

FOOD TALK

With **DAN JURAFSKY**, author of “The Language of Food”

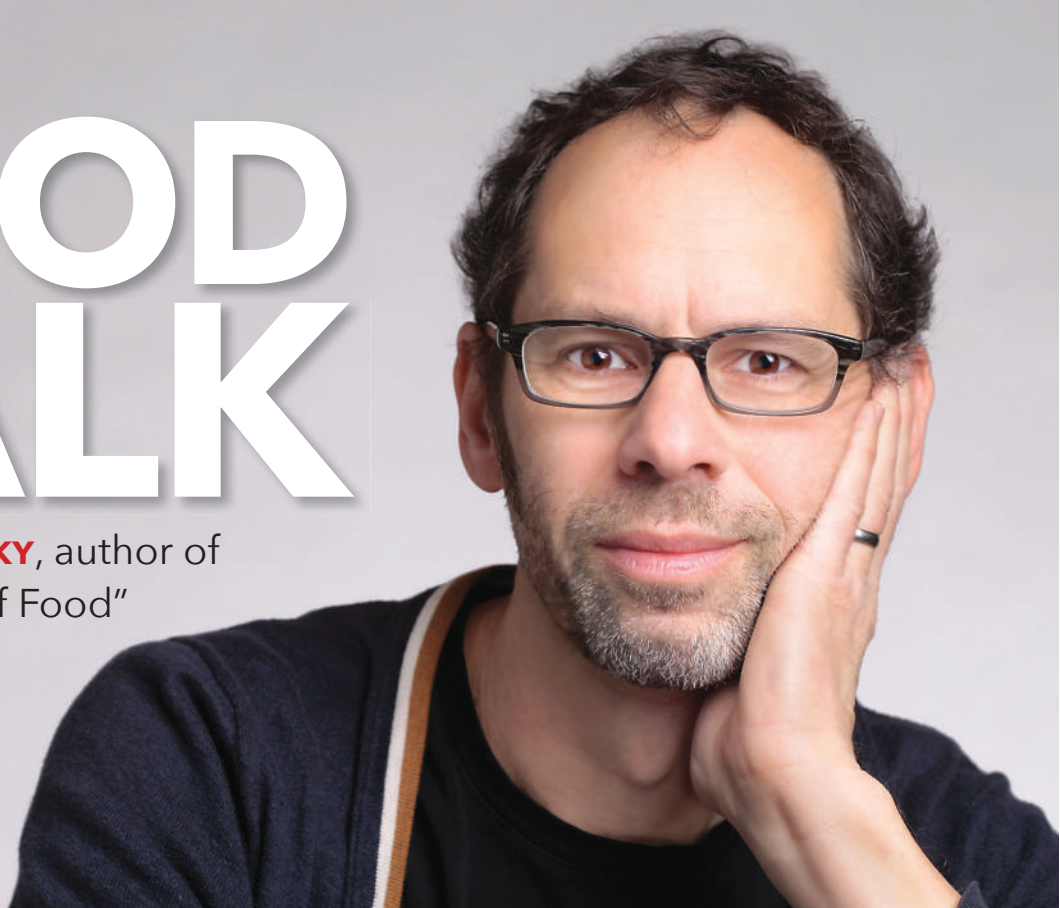
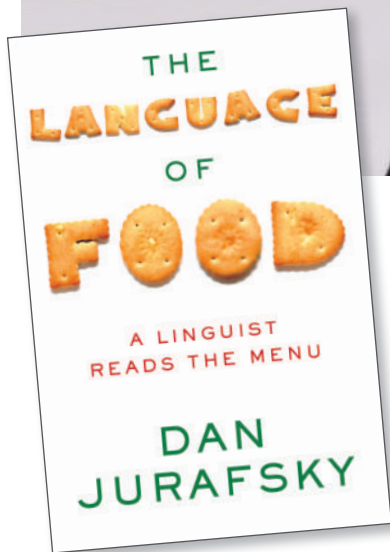


Photo credit: Kingmond Young



In “The Language of Food,” Stanford University linguistics professor and chair Dan Jurafsky journeys into the linguistic history of all things culinary. Jurafsky explores food terminology with easy-to-digest etymologies, entertaining anecdotes, and even snippets of ancient recipes—as well as some not-so-ancient ones, like Emily Dickinson’s recipe for coconut cake. “The Language of Food” asks questions about the similarities between words like macaroon, macaron, and macaroni, and explores how history, geography, and language have influenced the food (and words) we know today. Jurafsky took some time to chat with DiningOut about his motives, his discoveries, and his favorite junk food.

What drove you to write this book? Had you explored linguistics through the lens of food before?

I first became interested in the link between food and language when I lived in Hong Kong as a graduate student. Everyone there knew that “ketchup” was a Chinese word, but it took me a long time to get around to writing the story behind it. I didn’t put it together with all my other stories until I started teaching a freshman seminar on the language of food. Undergraduates these days are really passionate about food, and at first I was just trying to use food to get students excited about linguistics. I soon found that the combination of the two worlds was irresistible to me.

The book begins with a hard look at the language of menus. Has writing this book changed the way you order food at a restaurant, and how much you’re willing to pay when you dine out?

I don’t think it’s changed how I order, but I definitely have more fun reading the menus now. Every menu feels like I’m having a little conversation with the restaurant in which they are telling me about who they want to be and who they think their customers are.

The chapter “Sex, Drugs, and Sushi Rolls” opens with your research on restaurant reviews and the words people use to share opinions about food. You found that humans “tend to

notice and talk about the good things in life.” What is your opinion on review sites like Yelp and BeerAdvocate?

Review sites are the best! First of all, it’s how I find out about great new restaurants. I’m a big believer in the wisdom of the crowd, and you quickly learn to figure out who is giving useful advice and which reviews to ignore. But I also find it fun to read between the lines and learn something about the reviewers themselves. When we found that reviewers who write one-star reviews are displaying signs of minor trauma, I went back and looked at my own one-star reviews, and sure enough I had given those bad reviews after situations where people were behaving badly toward me.

