

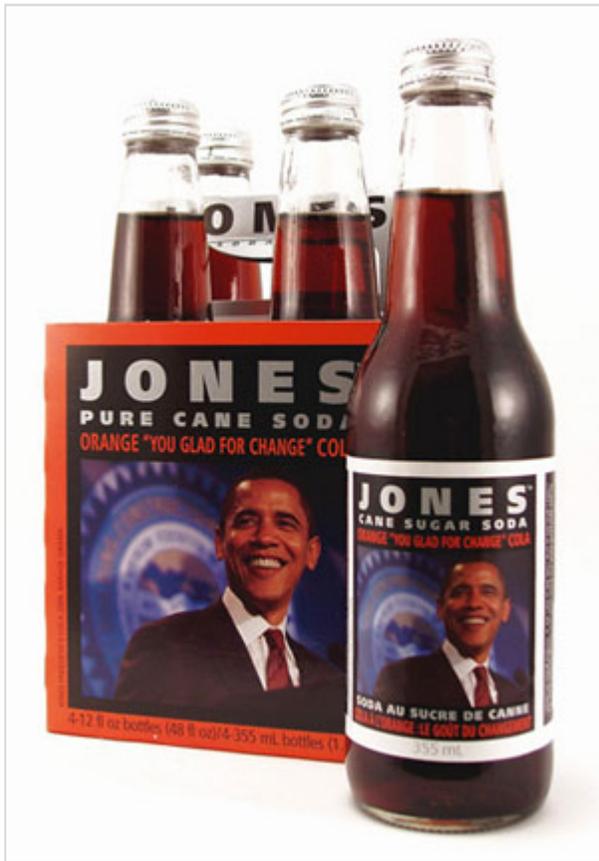
Political Humor

Eating Obama

All the tasty, ridiculous (even racist) dishes, snacks, and confections inspired by the 44th President

BY HOWIE KAHN

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I was taking the subway home from lunch, watching my leftover bag slowly absorb the grease inside. One cod fritter, one fried dumpling, the oil from each transferring to the brown paper in abstract spots. At first, they were just that—dark and irregular, but nothing substantive. But then they spread out, took form, announced themselves as something recognizable. A direction, a state: Hawaii, actually (Big Island to Kauai, east to west and true to scale), right there on my bag. It seemed I was having that kind of moment: the Jesus toast, the Fatima pancake, some divine force depicting the fiftieth state in excess lard. Or maybe it was my diet playing tricks on me.

This was the week I'd set aside to eat and drink as much of the president as possible. Barack Obama, by the end of his first year in office, had become, without question, our first fully comestible commander in chief. Breads had been baked in his likeness. Nearly a dozen beers capitalized on his name. Five thousand six hundred cupcakes were synchronized on the floor of the Smithsonian to interpret—pointillistically in flour, sugar, and butter-cream frosting—this fresh presidential visage. Overseas, Turkey punned baklava into "Baracklava." A bakery chain in Singapore cooked up savory egg-and-cheese "Obunmas" for breakfast. Egyptian fruit vendors started classifying their best dates during the month of Ramadan into two categories, "Obamas" and "Super Obamas." In Tokyo, a chef combined rice with eel sauce, fish paste, dried gourd, and black sesame to make a giant sushi relief of President 44. Shanghai boasts a 40,000-square-foot

meganightclub called, incredibly, Club Obama. And my lunch? That would have been a superlative plate of jerk chicken and coconut rice with peas and oxtail sauce at an idiomatically strange but otherwise excellent Caribbean-soul restaurant in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, called The Obama Flavor.

Blame the bounty for making me see things. Barack was everywhere. A recipe for Obama pizza burgers made rounds on the Internet. Obama fish sandwiches appeared on a menu in Maui. More than one business had the good sense, the finely tuned sensitivity, to use our first black president as a marketing vehicle to sell fried chicken. These geniuses were based in Brownsville, Brooklyn—where Al Sharpton led a compulsory protest in response—and Hamburg, Germany, where no one really cared. There, the "Obama Fingers"—frozen, breaded, and mass-produced poultry pieces—were about as popular as any variety of Angela Merkel Meals would have been here.

But make note: Nobody's eating Merkel. Or Putin. Or Sarkozy. You cannot buy biscuits shaped like Gordon Brown.

Jalal Talabani's smiling mug doesn't grace even a single vessel of baba ghanoush. Nobody loves Berlusconi enough to put his name on their salami. For leaders of state—or anybody else for that matter, Keebler elves included—there's no contemporary or historical parallel for anyone inspiring so much edible homage and as quickly, as plentifully as Obama. The man has been kneaded, processed, and brewed; creamed, leavened, and fried. None of it's White House—sanctioned, but it's president as pantry nevertheless. Having reached out to every presidential library in operation (there are thirteen) and with an assist from the Library of Congress, I can confirm this: No American elected official has ever been consumed so liberally, so literally.

Not that history didn't present some excellent opportunities. When Andrew Jackson held an open house at the executive mansion in 1837 to celebrate George Washington's birthday, a 1,400-pound wheel of Cheddar was noshed down in honor of the occasion. With some foresight, some real vision, that cheese could have been sculpted into a giant, curdy bust of the forefather. But no—it was merely shaped like a tree trunk. An 1884 dinner honoring Chester A. Arthur featured pastry miniatures of the Capitol building and the new Brooklyn Bridge, but no sugary effigy of the president himself—as if taking such confectionary liberties would have gone too far in either the direction of blatant disrespect or golden-calf-style worship. The caterers, I'm sure, were polarized. Less confusing should have been the corporate response to the Beer and Wine Revenue Act of 1933. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt made beer legal again, Anheuser-Busch trotted a team of Clydesdales up Pennsylvania Avenue to deliver the first post-Prohibition case of Budweiser to the White House, but few others paid proper homage. Roosevelt saved beer; every brewer in America should have somehow made FDR a part of their permanent merchandising strategy. But the biggest miss in the last half century involves Lyndon Johnson, who actually made a huge contribution to the American culinary landscape by nationalizing regional barbecue, serving it at official state functions, and inspiring rib master Walter Jetton's 1965 classic, must-have LBJ Barbecue Cookbook. It should have been the start of something: Johnson-inspired franchises of, say, Uncle Cornpone's 'Cue & Coleslaw lining highways coast to coast, with competing PitMaster of the Senate joints popping up across the way.

Why this scenario never materialized decades ago is beyond me, but I suppose we were a young nation even then, still utterly parochial in our presidential branding. In the decades that followed, we got little more than a thirteen-foot-tall statue of a peanut with Jimmy Carter's face on it, a beer named after his deviant brother, Billy (a slap to the face of the ghost of FDR), some Reagan jelly-bean ephemera, a corkscrew/nutcracker set honoring each of the Clintons, and finally Bush-era "freedom fries," quickly followed by a five-year-long loss of appetite.

If there's any antecedent to Obama as merchandise, it's not a president but rather a first lady. Frances "Frank" Folsom married Grover Cleveland in 1886, a year into his first term. She was 21; he was nearly 50. Much like now, the American economy was truly in the shitter, government required serious reform, and partisan politics spread over Washington like a disease. Also much like now, 1886 was primed for the birth of a Democrat icon. But Cleveland wasn't up to the task; he lacked the charisma to ignite any real feelings of warmth and hope among his constituents. But his new bride connected with the public in an extraordinary, unprecedented way. So much so that manufacturers quickly and knowingly pegged her as a bigger brand than merely first lady. It was the precursor to all this Obama mania, a marketing free-for-all, with mom-and-pop artisans making products more purely out of homage and larger corporations seizing on a moment of national need to jack up their bottom-line sales. Soon, Frank's likeness starting appearing on packaging for candy, perfume, cosmetics, liver pills, ashtrays, and women's underwear. Food production was just becoming industrialized at the time, but had Folsom become first lady during the supermarket era, there's no telling how many varieties of her might have ended up on late-nineteenth-century dinner tables.

When I got home from lunch—the grease building up topographically on my bag, making evident what I guessed to be Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa—the box containing my allegedly racist Barack Obama chocolate cookies had arrived from Spain. They'd drawn considerable online heat for recasting the president as a golliwog, a pickaninny—examples of bygone, bigoted cartoon iconography—but the young branding firm who'd commissioned these so called Obamitas in Cádiz had more altruistic intentions. The packaging advocated hugging, kissing, smiling, and joy in Spanish sloganeese. In their estimation, they'd used Obama's very being as a prompt to create a little box of love.

The cookies themselves were almost ovular, if not for the part of them meant to be ears. Each one had a thin arch of white frosting for a mouth, two tiny dots of it for eyes. On the one hand, they looked innocent enough, clearly playful; but on the other, identifying a graphic bridge between the cookie and the old Jim Crow animation didn't seem like a tremendous stretch. Whatever the case, any chocolate cookie named for a black public figure is bound to piss off at least some people, and these Obamitas aren't really worth the anguish.

In fact, they're much better as an ice cream topping than as a conversation piece, particularly if the conversation would inevitably be the role of race in industrial design. I realized this as soon as I crushed some up and spread the chocolaty dust over a couple of scoops of Ben & Jerry's Yes, Pecan, the company's rebranded butter-pecan. I liked the combination, but it seemed a little tame. I could get more Obama in there if I transferred the mix to a pint glass and covered it with Jones Orange "You Glad for a Change" Soda, which I did. In an entrepreneurial moment, I thought I'd stumbled upon a great American recipe—the genesis for a line of trademarked Hope Floats. But my evening Googling session stopped me in my tracks. A California company had already slapped that very same slogan on their Obama rubber-ducky bath toys.

TAGS

Politics, Political Humor, Barack Obama, Howie Kahn