“Gastrobamanica”

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself”

I don’t find it interesting that last year someone on eBay tried to auction off the leftover breakfast of Barack Obama. The future President had eaten most of his meal at the Gilder Diner in Pennsylvania, but his unconsumed scraps—a hunk of sausage and waffle, along with his cutlery—were snatched up by a server and given to a friend who advertised the relics online, with bids starting at ten thousand dollars. “His DNA is on the silverware!” promised the item description. I don’t find this interesting, because it’s a mere cash grab. The lengths to which people will go to make a buck might be surprising, but they’re usually not compelling.

Likewise, I don’t find it interesting that some corporations have crassly tried to profit from Obama’s election by associating their food products with him. Brooklyn’s Sixpoint Craft Ales, for example, brewed up a beverage they called Hop Obama (till they were forced to cease and desist by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms). Ben and Jerry’s “honored” the President by changing the name of their butter pecan ice cream to “Yes, Pecan” for Obama’s first month in office. Sprehe, a German company specializing in frozen foods, came up with Obama Fingers, morsels of fried chicken served with a dipping sauce. The Russian company Duet put a caricature of Obama—grinning maniacally and standing in front of the United States Congress—on an ice cream bar called “Black in White,” a mixture of chocolate and vanilla. Depressing, yes, but not very interesting.

What is interesting, I think, are the foods named after Obama by owners of small diners and neighborhood delis who do so not to boost their sales but because they are passionate supporters of their new President. Mr. Bartley’s Burger Cottage in Boston, for example, serves up an Obama Burger, while Paia Fish Market, a five-person operation in Maui, Hawaii, makes an Obama Fish Sandwich. In Columbus, Ohio, Katzinger’s Deli offers up an Obama Club Sandwich featuring turkey, roasted pineapple, and roasted red peppers. Seventy-six-year-old Ray Alvarez, owner of Ray’s Candy Store in New York’s East Village, goes even further with a roster of presidential foodstuffs, including Obama Fries, Obama Cones, Obama Cheeseburgers, and Obama Coffee. Invoking the President on the menu isn’t limited to the United States. Across the Atlantic, YK’s Deli in Leeds sells an Obama Sandwich—beef, lettuce, and tomato—for £2.35. In Cairo, Egyptian fruit sellers gave the

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name “President Obama” to their best fresh dates during the month of Ramadan. The honor is not trivial, considering that Muslims believe the Prophet Mohammed ended each day of fasting by eating dates. Back in the United States, Brooklyn’s Royal Fried Chicken, a neighborhood diner serving halal food, didn’t just name an entree after the President—they changed the name of their business to Obama Fried Chicken. In short, over the past year, in hundreds if not thousands of small diners and delis across the United States and around the world, Obama’s name has appeared on signs and menus.
Balkans the biscuit is shaped to resemble the deceased, while in Holland the biscuit—known as the doed koek or “dead cake”—is inscribed with the initials of that person. In some places the tradition persists in a mellowed form: in Ireland, for example, a glass of wine and a funeral biscuit are handed across the coffin to guests as they proceed through the viewing line.

Now, I’m not suggesting that when customers chow down on the Obama Club Sandwich at Katzinger’s Deli they consciously envision themselves as helping to absolve the President of his venial and/or mortal sins. But I would suggest that the grassroots phenomenon of Obama Burgers, Obama Fish Sandwiches, Obama Fried Chicken, and so on is an affirmation of community support that does, like all affirmations of support, invest the recipient with an enhanced ability to choose well and act ethically. In other words, knowing that people support you, and that they will continue to support you when you falter, makes you less—not more—likely to falter in the first place. Moreover, the fact that this grassroots support is conveyed by bestowing Obama’s name on food items—as opposed to hardware items, or tennis racquets, or paint colors—is not trivial, just as putting a person’s name on a birthday cake or a wedding reception is an investment that makes the community support implicit in the promise that the recipient is a part of a larger whole. The fact that the President, in the words of the manager of Royal Fried Chicken when he insists that the restaurant’s name change wasn’t for commercial reasons but because “the owner loves Obama. He loves him personally and he wants to put his name on the food”—is not trivial, either, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

Cynics might dismiss this grassroots phenomenon as a naive version of the large-scale corporate exploitation of Obama’s name and image previously described. However, I think there’s more to it than that. I actually believe that the manager of Royal Fried Chicken when he insists that the restaurant’s name change wasn’t for commercial reasons, but because “the owner loves Obama. He loves him personally and he wants to put his name on the food,” is right: the grassroots support of Obama Burgers, Obama Fish Sandwiches, Obama Fried Chicken, and so on is an affirmation of community support that conveys something of the President’s personal aura and moral suasion. But I would also suggest that the grassroots support of Obama Burgers, Obama Fish Sandwiches, Obama Fried Chicken, and so on is an affirmation of community support that does, like the food items named after him, invest the recipient with an enhanced ability to choose well and act ethically. In other words, knowing that people support you, and that they will continue to support you when you falter, makes you less—not more—likely to falter in the first place. Moreover, the fact that this grassroots support is conveyed by bestowing Obama’s name on food items—as opposed to hardware items, or tennis racquets, or paint colors—is not trivial, just as putting a person’s name on a birthday cake or a wedding reception is an investment that makes the community support implicit in the promise that the recipient is a part of a larger whole. The fact that the President, in the words of the manager of Royal Fried Chicken when he insists that the restaurant’s name change wasn’t for commercial reasons, but because “the owner loves Obama. He loves him personally and he wants to put his name on the food,” is right, for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.”

If it were somehow possible for Obama to share a meal with every one of his millions of supporters, there would be, I suspect, no profusion of homespun foods named after the President. But in the absence of that kind of personal opportunity to pledge support by breaking bread with their Commander in Chief, eating an Obama Burger might be the next best thing.