**Looking for Food in the New Smithsonian Institution Catalog, a White Paper**

**Introduction**

The Smithsonian Institution recently consolidated their collection databases so that the public can search subjects across collections. This is immediately very helpful for researchers who in the past had to search the collections separately. For food studies researchers this is particularly relevant because our material exists across categories and is interpreted across disciplines. Material that is of interest to food studies scholars is also generally of the quotidian and thus not fully categorized. Food is such a rich field for study precisely because it is everywhere, but this also sometimes makes it hard to see. In fact, the taken-for-grantedness of food is one of the things that makes it worth studying because its omnipresence means it can encode many meanings across and within cultures. Seeing food in all the places that it is, thus is not just an exercise in cataloging but rather in pattern recognition.

The Smithsonian Institution collection is particularly important for food studies research because it spans so many categories of collections over such a long time period and consequently both catches many objects related to food and many interpretations of those objects. Thus, the catalog can be useful both for the study of food and for the meta-study of the subject. If properly navigated, the collection can make food history and food’s many roles in culture and society visible to those who did not enter the collection looking for food. While our primary focus in this paper is the researcher who does approach the catalog with a food project in mind, we want to ensure that we readers recognize the importance of the collection’s power to reveal food to those not looking for it.

Although the consolidation of the catalogs has tremendous potential for enabling scholarship, there are still some significant barriers both to food-focused research and to food becoming visible to other researchers. The trouble lies primarily in the proper navigation of the collection, as we will discuss below. This paper explores digital access to the collections as currently configured. We identify a set of problems without proposing solutions because to do so is beyond our scope. Nonetheless, we hope that the way we frame the problems will help in identifying solutions and improving access to this extraordinary collection, vibrant with objects and meanings.

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**Why is this report necessary?**

Although the combination of the Institutions’ catalogs makes it much easier for researchers to find items that are related to food, there are some significant remaining challenges to locating connections between relevant food studies material in the new catalog. The main problem is that the separate entities of the Smithsonian Institution used different systems for cataloging their collections before the consolidation. They did not convert their records to a common format before sharing. This would have involved re-writing each catalog record and thus was not feasible and it is not realistic to expect it will happen. This means that items in the catalog do not have the same controlled vocabulary and metadata schema. Instead, there are many controlled vocabularies and metadata schemas being used. There is no consistency in use of topic or subject or item type terminology across collections. What this means for researchers is that an item too often appears to be a dead end rather than a step towards other relevant materials. This may be especially frustrating to researchers who are only used to searching in one type of museum (like an art museum) and who do not know that various controlled vocabularies exist. Also, this may be confusing for the food studies scholar who might not internalize that they are working in multiple types of Institutions when using the main search page. It is very likely that food scholars will find their searches leading to records in a variety of the Smithsonian's institutions without thinking about it.

It is not likely that the controlled vocabularies and metadata schema will be standardized because each vocabulary and schema generally relate to the majority of the museum's expected audience and contains features for that audience. For example, metadata fields in an art museum contain fields and terms that would not be useful in a zoology museum and vice-versa. Food scholars are often using the materials in a collection in new and exciting ways that are often unanticipated. There is potential for a really engaging crowd-sourced project to allow volunteers or the public to tag items and then have the tags reviewed by staff members and only made visible after approval. Until tagging can more consistently identify food-related items, researchers need a way to make sure they are finding everything that the collections hold related to their topic within food studies. The collections are remarkably rich in their diversity and it is important that scholars can understand that and benefit from it.

Another central problem in using the catalog is that items are inconsistently tagged in regards to their relation to food. Although it is not possible or advisable to set a single definition for “food,” it is worthwhile intellectually to identify items that are related to food so that these items can be understood fully. For example, where food and medicine overlap, it is important for the searcher to be made aware of the overlap because it is essential to understanding the history of medicine, culture and society. Wherever the boundaries are blurry it is better to err on the side of inclusion.

This white paper explores these challenges as they relate to research in food studies. The three authors are one food historian with a PhD, one professional archivist and Master’s degree candidate in Food Studies and one Master’s degree candidate in Food Studies. We conducted multiple sample searches at different levels of specificity to simulate the ways we could imagine researchers using the search tool. We assumed researchers at the master’s degree level. Two of us focused primarily on simple searches starting with the search bar and refining through the use of filters.

The third member of the team, who is a professional archivist both explored the more advanced search opportunities, using the API, and attempted to introduce these options to the other members of the team. For the team member who had success interacting with the API the process was very exciting. The importance of the API is that researchers can essentially make their own searching tools to find items related to their research. For those who did not have success interacting with the API its value remained theoretical.

Our team member found that instead of leading them to the exact thing they were looking for, the searches introduced new resources and search terms, which is also a desirable outcome.

One possible project that the team member imagines is that a food studies group could align with statisticians to use the API tools to decide what foodstuffs are most represented in the Smithsonian’s holdings choosing a set of working definitions. With growing overlap between digital humanities and food studies scholarship, we feel certain that more food researchers will be able to make use of the access to the API. The other two members of the team, however, who do not have backgrounds in any kind of data science did not feel drawn to the API for their own personal research, despite the possibility that it could be useful. Keeping this in mind, we would like to consider regular webinar workshops for food studies researchers to use the API in exploring and making meaning out of the collections.

We noted also that the lists and learning labs could potentially be useful both to researchers and to the institution. The “my list” function allows users to collect items in a file so that they are able to keep track of what has interested them over the course of multiple visits to the sites. The Learning Lab allows users to download items which they can mix to create learning experiences. A difference here is that items in “my list” prominently feature catalog information while those collected into learning labs can be shared as part of stories or lesson plans independent of their archival setting.

For researchers, My List and the learning labs enable us to build on searches over time to collect materials and to begin to see patterns among catalog terminologies. The public creation of collections could also reveal patterns to the SI that would make it possible for them to identify food-related material. If lists were anonymized, for example, the SI could analyze which food-related items are grouped together to better understand both food studies research needs and the food-relatedness of items in the collection. The matter of anonymity is, of course, very important here, and it might be worth asking users if they would like to make the metadata of their collections available for analysis without any connection to their personal account.

**Pathways**

We took many paths through the search results to explore how the filters can illuminate, winnow and sometimes obscure material. At every turn we encountered frustrations and mysteries as well as profound awe at the richness and diversity of this resource. Here we will try to articulate the kinds of problems we encountered while also celebrating the range of material that can be encountered. Our greatest frustrations have been with the inconsistent paths of encounter. One other complication that may be worth consideration beyond our exploration as food studies scholars is the language that archivists use to denote identification and connections. For the common user of the catalog, the term “tag” will mean a term that identifies and connects an item to others in the collection. It is terminology and an idea that they can recognize from other digital experiences. For archivists, tagging may have a different meaning, more specific within the professional discourse. Recognizing that users would be comfortable using “tags” in the colloquial sense might help archivists and museum registrars to smooth paths through catalogs. We have learned in research ancillary to this project, that the National Museum of the American Indian is working to collaborate with native people in the creation and navigation of metadata, so we are optimistic about the possibility for this kind of change (<https://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2005/papers/vulpe/vulpe.html>)

We propose to explain where the challenges are for researchers at the graduate level and to identify patterns if they exist that will help researchers to explore the collection database with confidence of finding most items that are relevant to their searches.

The more recently a collection was catalogued, the more likely it is to use terms that identify food-related material as such. Knowing this will be helpful for future cataloging projects. For example, the museum of the American Indian includes “Food Gathering and Preparation” in its object field and Food/Beverage Serving as a controlled term. The Museum of African American History and Culture uses the term “Cooking and Dining” in the object field. Some object descriptions include the terms ‘food’ or ‘foodstuff.’ This depends on the controlled vocabulary being used in that metadata field. It is helpful when the record includes the information that an item was used in a food exhibit. All of these cataloging practices are useful in that they will help researchers see an object as a food-related item. To identify food as a category across types of materials helps researchers who do not go in looking for food to understand that food regularly has a role to play. For those intentionally conducting food studies research, too, these terms should help in filtering through large data sets. Unfortunately, this more comprehensive cataloging means that research using the catalog may be biased towards the material in these collections. While The Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage occasionally uses the term ‘food’ in item descriptions it is not used in any of the fields that use a controlled vocabulary. Thus it is not very useful for the kinds of follow-up searches that researchers might want to do.

**Examples from Food Studies Research**

One of the team who has an interest in the history of domestic technologies entered the search term “coffee pot” in the search bar on the page https://collections.si.edu/search/. In the catalog, a coffee pot may be identified in very different ways across collections that are now all in the same database:

1. [https://www.si.edu/object/buckaroos-coffee-pot:nmah\_1060245](https://www.si.edu/object/buckaroos-coffee-pot%3Anmah_1060245);

2. [https://www.si.edu/object/coffee-pot:nmah\_842177](https://www.si.edu/object/coffee-pot%3Anmah_842177);

3. [https://www.si.edu/object/coffee-pot:chndm\_2019-29-23](https://www.si.edu/object/coffee-pot%3Achndm_2019-29-23))

A coffee pot in the national museum of American history (1) is cataloged with the subject term “food culture,” which is not necessarily a term that would naturally occur to most food studies researchers as a term to search. Another coffee pot in the same collection (2) has no subject term. A third coffee pot (3) in the Cooper Hewitt collection includes no identifying terms at all. While a researcher has thus discovered 3 coffee pots, they have not in the process encountered any pathways that offer to lead them to related objects. In the NMAH database, “food culture” is not clickable and a search for the term in quotation marks reveals no images at all, including the particular coffee pot that we began the search with. A search without quotation marks reveals several thousand items, but no clear criteria for what “counts” as food culture. Given that researchers at this level expect to find terms from controlled vocabularies, or what they would colloquially think of as tags and topics, in an item’s record that will lead them to related material, this experience can make a researcher feel apprehensive about the search process. The takeaway may well be, “Wow there is a lot of stuff here but how do I find my way through it?” Or worse, this experience can serve as a kind of gatekeeping that makes the researcher feel unwelcome. The reaction may be “I don’t understand what happened. This isn’t a place for me.” This of course is a larger problem that goes beyond the subject area of food studies to the heart of most archives and cultural institutions. In food studies, in particular, though, it can make researchers feel that their field remains undervalued.

Another member of the team who works on historic ice cream flavors, entered the term ice cream into the search bar, which caused the system to auto-complete to “ice cream, ices, etc.” which seemed promising. Results, however, brought up items in which the two letters “ic” were highlighted. While the items returned did actually have something to do with ice cream, the highlighting--in words such as America and electric could be very confusing to a researcher, no matter their level of experience. We have not been able to figure out why this happens.

Experimenting with broader terms, one of the team tried “Cooking and Dining” inside quotation marks since she had seen it associated with an item in another search. This results in just 144 images and 32 websites. The great majority of the images are from the Museum of African American History and Culture, suggesting that this catalog term is nearly unique to this institution. For inexperienced researchers who are not aware of the catalog’s nature, this may suggest that cooking and dining materials only exist in this particular archive and are associated particularly with this subject area.

Assuming that the researcher conducting this search--Cooking and Dining--is interested only in primary sources, that will leave them with the impression that there are only 144- items in the collection related to cooking and dining. They will probably--like us--have a strong suspicion that this is not true and feel thwarted by not having any indication that the term may be related to food in the metadata fields. Colloquially, they will experience this as a lack of tagging. At this point the food studies researcher is encountering a too-familiar experience in our field; we know food is out there but no one will admit it. This can give us the impression that food is still not taken seriously by archives, museums and libraries, despite the tremendous resources of the Smithsonian Institution and notable inclusions of food in the development of newer member museums--the NMAI and the NMAAH&C.

Making another approach to the topic, one of our team searched the catalog with the term “foodstuffs” because they had seen it in the metadata for an item in the NMAH collection. As a search term, foodstuffs yielded only visual materials, primarily fine arts sources such as paintings and photographs in which food is part of the subject matter. This was surprising given where we first encountered the term. It was very good to know that images not overtly “about” food had been identified as having to do with foodstuffs and it suggested the possibility of studying artistic representations of food across the collections. This is the kind of inspiration that catalogs should ideally foster. However, the researcher was also left wondering why none of the items returned through the search were material culture related to the making or consuming of foodstuffs. Had the SI created a dichotomy between material and visual culture? Was this an accidental dichotomy or did it have deeper meaning?

**Suggestions**

Based on our exploration of the database we advise some first steps for researchers new to the system. Because, as our experiences above reveal, a simple search and attempt to follow up through catalog topics or subject terms can be so frustrating, we recommend that researchers be made more immediately aware of the following resources:

Tutorial. This is a link in the dashboard on a particular page <https://collections.si.edu/search/> that is difficult to locate. Each of us found the page in a different way, but had trouble re-finding it each time we wanted to return to it. It is different from the page accessed through the “Explore and Learn” tab which is also an entry point to collections: <https://www.si.edu/collections>. It may be that the first page is an older version.

The tutorial can be very helpful for managing searches but people may not click on it simply because of the name. “How to search” might draw more users to the page. It would also benefit from a more dynamic interface, specifically some video.

Learning Lab. This resource is linked in the resources for educators, but not researchers <https://www.si.edu/educators/resources>. The learning lab can be an excellent way to collect food studies material using a kind of exhibition logic that might be useful in conceptualizing research projects and for sharing with colleagues. We would encourage the SI to suggest it to researchers as well as educators.

My List. This feature is available once a researcher has begun a search, but only if the search started from this page <https://collections.si.edu/search/>. This feature can be particularly useful for food studies researchers because it enables us to share with others--students and colleagues--in a visually compelling way the diversity of types of items the SI holds related to food and the multiple collections where they can be found. In fact, it helps us to make the connections that are missing in the catalog and thus might be useful for the SI to solicit. In the interests of understanding what objects in the collection are food objects, some examples of these lists--shared with permission--could be very helpful in eventually revising the catalog. Until that time, they might be used in updating search guides like the tutorial.

There is some redundancy between the Learning Lab and My List, which the SI may be in the process of resolving, since it is currently easier to find and navigate the Learning Lab than My List.

We also recommend that researchers be advised to keep a search journal so that they can find their way back from the rabbit holes they will inevitably descend. Rather than assuming that users will know about such tools, we think the SI would be doing a real service to the community to describe this tool alongside the others. It would also be a kindness to acknowledge that searching is a roundabout process, that it is not much like googling, however much the interface may suggest this.

**Ways to work around the system and the problem with that**

The tools described above can assist researchers in any field to find connections between items in the collections, whether that connection is food related or not. However, they are not prominent in the user interface and they are not presented as really essential for advanced searching. We recommend that the tools be more prominently displayed and that they be introduced with language that acknowledges the difficulties currently involved in searching the collection. As currently configured, these tools seem to be available for those who know where to look, the already existing insiders to archival research. Introducing them to the public more urgently can expand on the democratizing mission that is at the heart of the SI. If we want all people to be able to access “our” national treasure, we need to acknowledge that most people do not think archivally but can usefully be brought into the thought process behind the archiving of this material.

**Additional challenges to be aware of**

Related to this need for a more inclusive approach to the search function, we also wanted to encourage a more public recognition of bias in cataloging and a call for community engagement in amelioration. The NMAH has a page (not prominently displayed) that addresses bias and asks for users to help [https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/about-online-collection](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/about-online-collection.)

Bias is particularly visible to food studies researchers because food is so strongly tied to women, people of color, and low-wage labor. An item in the collection, which came up in a simple search for “cooking” offers a painful example of this problem: [https://www.si.edu/object/col-wiggelsworth-cook:nmah\_1849229](https://www.si.edu/object/col-wiggelsworth-cook%3Anmah_1849229)

This is a photograph of an African-American woman preparing food. The image is identified as “Col. Wigglesworth Cook” and the catalog description is about the photographer. There is not one word about this woman and her labor. What a researcher is going to see is an institution that treats the woman as property and her labor as belonging to someone else. In addition, they will see that her work has no value while the labor of the man who took her picture has much value. By not providing an explanation, the catalog dismisses both the woman and her work. An invitation to the public to share with the SI when they find examples of biased cataloging would help to improve the collection and also to bring the public into the archival mindset, a further step in building an inclusive institution.

To conclude, we are excited about the many benefits of the joining of the catalogs and even find some of the challenges presented by this merger to be exciting in that they provoke more meta-analysis of our field. We are also encouraged to see the tools developed to help researchers build their own mini collections as we think that will be very useful in the work of pattern recognition that is central to food studies research. We are aware that many of the challenges we faced in our research experiments are probably already known to the SI and we hope that our articulation of them will further support work in meeting them.

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