As a graduate student in the Sociology Department at Columbia University, I had the
privilege to work with Priscilla on her course “Food and Social Order.” The class was not only
insightful but also highly creative and, above all, fun. Priscilla’s reading list included extracts from
the Old Testament and the Quran, which revealed how foods and food preparations become part
of a belief system, and in doing so, change social behavior. These readings complemented the
classics of Sociology, such as Emile Durkheim’s comprehensive study of religion, through which
students learned how food was moved from mundane to sacred spaces, and how that shaped
everyday life, starting from the most elemental forms of social life. Georg Simmel and Pierre
Bourdieu’s theories were also discussed, including their ideas of food as a form of distinction in
modern society. We learned about the role of food in stratifying society, segregating individuals
across class and gender, about the role of food in creating social identities and movements, and
in confronting cultures. Towards the end of the course, and building on the theories we have
learned, Priscilla would encourage students to analyze movies - ranging from the food classic
“Babette’s Feast” to the contemporary animated movies “Kung Fu Panda” and “Ratatouille” -
through the conceptual framework we learned in class.

In her lectures, Priscilla would repeatedly point out: “Food is much more than food. Food
has a social meaning and significance beyond the physiological act of eating.” The class was run
as a dialogue. Priscilla would ask students questions about their shopping experiences, their food
preferences, “food fears,” and culinary backgrounds. In one of our most fascinating classes we
engaged in a discussion about the Thanksgiving meals we have enjoyed and how those revealed
part of our identities. Priscilla was always fascinated to hear students’ stories and incorporate
them into the class.

Priscilla embodied Bourdieu’s notion of distinction, in the most elegant way. For each
class, she was wearing a new, stylish and beautiful outfit. Leather jackets, purple hats, red coats
all matching — from top to bottom — with beautiful earrings, necklaces and shoes.

I had the privilege of being Priscilla’s last PhD student. I remember the day I knocked on
her door to tell her about my dissertation project on modernist cuisine — which deviated from the
classic culinary tradition she so much admired. She immediately believed in my project and saw
value in my work. She worked with me in identifying the connections of my findings to cultural
sociology. She told me that she would almost “jump off of her chair” while reading my field notes.
In our meetings, she showed me how much she enjoyed learning from my work, just as I had
enjoyed learning from her research and classes.

When I defended my dissertation, Priscilla and Diane Vaughan, my two female mentors,
invited me to celebrate at one of the best restaurants in New York (and in the world) - Jean
Georges. Priscilla knew the restaurant well and had interviewed the chef years earlier in her work
with Sharon Zukin. We had a wonderful meal, looking at the Central Park. Food, indeed, was
much more than food.

A year before her passing we were working on an article on the subject of “play.” Priscilla
had the idea to work on this topic after a seminar organized at the Sociology Department at
Columbia to pay tribute to her work, before her retirement in December of 2015. While coding the
interviews, we were both fascinated to learn how chefs incorporated play in their craft and the
joyful, fun, and ironic creations that resulted from their work. The process of working together on
this project resembled our previous interactions: filled with good conversations at Cafe Le Monde
(a French Brasserie, close to the Columbia University campus). We would talk for hours about
potential theoretical avenues and also about our findings, trying to establish connections between
the two. This collaborative process might explain why we decided to conclude our first draft with
the following sentence: “for scholars interested in the subject — and based on our own experience
— studying play may turn out to be not only illuminating for sociological research but also lots of
fun.”
Priscilla marked my life as a scholar, in a very simple but profound way. She studied novels, food, chefs, and roses because she loved them. She taught me that I could study something that brought me joy, and that in doing so - with care and dedication - I might bring joy to others and learn a great deal in the process.

-M. Pilar Opazo, Post-Doctoral Associate and Lecturer, MIT Sloan School of Management