about everyone [he] could see was eating a steak like an apple!” He concludes with: “If that’s not *Yellowstone*, I don’t know what it is!” (2023, 46). Leaving aside the confusion of actors and fans alike immersing themselves into the characters’ lives, motivations, and circumstances through food, the implication is that *Yellowstone* is about scorning former misconceptions and returning to a situation “between savagery and civilization” (Turner 1921, 3) when individuals regain touch with who they really are, their essence, their “inner ... Dutton” (Alpers 2023, 66).<sup>9</sup>

Research shows that nutritional benefits do not form the basis of meat eating and that “high levels of food neophobia” represent “an obstacle to fruit and vegetable consumption” as well as to, by extension, “acceptance of meat substitutes” (Guidetti, Carraro, and Cavazza 2022). While neither Guilbeau nor Alpers incorporate a breakdown into grams of protein, carbohydrates, fat, sodium, fibre, and calories per

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8 The colonisers of America considered the cultures and practices of Indigenous peoples as “primitive,” which should be read within the context of today as meaning “unfamiliar to European conceptions.” At the time, the word “primitive” chimed with problematic colonial notions about “modernity” that are currently viewed as harmful and ignorant.

9 Noticeable is the constructedness of the notion of “inner self” within fan merchandise, in service of what are some very essentialised cultural values about identity and one’s relationship with the environment.

serving into each recipe, they do promote “sustainable and traditional” food practices (Alpers 2023, 6), implying that traditional food is healthy, which is important given the strong relationship between environmental impact and health in diets from the consumer perspective, as Piracci et al. have shown (2023). To the value of environmental impact, I will return below. For now, it is of interest that the authors of these cookbooks expressly use the words “health” and “healthy,” which indicate a preference for wellness food product attributes, to convey a positive message about the key nutrients in Grilled Portobello Mushroom Burgers (where mushroom substitutes for beef, in Guilbeau 2023, 60), Prostate-Friendly Salad with Fruits,<sup>10</sup> prepared on the show after John Dutton is diagnosed with colon cancer in Season 1 (Guilbeau 2023, 19; Alpers 2023, 141), and Summer’s Wheatgrass Smoothie, named after vegan activist Summer Higgins in Season 4 (Guilbeau 2023, 154). Made with wheatgrass, spinach, avocado, banana, almond butter, and almond milk, the smoothie is so substantially high in calories that it is almost a meal on its own. Likewise, fit for “cowboy-sized appetites” (Guilbeau 2023, 56) are such staples of long cattle runs as Cowboy Beans (Alpers, 2023 146) and Lucky Cowboy Caviar (Alpers 2023, 142) or Rodeo Cowboy Caviar (Guilbeau 2023, 116). With dishes like “Train Station” Funeral Potatoes (Alpers 2023, 154), Gun Barrel Mac and Cheese (Alpers 2023, 56) and Potato Corn Chowder (Guilbeau 2023, 20), thinking of trans fats, one may wonder about their beneficial impact on overall health, no matter how much fuel is needed to herd and tend cattle. One might also wonder about frying “all kinds of vegetables: broccoli, green beans, onion rings, zucchini, you name it” (Guilbeau 2023, 31). Regardless of whether what is considered healthy is necessarily so, my point is that vegetarianism is neither evaluated negatively nor is it perceived as a threat. Almost half of the dishes in these cookbooks (including starters, main courses, sides, and desserts) contain no meat, poultry, game, fish, or shellfish. When they do, recipes may be flexible enough to accommodate the identity of readers who are vegetarian.

### **Taste: Organic and Convenience Foods**

One recipe that suits a vegetarian diet is Golden Squash Casserole. Not only is this “a good vegetarian dish” if the bacon is left out, but also “a great way to cook up” the surplus squash that “everyone on or around the Yellowstone Ranch . . . , all over Montana and probably the rest of the country too” grows during the summer, so that it is not wasted (Guilbeau 2023, 106). Both authors “hate to waste food” (Guilbeau 2023, 106), pride themselves on not wasting any food, and adjust their cooking to what is available during the season. In the spirit of “waste not, want not” they save leftovers that will be recycled for another dish (Alpers 2023, 7). Cornbread dressing, for instance, is truly “a great way to use leftover cornbread” (Guilbeau 2023, 107). Bourbon Pineapple Bread

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10 According to the Vegetarian Society (<https://vegsoc.org/>), a vegetarian is someone who does not eat meat, poultry, game, fish, and shellfish. Although certain types of vegetarians also avoid eggs, dairy, and other animal by-products, I abide here by the most basic definition of this dietary practice.

Pudding is made with “leftover biscuits” (Guilbeau 2023, 142), and Smash Burgers with Braised Onion with “leftover ground beef” (Alpers 2023, 101).

The authors preserve ingredients by canning, pickling, and dehydrating. They advise readers to do the same and recommend foraging greens and planting vegetables, regardless of “whether you have a few acres, a small front garden or a flower box by the window” (Alpers 2023, 5), because it is an economical way to feed the family, and, within the same movement, helps protect the environment. Additionally, they advocate for self-caught game, which, according to Guilbeau, “encourages a lifestyle living off the land, very much in line with the lifestyle on the Dutton Ranch” (2023, 28). Alpers concurs when she emphasises that “folks like the Duttons have been fighting for more than a century” against “the wasteful industrialization” of the land they love with the ultimate goal of preserving it. Thus, in her words: “If you’ve never tried hunting or fishing . . . , now might be the time to get a lesson and a license” (2023, 6), unless “you’re certain you don’t want to hunt or fish,” in which case her advice is to “try sourcing your meat and fish directly from those who do” so that they get a fair share of the price (2023, 6). She even has suggestions about cookware and dispensing with Teflon lined pans, which “create more waste” because they only last a year or two in good condition, in favour of “a good cast iron pan” (2023, 5). She adds that “when you go shopping, do so with a mind toward the source.” To make sure that the values guiding our food choices are respectful of origin, Alpers prompts us to ask ourselves: “Was this produce locally grown? Is it fresh, or has it come from across the continent in the back of a series of trains and trucks? Were these chickens free-range or from a factory farm? Was this fish pole-caught, farmed or caught in a dangerous and wasteful industrial net?” In her view, “the answers to these questions not only mean the difference between a good dinner and a great one—they can also make a huge difference in terms of your environmental impact” (2023, 7).

Generally, organic food is more expensive than convenience food, which has been “largely criticized,” be it certified organic or not, “for the negative burden imposed on the environment compared to home-made products because of its use of water, energy, other resources, and waste production” (Stranieri, Ricci, and Banterle 2017, 18). Liberal consumers who care about price and tend to avoid wasting resources do state a high willingness to pay extra for environmental labels, such as green identity and fair trade. As seen above, in the evaluation of sustainable food products, values such as environmental impact and fairness prevail over the value of taste, which, because of its private dimension, scores low and has not been studied as a possible driver of purchases that minimise ecological damage. Here, however, “the difference between good food and *great* food” (Guilbeau 2023, 23; original italics) permeates both personal and social domains, involving public good and personal pleasure at once. This becomes fully apparent in the expectations set by the images accompanying the recipes.

There are close-ups of the Montana landscape, Yellowstone National Park, wildlife, plants, bison, horses, cattle, ranching, cowboys, and cowgirls. In the official cookbook

these shots are taken from the show, with the characters in them. By association, these images answer the questions posed by Alpers in the affirmative, confirming to the reader that the produce is organic. They combine with big glossy photographs of the final dishes, in warm appetizing colours and high resolution, which allows viewers to see textures and details of “all the glorious buttery juices” (Guilbeau 2023, 27). Sensory words (“savory” [*sic*], “creamy,” “spicy,” “smoked,” “crisp,” “golden brown,” “warm”) and superlatives (“the best,” “the finest,” “the most delicious”) highlight the exceptional flavours of the food and make readers crave it before even tasting. Food is presented in a way that appeals to the sense of comfort and openly invites culinary emulation. Of note is that all the recipes look impressive on the plate, but not all of them carry environmentally sustainable attributes or contain main ingredients that are local to the area.

### **Price: Ordinary and Luxury Foods**

Two examples may illustrate the use of convenience food in the *Yellowstone* cookbooks. One is the recipe for Choco Chimps Cereal Treat (Alpers 2023, 26), which includes maple syrup, peanut butter, vanilla extract, strawberries, marshmallows as a bonding agent and, of course, the Choco Chimps that Tate, John Dutton’s grandson, eats in Season 3, Episode 9, instead of the scrambled breakfast the chef had prepared.<sup>11</sup> The second example is the recipes for Beth’s *Gourmet* Hamburger (or Tuna) Helper (Alpers 2023, 85; my italics) and Beth’s Cheesy Hamburger Mac Casserole (Guilbeau 2023, 63) inspired by the dish Beth Dutton cooks for her husband, Rip Wheeler, in Season 4, Episode 1, as an act of love.

During this episode, which begins with Beth “really getting this whole cooking thing” (Alpers 2023, 114), she attempts making Hamburger Helper (variant: Deluxe Cheeseburger Macaroni), but adds tuna to the mixture of dried pasta and prepackaged seasoning because she does not have ground meat at hand. The scene is comic because Beth, who is unaccustomed to cooking, does not know that another variant of this product is called Tuna Helper. Be that as it may, despite her best intentions, the recipe does not turn out very well. As expected, a version is recreated in the cookbooks, “but a whole lot better” (Guilbeau 2023, 63), elevating Beth’s “pedestrian” (Alpers 2023, 114) dish with the addition of beef or chicken stock, grated Cheddar cheese, onion (chopped or in flakes), and elbow macaroni (or panko), so that it feels “like a big warm hug” (Guilbeau 2023, 63).

Just as a meal that comes out of a box and is cheap (Hamburger Helper costs around 1 USD) can achieve “gourmet” status when other ingredients are incorporated, using luxury foods may not be economically justifiable. In this sense, perhaps the highest priced dinner in the series takes place in Season 2, Episode 3: char-grilled octopus. “The real sea creature” that Guilbeau prepares (Utley 2023) is very expensive to buy because

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11 Despite being certified organic the product had already been recalled for undeclared gluten (wheat and barley) in 2019, before the episode aired.

the animal cannot be farmed humanely, the meat is not domestic to the United States,<sup>12</sup> and scarcity is what makes certain foods valuable. Furthermore, the dish is labour intensive. Considered a luxury in many parts of the world, it is semi-ironically served as a “humble pie” to Jamie Dutton, after he “learns in his first abortive campaign [that] government is a strange, many-tentacled beast” (Alpers 2023, 113), when he sits down at the dinner table with the family. Nobody finishes the meal, and, as Guilbeau puts it: “In no way, shape, or form would [Kevin Costner] ever eat the grilled octopus” (Phillips 2023). Noting that the actor’s eating habits are similar to Mr Dutton’s, Guilbeau comments that when setting the dish in front of the *Yellowstone* patriarch, he asked “‘Gator, what the h\*\*\* is that?’ But Kevin Costner didn’t say ‘h\*\*\*’ in the moment, dropping a full-on f-bomb in reaction to the octopus and promptly asking his dinner companions to send a plate of potatoes his way” (Phillips 2023; asterisks in the original).

What is important is not whether Costner/Dutton is a picky eater, as Guilbeau has remarked on several occasions (Utley 2023), or whether he has the palate to appreciate grilled octopus, or whether the dish is too un-American. Significantly, an increase in price is not associated with an increase in quality. Nor are luxury products favoured to pursue and satisfy the status-maintenance goal. A central tenet of the literature on political differences in consumption is that conservative consumers tend to use price as a cue to assess product quality. However, the conservatism of the Duttons is articulated against price quality judgments. Being so wealthy, they are free from the urge to conspicuous consumption. This affluence might not be shared by fans, however. Similarly, most fans are unlikely to have a private chef. Still, with the simplified recipe for Grilled Octopus with Lemon and Roasted Potatoes in the official cookbook (2023, 93) we may prepare octopus in 15 minutes if we buy it cooked and frozen. By all accounts, cooking from scratch is better, but shortcuts are welcome, as is clear from the fans discussing how to replicate this dish on *Reddit*, where two years ago, in the forum dedicated to those who remembered the octopus scene from *Yellowstone*, they were recommending and exchanging pictures of Nuchar Cooked Octopus 17.6 oz bag, which sells at Costco for a reasonable price (Distilled-Blockout 2021).

## Conclusion

Liberals and conservatives differ in many ways, including in terms of their culinary habits. Following on previous studies investigating the food values of consumers along the political spectrum and how these values affect the choice of specific products, this article argues that the food presented in the *Yellowstone* cookbooks is politically ambiguous, combining meat and vegetarian foods, organic and convenience products, ordinary and luxury items.

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12 As per Volza’s 2023 import data, the United States imports most of its octopus from China, India, and Spain.

On the one hand, by considering meat as healthy food, the authors of these cookbooks relate the values of nutrition and naturalness, which rank as among the most crucial for liberals, to an ingredient favoured by conservatives who, as per the existing literature, express low levels of concern for maintaining a balanced diet. Like conservatives, these authors exhibit a predilection for eating according to tradition, but it is a tradition that is open to what is unfamiliar and new. On the other hand, by finding in taste and appearance a driver of sustainable consumption, Alpers and Guilbeau prioritise values positively associated with conservatism in a behaviour that is characteristic of the political left, which (unlike the right) shows deep concern for the environmental impact of food, states a preference for fairness and is willing to pay extra for organic food. Lastly, although there is a relationship between green consumption values and price consciousness, price is not found to be a determinant of quality in these cookbooks. In light of this, if these texts are seen as expanding the lore and character of the *Yellowstone* series, the show might not be reflective of the conservatism that is often ascribed to it. Furthermore, it appears that fans may also not necessarily entirely embody such an ideology. In sum, these two cookbooks seem to reveal that the appeal of the show might go beyond just a conservative viewer base and might also include viewers from a more left-leaning side of the political spectrum.

In view of the growing number of popular culture cookbooks, examining the food values in these texts adds to the theoretical and practical research on the preferences and behaviours of consumers and fans. It also contributes to a better understanding of the content and complexity of political categories. Despite its limited scope, this article may provide a useful theoretical framework for future research on the relationship between political ideology and food values in film and television-themed cookbooks.

## Funding Information

The research carried out for the writing of this article has taken place within the framework of the research projects “The Premise of Happiness: The Function of Feelings in North American Narratives” (PID2020-113190GB-C21), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation; and “Comida, identidad y comunidad en la literatura infantil hispánica del siglo XXI” (CIAICO/2022/208), funded by the Conselleria de Innovación, Universidades, Ciencia y Sociedad Digital (Comunitat Valenciana, Spain).

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