“Is your refrigerator running?” asked the smiling blond with the bubble-cut hair as she cradled the black telephone receiver in her left hand, waiting for the expected affirmative response at the other end. “Well, you better go catch it then!” She slammed the receiver down to the enthusiastic giggles of her fellow slumber party pals, took a triumphant gulp of her Coke, and dug into the bowl of freshly popped corn. She handed off the phone to her best friend, who dialed the number shouted out by a third girl, who had selected it with the jab of a finger from the middle of page fifty of the Indianapolis white pages. “Is your refrigerator running...?” We made a lot of refrigerator calls at our junior high school slumber parties.

These days I wish my refrigerator weren’t running, so I could get rid of it. When my husband and I divorced and I moved to my present home seven years ago, the only thing I downsized was the fridge, thinking my daughter and I could easily make do with the eighteen-cubic-foot model instead of the twenty-four. Now, even though she’s graduated from college and home only for holidays and occasional long weekends, I’m longing for something bigger. Teaching a course on food and culture has raised my consciousness about cooking with fresh, local ingredients, and my weekly jaunts to the Rochester, New York, public market and occasional dinner parties have taxed the capacity of my refrigerator. I have a freezer in the basement, which helps. In the wintertime I happily set jugs of cider and big pots of soup or stew on the back steps, and I chill the wine for my Christmas party in the snow bank on the patio. But in the heat of summer, the season’s bounty of fresh vegetables and fruits jostles with the milk and juice and wine and leftovers for a place on the cold shelf. It’s not just the small size of the fridge that’s troublesome, or the vegetable crispers that won’t stay on their tracks, or the ice that freezes together in a big clump in the ice maker; it’s the sterile pebbly white facade surrounded top and sides by handcrafted cherry kitchen cabinets that make this fridge look like it belongs to a real cook. I need a fridge to match. The average life of a modern refrigerator is fifteen to twenty years, so my deathwatch on this one is probably premature.

The refrigerator is the most nearly universal household appliance in America. More than 99 percent of American homes today have one. “Selling refrigerators to Eskimos” is still a catchphrase for pointless activity, but Eskimos are among the 99 percent of Americans who own them. I know, because my research as a cultural anthropologist takes me to a small village in Alaska’s arctic interior. When these nomads settled into village life in 1949, they dug a community ice cellar fifteen feet deep into the permafrost at the north end of the village, where they stored their meat until electricity and refrigerators and freezers arrived in the late 1970s. Ever since 1988, when I first went there, the fridge has been a household fixture. But one summer we arrived and unloaded our gear at the house we had rented for the two previous summers only to find an empty space where the refrigerator had been. It turns out that its Eskimo owner had gotten rid of it—sold it to another Eskimo—because it used too much electricity. Much of my research time that summer was taken up hauling around the icepacks for the big plastic coolers in which we kept our vegetables, fruits, and meat. Each morning after breakfast, armed with several thawed ice packs, I went in search of freezer space, and each afternoon I returned to fetch my frozen packs. A couple of villagers kindly agreed to house the ice packs in their big freezers, where they nestled next to frozen caribou legs and haunches. Such a grinding daily effort to keep food cool in a place where it isn’t all that hot, even in the summer!

My mealy efforts to cool food and drink in the bush pale before the long and interesting history chronicled by Gavin Weightman in The Frozen Water Trade. Before ice became essential to Americans to make ice cream, cool drinks, and keep food fresh in iceboxes, it was being cut from New England lakes and rivers in the winter, stored in huge log icehouses, loaded into the holds of ships, and exported to the West Indies. By 1820, a market for New...
England ice had been established in Charleston, and by the 1830s ice from Massachusetts lakes was being shipped all the way to Calcutta. The early nineteenth-century innovations in securing and transporting ice for the export trade—from the patented ice saw to the use of sawdust as insulation material to the big log warehouses built for ice storage—made possible the widespread use of ice at home in America.

Many clever minds contributed to the invention of the modern household refrigerator, beginning with the evaporation and liquefaction experiments of Scotsman William Cullen in the 1700s and Englishman Michael Faraday in the 1800s. The electrically driven, sealed container refrigerator dates to the experiments of a French monk and physics teacher, Marcel Audiffren, who used sulfur dioxide gas as the cooling agent and patented his invention in 1895. But feasible units for households depended on small compressors, which were developed during World War I. The year the war ended, Kelvinator introduced the first refrigerator with an automatic control. By 1922 a refrigerator with a wooden cabinet, a water-cooled compressor, two ice cube trays, and nine cubic feet of storage space sold for $714.00—in actual money nearly what I paid for my eighteen-cubic-foot refrigerator in 1997, but more than twice the price of a 1922 Model T Ford Touring car. It was some time before the refrigerator became an affordable purchase for most Americans.

My mother remembered well the first refrigerator she and my father bought. It was a secondhand GE Monitor Top, purchased during World War II—secondhand, because none were manufactured during the war. “You do know what a Monitor Top is, don’t you?” she queried. I didn’t, though I remember from family photos, if not from actual memory, the white boxy refrigerator on legs topped with a short, fat cylinder that sat in our kitchen. The compressor on top of the refrigerator was reminiscent of the cylindrical gun turrets on the ironclad Monitor, thus its unusual name. Once I learned the origin of the name, I couldn’t help wondering how well these GE models sold in the South seventy-some years after the Civil War and the Monitor’s battle with the Confederate ironclad Merrimack. Not only that, but one of the first casualties of the Civil War, due to the blockade of southern ports, was the shipment of New England ice on which the upper classes of the South had come to depend.

When I think of refrigerators, it is hard to envision a façade free of magnets, photos, appointment reminders, business cards, and notes. Try as I might, I can’t pinpoint when we first started putting things on refrigerators. Throughout my childhood and adolescence, from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, our refrigerators had nothing on them, and then, suddenly it seemed, refrigerators blossomed with Day-Glo plastic magnetic letters and decorative refrigerator magnets.

The magnets are a study in and of themselves. People buy magnetic Amish buggies, palm trees, and Eiffel Towers as souvenirs of their travels. They put up magnetic images...
of their favorite TV shows and movies, and they buy celebrity and sports hero magnets. The fridge is a great gallery for your magnetized wedding photo, your child's birth announcement, and a snap or portrait of your pet. Organizations, from the ACLU to the US Geological Survey, advertise with refrigerator magnets. At fridgedoor.com and dozens of other Web sites, you can custom order refrigerator magnets. And if you want to talk about them, log on to one of Yahoo's refrigerator magnet collectors' groups. I thought I had seen them all until I came across a “dress up Jesus” magnet marketed by the artist because no retailer would handle it and a crematorium magnet sold as an “Auschwitz souvenir” by a Polish artist in the Netherlands.

Nowadays refrigerator doors are covered with so much stuff they have attracted the attention of cultural anthropologists. With its business cards, photos, and children's certificates of accomplishment and artwork, the refrigerator, Thomas Maschio notes, is a ritually marked space, a billboard for the domestic culture of the household. Also, where these items are placed on its façade—at eye level, at the bottom, in the center, on the periphery—and when they are replaced are noteworthy. The refrigerator is so important as a keeper of information, a colleague in health science reminded me, that EMTs know do-not-resuscitate orders are typically placed on the fridge.

Inspired by this social-scientific attention to refrigerator façades, I asked my students what was displayed on their refrigerators at home or at school. When did the display change, I wondered, and what did it mean? Regarding photos, one student said, only snapshots; the formal portraits went into frames and were displayed in the living room. Not so, countered another; the formal wedding photos graced the refrigerator door in her house. “My mother drives us all crazy,” noted a third, “because she won't have anything on the fridge door. She puts it all to the side where we can’t even see it. She hates clutter.” Newspaper clippings and cartoons also went up on fridge doors. One student was more than a little distressed by what she found on her grandmother’s fridge. The student’s sister, the head of the local March of Dimes campaign in her hometown, suffered the wrath of PETA, the animal rights group, in the local newspaper. She was identified by name and held accountable by PETA for the animal research that the March of Dimes supports. The newspaper clipping was prominently displayed on their
grandmother’s refrigerator. Grandma refused to remove it: “Any one of my children or grandchildren who gets their name in the paper goes on the fridge.” Most students remembered their own kid drawings proudly displayed there. Said one, “Our refrigerator is used to display things that are important in our lives; for the past four semesters my parents have hung my grades on the fridge because they were proud of how well I have done in my first two years in college.”

“We keep the fridge lighthearted,” commented one student, “cartoons, clippings, funny photos. Something to smile about when you open the door.” The refrigerator display changes with the season, noted another, and a third added, come Christmas time, the fridge is cleaned off so that the display can start over with the new year. At college, one student and her roommate have divided their shared refrigerator down the center, her photos on one half, her roommate’s on the other. Another student said before she left for school she made sure she purchased several magnetic picture frames for the refrigerator. “It just feels more like home,” she concluded. But not for everyone. “Now that I am at college,” wrote a student, “the only thing that is hanging on our refrigerator is the list of bills and who owes money.”

An anthropologist colleague reminded me that the gallery space of the refrigerator has its own life cycle, mirroring and commemorating that of its owners. Commenting on her own fridge, she said that first there were the grade
school drawings, then the bar and bat mitzvah announcements, followed by the prom and graduation photos. Now that her daughters are grown but not yet with children of their own, the refrigerator door is once again a blank slate.

The refrigerators of “real” cooks, I am learning, aren’t adorned with photos and poetry and notes, at least if you believe the kitchen remodeling and design magazines. The dedicated cook’s refrigerator is double wide and unadorned. It’s an imposing, no-nonsense appliance that conveys the seriousness of its mission. In 2001, Julia Child’s home kitchen was acquired by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History. It included over twelve hundred items, not a single one of them for the refrigerator door. In the glossy magazine kitchen layouts aimed at kitchen lovers, but not necessarily professional cooks, the refrigerator—that very heart of the kitchen—is difficult even to locate. You can find it by tracing the sacred triangle connecting stove and sink and refrigerator, but it is camouflaged behind wooden panels that mimic the kitchen cabinet doors. I’m not sure why this is, particularly when the stove—for obvious practical reasons—is never hidden. Maybe the sheer size of the modern refrigerator and the amount of food it is capable of holding suggests the unsavory and Goliath consumption patterns of its household members. At any rate, the bottom line is that in the ideal kitchen the refrigerator is never adorned, only in real life.

And then there’s the matter of who’s allowed inside. What have been called “refrigerator rights” are measures of kinship and social distance. Who can come into your home and, without asking permission or announcing intent, walk straight to the refrigerator, open the door, look inside, and help him- or herself to some of its contents? I am reminded of my Caribbean friend’s story of the introduction of affordable refrigerators to his small southern Caribbean island in the 1960s. (The planter aristocracy of the island had long benefited from refrigeration, beginning with the frozen water trade in the nineteenth century.) Until the 1960s most islanders had depended on iceboxes and the delivery of manufactured ice. But in the early 1960s, Kelvinator refrigerators appeared in island stores, and every one of them had a built-in lock on the door. In my friend’s household it was his mother who kept the key, and for some time family members had to secure the key for admission to the refrigerator.

My students noted that refrigerator rights were a matter not only of kinship but in some families—especially those with several children—of age as well. When you no longer had to ask permission to access the fridge, you had crossed an important threshold, and though still a child, you felt more grown up. To be given refrigerator rights as an outsider to the household is to be offered something akin to membership in the family. Reported one student when given access to her boyfriend’s family’s fridge, “My boyfriend’s father said to me, ‘You know you’re family when you can help yourself to anything in the fridge.’” But another student didn’t feel comfortable, even with permission. “When I started dating my boyfriend, he would tell me to go in the fridge and get a drink, and I would always tell him, ‘No, you come with me.’ I felt I didn’t have the right to go into his refrigerator and get something myself even though he was telling me it was okay.” Refrigerator rights may also have reciprocities attached. One student’s mother stocked the fridge for her son’s friends, and they freely helped themselves, but payback time came when she needed furniture moved to paint a room. Will Miller and Glenn Sparks, authors of a book entitled Refrigerator Rights, suggest that the lack of the very kind of intimacy refrigerator rights imply is the cause of the mental and emotional suffering of so many Americans.

Once inside the beast, there are other issues. “How can people let the fridge get so dirty?” a student complained. “They won’t eat the stuff, but they won’t clean it out either. How can they put food next to rotten stuff?” Sharing the interior space and the contents among unrelated people is a study in social relations and the private ownership of food. Assignment of specific shelves and labeling food with one’s name are familiar ways of addressing the issue. Remarked one student, “I put my name on my food in the fridge, and that keeps others from eating it. I’d love to feed them all,” she added generously, “but I’m just a poor college student.”

The refrigerator is the keeper of the household’s leftovers, and French gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s famous quote, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are,” surely encompasses what we haven’t eaten or have only half eaten. How many mothers, like mine, have returned home after depositing their freshman child at college only to open the door of the fridge and discover inside the new collegian’s half-eaten bowl of soggy cereal or melted ice cream and then burst into tears at this remainder of a meal and reminder of their child?

Left over or not, there’s something very intimate about a refrigerator’s contents that stands in contrast to the public face it displays on its door. Here for the taking is the momentary archaeology of the dietary habits of its users. Is it a window into their character as well? Do we keep the inside of our refrigerators like we keep the public and private spaces of our homes? Do we clean it out and wipe it down
just like the routine of changing the bed sheets or vacuuming the rugs? Or is the refrigerator’s interior like the inside of a closet of horrors? Are serious cooks more fastidious about the innards of their refrigerators than junk-food junkies are? Do our refrigerators really mirror who we are?

The “smart” fridge is the latest frontier in home refrigeration, described by one writer as “the Trojan horse by which appliance makers hope to bring networking into the kitchen.” The eight-thousand-dollar LG Electronics Smart Fridge has a titanium finish that guarantees no fingerprint marks, but its price tag more accurately reflects the flat-screen PC embedded in its façade, with a video camera, a microphone, speakers, and a jack for internet connection. The computer can’t yet read the fridge’s contents, but its gadgetry nonetheless points to the refrigerator as the command center of the home. It remains to be seen whether purchasers will add magnets and photos to such a luxury model and to whom they will extend refrigerator rights. As for me, I can wait a while for a “smart” fridge. I just want an eighteen-cubic-feet, stainless-steel-fronted model that looks like it belongs to a real cook.

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