

**Harry Potter and the Never-Ending Plate: Wizarding Culture and Character Behaviors
Surrounding Food in the Harry Potter Series**

Margaret-Ann Simonetta

American Eating: Succotash, Spam, and Cultures of Food

Dr. Zoe Eddy

April 25, 2021

"I've got it all worked out," she went on smoothly, ignoring Harry's and Ron's stupefied faces.

She held up two plump chocolate cakes.

"I've filled these with a simple Sleeping Draught.

All you have to do is make sure Crabbe and Goyle find them.

You know how greedy they are, they're bound to eat them.

Once they're asleep, pull out a few of their hairs and hide them in a broom closet."

- Hermione Granger,

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets, J. K. Rowling

Since 1997, the *Harry Potter* series has provided its global readers with essential personal escapes through the imaginaries found within its printed form; demonstrating the series is more than just a handful of books, it's a way of life. J. K. Rowling's hit series, which includes seven novels and eight feature films, has been supplying fans for over two decades with an excess of envious optics, including the mouthwatering foods scattered throughout the wizarding world. From the famed Hogwarts Great Hall feasts to Honeydukes' tantalizing sweet-treats, *Harry Potter* enthusiasts have ended chapters hungrier than they were before they started reading thanks to J. K. Rowling's acclaimed milieu. Although many attribute the novels to revealing the tale of a young boy fighting his way through the wizarding and Muggle realms, the series has a copious relationship with food and the societal standards surrounding such wizarding edibles. How do the cultural behaviors encompassing food include or exclude those within a community, specifically through the lens of the *Harry Potter* series? By comprehending how the series enables such nourishment motifs, scholars and fans alike may begin to analyze how the culture of food throughout the *Harry Potter* series reveals a wizarding identity between those accepted and those rejected. The wizarding world's exclusive capability to cook and provide never-ending plates of food at the flick of a wand has a quirky way of contextually signaling to the reader the

cultural behaviors behind the enchanting culture. Interestingly, J. K. Rowling's words have a way of showcasing such internal struggles via the essence of food; giving way to a relevant narrative while dually signaling to the reader who is a friend and who is a foe. Enjoining these food-based cultural performances, *Harry Potter* fans have the option to read beyond the text and explore the depths of such cultural identities 'S.P.E.W.d' throughout the books to gain a better understanding of why wizarding food is more than just a plateful in the Great Hall.

To obtain a more complex narrative of such food culture interlaced within the Potter series, author Leisa Anna Clark (2012) discusses this topic in-depth throughout her case study entitled, *Butterbeer, Cauldron Cakes, and Fizzing Wizbies: Food in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series*. Clark's central argument stems from an anthropological frame of reference between how the reader connects with the characters by means of the food consumed throughout the series. Clark's (2012) overarching argument contests that the characters use food "to create and reinforce friendships or exclude those who do not belong," within the wizarding community (p. ii). Anthropologically, nourishment has ushered together individuals and communities alike for as long as humans have existed; creating a sense of clanship for those who gather in small or big groups. Akin to those motifs within the *Harry Potter* series, food gives the reader a unique understanding of the characters and their level of acceptance inside wizarding society — beginning with the series starter, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (PS).

Our first glance as to how food is dually used to showcase a character's inclusion, yet lack of wealth, is displayed in PS during Harry's first magical Hogwarts Express train ride. Harry's exposure to the plentiful trolley cart's goodies has him giddy with sugar ecstasy, as he comically buys a stockpile of treats for the journey to Hogwarts. Introduced within the same

chapter is Ron Weasley, Harry's forthcoming best friend, whose "lumpy package" of homemade corned beef sandwiches is embarrassingly dismal compared to Harry's lot, as Ron exclaims, "you don't want this, it's all dry" (Rowling, 1997, p. 76). Ron's immediate reaction to his food, juxtapose to Harry's, is the initial signal the reader is given on behalf of the Weasley's lack of wealth; a theme which is greatly discussed throughout the entirety of the books. Harry's reaction regarding Ron's self-conscious explanation presented the audience with their earliest look into Harry's manner of inclusion by offering to split his bites with Ron and dismissing his obvious fiscal shortcomings. This simple yet poignant moment involving wizarding snacks quickly matured into two pivotal themes scattered throughout the series; the first being how food can initiate a blossoming friendship and the second being a brief look into the financial matters between some characters within the series.

Clark's (2012) opinion on this scene is an examination of how food manifests the "cultural capital and economic capital" between these two characters, as she goes on to say, "[Harry] proves to be generous and fair" with his sugary treats while ignoring Ron's inability to buy such goodies on his own (p. 28). Although Ron's character is often bullied about his family's monetary circumstances within the wizarding world, Harry's ability to accept Ron into his cultural and social relations is just the beginning for this duo — all thanks to a trolley cart full of food and a shared Chocolate Frog.

Cultural identities are commonly displayed employing food when one analyzes societal factors through an anthropological lens. Historically, food and beverage have been a favored commonality between peoples across our globe for over three millennia; creating a socialized setting for individuals and groups alike to nourish their bodies and mingle during the process. As

discussed in the article *The Anthropology of Food and Eating*, authored by Mintz and Du Bois (2002), the process of eating and identities is also paired by “class or social position,” which connects elements such as “nationality, ethnicity, class, and gender” when considering a culture’s food habits (pg. 109). Equating wizarding culture against these themes is effortless when one begins to probe the *Harry Potter* series and comprehend how important these social class positions are within the wizarding realm. From the decisions made by the famed Sorting Hat to who chooses to side with Harry Potter or Lord Voldemort by the series finale, the entirety of the novels is based upon these positions within the wizarding realm, adding a compelling anthropological twist to this global success. Moreover, Mintz and Du Bois (2002) also explore the depths of how “food serves both to solidify group members and to set groups apart,” yet another theme the fandom regularly consumes within the Potter franchise (p. 109). In a like manner, these anthropological themes intertwine themselves through Rowling’s written words via how food is used in favor of or against a character. This motif serves as an important lesson for the reader to quickly grasp during book one so they may better understand the innumerable other food-based cultural choices made throughout the series.

Notably illustrated in chapter twelve entitled ‘Polyjuice Potion’ of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (CS) is a comical yet informative food scheme conducted by Harry, Ron, and Hermione Granger. While the school was trying to confirm who was attacking multiple students and ghosts within the walls of Hogwarts, the trio assumed it was their malicious classmate, Draco Malfoy, and went to extreme lengths to prove his possible guilt. Yet, their plan was anything but simple... use two chocolate cakes infused with a powerful Sleeping Draught to trick Draco Malfoy’s overweight best friends (Crabbe and Goyle) into eating them. Then, Draco’s

cronies will subsequently lose consciousness while Harry and Ron shove them inside a broom closet and pull out a piece of their hair to perfect their Polyjuice Potion brew to use against Malfoy through verbal manipulation.

“How thick can you get?” Ron whispered ecstatically as Crabbe gleefully pointed out the cakes to Goyle and grabbed them. Grinning stupidly, they stuffed the cakes whole into their large mouths. For a moment, both of them chewed greedily, looks of triumph on their faces. Then, without the smallest change of expression, they both keeled over backward onto the floor,” (Rowling, 1999, p. 214).

While their plan did not prove Malfoy’s guilt, it did, however, obtain them more information which moved the story onward; an advancement that could not have been achieved without the spiked chocolate cakes. Furthermore, the writing style used within this chapter is evident that Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle are antagonists, as many readers do not feel bad for the bewitched cake effects. In this instance, food was used as a vessel for information and trickery against three rejected characters, prompting the reader to further understand the negative societal placement of Draco, Crabbe, and Goyle in comparison to the positive positioning of Harry, Ron, and Hermione. Although Clark’s case study does not include this central example from *CS*, she does contest that Rowling employs food to position the characters within the books, whether that be in a positive or negative light. Be that as it may, this author argues there is much more to be studied on behalf of this theme within the Potter series; particularly how food is implemented to showcase the good or bad within a written character or societal factor.

To conclude, although the bulk of *Harry Potter* fans do not position the series in a culinary light, the essence of food and its importance behind character, story, and cultural

development are undeniable to any exceptionally keen fan. Throughout the books, J. K. Rowling had a way of serving readers vital information by means of drink and nourishment; guidance which ultimately led Harry on his pathway to victory. By the final book, Muggle fans were entranced by the magical eats scattered throughout the pages — many of these foods having signaled to the reader the overarching cultural identity that is *the* wizarding world. From food foraged friendships to dessert dupes, wizarding grub was used for more than mealtime fun in the Great Hall at Hogwarts. While some may read these tales and snicker at the comedy baked into the storyline, scholars and super-fans have the chance to reread the series and take stock of these food-based narratives for what they truly are: a crumb of trails left behind by Rowling to further advance the reader toward the final plate of her seven-course meal... the series finale.

References

- Clark, Leisa Anne. (2012). *Butterbeer, Cauldron Cakes, and Fizzing Whizzbees: Food in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter Series.*
- Mintz, Sidney W, & Du Bois, Christine M. (2002). THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD AND EATING. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31(1), 99-119.
- Rowling, J. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Rowling, J., & GrandPré, M. (1999). *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. New York: Arthur A. Levine Books.