



VEDA'S

JOURNAL OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (JOELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

Impact Factor (SJIF) 6.002

<http://www.joell.in>

Vol.13, No.3

(July-Sept.)

2026

RESEARCH ARTICLE



RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST THROUGH CULINARY MEMORY: A CULTURAL MEMORY READING OF RUTH REICHL'S *DELICIOUS!*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13306>

ABSTRACT



Ruth Reichl gives a clear picture of how culinary memory operates as a medium of cultural remembrance that enables the recovery of forgotten histories and creates a connection between generations through recipes, food archives, specifically, letters. Lulu Swan's wartime correspondence and records illustrate the role of Food in reconstructing the past and sustaining cultural memory.

Molly Wizenberg has rightly said that "Food is never just Food. It is also a way of getting at something else: who we are, who we have been, and whom we want to be." But what is on the line in Ruth Reichl's narrative goes beyond the preparation and consumption of Food, that is, the way culinary practices function as a repository of memory, identity, and collective history. Food becomes a powerful cultural artifact through which suppressed emotions, familial bonds, and silenced histories are preserved and retrieved later.

Keywords: Culinary Memory, Wartime Correspondence, Archive, Identity, Belonging

Article history:

Received on: 24-06-2026

Accepted on: 18-07-2026

Available online: 25-07-2026

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INTRODUCTION

The paper examines how Food in *Delicious!* becomes a means of historical reconstruction and cultural continuity. It argues that *Delicious!* positions Food as a living archive. Reichl links food narratives to historical discovery and highlights the power of culinary storytelling to preserve cultural heritage, which shapes individual and collective identities. It has taken a significant place in Literature today because it shows much more than the act of eating. Across periods, writers' emotions, relationships, traditions, social hierarchies, and everyday experiences with Food. A meal symbolises love and belongingness when Food represents poverty, loss, or displacement and it is mostly associated with negativity. Thinking of Food, it is about preparation, sharing, and consumption, which reveal the customs of our community, making it an important cultural marker. Consequently, Food serves as a medium through which characters express their identity, traditions, and relationships with society. This recognition of Food as a growing, meaningful literary element contributed to the emergence of food studies as an interdisciplinary field that explores the cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions of Food in literary and cultural texts.

Many dimensions of Food are represented in Literature. Among them, the relationship with memory has attracted scholars' attention. In the individual's consciousness, the smell, taste, and texture of Food evoke deep memories. Helps in reconnecting people with places and past experiences. Simultaneously, Food preserves memories by carrying family traditions and cultural practices from generations past and talking about

recipes, cooking methods, festive meals for celebration, and the rituals connected to culinary practices beyond domestic life. Through this, it becomes clear that food narratives extend beyond personal recollections to reveal how people from different communities remember, preserve, and transmit cultural heritage. This close relationship between Food and memory provides an important framework for understanding literary works through culinary practices, which helps remember the past and preserve collective identity.

Ruth Reichl's *Delicious!* (2014) deeply talks about the Food and memory connected with history. The novel centers on Billie Breaking, a young woman who leaves her hometown and her cooking career to join the prestigious food magazine *Delicious!* in New York City. Initially, Ruth Reichl talked about recipes, cooking, and culinary experience, and slowly shifts, unfolding the journey of historical discovery. A major twist occurs when Billie discovers a hidden collection of letters that was written by a young girl named Lulu Swan. She has written to the celebrated Chef James Beard during the Second World War. Those letters with recipes and food records reflect the hardships of wartime life and express how Food sustained hope, resilience, and human relationships during great difficulties. Rachel transforms Food from an act of nourishment into a medium that preserves connections between generations and reconstructs forgotten histories.

The initial discussions on *Delicious!* Explored the novel's themes of Food, identity, emotional healing, and transformation. These perspectives provide insight into Reichl's culinary narrative. The novel engaged with memory through recipes and wartime



letters. These records hold experiences that are more than individual lives and are part of a shared cultural inheritance. A new perspective on the novel reveals that ordinary food practices recover forgotten histories and sustain cultural continuity across generations. The study examines the role of culinary memory in constructing the past and preserving collective identity in Ruth Reichl's *Delicious!*

LITERATURE REVIEW

For a long time, it has not been taken seriously in academic discourse. It was dismissed as it was thought that Food is not related to academic discourse. It was primarily about domesticity and nutrition. This perspective significantly changed Sidney Mintz's work in *Sweetness and Power* (1985). This work repositioned Food as a major part of understanding social and economic history. Mintz proved how sugar was not simply a commodity but was a cultural force that played a major role in shaping the colonial economy, labor systems, and everyday life. His intervention had a major shift from the margins to the centre of cultural analysis. This strongly shows that what people eat is deeply connected with power and identity.

Another scholar, Carole Counihan, widened the discussion, highlighting the symbolic and social dimensions of Food. Her ethnographic work underlined that food practices encode gender roles, cultural values and family structures. Counihan stated Food is a language through which societies express and negotiate identity.

Through many scholarly interventions like these, Food came to be understood as a cultural text that can be read and analysed like Literature or ritual.

Scholars treated meals, recipes, and culinary traditions as narratives that preserve memory, proclaim belonging, and indicate broader cultural dynamics.

The basis of cultural memory studies is from Maurice Halbwachs. Forgot that memory is socially framed, which breaks the thought that it is purely individual. He emphasised that what is remembered is being passed on to the next generation. Building on this framework, Jan Assmann developed a more systematic framework that highlights the distinction between memory forms and cultural practices in his work *Communicative and Cultural Theory* (2008). His work is central to the analysis. Jan Assmann rightly said

"Dishes, feasts, rites, images, texts, landscapes and other things do not 'have' a memory of their own, but they may remind their beholder, may trigger that person's memory because they carry the memories that he or she has invested them with."

(Assmann, 17)

Assmann defines cultural memory as the preservation of meaning over time through images, texts, rituals, and institutions. He strongly states that communicative memory captures live experience. As it is oral and fluid, limited to roughly 80 to 100 years, it would fade with each passing generation. He explains the mechanism of how cultural memory is passed on. It is through education, storytelling, and symbolic practices. In this process of transmission, cultural knowledge and values are lost and preserved as collective identity. Archives are repositories of cultural memory. They preserve artifacts, documents that societies choose to safeguard. Rituals are



performative acts that reinforce cultural memory. They provide continuity by linking the present to the past, as witnessed in recurring symbolic practices.

Assmann stresses that cultural memory is dynamic, adapting to new contacts while maintaining historical rootedness. This cultural continuity promises that societies remain connected to their heritage as they evolve. This framework is applied to interpret how *Delicious!* uses Food, letters, and narrative as a medium of memory. This bridges personal experience with cultural heritage.

Mauri Halbwachs was the pioneer to bring the concept of collective memory, stating that memory is socially framed and through group contexts it is sustained. His work points out that individuals remember within the structures of social groups, which become the Framework for recalling and interpreting the past.

Jan Assmann developed his Foundation by finding the difference between forms of memory and concentrating on cultural knowledge across generations, which is why it is transmitted. Assmann's theory is useful for food traditions and rituals careers of cultural continuity.

The key concepts used for analysis are:

- Cultural memory refers to the institutionalized forms of memory that are preserved through rituals, monuments, texts, and traditions. This ensures that astrol knowledge sustains across centuries.
- Communicative memory, which is a short-term memory transferred through interpersonal communication. It typically stays for three to four generations and is

important for understanding the food practices and how they are passed down within families.

- Cultural transmission is the process of passing on cultural knowledge, values, and practices. This transmission takes account of oral recipes, apprenticeship in kitchens, and the symbolic meaning attached to ingredients.
- Archives are the physical storehouses of natural knowledge. Food museums, cookbooks, and digital recipe blogs are part of archives that preserve culinary traditions for future generations.
- Cultural continuity refers to the stable identity through time. Food traditions act as stabilizing forces that link communities to their heritage.

Scholars such as Shruti and Saranya (2023) have attempted to analyze Billie's suffering in *Delicious!* as an expression of cultural differences in Food. Their work highlights how Reichl mentions Food as a metaphor for struggles and cultural displacement related to identity. Literary commentaries stress the novel's use of Lulu Swan's World War II to James Beard. In this case, Food becomes a medium of solace and a means of historical connection. Many critics note that Reichl's background as a memoirist and food critic strengthens her fiction, which explores Food as a cultural text, adding narrative layers of trauma and healing.

Existing scholarship on Ruth Reichl's *Delicious!* Old the teams of food culture, historical suffering, and identity, critical dimensions remain underexplored. First, the novel's potential as a



repository of Cultural memory, where food practices serve as anchors of collective identity. Second, scholars have it to investigate how *Delicious!* illustrates cultural transmission through archives and intergenerational storytelling, particularly the interplay between Billie Breslin's present and Lulu Swan's wartime letters. Third, the part of rituals and continuity in food traditions as stabilizing forces against globalisation and modernity remains overlooked. Lastly, there is no systematic integration of Reichl's fiction into Food Studies frameworks or Kan Assmann's cultural memory theory, which could illuminate how the novel negotiates the tension between personal memory and cultural heritage.

Studies tend to emphasize individual experience and socio-cultural differences, but overlook how Food in *Delicious!* mediate as collective remembrance, transmission and identity stabilization. This gap provides an opportunity to situate the novel within Food Studies and Cultural Memory Theory.

FOOD AS A LIVING ARCHIVE

Billie Breslin, the protagonist of Ruth Reichl's *Delicious!* represents the novel's main theme of Food as a living archive. Her journey moves from personal to symbolic as she becomes the mediator between past and present via her Encounters with recipes and hidden histories. A close reading of Billie reveals her character development is structured around acts of remembering, preservation, and cultural continuity. Billie's work at *Delicious!* magazine situates her within a food that is both professional and symbolic. Her role as editor requires her to engage with recipes and culinary records, but her involvement gets deeper when she discovers the secret room. This

hidden food archive, filled with wartime letters and old food records, transforms Billie from a passive consumer into an active custodian of cultural memory. This discovery of Billie brings out how food archives are dynamic spaces where identity and history are negotiated. As Billie puts it while reading the letters

"Feeling slightly better, I went back to Lulu's letters. I was still thinking about Sammy, still thinking how much more fun it would be if I were sharing this with him."

(Reichl, 130)

Billie attempts to view recipes as more than culinary instructions; they are texts that carry emotional weight and intergenerational knowledge. Through Lulu Swan's letters, Billie finds recipes that show how people stayed strong during wartime hardships. These recipes prove that food practices can carry values and survival lessons from one generation to the next. By saving and interpreting these recipes, Billie takes on the role of someone who keeps cultural traditions alive. Billie's narrative curve emphasizes the role of rituals in food traditions. Her personal struggles are marked by trauma and loss that is counteracted by her immersion in culinary rituals, which provide stability and meaning. The act of cooking, tasting, and sharing meals is linked to remembering, which, in turn, connects her personal identity to collective heritage. In this way, Billie concretizes Food's capacity to stabilize identity against the force of modernization.

Billie's emergence as a custodian of cultural continuity shows how food traditions stabilise identity over time, demonstrating that cultural



heritage endures despite displacement and change. Billie exemplifies how food functions as a living archive, anchoring them to their past through community while enabling them to navigate the present.

LULU SWAN'S LETTERS: RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

In *Delicious!* The discovery of Lulu Swan's wartime correspondence with James Beard becomes the hinge on which the past is reconstructed. These letters were written during World War II. These letters are not simple personal exchanges, but cultural documents that preserve the experience of food rationing, childhood memories, and the emotional landscape of loss and hope. Lulu wrote in one of the letters to Mr. Beard.

"Thank you for your letter. I read Mother the part where you said it is good when people change recipes to make them their own. She says that you are a very wise man."

(Reichl 105)

Reichl uses Lulu's voice to show how food practices intertwine with historical memory, transforming recipes into testimonies of resilience. The incidence narrated in Lulu's letters reveals that food scarcity shaped everyday life. Recipes adapted to rationing constraints illustrate creativity and tolerance, while Beard's replies boost encouragement and continuity. These exchanges stress how Food becomes a medium of survival and cultural transmission. More than private reflections, the letters function as historical records that reconstruct the wartime past through culinary detail.

Lulu's recollection of childhood and her confrontation with loss are mediated through Food. Recipes for simple meals bear emotional weight, providing comfort and stability in uncertain times. At the same time, correspondence conveys hope, the belief that food traditions can continue even under duress. This duality positions Food as both a marker of suffering and a source of resilience. Billie's discovery of the letters in the secret room changes her role from editor to archivist. The letters exchanged between Lulu Swan and James Beard serve as cultural documents that allow for the reconstruction of history through Food.

CULINARY MEMORY AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Based on previous discussions, it is important to locate Reichl's *Delicious!* Within a wider literary landscape, demonstrate how food-centred texts consistently engage with culinary memory and cultural continuity. This comparative framework highlights the shared strategies across texts. In *Delicious!*, Billie's transformation shows how Food stabilizes identity and enriches the community. Her immersion in cultural rituals gave her the space to move beyond a traumatic mindset. A parallel can be drawn with Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, where recipes and cooking rituals sustain cultural belonging and familial bonds. These texts show that food practices are not isolated acts but are strengthened in networks of collective identity.

Lulu Swan's wartime experiences illustrate intergenerational memory, transmitting creativity and resilience through recipes adapted to scarcity. This resonates with Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*, in which culinary practices preserve fragments of Vietnamese identity in exile. Across these works,



Food becomes a vehicle of tradition that ensures continuity even under conditions of rupture and displacement. Reichl's use of the magazine archive and the secret room locates Food as a form of remembering, in which recipes and letters are considered cultural documents. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* similarly treats everyday objects and oral traditions as Archives of memory, though in a different historical context. In these two cases, archives both in culinary and oral form function as repositories that reconstruct forgotten histories and connect past incidents to present identity.

The final chapters of *Delicious!* demonstrate how traditional Food stabilizes a community's identity against the pressures of modern globalization. A parallel theme emerges in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*, where heritage recipes preserve a critical sense of cultural belonging within immigrant families.

Together, these literary works prove that food functions as far more than basic biological fuel:

- **Preserves history** across generations
- **Combats the erasure** of heritage caused by rapid modernization
- **Acts as a vital cultural text** that keeps diasporic communities anchored to their roots

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that Ruth Reichl's *Delicious!* positions Food as a living archive, which refers to a medium through which memory, identity, and cultural continuity are preserved. Through the analysis of Billie Breslin's and Lulu Swan's wartime

Correspondence and the role of the magazine archive, it was understood that Food in the novel is consumed and later becomes a repository of historical memory and stabilizes the force for collective identity. Findings highlight three dimensions: Firstly, Food as a site of identity and belonging, where culinary rituals help individuals move beyond trauma and connect back with community; secondly, Food is considered as a vehicle of intergenerational memory, passing on tradition across generations; thirdly, Food as an archival practice, where letters, recipes, and records reconstruct what is forgotten and warrant cultural continuity.

The contribution of this study lies in positioning *Delicious!* within the broader discourse of Food Studies and Cultural Memory Theory. Most existing scholarship has emphasized identity, suffering and culture. This research examines Reichl's novel uniquely, foregrounding the archival functions of Food and presenting it as both sustenance and a cultural text. Future research could expand this framework by comparing *Delicious!* with other food-centered narratives across different contexts and exploring how memory operates in diasporic Literature, postcolonial texts, or contemporary digital food cultures. Such comparative work would depend on an understanding of Food that keeps cultural identity alive even as the world becomes more global and fast-changing. It connects people to their past, carries tradition forward, and makes sure communities do not lose their sense of who they are.

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