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Los Angeles

Evocative Comfort:

Spam® in Sāmoan Communities

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Asian American Studies

by

Marina Sideborah Aina

2025

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2025

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Evocative Comfort:

Spam® in Sāmoan Communities

by

Marina Sideborah Aina

Masters of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2025

Professor Keith L. Camacho, Chair

Even with the knowledge of Spam® being an American product, the Hormel canned meat is associated with Pacific Islander communities in the United States. In California, Spam® is generally viewed favorably by Sāmoans, with most of them consuming the meat from a young age. Is Spam®'s popularity within Sāmoan communities a case of when a group indigenizes a food product to incorporate it into their cuisine or is there something else at play? This thesis proposes that Spam® operates as a comfort food item in California Sāmoan households — a food

that evokes nostalgia for American Sāmoa, the homeland intertwined with legacies of American military presence. Opening up with the historical context behind Spam®, an embodiment of American militarism, and how eastern Sāmoa became "American," this thesis asserts that Spam® is a comfort food item through carefully interrogating the bounds of what constitutes cultural cuisine and comfort food. To further support this claim, Spam®'s presence and absence in *fa'alavelave* processions is examined to highlight how the canned meat ultimately falls into a comfort food category.

This thesis of Marina Sideborah Aina is approved.

Valerie J. Matsumoto

Lisa Uperesa

Keith L. Camacho, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2025

Dedication

This is for those who seek to sustain their joy during these trying times. Sometimes, focusing on the silly and goofy things in life heals something in you, allowing you to refocus and redirect your energy towards working to foster and create a liberated and more equitable world. Do not let anyone or these systems of domination rob you of your ability to experience joy and imagine a better tomorrow. For if they do that, you will fail to see just how interconnected our futures are, and therefore how our liberations are linked to one another. I will forever be cheering you all on!

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This acknowledgements page will be long. While this is due to the fact that I have a tendency to ramble, it is also for the fact that so many people helped support me to where I am today. While I could not name and list every individual person, I still nonetheless want to highlight some of these lovely individuals who make and influence who I am.

First and foremost, I would like to thank and extend my gratitude to my family. My entire being is a testament to the love my family has poured into me throughout the years, allowing me to blossom and flourish into the woman (and scholar) that I am today. To my parents, Belinda and Sefa Aina, thank you for always encouraging and having faith in me when it comes to any and everything I do. You both have consistently seen something in me that I struggle to grasp, so it is through your continued belief in and love for me that I am able to confidently navigate this project and the world as a whole. To my younger siblings, Marcus and Malie Aina, thank you both for the love and laughter you have given me throughout the years. Any and every time I see you both chasing and living life unabashedly to the fullest, I feel parts of myself heal and that in turn inspires me to do the same as you both. To my precious extended family here and up above (including my beloved family dog Marley who passed at the beginning of my time here at UCLA), thank you all for the love and fond memories throughout the years. I held onto these as I embarked on this writing process. Without my family as a whole, I truly would not be here writing and completing this thesis. I know I do not say this nearly as often as I should, but I genuinely do love and am deeply appreciative to have you all in my life.

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community I had sustaining me, I also actively chose to stick with this program and continue. So, I would like to conclude by thanking myself, since I am the embodiment of all the love shown by those listed and unlisted above me.

Introduction

In eighth grade, I befriended the new kid, and to our mutual surprise, we were both excited to learn that the other one was Pasifika (Pacific Islander), with her being Kānaka and me being Sāmoan. Prior to her transferring schools, I was one of six Pasifika kids in my year and the only girl of the six. Considering the small number of Pasifika students at the school, we became quick friends. During one of our earlier conversations, she had promised me that she would one day make Spam® musubi for me. And sure enough, when we got to high school, she kept her word. So ecstatic, I unraveled the saran wrap around the Spam® musubi during my second period and started devouring it. Mid-bite, I noticed that my tablemates were staring at the food, with a mixture of confusion and barely concealed disgust clouding their eyes. Having noticed the curiosity first, I explained what a Spam® musubi is, to which the table had expressed shock that I would even want to consume Spam®. It was at this point that I started to reflect on the presence of Spam® in my life.

My family did not consume Spam® often, but when we did, it was always at large gatherings. Family visiting and staying the night? We would have Spam® and eggs for breakfast. Long road trip ahead? We made Spam® musubi in bulk so that we would not have to stop for food. Holiday gathering coming up? We would have Spam® fried rice. Because I grew up eating Spam® with my family, I enjoyed Spam® a lot. To this day, my dad's Spam® fried rice is still my favorite dish to eat and always evokes this sense of home. Even though I have seen him cook it countless times and have been told that the fried rice I make is very tasty, I still cannot nail down the specific flavor palette present in his. It was not until I would talk to other Pasifika people outside my own family that I realized that Spam® held a large presence in our communities.

After all, outside of our communities, most of my peers, at my predominantly Latine high school, had either never heard of it or held disparaging views about it.

As I completed high school, and later during my undergraduate years, my thoughts about Spam® expanded beyond what I ever imagined, nor would I have predicted that Spam® would be a vital part of my thesis. Conversations around the health detriments of Spam® and other processed food items among Pasifika communities also became more commonplace. Discussions highlighting how the presence of Spam® in certain communities trace back to U.S. military presence likewise started to pop up around me. It was during these times that I thought more critically about how people can exemplify ingenuity through food. Specifically, I realized how savviness during hardship led people to get creative and make dishes to get by, and furthermore how these dishes can become household staples or become elevated to cultural cuisine. In other words, a simple good/bad binary will not suffice when discussing Spam®'s complicated origins and its continued presence and affinity among our communities.

Initially, when I set out to do this project, I had envisioned that I would be discussing Spam® in two ways: as an embodiment of military legacies and as a cultural tether. And with regards to the latter, I would examine Spam®'s presence in both casual and formal settings. Yet, as I embarked on my research, I realized that I myself could not even gauge if Spam® could be considered a Sāmoan cultural staple. On one hand, Spam® rarely, if ever, comes up when discussing Sāmoan food. On the other hand, most Sāmoans in the United States have stories about eating Spam® growing up. While pondering these two factors, it occurred to me that there was a third avenue: Spam® as comfort food for Sāmoans in the US and the feelings of nostalgia that it evokes. Thus, in "Evocative Comfort: Spam® in Sāmoan Communities," I assert that the Hormel canned meat product, Spam®, has become a common comfort food item in Sāmoan

households in California. Specifically, I explore how Spam® became a household staple in the United States, with a focus on why Sāmoans consider Spam® a comfort food item, but do not generally perceive Spam® as part of Sāmoan cuisine.

Important Concepts

Imperative to this thesis are the conceptualizations of cultural cuisine and comfort food. These two terms are fleshed out in depth in my second chapter, but given that they are critical to understanding the distinction being made, I will list the operative definitions here as well. The term "comfort food" refers to dishes and snacks that evoke a sense of familiarity, eaten when wanting to soothe oneself, and can be consumed in solitude or when with others. "Cultural cuisine," on the other hand, refers to gastronomical embodiments of a social group's continued existence, in which the embodiments are recognized and accepted by said community as part of their identity. I specifically utilize "gastronomical embodiments" in this definition because of how these foods become physical and tangible expressions of one's cultural identity — moving culture from intangible and abstract into something that can not only be seen and felt, but also have the ability to bring a community together. "Cultural cuisine" in my thesis operates as an umbrella term that encapsulates traditional foods of the homeland and ethnic food that may arise when coming to the United States or coming into contact with other ethnic groups. While dishes that compose one's cultural cuisine can still fall under comfort food (considering the subjectiveness of comfort food), I assert that Spam® is unambiguously a comfort food item, for many Sāmoans in California.

In Sāmoan communities, Spam® has become more prominently featured in events known as *fa'alavelave*. Essential to my thesis, especially my third chapter, is understanding the multiple layers of a *fa'alavelave*. To do that, I must contextualize *fa'alavelave* within the contours of

fa'asāmoa. *Fa'asāmoa* loosely translates as "the Sāmoan way."[1] *Fa'asāmoa* encapsulates cultural practices, beliefs, protocols, and perspectives on life that are considered to be Sāmoan. One of these practices is *fa'alavelave*. *Fa'alavelave* are cultural obligations that link communities to each other during momentous events for their loved ones, namely weddings, funerals, and the bestowing of a *matai* (chief) title. *Fa'alavelave* also demand extensive time, labor, and financial resources on the part of individuals and families. To engage in a *fa'alavelave* is to essentially pause your own individual life to collectively contribute to support a loved one. *Fa'alavelave* are also very layered and multi-faceted rituals with multiple tasks and obligations. Due to their significance to *fa'asāmoa*, *fa'alavelave* are highly formal sites of cultural expression and performance. For my thesis, I focus on funeral *fa'alavelave* due to my own familiarity with them and the heightened importance of funeral *fa'alavelave* in particular. While the *fa'alavelave* for the bestowing of a matai title may carry more formalities in its process, *fa'alavelave* for this type of celebration do not occur nearly as often as *fa'alavelave* for weddings and funerals in the United States. Reasons for *fa'alavelave* for the bestowment of *matai* title occurring less often in the United States vary but ultimately stem from varied access to key components of Sāmoan cultural knowledge and embodied experience in the diaspora. Those growing up in the United States are less likely to be fluent in the Sāmoan language, know certain protocols, and/or be willing to uproot their lives in the United States to return and live on their homelands, even if it were to only for a few months.

Also critical to this thesis is how I use the terms Sāmoan, American Sāmoa, and (American) Sāmoa/Sāmoan. Sāmoan in and of itself refers to the culture and people of Sāmoa,

[1] Fa′anofo Lisaclaire Uperesa and Adriana María Garriga-López, "Contested Sovereignties: Puerto Rico and American Samoa," in *Sovereign Acts*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Contesting Colonialism Across Indigenous Nations and Latinx America (University of Arizona Press, 2017), 50, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vjqqvv.5.

with no distinction between American Sāmoa and the Independent State of Sāmoa since the only main distinguisher between the two is geopolitical status. With shared ancestry and culture, we are the same people. When specifically listing American Sāmoa, I am referring to the geopolitical status that Tutuila, Manuʻa, and Aunuʻu share with the United States as an unincorporated territory. When mentioning (American) Sāmoa or (American) Sāmoan, I am referring to people whose Indigenous roots stem from the islands of American Sāmoa. However, "American" is placed in parentheses to decentralize it from the identity because no major cultural difference exists between the two Sāmoas. It is mainly the geopolitical categories that impact the ways in which Sāmoans navigate the world. I place "American" in quotations as a reminder that just because American Sāmoa is a territory and is not a sovereign nation, we are not any less or more "Sāmoan" or "American." With these caveats in mind, I use these terms interchangeably throughout this thesis.

Another thread throughout my thesis is "nostalgia." For me, "nostalgia" is longing that is intertwined with one's recollection. Nostalgia can also mean fond reminiscences that have a depressive undertone. Nostalgia is employed in different contexts in each of the chapters. In chapter one, I mention nostalgia in the context of (American) Sāmoans coming to the United States and searching for reminders of the motherland. In chapter two, I also explicitly link nostalgia to the framing of comfort food.[2] In chapter three, I also show how nostalgia constructs the contexts in which Spam® is deemed appropriate in the Sāmoan community and where it is not, solidifying that it is not part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. While the way nostalgia appears

[2] The link between food and nostalgia is not a novel idea, and there have been numerous articles and studies exploring this topic. For more information, please refer to:
Vignolles A. and Pichon P.-E., "A Taste of Nostalgia: Links between Nostalgia and Food Consumption," *Qualitative Market Research* 17, no. 3 (2014): 225–38, https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2012-0027.

differs from chapter to chapter, nostalgia is the connector linking all the chapters together when discussing Spam® in the Sāmoan community.

Stylistically, I chose to represent Spam® as such. The reason is because Spam® is a trademarked item and therefore needs to be capitalized. The "®" is in superscript for personal aesthetic purposes. The only exceptions are when I am citing another source, listing the titles and sub-headers of my chapters, and identifying an official Hormel entity (in the case of the latter two, Spam® is entirely capitalized). Another stylistic choice I am employing is the italicization of all words that are Sāmoan. Although it is true that the implementation of italics on "foreign" words can further reproduce the othering of people and their languages, that is not my intention. Rather than interpreting my italicization of Sāmoan as me rendering these words "foreign" and thus okay not to know, I encourage others to see this as privileging of the Sāmoan via italics. I want to emphasize and uplift the language of my ancestors, inclusive of those who have passed on and those who remain living. Through highlighting these words, I am preventing them from falling through the cracks and blending in with the colonial language this thesis is written in. While I may not be fluent, the least I can do is center the Sāmoan language.[3]

Lastly, I want to highlight the intentional use of Pasifika over Pacific Islander. A trans-literation of the word "Pacific," I choose to privilege Pasifika for a number of reasons. The term Pasifika originated from Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the 1980s "to represent the growing communities of Indigenous migrants" from Oceania, including Sāmoans, and is predominantly used more on the West Coast of the continental United States.[4] Specifically, the term "Pasifika"

[3]If curious about the conversation surrounding italicization of Indigenous words within Indigenous communities, please refer to:
Alice Te Punga Somerville, "Writing While Colonised," *E-Tangata* (blog), August 27, 2022, https://e-tangata.co.nz/reflections/writing-while-colonised/.

[4] Marc Ramirez, "In Pasifika, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Communities Seek Identity and Independence," *USA TODAY*, accessed May 6, 2025,

stems from New Zealand colonial government policies that wanted to make a distinction between Māori peoples, who are considered *tangata whenua* or "people of the land," and the growing number of people immigrating from Melanesia, Micronesian, and Polynesian nations.[5] Although the term's history does hold problematic racial undertones due to violent associations the New Zealand government would project towards the wider Pākehā (white New Zealander) public, in the United States specifically, the term has been viewed as more of unifying umbrella term or a term of "diasporic nationalism" that goes beyond nation-state conceptualizations.[6]

As a trans-literation, Pasifika as a term centers the ocean over land when it comes to the identity of people from Oceania. For me at least, I see this as emphasizing the vastness of the ocean that connects all Oceania and her people together. In contrast, the phrase "Pacific Islander" conjures up images of small-ness and isolation due to how the Pacific is conceptualized in mainstream thought.[7] Second, my employment of Pasifika is a political choice. To me, "Pasifika" incorporates and recognizes the Indigenous layer to our identities. The trans-literation in and of itself is an act of indigenizing the phrase and reclaiming it for ourselves. As Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon's IRES (Indigenous, Race, and Ethnic Studies) program Lana Lopesi said: "it's really important for Pacific diasporic communities in the United States to take control of their own representation. The growing use of the term Pasifika does that."[8]While I do not have any issue with the term "Pacific Islander" and code switch to use it in situations that call for it, I do feel that this term, in comparison to Pasifika, is less politicized due to my personal

https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2023/01/15/pacific-islanders-pasifika-statement-identity-independence/11049428002/.

[5] Dion Enari and Innez Haua, "A Māori and Pasifika Label—An Old History, New Context," *Genealogy* 5, no. 3 (September 2021): 70, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy5030070.

[6] Ibid; Even though both New Zealand and the United States are settler-colonial states, the way "Pasifika" is employed has one noticeable change when taking this context into consideration. While in the Aotearoa (New Zealand) context, Pasifika excludes Māori due to them being the Indigenous peoples of the land, in the United States, the usage of Pasifika encapsulates all those of Pacific Islander descent, including Native Hawaiians.

[7] Hau'ofa, Epeli. "Our Sea of Islands." *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 150.

[8] Ramirez, "In Pasifika, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Communities Seek Identity and Independence."

associations with us as "Pacific Islanders" being marginalized and therefore erased from public conversations. Hence, where I view "Pacific Islander" as a phrase to be passive, I view "Pasifika" to encompass a more active role. Thus, when reading my thesis, if the phrase "Pacific Islander" comes up, it is because I am quoting a source; otherwise, I will be using Pasifika.

Methods

For my study, I drew on a combination of primary and secondary sources, ultimately employing a mixed-method approach. The primary sources I incorporated were formal advertisements of Spam® made by Hormel, Hormel's financial reports, statistics on Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities, archival documents and oral histories, information gathered during a virtual museum tour of the SPAM® Museum, information learned during a *fa'alavelave* workshop I attended, and interviews I conducted.

When engaging with official Hormel advertisements for Spam®, I utilized a close reading approach, focusing specifically on the content of the ad while also contextualizing it during the time period it was released.[9] It was essential for me to do this in order to trace when certain perceptions of Spam® originated, specifically the canned meat's reputation for being cheap, versatile, and associated with the U.S. military.

I incorporated archival research into my thesis to assist in historicizing the relationship between Spam®, the U.S. military, and those with ancestral connections to American Sāmoa. Through the archival research, I came across official government documents that detailed the economic conditions of American Sāmoa as well as non-government affiliated cookbooks made by cultural outsiders. It was critical for me to incorporate the former into my research in order to better understand the circumstances that made immigration to the United States an appealing

[9] This approach was not influenced by any literature per se, but by the recommendation of two of my committee members and how they advised I approach this method.

choice for Sāmoans in American Sāmoa. The cookbooks gave a glimpse into what was labeled as Sāmoan cultural cuisine; even though they were made by cultural outsiders, they did allow me to access perspectives from a time period that I would otherwise not have.

Although I have a separate section dedicated to the oral histories I gained via interview that comes later in my introduction, I felt that it was necessary to highlight them here as well. I have a total of nine interviewees, with one of these people being interviewed twice. The recruitment method for the interviews around Spam®, *fa'alavelave*, and Sāmoan cuisine somewhat shifted over time. I initially reached out to people who I thought would be interested and knowledgeable about the subject. From there, as they gave me recommendations on who else I should reach out to, I also put out an ask on social media. For the food industry interviews, I personally asked one of the interviewees I already had a pre-established relationship with if I could interview her again in this new context. I was able to interview the L&L Leadership member through putting an inquiry in the website's "Contact Us" form.

Considering that I had no reliable mode of transportation, the interview's medium was rather flexible for both the interviewees and myself. I was fortunate to be able to meet with three of my interviewees in person when conducting their interviews. In person, it was easier to build rapport and let the conversation flow more easily. That said, they were the exception, as most of my interviews were done remotely. I allowed for the interviewees to select their preferred medium for the interview: phone call or Zoom. Two of the interviewees preferred doing their interview over the phone. This medium allowed me to place my phone down and type notes more quickly during the actual interview. Three of the interviewees preferred doing their interview via Zoom. Even though I typed slower in the moment, this medium allowed me to record the interview (if explicitly given permission) and return to the recording to fill in the gaps.

One of my interviews occurred via email exchange due to complications around finding a compatible time to meet. While this method of communication did not allow for the spontaneity and potential follow up questions that typically occur with interviews, the email chains made the documentation process easier, since I could more easily incorporate her specific words into this thesis.

Outside of the interviews I conducted, there were two other major instances in which I engaged with others to better understand the thesis topic: a Le Gafa workshop on *fa'alavelave* and a tour of the SPAM® Museum. Based in Southern California, Le Gafa is a community organization whose mission revolves around the preservation of Sāmoan culture for those of us who live in the United States. They offer an array of classes, ranging from focusing on the Sāmoan language to cultural protocol. In June 2024, I happened to stumble upon a flyer for a workshop they were hosting in Long Beach, CA, on *fa'alavelave* they were having later that month. I cleared up my schedule and paid the registration fee in order to attend. Filled with people of varying ages, they had us follow along with the presentation about the cultural significance of *fa'alavelave* (complete with a packet to help assist in note taking) before having us practice the skills. Besides the fact that this was helpful information to know for my thesis, this workshop helped reduce the anxiety I have when partaking in the *fa'alavelave* process. If anyone from Le Gafa happens to come across my thesis, I give you my most sincere thanks.

In contrast to the Le Gafa workshop, I engaged with the SPAM® Museum virtually. While the SPAM® Museum does conduct in person tours in Austin, Minnesota, I was unable to attend in person. If part of the virtual tour, one of the museum workers will be holding an iPad as they walk alongside the tour guide to emulate the viewer being there in person. I was curious to attend the tour to strengthen my understanding of how Hormel publicly markets Spam®, both

historically and currently, and what better way to accomplish that than attending a tour sanctioned by the very company themselves. I will note that I was ghosted by Hormel when inquiring about an interview. I filled out an inquiry form to ask if they would be willing to schedule an interview with me or able to direct me to resources that could answer my questions; instead of answering in the affirmative or negative, they redirected me to brand websites of theirs I was already familiar with. When I had followed up again for clarification on the questions and to see if they would be willing to schedule the interview, I never received a response.

The secondary sources integrated include a variety of scholarly articles, newspaper articles, magazine articles, academic book chapters, news broadcasts, encyclopedia and dictionary entries. I engaged with scholarship from a variety of fields including Ethnic Studies, Food Studies, Folklore Studies, History, and Sociology. The frameworks and perspectives that each of these fields offer were complementary to one another and to my project as a whole. I also incorporated non-scholarly articles as a way to capture community perspectives and mainstream framings of some of the debates being discussed, especially in regard to how the Sāmoan community is perceived either from within or by outsiders.

The Interviews and Oral Histories

A critical component to my thesis are the oral histories. Each of these stories are individually powerful, yet the beauty derives from the intertwining of these stories to form a collective story. Being interwoven together allows for "diversities of truth" to shine through and enables those sharing their stories to retain control of their narratives.[10] In order for those sharing their stories to retain control over their narratives, I sent them the questions ahead of time to

[10] Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London, UNITED Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2021), 194, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucla/detail.action?docID=6605401.

review and confirm whether they were still interested and comfortable being interviewed. While some scholars may argue against sharing the questions in advance, others have rightfully pushed back against this claim. Specifically, providing the questions in advance to the interviewees can help reduce hesitation about having a conversation, "alleviate anxieties" connected to the process, and overall create a more comfortable and relaxed interview environment.[11]

Eight of the nine interviews conducted focused on conceptions of "Sāmoan food," *fa'alavelave*, and Spam®. The interviewees are all of Sāmoan descent, with familial ties to American Sāmoa specifically. Given the varied lived experiences of everyone interviewed, I used these interviews to form a limited but still very significant community perspective when considering whether Spam® is part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine or a common comfort food staple broadly for Sāmoans in the United States. When reflecting on the interviews I completed, I was able to develop the direction for my thesis. While my study posed little to no risk, I still want to protect the privacy and confidentiality of my interviewees here.[12] Thus, in addition to being vague about their backgrounds, I will be using broad age categorizations — Gen Z (1997-2013), Millennial (1981-1996), and Gen X (1965-1980) — to obscure their specific ages and employing fictitious names to further conceal major identifying information.

Sofia

When conceptualizing this project and whom I should ask, Sofia was the first person to come to mind. Born and raised in Southern California, Sofia is a Gen X woman who resides in a different part of Southern California from where she was raised. She also spent part of her youth living in American Sāmoa before heading off to college. In addition to her full-time job, she is

[11] Valerie Matsumoto, "Reflections on Oral History: Research in a Japanese American Community," in *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1996), 162, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429493843-8.
[12] I obtained IRB research approval before conducting these interviews.

heavily involved in the church that she attends. Based on prior interactions, I knew that she was both very knowledgeable about *fa'asāmoa* ("the Sāmoan way") and eager to answer any questions I had pertaining to *fa'asamoa*, Sāmoan history, or anything remotely related to Sāmoa. When asked if I could interview her for my thesis, she immediately agreed. Because of conflicting scheduling arrangements, our interview occurred via a chain of emails. This exchange functioned closer to a questionnaire.

Natalie

Natalie was the first person I was able to conduct an interview with. I had disclosed to a close family member that I was looking for people to interview pertaining to my thesis topic at the time. Said close family member told me that one of her friends was very interested in my thesis project and would be open to being interviewed. Natalie is currently an undergraduate student attending a college in Southern California. Born in the Pacific Northwest, Natalie grew up both within the United States and in American Sāmoa. Her interview occurred over the phone on Election Day in 2024.

Felicia

When hearing about my project from my Instagram story, three people reached out to me and volunteered to be interviewed. They are Felicia, Krystal, and Tasha. Felicia is a mixed-race Sāmoan creative based in Southern California. I highlight her mixed identity because she was able to seamlessly navigate comparing and contrasting her Sāmoan identity with her Asian and Latiné identities. She was also the only one who disclosed her mixed-race identity. Born and raised in Southern California, her interview was conducted over the phone.

Krystal

Krystal is a young Gen Z woman who came of age in Southern California. Active in her church, she is the daughter of a *matai* (chief). Both these aspects of her identity helped shape her answers during the interview. Her interview occurred in person.

Tasha

Tasha is a U.S. national who spent part of her youth residing in Southern California and currently resides in a different state.[13] She incorporates art as a medium for both cultural expression and community advocacy. Due to her being out of state, this interview occurred via Zoom.

Joseph

In December, I spontaneously met with Joseph and asked if he would be open to being interviewed for my thesis project. Joseph is a *matai* who was raised in Southern California and has lived here most of his life. He currently works in higher education and remains steadfast in his commitment to Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) communities with his advocacy work. His interview occurred in person. Through Joseph, I was connected to the following two interviewees: Alicia and Jonathan.

Alicia

Alicia is a millennial woman who lives in Southern California. Joseph suggested Alicia, his sister-in-law, as a great potential interviewee due to how integral she was in assisting his family through their most recent *fa'alavelave* process. When I reached out to ask to interview her for my thesis, she agreed immediately. Her interview occurred in person.

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[13] People born in American Sāmoa are considered U.S. nationals. While they can travel freely to the United States and have certain protections underneath U.S. law, they are also not considered U.S. citizens and therefore do not have the same rights as citizens. That said, some argue that this status gives (American) Sāmoans more flexibility in retaining some of their autonomy in relation to maintaining *fa'asāmoa.* For more information, please refer to: Fa′anofo Lisaclaire Uperesa and Adriana María Garriga-López, "Contested Sovereignties: Puerto Rico and American Samoa," in *Sovereign Acts*, ed. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, Contesting Colonialism Across Indigenous Nations and Latinx America (University of Arizona Press, 2017), 39–81, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vjqqvv.5.

Jonathan

Jonathan was the last person I interviewed. Growing up alongside Joseph, Jonathan is a close confidant to Joseph as the two continue to cross paths in the NHPI advocacy spaces. Jonathan is currently based in Southern California. His interview occurred via Zoom.

Food Industry Interviews

Two of the nine interviews conducted were with people in the food industry, particularly those whose food catering and business heavily serve the NHPI community. With these two interviews, I wanted to see the prevalence of Spam® in these spaces and how the meat makes its way onto the menu option.[14] One of these interviews was with Sofia, since she is connected to a Sāmoan food catering business. The other interview was with an L&L Leadership Member, who I will be referring to as such out of respect for privacy. I reached out to L&L due to the affinity that Sāmoans and other Pasifika people have towards the food chain in California.

Intellectual Touchstones

While numerous scholarly contributions have influenced the development and direction of this thesis, there are three specifically that I want to highlight because of how integral they were to the approach of my thesis. The idea to engage foods as embodiments of an other (history, culture, militarization, etc.) came to me during my undergraduate years when reading Crystal Mun-Hye Baik's *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*. While it is solely her introduction that engages with food, her linking of budae jjigae (army base stew) to histories and legacies of American militarism was incredibly formative for me. Prior, I never considered how food could directly be the product of military legacy at a place. Reading her

[14] Whereas the eight interviews mentioned above function more as oral histories, the two interviews here are unambiguously interviews. The difference is that the oral histories preserve the personal and community narratives and perspectives being put forward through letting them speak through their own words whereas the interviews had limited scope concerned with the perspective on food. My approach towards interviewing was, nonetheless, still inspired by the same literature that shaped how I approached oral histories.

engagement with budae jjigae led me to reflect and reconsider some of the food items normalized in Sāmoan communities. I focused on Spam® because of its relationship with the American military, and by extension other nations and territories exposed to large military presence; Spam® has been well documented in various scholarly works, however, the exploration between Spam® and American Sāmoa specifically has yet to be explored.

Another reading significant to my approach was Teresia Teaiwa's 1994 article titled "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans". Her article discusses how the bikini bathing suit renders U.S. militarism and nuclear testing of Bikini atoll invisible through the hyper-sexualization of the female body. Towards the end of her essay, she puts forth her theorization of the concept she coined: s/pacific n/oceans. Politicizing Indigenous Pasifika ways, this concept "honors the specificities of Islander experience [while] recognizing the generic effects of (neo)colonialism, and are committed to political and cultural cooperation at the regional level"; with an interdisciplinary composition, s/pacific n/oceans creates a space to analyze the impact of militarized technologies on Pasifika nations and bodies.[15] I found this concept and theory empowering and eye-opening when doing a close reading of the construction of the phrase "s/pacific n/ocean." If reading it as "specific notions," then I took it as specifying that this is a phenomenon particular to the nations of Oceania. It is true that there are multiple communities that suffer the consequences of the United States's militaristic ventures. However, Pasifika stories are generally marginalized. Thus, this callout shines a light on a common experience in the Pasifika community. Furthermore, while the above holds true, this interpretation can also serve as a reminder that this is about Bikini Atoll and the Marshall Islands. Hence, it is a reminder to not essentialize all Pasifika communities since each Pasifika community has their

[15] Teresia K. Teaiwa, "Bikinis and Other s/Pacific n/Oceans," *The Contemporary Pacific* 6, no. 1 (1994): 103.

own nuanced relationship with colonial and imperial powers. While her article specifically focused these conversations around Bikini atoll through examining feminized fetishization via clothing, I wanted to extrapolate this concept in order to fill the gaps when it comes to scholarship about Sāmoans in California. Specifically, I incorporate the broader scholarship concerning Spam® and its military relationship to communities in Asia and the South Pacific broadly, and then narrow in and focus on how this relationship plays out for Sāmoans in California particularly.

The third and final secondary source I want to highlight explicitly here is Dr. Eve Tuck's open letter: "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities." In this letter, she emphasizes the need for and importance of desire-based research, which significantly reworked how I view research and my obligation to my own communities. Using Tuck's work, I have previously conceptualized and defined this term in my undergraduate thesis and utilize that definition here[16]:

> Pushing beyond the victim narrative, this research style focuses on the "complexity, contradiction, and self-determination" of Indigenous peoples.[17] It disrupts the binary of reproduction vs resistance by offering an alternative: a hidden transcript compiled of a mixture of experiences, ideas, and ideologies (that can be at odds since it makes no distinction for ones that are subversive versus dominant) that "necessarily complicates our understanding of human agency, complicity, and resistance."[18]

Reading this open letter reminded me that no matter the circumstances that may arise when discussing my own community, I should always have hope about our futures. Indeed, we have been victims of, as well as beneficiaries of and participants in, colonialism and American militarism, yet we still managed to survive and sustain joy. My community is resilient. It is my responsibility to uplift our stories in a way that does not minimize or over glorify our traumas, but rather highlight the agency we have had historically and have today. This mindset was

[16] Marina Aina, "Militarized Foodways: The Connection Between the Militarization of American Sāmoa and Chronic Health Conditions Experienced by Sāmoans in the U.S." (Pomona College, 2023), https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_theses/274, 60-61.
[17] Tuck, 416.
[18] Ibid, 420.

important for me to keep in mind when doing research surrounding food in Sāmoan communities, considering the negative stereotypes associated with Sāmoans and food. In the United States, roughly 35% of NHPI peoples are considered obese, which is higher than the average rate of 28%.[19] These statistics feed into the stereotypical narrative that Sāmoans are large people, partially fueled by the foods they consumed.[20] This assumption was prevalent enough to warrant studies investigating obesity in Sāmoan communities. In a specific study, the researchers were able to link the dietary and lifestyle changes as a result of "modernization;" considering how "modernization" employed throughout the article, this conceptualization is heavily intertwined with colonialism.[21] I mention this because my project aim is to move away from prescribing blame onto my community and instead investigating the nuances in which food like Spam® are present.

Thesis Overview

In the first chapter, "SPAM® — Sāmoans and Pink American Meat," I provide the context of how Spam® became a comfort item for Sāmoan households. I begin by tracing the origins of Spam® and its connection to World War II and postwar military efforts. Then, the chapter pivots to focusing on Sāmoans in American Sāmoa starting from its partitioning and the American naval administration stationed there. I then discuss (American) Sāmoans in WWII to their eventual out-migration to California and other parts of the United States. In this chapter, I also combine archival research, interviews, museum tours, and academic writings to illuminate when and how Spam® first crossed paths with (American) Sāmoans during the twentieth century.

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[19] EPIC & AAAJ, *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders In the United States, 2014* [United States], (Los Angeles: 2014), 15.
[20] luaikenasio, "13 Offensive And Annoying Stereotypes About Pacific Islanders I'm So Tired Of Hearing," BuzzFeed, March 22, 2023, https://www.buzzfeed.com/luaikenasio/stereotypes-about-pacific-islanders-i-hate.
[21] ST McGarvey, "Obesity in Samoans and a Perspective on Its Etiology in Polynesians," *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 53, no. 6 (June 1, 1991): 1589S-1590S, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcn/53.6.1586S.

I utilize my second chapter, “Cultural Cuisine vs Comfort Food: SPAM® 's Presence in Sāmoan Communities,” as a roadmap to examine how Spam® fulfills the role of comfort food in Sāmoan communities in California. After fleshing out the conceptualizations of cultural cuisine and comfort food, I move to community perspectives surrounding what is considered “Sāmoan food.” It is important to establish the distinction between cultural cuisine and comfort food, since my thesis argues that Spam® is unambiguously a comfort food not part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. I also employ close readings of definitions, scholarly texts within food studies, cookbooks, and interviews throughout this chapter.

In my third chapter, “Bridging the Diaspora Through Faalavelave ~~and SPAM~~®,” is where I incorporate *fa‘alavelave* as a site to further examine Spam®’s place as comfort food in Sāmoan communities. I selected *fa‘alavelave* as the site due to its indisputable place in Sāmoan culture, including in the diaspora. The first half of this chapter provides a general overview of the *fa‘alavelave* process as it pertains to funerals. I also discuss why *fa‘alavelave* are considered an integral aspect of Sāmoan culture. In the second half, I examine the use of food in this space. Through exploring where and why certain foods show up (and where they are absent), Spam® emerges as a product common enough to Sāmoans to be gifted but still inappropriate to be served to guests.

In my conclusion, I reiterate the key arguments about Spam®’s place in Sāmoan communities as a comfort food item specifically and consider the significance of my thesis in expanding our understanding of the intertwining of militarization and cultural cuisine, as well as the various ways cultural preservation in the diaspora can manifest. While I do put this project forward as an academic labor of love about Spam® in Sāmoan communities and dedicate this to

my community, at the end of the day, this project also serves as a continuation of my personal journey and exploration of my identity as a mixed-race Sāmoan woman.

Chapter 1: SPAM® — Sāmoans and Pink American Meat

It is imperative for me to set the foundation as to why Spam® is prevalent in our communities. In the first half of this chapter, I trace the origins of Spam®, particularly its conception and evolution around the marketing and perceptions of the product from the 1930s through WWII. Here, the connection between Spam® and American militarism becomes apparent. In the second half of the chapter, I focus on American Sāmoa, discussing the history of how eastern Sāmoa became "American" and the influence of American military presence Following this, I examine Sāmoan immigration to the United States and explore what propelled those to emigrate off island. By the end of this chapter, the fact that American Sāmoa has sustained and prolonged the influence of American militarization is made abundantly clear. Ultimately, I establish in this chapter that Spam®'s continuing presence in Sāmoan communities is undeniably linked to a militarized past that continues to permeate them to the present. In the following two chapters, I then explore why and how Spam® has become a common comfort food for Sāmoans in the United States, focusing on California in particular.

SPAM®: Suspicions Pertaining to American Meat

Hailing from Austin, Minnesota, Spam® came into existence in 1937. George Hormel, the founder of the SPAM® product, first came across this processing meat skill set when learning about pig butchering from his uncle, who worked at a meat-packaging facility.[22] Later wanting to pursue running a meat packaging business, Hormel met with a WWI-era canning specialist.[23] Together, they created Spam® by cooking the whole meat in the can (to relieve pressure).[24] Once

[22] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.
[23] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.
[24] "Pressuring" meat utilizes high pressure steam to cook meat more rapidly and efficiently. It is important to create a vacuum seal to release air (also known as pressure relief) in order to prevent food spoilage. If you want to know more about this, please refer to these articles for a general audience:
"Extension | Canning Process," accessed May 3, 2025, https://extension.wvu.edu/food-health/home-food-preservation/canning/canning-process.

the meat was at the right temperature, they would then can it.[25] Spam was initially composed of five simple ingredients: pork shoulder, sugar, salt, water, and sodium nitrate.[26]

Spam® follows a long interconnected history between canned meat products and the military. The origins of meat packaging and canning trace back to France in the midst of the French Revolution and subsequent Napoleonic era. In 1795, the French government offered a financial prize to whoever could find a way to preserve food in order for Napoléon Bonaparte to provide a safe food supply to the military; fourteen years later, French confectioner Nicolas Appert achieved this goal.[27] First cooked in open kettles, the food was then subsequently placed in glass jars, with as much air sealed off as possible.[28] This method was later improved upon by two English men in the early 1810s: Bryan Donkin and Peter Durand.[29] Bryan Donkin is credited with switching from glass containers to iron metal containers, which was beneficial for two reasons: iron containers were more durable and easier to make.[30] Peter Durand is credited with the idea of covering the metal cans with a thin layer of tin to prevent rusting (which iron was prone to do when coming into contact with water), thus inventing the tin can.[31] These canned foods were then subsequently sold to the British Royal Navy.[32] Without these innovations, the development of Spam® as we know it would not exist. Furthermore, the history of meat

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[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid; The Hormel company would later add potato starch as the sixth ingredient in 2000 to help keep the gel inside the canned
[27] Adel P. den Hartog, "Packaging and Canning, History Of," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon H. Katz, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 28, https://link-gale-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX3403400460/GVRL?u=claremont_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=6cfd9ae6.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid, 29.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

packaging and canning set a precedent for connecting these products to military endeavors, demonstrating how canned foods become entangled in military legacies.

While any type of food was desired due to high levels of food insecurity during The Great Depression, the products that were in high demand were known for their inexpensiveness and long shelf life.[33] Spam® exemplified these qualities. Its shelf stability stemmed from the canning sterilization process utilized to make Spam®. This process was done via sealing the meat inside its metal container and subsequently "treating [the meat] thermally in order to destroy all pathogenic and spoilage microorganisms."[34] This technique essentially reduced the possibility of recontamination, thus resulting in its becoming shelf stable for three years.[35] During the Great Depression, food instability was rampant across the nation, with "a quarter of the American workforce unemployed" which "threw millions of people upon relief rolls," also known as federal assistance.[36] A product such as Spam® provided the public relief in its stability, both on the household shelves and in the market. Food instability was such a pervasive issue that many of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programs attempted to address this issue, one of them being the creation of food stamps. Yet, even with food stamps, people were only allotted a certain amount of money that they "had to maintain within" when shopping for entire

[33] "The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl: 1929-1941 · Food Waste · USU Digital Exhibits," accessed May 3, 2025, http://exhibits.lib.usu.edu/exhibits/show/foodwaste/timeline/thegreatdepression.
[34] John D. Floros and Konstantinos I. Matsos, "Packaging and Canning, Modern," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon H. Katz, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 32, https://link-gale-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX3403400461/GVRL?u=claremont_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=9acd8795.
[35] Ibid.
[36] "Hunger and Food Insecurity | Food System Primer," accessed May 3, 2025, https://foodsystemprimer.org/food-nutrition/hunger-and-food-insecurity; United States. Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, *Community Canning Centers* (Washington, D.C., 1935), 4, http://archive.org/details/CAT31038847.

households.[37] Thus, an inexpensive product like Spam® became attractive to families during the 1930s.

In addition to being inexpensive, Spam was also a versatile ingredient in family meals. Hormel advertisements of Spam® in 1938 hone in on this attribute (refer to Figures 1 and 2). The "Hormel Announces SPAM" advert describes the product as a "delicious year round meat treat that hits the spot for breakfast, luncheon, dinner" (refer to Figure 1). Therefore, accessibility to and wide consumption of Spam® fed into its image as a "miracle meat" due to the relief it provided to families during this hardship (Fig. 2).



Figure 1: Hormel Announces SPAM advertisement[38]

[37] Oral History: John Tilghman (Pearl Harbor, HI Montford Point, NC Camp Lejeune, NC Marshall Islands Gilbert Islands, May 11, 2007), The National WWII Museum, https://www.americainworldwartwo.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/OH_2560_AM.

[38] AxlCobainVedder, "A 1938 Print Ad Introducing Hormel's Spam!," Reddit Post, *R/Vintageads*, July 2, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/vpiucm/a_1938_print_ad_introducing_hormels_spam/ .



Figure 2: Spam: The New Miracle Meat (July 23, 1938)[39]

Another critical aspect of Spam® touted in advertisement was that the consumer could eat Spam® in a variety of ways. Spam was seen as a breakfast item when paired with eggs, a lunch item when put in sandwiches, and a dinner item when baked and paired with vegetables (see Fig. 1). The meat can be eaten hot and cold, which allows for flexibility when whipping up meals to serve (Fig. 2). Having the choice to eat Spam® cold also increased accessibility in the sense that one could still eat Spam® without having access to power, which was important since electricity was not universally available at this time. Roughly nine in ten families that were in the city or rural non farmer homes had access to electricity, whereas for people living on farms, the percentage of them who had access to electricity was less than ten percent.[40]

[39] Post Editors, "Vintage Ads: Meat in a Can," The Saturday Evening Post, February 7, 2018, https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/02/vintage-ads-meat-can/.

[40] "Electrifying Rural America | Richmond Fed," accessed May 3, 2025, https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/econ_focus/2020/q1/economic_history; "US Electrification in the 1930s," CEPR, January 29, 2014, https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/us-electrification-1930s.

The product's low price made it very affordable during the Depression. Decades later, by the 1980s, advertisements pivoted to more intentionally focus on the gustatorial experience as well (refer to Figure 7). Some of the advertisements still incorporated the versatility of Spam® but instead focused on how its flavor was flexible for people of color to use Spam® in their cuisines (see Figures 5 and 6). Explicitly incorporating people of color into the marketing of Spam® was a notable marketing pivot, since prior Spam® advertisements explicitly catered to white families. This approach is still incorporated today, although more subtly through Spam®'s more recent "Sizzle. Pork. And. MMM" advertisement campaign in 2019, which has continued to increase profits for Hormel into 2025.[41,42] More critically, Spam®'s popularity as a global commodity did not fully emerge until the onset of World War II (WWII). Following WWII, Hormel's marketing continued to emphasize all these same points (see Figures 3 and 4).

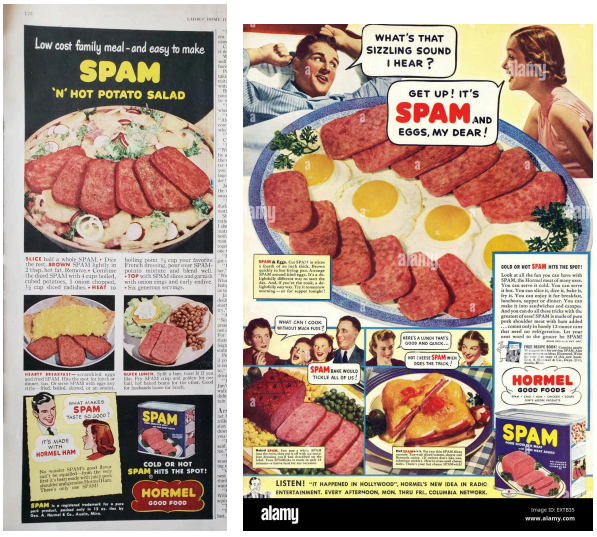


Figure 3 (Left): 1948 Spam® Advert[43]

[41] "Spam®: Sizzle. Pork. And. MMM. • Ads of the World™ | Part of The Clio Network," Ads of the World™, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/sizzle-pork-and-mmm.
[42] "Hormel Foods Reports First Quarter Fiscal 2025 Results," Hormel Foods, February 27, 2025, https://www.hormelfoods.com/newsroom/press-releases/hormel-foods-reports-first-quarter-fiscal-2025-results/.
[43] "Lot of 3 Vintage Hormel Spam® Ads Cold or Hot, It Hits the Spot!," eBay, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.ebay.com/itm/293526026053.

Figure 4 (Right): 1960s USA Spam® Advert[44]



Figure 5 (Left): 1990s UK Spam® Magazine Advert[45]

Figure 6 (Right): 2000s UK Spam® Magazine Advert[46]



Figure 7: "You'll Think It's Junk Food" (1980)[47]

[44] Alamy Limited, "Spam® Food Advert Hi-Res Stock Photography and Images," Alamy, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/Spam®-food-advert.html.
[45] Alamy Limited, "Spam® Food Advert Hi-Res Stock Photography and Images," Alamy, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/Spam®-food-advert.html.
[46] Ibid.
[47] "1980 Hormel Spam® Ad - You'll Think It's Junk Food," eBay, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.ebay.com/itm/402347760350.

SPAM®: Spam's Participation in American Military

During WWII, the U.S. government sought food to feed their troops abroad. Because conditions of the war were unstable and the government did not want the food to expire before it could be consumed, the government prioritized processed protein products with long shelf lives. Spam® became a solution to this issue. Spam was classified as a K-ration.[48] K-rations were "complete meals in water-resistant packages."[49] While intended for short term usage, these rations became infamous for being monotonous when consumed for days and weeks on end.[50] At one point, Spam® was the only food option available for the troops to eat.[51] This war effort abroad was also extended back home.

In the United States, Spam® was one of the rationed foods the public was encouraged to purchase. Advertisements for Spam® capitalized on a sense of patriotism in their marketing efforts during WWII (see Figure 8). The most obvious connection between this advertisement and arousing patriotism was the image and quote from Jack Thompson – a member of the American armed forces (refer to Figure 8). In this quote on the ad, Thompson endorsed the product, by stating that the Hormel meats (which included Spam®) were commonplace on the military bases. Yet, the more engaging connection between the advertisement and wartime patriotism was how the women were portrayed in the advertisement.

In Figures 1 and 2, Spam® marketers of the 1930s portrayed the white women in a more traditionally feminine sense — they were dolled up in dresses with their hair down. In the

[48] Bruce Heydt, "SPAM AGAIN," *American Heritage*, June 2006, http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/spam-again/.
[49] Richard L. Lobb, "Military Rations," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon H. Katz, vol. 2 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 529, https://link-gale-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX3403400422/GVRL?u=claremont_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=05ee6942.
[50] Lobb, "Military Rations," 529.
[51] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.

advertisements prior to the war effort, advertisements towards women appealed to their sensibilities as homemakers (Figures 1 and 2). Yet, in wartime advertisements (such as the one depicted in Figure 8), Hormel marketing represented white women as symbols of military and national pride, consistent with wartime messaging seen with Rosie the Riveter ads. Instead of dolled up ladies, women with defense factory machinery were depicted on these Hormel ads, as if to say that they were doing their part for the war on the home front, both within and outside of the domestic sphere. While the convenience of Spam® and its versatility in meals remained a constant in the advertisements, appealing to women's homemaking sensibilities expanded to incorporate the military and patriotism.



Figure 8: 1943 Spam Advert[52]

Following the conclusion of WWII, Spam® remained intertwined with the American military and its legacies. Domestically, Hormel created the Hormel Girls to help sell Spam® within the continental United States. Formed in 1947, the Hormel Girls were composed of

[52] "1943 Hormel Spam Ad.," Reddit Post, *R/Vintageads*, March 24, 2024, www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/1bmvpur/1943_hormel_spam_ad/.

musically inclined women who went door to door promoting Spam® to housewives.[53] As with the earlier Spam® that catered to women because they were the ones assumed to be buying food for the household, the Hormel Girls focused their efforts towards housewives instead of the husbands.[54] The Hormel Girls also publicized Hormel's patriotic role in feeding the troops during WWII.[55] Although they only lasted seven years and concluded their operations in 1954, the Hormel Girls ultimately improved sales by double digit numbers.[56] While Spam®'s military connection was by no means hidden, its relationship to the American military was even more palpable beyond the U.S. continent.

Prior to the United States officially entering the global arena during WWII, the government had passed the Lend-Lease Act in 1941. Through this act, the United States could lend or lease wartime supplies to other nations that were deemed vital to the protection of the United States. In other words, this act allowed the United States to share supplies with the troops of nations that the United States believed to be valuable allies in protecting American interests.[57] In addition to weapons, food rations also fell under the Lend-Lease Act, which meant Spam® was also sent to and shared among troops during the war. This was especially the case for Great Britain, which saw an overall increase in expenditures around Spam® and other rationed meat

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[53] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.

[54] Heather Holmes, "Advertising of Food," in *Encyclopedia of Food and Culture*, ed. Solomon H. Katz, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003), 18, https://link-gale-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/CX3403400013/GVRL?u=claremont_main&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=ac2a9efb.

[55] Anne Ewbank, "The Rise and Fall of the Hormel Girls, Who Sold America on SPAM," *Atlas Obscura* (blog), http://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/history-of-spam-hormel-girls.

[56] Ibid; I have scoured numerous sources who have stated this exact point in order to find the raw data that supports this claim. While I have not seen the numbers, this claim has been parrotted by Hormel themselves, and I found where this point likely came from. To see (what is likely) the original source of this specific claim, please refer to: Ron Da Silva et al., *A History of Drum & Bugle Corps. Volume 2* (Madison, WI: Drum Corps Sights and Sounds, 2003): 273.
To see Hormel themselves citing this claim, please refer to:
"125 Years of Connecting with Consumers," Hormel Foods, accessed May 3, 2025, https://www.hormelfoods.com/inspired/story/125-years-connecting-consumers/.

[57] "Lend-Lease Act (1941)," September 21, 2021, National Archives, https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/lend-lease-act.

from 1942 to 1945.[58] At that time, Spam® was categorized as a point rationed food – "a scheme introduced in December 1941 to cover foods in short supply."[59] Being shelf stable and high in protein made Spam® a desirable product to feed to soldiers and the masses during this time. Spam was also viewed more positively by British soldiers during this time in comparison to American soldiers.[60] By 1944, more than 90% of Hormel's canned meat was sent abroad to feed allied troops, with Spam® being the most prominent.[61] Former editor of *American Heritage* magazine Bruce Heydt documented a story shared with him by a veteran rifleman of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division:

> He and his mates were complaining about army food during the Normandy campaign in 1944 when two visiting Brits, without a word, lifted a slab of meat from the Americans' mess, dropped it in the dirt, and then picked it up and swallowed it. The message was clear: You pampered Yanks have nothing to complain about; this is a treat compared to what we get.[62]

Spam played such a critical role in feeding the British masses that the canned meat is now commemorated in the first week of March: the United Kingdom's SPAM® Appreciation Week.[63]

Running concurrent to Spam®'s expansion across the Atlantic was Spam®'s integration in the Pacific. Hawai'i was critical to American involvement in WWII, considering that it was the bombing of Pu'uloa (also known as Pearl Harbor) that led to the United States formally entering the war.[64] The United States introduced Spam® into the Hawaiian markets due to a fishing limit

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[58] For more information, please refer to:
"Wartime Food Survey: Reports 1943-5," 1943, MAF 156/379, The National Archives, https://www.foodanddrink.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/TNA_MAF_156_379.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Bruce Heydt, "SPAM AGAIN." *American Heritage*, June 2006. http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/spam-again/.
[61] Jill M. Sullivan and Danelle D. Keck, "The Hormel Girls," *American Music* 25, no. 3 (2007): 282–311, https://doi.org/10.2307/40071663.
[62] Bruce Heydt, "SPAM AGAIN." *American Heritage*, June 2006. http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/spam-again/.
[63] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.
[64] By intentionally privileging pu'uloa over Pearl Harbor, we move away from normalizing American military presence in Hawai'i. For more, please refer to:

they had imposed to help with rationing food. To cover the gap created by less fishing, the government offered Spam® to the masses.[65] From there, Spam® was cemented in the local cuisine in Hawai‘i that we see today, such as Spam® musubi and Spam® saimin.[66] Spam's presence remains so widespread in Hawai‘i that they now hold an annual Waikiki Spam Jam — a festival in honor of and celebrating Spam®.[67]

Broadly speaking, for Pasifika people, Spam® is generally viewed positively. Spam®'s popularity has led to the canned meat being considered "island food" in some spaces despite its status as an imported product.[68] For some of our community members, Spam® is not just a canned meat product but also "a cultural vehicle imbued with layers of meaning."[69] For example, L&L Hawaiian Barbeque is a restaurant chain that is popular among Pasifika people, especially when it comes to catering. While they serve a variety of foods, their best sellers are Spam® musubi, chicken katsu, pork and cabbage, and saimin, according to an L&L Leadership Member.[70] He also indicated that while options like chicken katsu are more sought out by those who may be venturing into local cuisine in Hawai‘i for the first time, Spam® musubi remains the clear top seller for L&L.[71] It is worth noting that Spam® musubi was initially not on the menu at L&L and was only added after a huge demand from customers to add the item in 1999.[72,73]

Jon Kamakawiwo‘ole Osorio, "Memorializing Pu‘uloa and Remembering Pearl Harbor," in *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Cynthia Enloe, Setsu Shigematsu, and Keith L. Camacho (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 0, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816665051.003.0001.

[65] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024

[66] L&L Leadership Member, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

[67] Ibid.

[68] N. Kau'i Baumhofer et al., "Association of Cultural Affinity and Island Food Consumption in the Pacific Islander Health Study," *Ethnicity & Health* 26, no. 5 (July 2021): 770, https://doi.org/10.1080/13557858.2018.1547815.

[69] Ibid.

[70] L&L Leadership Member, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Ibid.

[73] "Get a Free SPAM Musubi on The Day Celebrating One of Hawaii's Favorite Snacks | News | Kitv.Com," accessed April 19, 2025, https://www.kitv.com/news/get-a-free-spam-musubi-on-the-day-celebrating-one-of-hawaiis-favorite-snacks/article_70f9b254-52a0-11ef-95c7-5f1a83e45feb.html.

Considering that L&L started in Hawai‘i before branching out to the continental U.S., this fact relates directly to Pasifika communities. When considering that Hawai‘i as a state in the United States has the largest concentration of Pasifika people, it is easy to surmise that they were part of the customer base advocating for the inclusion of Spam® musubi.[74]

Yet, considering that Pasifika people are not monolithic, there are also a sizable number of people hypercritical of Spam®, whether it is due to its military legacies or its connection to non-communicable diseases that afflict our communities.[75] Both these points indicate a potential moral dilemma surrounding Spam®. American anthropologist Deborah Gewertz and ethnographer Frederick Errington raise a thought-provoking point when examining the popularity of mutton flaps (essentially the fatty meat of lamb and sheep) amongst Papua New Guineans in contrast to the avoidance and derision amongst white Australians and New Zealanders:

> …this dichotomy suggests not only differences in who can afford to buy what, but also in who is better than whom. Thus the trade in flaps, at least in the Pacific Islands, is not a simple matter of supply and demand. Rather, it is a complex and political matter filled with connotations about comparability and worth. Moreover, because this is a trade in fatty flesh, the complexities often become embodied in fatty Pacific Island flesh in a manner that compels attention and demands response. As we have suggested, the prevalence of eating-related lifestyle— also known as "non-communicable"— diseases among Pacific Islanders is alarming.[76]

While the focus is on mutton flaps, it is important to know that these critiques can also be seen with Spam®. Pacific Islanders' contemporary connection to Spam® arguably reflects a dynamic

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[74] EPIC & AAAJ, *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders In the United States, 2014* [National], (Los Angeles: 2014), 8.

[75] For examples, CHamoru poet Craig Santos Perez has multiple writings on this subject. If interested, please feel free to refer to:
Craig Santos Perez, "SPAM's Carbon Footprint," text, Poets, 2010, https://poets.org/poem/spams-carbon-footprint.
Craig Santos Perez, "'I Eat Therefore I SPAM' « Kenyon Review Blog," *The Kenyon Review* (blog), February 21, 2013, https://kenyonreview.org/2013/02/i-eat-therefore-i-spam/.
Craig Santos Perez, "An Indigenous Poet's Ode to SPAM and Colonialism," Indianz, May 2, 2018, https://www.indianz.com/News/2018/05/02/craig-santos-perez-an-indigenous-poets-o.asp.

[76] Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington, *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands* (University of California Press, 2019), 23.

that goes beyond gustatorial preferences and cost affordability, similar to Papua New Guineans in Australia and New Zealand. Spam® is advertised as being inexpensive, thus there is a socioeconomic connotation placed onto those who consume Spam® similar to the implications placed on Papua New Guineans in Australia and New Zealand who consume mutton flaps. Spam®, like mutton flaps, is incredibly fatty. And more importantly, Spam® is also connected to the "non-communicable" diseases that afflict Pacific Islander communities. An entire can of Spam® contains "nearly 100 grams of fat, more than 1,000 calories, 240 milligrams of cholesterol, and a heart pounding 4,696 milligrams of sodium."[77] While the entire can of Spam® contains six servings, a single serving of Spam® still contains 16 grams of fat (with 6 grams being saturated fat) and a third of the daily recommendation of sodium intake.[78] As a result, some people deride Spam® as cheap or consider it "white trash" food.[79] Others hone in on the fact that Spam® is junk food. Yet, for all its detractors, there are those who adore and rally behind Spam®. Some are quick to highlight its existence in a variety of cuisines, including "American, Korean, Japanese, [and] Filipino," indicating that the meat does not deserve the non-health related derision that it receives.[80]

Spam's influence goes beyond Hawai'i when discussing its presence in the Pacific. Statistically speaking, two-thirds of all Spam® consumed is in the "Asia-Pacific region today."[81] In addition to the United States (which includes Hawai'i), South Korea and Guåhan (Guam) are

[77] Jeff Swystun, "How Spam Came to Rule the World," *Medium* (blog), May 3, 2022, https://jeffswystun.medium.com/how-spam-came-to-rule-the-world-8df7800040a9.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Robert Ji-Song Ku, *Dubious Gastronomy : The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA / Robert Ji-Song Ku*, *Dubious Gastronomy : The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA*, Food in Asia and the Pacific (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014), 200.
[80] Ku, *Dubious Gastronomy : The Cultural Politics of Eating Asian in the USA*, 196.
[81] SPAM® Museum Tour, Zoom, October 2024.

the highest consumers of Spam®.[82,83] Spam was introduced in Guåhan following American re-invasion of Guåhan in 1944, defeating Japanese troops and ultimately gaining colonial control over the region.[84] Six months later, the United States started bringing over rations to Guåhan, with one of these rations being Spam®.[85] Spam's and other canned meats' popularity then began to grow; on Guåhan, Spam® consumption is estimated to be sixteen cans per person annually, giving CHamorus and others in Guåhan the highest consumption rate per capita.[86]

While the US military introduced Spam® overseas during the Second World War, Spam® came to South Korea during the Korean War in the 1950s. American Studies scholar Crystal Munhye Baik wrote that during this war, "starving Korean civilians scavenged military bases for leftovers," which is how they ended up procuring Spam® and other canned meats.[87] Spam and other canned goods became highly sought after commodities due to their symbolizing of "American abundance in the face of scarcity among Koreans."[88] In this period of time emerged *budae jjigae* – translated in English as "army base stew." Reflecting struggle and ingenuity, this

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[82] Ibid.
[83] While I have yet to come across the specific numbers to substantiate the claim made by the SPAM® Museum, I have seen this claim made in various articles centering on Spam® and thus feel at ease asserting this point. For more, please refer to:
Mary Bergin, "Even before COVID, Spam Was Coming Back - the Meat, Not the Email," *Journal Sentinel*, accessed April 19, 2025, https://www.jsonline.com/story/life/food/2021/01/05/spam-meat-back-covid-adds-quest-portable-cheap-food/3907309001/.
Christopher Doering, "Spamalot: Consumers Can't Get Enough of the Mercilessly Mocked Meat | Food Dive," accessed April 19, 2025, https://www.fooddive.com/news/spamalot-consumers-cant-get-enough-of-the-mercilessly-mocked-meat/525327/.
Jeff Swystun, "How Spam Came to Rule the World," *Medium* (blog), May 3, 2022, https://jeffswystun.medium.com/how-spam-came-to-rule-the-world-8df7800040a9.
The Week Staff, "Five Things You Never Knew about Spam," *The Week*, July 5, 2017, https://theweek.com/86380/five-things-you-never-knew-about-spam.
[84] Rohan Lovell, "The United States Military, Canned Foods, and Guam: How Has Food Contributed to Structures of Dependence?," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 2 (2022): 76.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Crystal Mun-hye Baik, "The Delicious Taste of Army Base Stew: An Introduction" in *Reencounters: On the Korean War and Diasporic Memory Critique*, 1st ed., vol. 204, Asian American History and Culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019): 3.
[88] Crystal Mun-hye Baik, "The Delicious Taste of Army Base Stew: An Introduction," 5.

wartime meal is still eaten today in South Korea. Koreans were introduced to Spam® because of the United States using the Korean peninsula as a stage for their proxy war against the Soviet Union, again pursuing American interests to the detriment of the local population.

Similarly, Hawai‘i’s and Guåhan’s relationship with the United States and their military was and continues to be a point of contention, with the former becoming a state through illegal annexation and a statehood vote, with the latter remaining an unincorporated territory of the United States. Both Hawai‘i and Guåhan have had well documented issues with the U.S. military, especially with regard to intervening in politics and encroaching on land to pursue American national interests.[89] As with the consumer tastes in South Korea, Spam® remains an incredibly popular item — a product explicitly intertwined with the US military as the root of many problems both Kānaka Maoli and CHamorus face. For the most part, American militarization in Hawai‘i, Guåhan, and South Korea has been well documented. The connections that each of these places have with Spam® has also been discussed in these respective communities.[90] It is here that I want to transition to highlight American Sāmoa: that is, what can we learn about American Sāmoa and Spam®?

[89] For more information specific to Hawai‘i please refer to:
Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i*, Revised edition. (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999).
For more information specific to Guåhan, please refer to:
Alfred Peredo Flores, *Tip of the Spear: Land, Labor, and US Settler Militarism in Guåhan, 1944–1962*, 1st ed., The United States in the World (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023).

[90] Please feel free to the following texts for more information:
Robert Ji-Song Ku, “SPAM,” in *Dubious Gastronomy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2018), 190–223.
Nicolyn Woodcock, “Tasting the ‘Forgotten War’: Korean/American Memory and Military Base Stew,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 135–56, https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2018.0005.
Rohan Lovell, “The United States Military, Canned Foods, and Guam: How Has Food Contributed to Structures of Dependence?,” *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 41, no. 2 (2022): 74–86.
Bonnie Etherington, “Reckoning With the Oceanic Territoriality of ‘Uncle SPAM’: Processed Meats and Resurgent Seeds in Craig Santos Perez’s Poetics of the Militarized Pacific,” *NAIS : Journal of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Association* 9, no. 2 (2022): 38–65, https://doi.org/10.1353/nai.2022.a863582.

SPAM®: Sāmoa Procures American Meat

Spam® is prevalent in Sāmoan communities, which also has an entangled history with the American military. To better understand why American Sāmoa and Sāmoans living in the United States typically remain marginalized in conversations around Spam® and its status as a physical embodiment of U.S. militarism abroad and domestically, it is important to give context as to the relationships between American Sāmoa and the United States. After all, how did Eastern Sāmoa become American in the first place? And how did Spam® enter the Sāmoan world of foodways?

The partitioning of Sāmoa into two polities— American Sāmoa and the Independent State of Sāmoa (formerly known as Western Sāmoa) — occurred as a result of inter-imperial rivalries between three major colonial powers of the time: Germany, the United States, and Great Britain. Due to the value each of these countries saw in Oceania when it came to advancing naval and broader military interests, these three nations already had pre-existing inter-imperial relations. These relationships included "cooperation, competition, and conflict between empires, including subaltern attempts at creating spaces for maneuver and agency between them," all of which came to a head in Sāmoa in 1899.[91] Each colonial country had an interest in the Sāmoan archipelago, and to alleviate tensions in a facade of neutrality, the three nations ended up signing the General Act of Berlin 1889. While on paper this act expressed interest in preserving "independent and autonomous government for the islands," it came with stipulations from the three nations.[92] In other words, these three nations created the terms for Sāmoa to be "independent" without the consultation and consent of Sāmoan chiefs and the wider Sāmoan community.

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[91] Augusto Espiritu, "Inter-Imperial Relations, the Pacific, and Asian American History," *Pacific Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (2014): 238, https://doi.org/10.1525/phr.2014.83.2.238.
[92] "German Aggression in Sāmoan Islands | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives," https://history.house.gov/Records-and-Research/Listing/pm_028/.

The stipulation that ultimately sparked a more explicit takeover was that in order for Sāmoan independence to be preserved there needed to be a king. This stipulation entrenched Sāmoa in a civil war between two factions: those who supported Malietoa Tanumafili to fulfill that kingship role and those who preferred Tui Atua Mataʻafa to fulfill that same position.[93] Due to the civil war in Sāmoa making it more difficult for the imperial nations to retain colonial control over the island, the three nations intervened. Speaking to Tanumafili and Mataʻafa separately, the representatives of the three colonial governments threatened a hostile military takeover if both sides did not resolve the war and surrender their guns.[94] Prioritizing communal survival over potentially battling against the three nations' respective military forces, the Sāmoan high chiefs submitted to the inter-imperial coercion and agreed to the conditions thrusted upon them: abolishing the kingship role and returning firearms to the inter-imperial powers. The second condition was completed in May 1899, with the first condition being completed in June 1899. The U.S. utilized the vacancy to prop up in eastern Sāmoa a provisional government in the interim.[95]

Concurrent to these interventions, the imperial trio explored how they wanted to split Sāmoa among themselves. The United States had a very keen interest in Tutuila in eastern Sāmoa due to the US military's desire to build a port in Pago Pago harbor. The result was that the United States would claim the eastern parts of Sāmoa (Tutuila, Aunuʻu, and Manuʻa) and that the western parts of Sāmoa would be under Germany's jurisdiction. Considering Great Britain received no formal stake in Sāmoa, Germany made some concessions. In exchange for getting Western Sāmoa, Germany gave Great Britain any land stakes they had in Tonga, Solomon

[93] J.A.C Gray, "The Partition of Sāmoa," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1960), 99.
[94] Gray, "The Partition of Sāmoa," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration*, 101.
[95] Ibid.

Islands, and West Africa. By the end of December 1899, the agreement was formalized and signed.

In 1900, the United States then implemented a naval administration to run the naval station in Tutuila and govern American Sāmoa. This colonial hold was accomplished through the signing of the Deed of Cession. Addressed to Commander Tilley and signed by the current *matai* (chiefs) of the time, the written agreement stated that "only the Government of the United States of America shall rule in Tutuila and Manua," which explicitly swore off ever wanting to be under another foreign power's jurisdiction and thanked the foreign nations for placing them under America control.[96] People like myself do have concerns or have raised questions about whether the matais had actually consented to these terms. The matai may have even been coerced, since no written record exists of the negotiations and conversations that led to this document being produced and signed. However, it does not negate the fact that this legal doctrine is still in place and Sāmoa remains legally and politically partitioned to this day.[97,98]

With the naval administration emerging over a period of time, existing Sāmoan protocols were contingent on American approval, creating a paternalistic hierarchy that limited Sāmoan autonomy in American Sāmoa. Sāmoan customs and protocols could continue to exist and function as long as they did not conflict with American law or as long as the American commandant approved of it. It is also important to note that not all power was consolidated by white Americans and that Sāmoans held positions in government, albeit through getting selected

[96] The Deed of Cession is reproduced in "The United States Naval Station, Tutuila," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration*, 112-117.
[97] Gray, "The United States Naval Station, Tutuila," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration*, 108.
[98] While not in the scope of my current thesis, this particular point is expanded upon in more depth in the first chapter and conclusion of my undergraduate thesis: Aina, Marina. "Militarized Foodways: The Connection Between the Militarization of American Sāmoa and Chronic Health Conditions Experienced by Samoans in the U.S." Bachelor's thesis, Pomona College, 2023.

by the naval Commandant.[99] American naval control and overreach, therefore, had the potential to encroach upon the *fa'asāmoa* (Sāmoan way of life) if the United States, through their naval administration, deemed it appropriate. And this did happen, with two well documented cases being "The Case of Skipjack" and "The Ipu of Tui Manu'a." In both cases, Sāmoan cultural protocols were violated and instead of letting the Sāmoan community settle matters amongst themselves, the naval administration intervened and overrode the decisions, dually undermining the *matai's* power and chipping away at the integrity of the *fa'asāmoa*.[100] In this way, as the naval administration whittled down the *matai's* power, the naval administration increased their own power. American Sāmoa also underwent increased militarization: an extension of colonialism that is the result of the "step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria."[101]

The clearest example of the naval administration militarizing American Sāmoa is the creation of the Fita Fita guard.[102] Believing that military training would be beneficial for establishing discipline, then acting Commander Benjamin F. Tilley created the *Fita Fita* guard — "a paid volunteer militia that became a sign of status with its uniform, payments and benefits

[99] J.A.C Gray, "The Island Government," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1960), 126.
[100] Due to the constraints of my thesis, I cannot go into depth on these cases. If interested in reading more on these, I would recommend their respective chapters in J.A.C Gray's *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1960).
[101] Joseph H. Genz et al., "Framing Militarism and Nuclear Testing in the Pacific" in *Volume 1 of Teaching Oceania Series, Militarism and Nuclear Testing in the Pacific* (Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies, University of Hawai'i-Mānoa, 2019): 3. http://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/handle/10125/42430.
[102] To know more about the Fita Fita Guard, please refer to:
Toeutu Faaleava, "Fitafita: Samoan Landsmen in the United States Navy, 1900–1951" (Ph.D., United States -- California, University of California, Berkeley, 2003), https://www.proquest.com/docview/305337638/abstract/FC9A24D37FB0489CPQ/1.

(e.g., access to purchasing goods in the Naval Station store)."[103] The Fita Fita guard was integrated into pre-existing Sāmoan social hierarchy, due to the designation extending "chiefly power (or *pule*)" and complementing "Samoan concept[s] of service."[104] Additionally, working within the Navy provided Sāmoans with perks that they could leverage to rise up in the enlisted ranks. For example, working with the Navy "offered the possibility of a good income and the chance to learn English."[105] This was especially advantageous in light of American Sāmoa transitioning into a wage-labor economy.[106] For example, in 1940 a retired Fita Fita guard could make "an income of $60.10 per month" and a carpenter at the Naval Station "an income of $21.12 per week."[107] During this time period, $21.12 per week would have been considered a stable income.[108] When the second World War started, military enlistment and militarization rapidly increased as well. Starting from when the United States entered the war to the conclusion of the war, "about 10,000 Samoan and U.S. marines and staff were stationed on Tutuila."[109]

The rapid militarization occurring during WWII also irreparably shifted the economy in American Sāmoa. Copra exports were a major source of income prior to WWII, but when those had halted because of the war, military expenses replaced copra exports as a major source of income. By expenses, I am referring to the wages paid to Sāmoans who were part of the Marines and Sāmoans who were involved in military project construction, as well as the money local

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[103] Karen Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," *Suomen Antropologi : Suomen Antropologisen Seuran Julkaisu = Antropologi i Finland : Antropologiska Sällskapet i Finland* 33, no. 2 (2008): 52, https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v33i2.116437.
[104] Ibid, 53; the italics are not my own and from the original source.
[105] Karen Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," 58 https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v33i2.116437.
[106] Robert Franco, "Samoans, World War II, and Military Work," 1991, 173, http://hdl.handle.net/10125/15564.
[107] Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," 59; The numbers used were specific wages made by candidates for a Ilaoa matai title in a 1940 case. While specific to the gentlemen in the case, it can be assumed that these numbers are near the average of what someone of their profession would be making, thus representative of how much one would be financially compensated for their labor.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," 59.

merchants brought in from selling their products to American sailors and Marines. Through this change came a "wave of prosperity" that added to the "government's custom revenue."[110] This critical juncture in time is what ultimately led to American Sāmoa adopting more of a wage-based economy, in addition to equating economic prosperity with military employment.

When looking at the import side of economics, the war effort unsurprisingly led to the relationship seen today between Sāmoans and Spam®. The quantitative demands for canned meats increased significantly during this period, astronomically higher than any other imports coming into the territory.[111] In a government report detailing American Sāmoa's fiscal year in 1950, preserved meats, including canned meats like Spam®, had the highest volume of imports with the government buying 978,714 preserved meat products; the second and third highest imports were, respectively, wheat flour products (513,451) and sugar products (478,748).[112] Prior to the naval administration's stint in American Sāmoa, canned meats were absent from the U.S. Naval government documents reporting on imports and exports. While the import records do not specify which canned meats were being sent, it is plausible to assume that Spam® was one of the main imported canned meats to American Sāmoa. It has been documented that Spam® was a major ration sent abroad — including to Hawai'i, Guåhan, and South Korea — by the US military.

Due to the limited food supply, not only was Spam® consumption necessary for food survival, but consuming Spam® could also be seen as an act of patriotism on the part of Sāmoans

[110] J.A.C Gray, "World War Two," in *Amerika Sāmoa and Its Naval Administration* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1960), 244-245.
[111] "Information on American Sāmoa Transmitted By The United States To The Secretary-General Of The United Nations Pursuant To Article 73 (c) Of The Chapter," RG284 Records of Government of American Sāmoa, box 5 Record's of Governor's Office, series 16 Coded Subject Files 1941-1951, folder 8A Affairs in American Sāmoa 1947-1950 (3 of 3), National Archives, San Bruno, CA: 15.
[112] Ibid.

in American Sāmoa.[113] By this point, the American Navy had made themselves partly legible to pre-existing Sāmoan concepts — such as *faʻaaloalo* (respect), *pule* (authority), and *tautua* (service) — that did not conflict with American law. Take, for instance, the claim that "the military is one way that Samoans are well-integrated into an institution of the American state," an institution that a lot of Sāmoans are proud to participate in.[114] By the end of WWII, Sāmoan livelihood had been irrevocably influenced by the militarization of American Sāmoa and by the increased presence of canned goods.

SPAM®: Sāmoans Participating in American Migration

While migration from American Sāmoa to the United States occurred in small numbers in the early twentieth century, the impetus that led to the large waves of emigration starting in the 1950s was the militarization that took place during WWII and its after effects. Prior to WWII, Samoan seldom emigrated to the continental United States.[115] Immediately following the war up until the disestablishment of Naval Station-Tutuila and subsequent transfer to the Department of the Interior in 1951, "the first large-scale migration of Samoans occurred when Samoans in military service moved to bases in Hawaiʻi."[116] American Sāmoans were, and still are, considered non-citizen US nationals, which allows them to "enter, work and reside in any of the fifty states" while they are rendered ineligible to vote in US general elections.[117] When the United States transferred colonial administrative responsibilities over American Sāmoa (and Guåhan) to the Department of the Interior, immigration to the United States increased and California soon became the hub for resettling Sāmoans. Major factors that influenced out-migration during time

[113] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[114] Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," 60, https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v33i2.116437.
[115] Gordon R. Lewthwaite, Christiane Mainzer, and Patrick J. Holland, "From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel," *The Journal of Pacific History* 8 (1973): 133.
[116] Armstrong, "American Exceptionalism in American Samoa," 52, https://doi.org/10.30676/jfas.v33i2.116437.
[117] Uperesa and Garriga-López, "Contested Sovereignties," 50.

period included: “a sharp drought that reduced food supplies, the depletion of reserves of cash and good that had been accumulated during the war, the end of the GI Bill of Rights with its provisions for education and vocational training, and a cost-price squeeze that was the concomitant of falling export and rising import prices.”[118] It is worth noting that Spam® would be impacted by the rising cost of imported goods, since American Sāmoa imported Spam® from the United States.

From 1947-1956, roughly 3,000 Sāmoans emigrated out of American Sāmoa. Considering that at least 1,000 traveled westward to then Western Sāmoa, this meant that approximately 2,000 immigrated to military bases in Hawai‘i and the continental United States.[119] Records also showed that immigration to the United States increased as the years approached 1956 due to transportation improvements and the introduction of a regular commercial airline to Pago Pago. As a result, transportation gradually became more accessible to non-military personnel.[120] From 1956, migration officers also noted that their work increased tremendously by fifty percent in 1957, doubling 1956 numbers by the time 1958 came around, and surging through 1959 and hitting a peak in 1960.[121] By the onset of 1960, over 4,000 Sāmoans emigrated to the United States between 1956-1960, meaning that roughly 6,000 Sāmoans emigrated within the decade.[122]

Initially, when out migration to the continental United States was occurring, it was explicitly tied to the military; that is, men were going abroad to work at military bases in Hawai‘i. This meant that most of the migrants of the earlier generation were young, able-bodied

[118] Lewthwaite et. al, “From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel,” 134.
[119] Ibid, 137.
[120] Ibid, 137.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid, 138.

men. When California became more of a hub for resettlement, the gender ratio evened out by the 1970s as seen in the tables provided in the Lewthwaite article (refer to Figure 9).

TABLE 1 MIGRATION AS MEASURED BY ANTICIPATED AND ACTUAL NUMBERS

Age (years)	1950	*Anticipated population 1960	Census 1960	Net change, migration 1950-60	Anticipated population 1970	Census 1970	Net change, migration 1960-70
Male							
5-14	2778		(3270)				
15-24	1911	2748	1848	−900	3240	2614	−626
25-34	1382	1881	974	−907	1818	1640	−178
35-44		1325	945	−407	944	1188	+244
Male migration loss				−2214			−560
Female							
5-14	2447		(2967)				
15-24	1880	2417	1778	−639	2937	2644	−293
25-34	1275	1850	1287	−563	1748	1566	−182
35-44		1245	899	−346	1257	1200	−37
Female migration loss				−1548			−512
Total migration loss, 15-44 age group				−3762			−1072

* Anticipated population is based, as in Doumenge, on the assumption of a natural loss of three men and three women per year in the 5-14, 15-24, and 25-34 year age groups.

TABLE 2 CHANGING NUMBERS IN YOUTHFUL AGE GROUPS, 1950-1970

Age (years)	Sex	1950	Change	1956	Change	1960	Change	1970
15-24	M	1911	−36	1875	−27	1848	+766	2614
	F	1880	+27	1907	−129	1778	+866	2644
25-34	M	1382	−209	1173	−199	974	+666	1640
	F	1275	+86	1361	−74	1287	+279	1566

TABLE 3 AGE-GROUPS AS A PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION, 1930-1970

Age (years)	1930		1950		1956		1960		1970	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
−15	45·8	45·5	49·1	47·5	49·9	47·0	51·0	48·2	47·3	47·5
15-34	31·7	32·5	32·2	33·3	30·2	32·4	27·8	31·0	31·1	31·2
35-54	17·8	16·8	13·9	14·0	14·2	13·7	15·4	14·7	15·4	15·4
+55	4·7	5·2	4·8	5·2	5·8	6·9	5·8	6·1	6·2	6·1

Figure 9: Tables 1-3 within “From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel” (Lewthwaite et. al)[123]

There are a few major factors for why California became a major resettlement location, with one of these tying explicitly to the Navy. Even after the Navy administration vacated Sāmoa, Navy and military enlistments still occurred. This leads into the first major reason for

[123] Lewthwaite et. al, “From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel,” 142.

California: the Navy sent many of its Samoan personnel from Hawai‘i to Pacific Coast bases between “Seattle [in Washington State] in the North and San Diego in the south.”[124] The other major reason is family reunification. Archival records suggest that there were already Sāmoans residing in California before WWII.[125] After the war, the numbers increased due to the rise in Sāmoan enlistments. This would again indicate that the first batch of people coming tended to be young, able-bodied men. Yet, the reason for the gender ratio eventually evening out has to do with their families coming along. According to Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge’s Geology Department Gordon R. Lewthwaite:

> For once the young Samoan man was overseas, the young woman was sure to follow; once the family was established the ‘āiga with all its ramifications was potentially involved, and once one Samoan heard of an economic-opening the others were quick to learn. It was thus no accident that the balance of male and female migrants was largely restored in the late 50s and that virtually every family included at least one person from beyond the immediate biological circle.[126]

Major places of resettlement in California, listed geographically from north to south, included: San Francisco (which was noted to have the earliest record of American born Sāmoans), Oxnard, Los Angeles, Oceanside, San Diego and National City.[127] Outside of Hawai‘i, these settlement patterns indicate that California became a bonafide hub for Sāmoans to resettle by the end of the 1950s. Additionally, some sought educational opportunities at the high school and college levels, as well as employment in industrialized work forces in the more urban areas listed above.[128] Conservative estimates during this time indicated that between Hawai‘i and California alone,

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[124] Ibid, 140.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid, 143; Research in California Sāmoan communities was largely conducted by Christiane Mainzer (now a professor at Oxnard College), and research in American Sāmoa was primarily conducted by Patrick J. Holland. For that reason, the citation is “et. al” but the writing was primarily done by Lewthwaite.
[127] Ibid, 140-43.
[128] Lewthwaite et. al, “From Polynesia to California: Samoan Migration and Its Sequel,” 143.

more than 30,000 Sāmoans resided in the United States.[129] During this time, Sāmoans, other Pasifika peoples, and Asian Americans had already been introduced to Spam® as a result of U.S. wars in Asia and the Pacific.

How did Sāmoans maintain community ties during these initial moves? After all, the hyper-individualism of the United States is starkly different from the collectivism of life in the islands. For example, a U.S. government report documenting the economic conditions in American Sāmoa reported that "it is impossible to provide a per capita breakdown and distribution of this income [$1,800,000 brought in during the fiscal year] inasmuch as under the Samoan communal way of life, many families besides those of the wage earners may share in the income."[130] It also did not help that many Sāmoans were apprehensive about socializing outside of their own culture. While younger men, especially bachelors, were more at ease in talking to non-Sāmoans, women and elders not associated with the U.S. Navy or other military bodies were more reserved in this regard due to their insecurities in speaking English, with many being less than fluent in the language.[131] The major community connector ended up being the church. But even before the church revitalized Sāmoan social life, the Sāmoan families living near each other formed bonds by way of their shared experiences, which was especially the case with stay-at-home wives.[132] As Sāmoans started forming church communities, their social lives shifted beyond their initial feelings of isolation in California. This change came about in the early 1960s, likely between 1963-64.[133] Due to the increased migration, more Sāmoans were present in the

[129] Ibid, 146.
[130] "Information on American Sāmoa Transmitted By The United States To The Secretary-General Of The United Nations Pursuant To Article 73 (c) Of The Chapter," RG284 Records of Government of American Sāmoa, box 5 Record's of Governor's Office, series 16 Coded Subject Files 1941-1951, folder 8A Affairs in American Sāmoa 1947-1950 (3 of 3), National Archives, San Bruno, CA: 14.
[131] Ibid, 148.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Joan Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," *Ethnology* 9, no. 3 (1970): 218, https://doi.org/10.2307/3773023.

continental U.S., many of whom wanted to participate in *fa'asamoa* protocols that maintained relations with the motherland. With "many older people who were knowledgeable about Samoan custom and who wished to perpetuate it" living abroad, the church space extended Sāmoan social life.[134] Broadly speaking, Christianity is the most practiced faith in Sāmoan communities. Christianity intertwines itself within the Sāmoan community so much so that the national mottos for both the Independent State of Sāmoa and American Sāmoa reference God: *Fa'avae i le Atua Sāmoa* ("Sāmoa is founded in God") and *Sāmoa, Muamua Le Atua* ("In Sāmoa, God is first") respectively. That said, there is a large diversity of Christian denominations Sāmoans practice, including but not limited to Catholicism, Mormonism, Congregation, Methodism, etc.[135]

The church is also a significant space because of its role in facilitating funeral *fa'alavelave*, a matter I discuss more in depth in my third chapter. Considered as a tenet of *fa'asāmoa, fa'alavelave* (commonly translated as "a disruption" or "an interruption") revolves around major life events, namely weddings and funerals. Prior to church becoming a central aspect of Sāmoan identity formation and performance in the continental United States, when Sāmoans passed away abroad, there was little fanfare outside of the deceased's immediate family in the States.[136] Yet, with church becoming a large connector of building community amongst Sāmoans already residing in the United States, there was an increasing interest in conducting funeral activities similar to how they did back in the motherland, namely through the *fa'alavelave* process. While the church in the motherland is connected to the *fa'alavelave* ritual,

[134] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 218, https://doi.org/10.2307/3773023.
[135] C. Macpherson and L. Macpherson, "Churches and the Economy of Samoa," *Contemporary Pacific* 23, no. 2 (2011): 305; While the *fa'alavelave* process is generally consistent irregardless of denomination, there are some nuances to the processions and fanfare depending on the branch of Christianity. Additionally, these differences can also be seen geographically. Due to the constraints of my thesis, I did not explore how the specific denominations also influence the *fa'alavelave* process. To read more, either read the entire article above or the following article listed below:
Maureen H Fitzgerald and Alan Howard, "Aspects of Social Organization in Three Samoan Communities," *Pacific Studies* 14, no. 1 (1990): 31–54.
[136] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 218, https://doi.org/10.2307/3773023..

for those in the United States, the church became increasingly intertwined with *fa'alavelave* to the point of being central to the *fa'alavelave* processions even today.

Postscript on SPAM®: (simply) Spiced Ham

By the time that Spam® was created, American Sāmoa was already undergoing a process of rapid militarization at the hands of the U.S. Naval Administration. Known for its versatility and the ease in which it could be prepared, Spam® quickly played a pivotal role in WWII when becoming a predominant food ration both for the soldiers and those at home. It was during this time that Spam® found its way into American Sāmoa. For those at home in American Sāmoa during WWII, consuming Spam® was viewed similarly as it was in the United States during this era — a way to participate and support the war effort. One of the driving factors of emigration from American Sāmoa during the 1950s was the rising cost of imported goods, which is the designation that Spam® would find itself in.

Spam®'s connection to Sāmoan communities did not end in American Sāmoa once those imported products had their prices increase. For those stationed in Hawai'i or later moved to California, they would have encountered Spam® frequently since, following the war, Spam® became a staple in local food in Hawai'i. As I noted in the prior section, coming to California could be viewed as somewhat of a culture shock when settling down. Usually, when people get accustomed to a new place, they either cling to what is known and therefore comfortable and/or what is affordable.[137] When overlapping these two aspects, one finds Spam® at the center of it all.

Increasing the likelihood that familiarity and affordability were a factor in Spam®'s presence within Sāmoan households were the military commissaries. For Sāmoans whose family

[137] Julie A. Caswell et al., "Individual, Household, and Environmental Factors Affecting Food Choices and Access," in *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Examining the Evidence to Define Benefit Adequacy* (National Academies Press (US), 2013), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK206912/.

had military ties, they could save money through shopping at commissaries. Originating from the 1820s, commissaries were grocery stores that provided goods at a reduced price for military personnel, veterans, and their family.[138] As the U.S. military expanded, these commissaries became available for American military personnel starting at the turn of the twentieth century.[139] Commissaries grew so much so that the United States established The Defense Commissary Agency in 1990 to oversee these specific operations.[140] Commissaries also have a history of selling Spam® to their patrons during and immediately after WWII.[141] It is thus not surprising that Spam® was found in Sāmoan households in California.[142] Not only was the canned meat recognizable, but through military connections, the already inexpensive canned meat became cheaper, which would be appealing for Sāmoan families.

All these factors contribute not only to Spam®' being in the cupboards of Sāmoan homes in California, but also to the explicit association between canned meat and the U.S. military, and potentially an implicit link between the U.S. military and memories of being in American Sāmoa. And as these newly immigrated families feed Spam® to their little ones, it continues the cycle and presence of Spam® in Sāmoan communities. As these children come of age and have families of their own, they too buy and feed Spam® to their families.

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[138] "Commissary History | Commissaries," Commissaries, accessed July 4, 2025, https://corp.commissaries.com/our-agency/commissary-history.; "About the Defense Commissary Agency | Commissaries," Commissaries, accessed July 4, 2025, https://corp.commissaries.com/our-agency/about-deca.
[139] "Commissary History | Commissaries," Commissaries, accessed July 4, 2025, https://corp.commissaries.com/our-agency/commissary-history.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Tamara Eastman, "CANNED DELIGHT: The Military Community Has Long-Standing Love Affair with Food Packaged in These Historic Containers," *Commissaries*, January 25, 2022, https://corp.commissaries.com/our-agency/newsroom/news-releases/canned-delight-military-community-has-long-standing-love-affair.
[142] Kevin L. Robinson, "Football Fans Can Use Their Commissary for Big Game Menus | Commissaries," *Commissaries*, August 19, 2018, https://corp.commissaries.com/our-agency/newsroom/news-releases/football-fans-can-use-their-commissary-big-game-menus; Kevin L. Robinson, "Lower Prices, Better Value: YES! Gives Stateside Commissary Patrons More Options for Consistent Savings," *Commissaries*, April 25, 2019, https://prod.commissaries.com/our-agency/newsroom/news-releases/lower-prices-better-value-yes-gives-stateside-commissary-patrons.

Overall, Spam® is a hotly contested meat that remains known for its versatility and cheap price. While Spam®'s incorporation into a variety of cuisines demonstrates its appeal and gustatorial strength to consumers, increasing conversations concerning the fatty meat and connected health problems also deter consumers. Even within Pasifika communities, Spam® is both a beloved and derided product.

Spam® is also a gastronomical embodiment of American militarized legacies, one of which extends itself to American Sāmoa. Yet, what remains less clear is what Spam® represents and is exactly for Sāmoans living in the continental United States, particularly California. Does Spam® transform and become forged into a cultural product for Sāmoans? Or does it instead provide familiarity and comfort to Sāmoans, thus shifting into a common comfort food that evokes a sense of nostalgia for the motherland? While militarized pasts and legacies play a role in its status regardless, a huge distinction must be made between cultural cuisine versus comfort food items. In the next chapter, I address these two questions. My main argument is that in the Sāmoan communities of California, Spam® is a common comfort food that evokes various sorts of nostalgia.

Chapter 2: Cultural Cuisine vs Comfort Food: SPAM®'s Presence in Sāmoan Communities

In the previous chapter, I examined Spam® as an embodiment of the U.S. military presence in the Pacific and as an introduced food item in Sāmoan households, serving as a reminder of the Naval Administration and militarization of American Sāmoa. I now explore whether Spam® can be considered cultural cuisine or comfort food for Sāmoans. I will first distinguish between cultural cuisine and comfort food. I then move to focusing on community perceptions of what exactly makes Sāmoan food Sāmoan. In the subsequent section, I answer the main question of this thesis: can Spam® be considered more of a cultural cuisine or can Spam® be better understood as a comfort food Sāmoans in California? Based on the oral histories shared with me concerning food in Sāmoan spaces, I assert that it is the latter case.

Constituting Cultural Cuisine

What constitutes cultural cuisine?[143] While what constitutes "cultural cuisine" fluctuates from scholar to scholar, there does seem to be a general consensus of elements that compose this label. There is an unspoken belief that cultural cuisine, especially for ethnic groups outside of their motherland, should be evocative of their motherland. In discussing the importance of home gardens for immigrant households, University of California, Irvine Professors Dr. Shampa Mazumdar (Department of Sociology) and Dr. Sanjoy Mazumdar (Department of Planning, Policy, and Design) highlight how home gardens "provide easy access to raw materials" needed for cultural cuisine, especially if the materials are not available in local stores and/or families that "live far away from ethnic markets."[144] In connection to cultural cuisine is the idea of cultural

[143] At the time of me doing this research, the scholarly articles I found on the topic shied away from explicitly defining and conceptualizing this "cultural cuisine". Thus, based on the context of how they were employing the concept and what they were projecting as assumed parameters, I read into their defining of "cultural cuisine" in the subsequent sentences that follow in my thesis.

[144] Shampa Mazumdar and Sanjoy Mazumdar, "Immigrant Home Gardens: Places of Religion, Culture, Ecology, and Family," *Landscape and Urban Planning* 105, no. 3 (2012): 261, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2011.12.020.

heritage. Scholars in the *Journal of Ethnic Foods* have posited that critical to maintaining the idea of cultural heritage is the "traditional passing down of cultural cuisine" from generation to generation, which ultimately contributes to food being an example of "intangible cultural heritage."[145] Related to this, Dr. Mardatillah, a senior lecturer at Universitas Islam Riau, observed that "traditional food as a cultural heritage has a higher value because of the history" associated with the food, especially if the idea of "authenticity can be reminiscent of a past memory."[146] The operative definition of "traditional food" that I will employ comes from a collaborative article from the *Journal of Ethnic Food* stating that "traditional foods are considered to be those that have been handed down from one generation to the next in terms of knowledge, techniques or practices used in their preparation or in the choice and use of the raw material, which is generally local."[147] Traditional foods are also linked to a group's knowledge production because said food gets passed down from generation to generation. Additionally, traditional foods hold a temporal element, a geographical foregrounding, and cultural significance. Overall, it is common to find that literature about cultural cuisine tends to conflate cultural heritage — which cultural cuisine falls under — and traditional food.

Furthermore, some scholars implicitly distinguish cultural cuisine as a separate category than ethnic cuisine. For example, when returning to the home garden example I highlighted earlier, the same authors link home gardens to cultural cuisine through how they function tangibly yet when talking about ethnic cuisine they stated the following: "[kitchen garden] also

[145] Karen Grace V. Aster et al., "Sawsawan: Explicating the Culinary Heritage Significance of Philippine Condiments Using Bibliometrics (1972–2018)," *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 10, no. 1 (July 1, 2023): 19, https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-023-00186-3.
[146] Annisa Mardatillah, "The Enterprise Culture Heritage of Minangkabau Cuisine, West Sumatra of Indonesia as a Source of Sustainable Competitive Advantage," *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 7, no. 1 (September 22, 2020): 34, https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-020-00059-z.
[147] Rocillo-Aquino, Zeltzin, Fernando Cervantes-Escoto, Juan Antonio Leos-Rodríguez, Daniela Cruz-Delgado, and Angélica Espinoza-Ortega. "What Is a Traditional Food? Conceptual Evolution from Four Dimensions." *Journal of Ethnic Foods* 8, no. 1 (November 29, 2021): 8. https://doi.org/10.1186/s42779-021-00113-4.

has symbolic meaning expressed in the desire to maintain identity continuity through ethnic cuisine."[148] In the U.S. context, ethnic cuisine is derived from ethnic culture which develops out of immigrant culture, as the moment one enters the United States they become "ethnic."[149] Ethnic culture is a combination of three factors including the culture of the homeland (which undergoes an "amalgamation [process] of the local, regional, and class-related subcultures"), the mainstream and therefore dominant American culture, and the cultures of other ethnic groups in close geographical proximity within the United States.[150] This process can be considered a version of "creolization," which becomes clearer when observing how food becomes impacted.[151] On one hand, "because cuisine is especially responsive to new environments, where some ingredients are unavailable, and because new social settings bring new ways of eating and cooking, foodways are especially quick to adapt and change."[152] On the other hand, however, food is one of the more tenacious aspects of culture resistant to change; even for those who may not be able to speak their mother tongue, they can still enjoy and recreate (some version of) the meals from their motherland.

While I do find these conceptualizations to be helpful, I find that they fall flat due to both implicit and explicit conflation of cultural cuisine meaning traditional foods. Moreover, while the literature indicates that "cultural cuisine" and "ethnic cuisine" are two distinct categorizations, I

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[148] Mazumdar and Mazumdar, "Immigrant Home Gardens: Places of Religion, Culture, Ecology, and Family," 264.
[149] William G. Lockwood and Yvonne R. Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (London, 2015), 72.
[150] Ibid.
[151] When I think of "Creole," I think of Édourad Glissant's (in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*) theorization and utilization of creolization in the Caribbean context. In that context, creolization is a politicized outlook on the hybridity and multiplicity inherent in identity formation in the Caribbean; viewed as a liberatory key due to its constant movement and unpredictability, it eludes colonial attempts to fully assimilate the person. While it is unrelated to my thesis, I do feel it is imperative to give a bit more context to this concept of creolization through how it is defined in relation to Glissant's reversion and diversion. Reversion (an obsession with an unchanging single story origin) and diversion (an ongoing and dynamic space that allows for the colonized to redefine themselves in the shadows away from the colonial gaze) are linked together in that diversion sustains itself through reversion via returning to the point of colonial entanglement, and through doing so, this sustains creolization.
[152] Lockwood and Lockwood, "Continuity and Adaptation in Arab American Foodways," 73.

argue that "cultural cuisine" is an umbrella term that encapsulates both traditional foods and ethnic cuisine. In order to further flesh out how I conceptualize cultural cuisine, it is important to examine the words, "cultural" and "cuisine" separately, and the implication of them together. Both the Cambridge English dictionary and the Merriam-Webster's dictionary define "cuisine" as "a style of cooking."[153,154] While the two dictionaries have a clear consensus when defining "cuisine," the same cannot be said for how they defined "cultural."

According to the Cambridge English dictionary, the term "cultural" means "relating to the habits, traditions, and beliefs of a society."[155] Merriam-Webster's definition of "cultural" (which simply states "of or relating to culture") redirects the user to look up "culture," which is defined as: "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group" which can also mean "the characteristic features of everyday existence (such as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a time or place."[156,157] While each dictionary has a distinct meaning being employed in their definitions, the commonalities in the definitions revolve around custom/traditions of a shared social group/society.

I appreciated the distinction Merriam-Webster made in the definition's inclusion of the phrase "everyday existence." This phrase implicitly underscores that culture/cultural aspects are not static and thus dynamic. The phrase "everyday existence" also places the object in the present, so for an object to have continued to survive to the present indicates dynamism. When applying this read to "cultural," it then becomes an embodiment of the evolution of a social

[153] "CUISINE | Definition in the Cambridge English Dictionary," accessed March 6, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cuisine.
[154] "Definition of CUISINE," March 2, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cuisine; Merriam-Webster also expands the definition to also entail the way in which the food is prepared
[155] "Cultural," March 5, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/cultural.
[156] "CULTURAL Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster," accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultural.
[157] "CULTURAL Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster," accessed March 6, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultural.

group's customary habits and beliefs. I understand cultural cuisine as a style of preparing and cooking food indicative of a social group's shared everyday existence. In other words, cultural cuisine is the gastronomical embodiments of a social group's continued existence.

Critical to my framing of cultural cuisine is that this concept is not intrinsically intertwined with the idea of authenticity. The idea of authenticity, linked to an obsession with purity, has historically been weaponized to relegate people and products of a community to the past. Regardless of intention, the pursuit of "authenticity" ultimately causes communities (and their cultural byproducts) to dwindle instead of flourish.[158] This dwindling stems from authenticity's pursuit of purity (as in "what is considered to be *truly* authentic") implicitly postulating that communities and their cultures are static and unchanging, and that one can determine authenticity based on a comparison from the current to this static snapshot. Additionally, due to the ways in which food is constantly shaped by its environment, it is difficult to establish a benchmark to determine the origin. On the topic of authenticity when it comes to cuisine, Dr. Martin F. Manalansan IV — a Professor in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Department at Rutgers University — stated the following:

> In other words, there is nothing inherent in the food that makes it "authentic"; rather, authenticity emerges from the shifting standards, conventions, cultural, and class backgrounds of the person authenticating the phenomenon at hand. Therefore, an individual's various positions — including class standing, cultural background, and other historical markers — shape, alter, and control the understanding of authenticity. In short, authenticity is not based on a timeless set of standards or criteria.[159]

In other words, despite authenticity putting rigid standards as what is considered "truly" cultural cuisine, authenticity itself is subjective and thus susceptible to change depending on who one

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[158] Arvin, Maile. "Analytics of Indigeneity." In *Native Studies Keywords*, edited by Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle H. Raheja, University of Arizona Press, 2015: 120. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183gxzb.12.

[159] Martin F. Manalansan, "Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Culinary Diaspora," in *Eating Asian America*, ed. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur, A Food Studies Reader (NYU Press, 2013), 290, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qg92s.20.

asks. Therefore, instead of using authenticity as a benchmark for recognizing cultural cuisine, it is more fruitful to examine community conceptions and perceptions. Utilizing community input as the benchmark for recognizing cultural cuisine places agency back into the community's hands for determining, not policing, this matter. The following three examples shaped my reasoning for cultural cuisine to be divorced from relying on authenticity: budae jjigae for Korean communities, frybread in Native American communities, and local cuisine for the peoples of Hawai‘i.

As referenced in the previous chapter, *budae jjigae* is known as army-base stew in English and is a dish that originated from the Korean War. With the war causing instability and food insecurity, Koreans sought food when they could, even near the American military bases. Around these military bases, Koreans found Spam® and other ingredients that led to the creation of budae jjigae. During Spring of 2024, I visited a close friend who identifies as Korean. As my friend was listing the meals that they could cook for us, when they got to the "Korean" dishes that they had the ingredients for, they had listed budae jjigae as an option. While the history behind the conception of this dish may disqualify it from being considered traditional Korean cuisine, this dish can still be considered part of Korean cuisine due to the fact that "many [other] popular foods in Korea were influenced by the availability of wartime/war rations."[160] For older generations, this dish embodies their resilience during the war, specifically coming to represent "survival and an attempt to hold onto some sense of self in the moment when markers of belonging such as nation, home, and family have been destabilized by war."[161] Younger, diasporic Koreans may hold a different viewpoint on the dish; while not dismissive of how their

[160] LK, direct message via Facebook Messenger, February 10, 2025.
[161] Nicolyn Woodcock, "Tasting the 'Forgotten War': Korean/American Memory and Military Base Stew," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 1 (2018): 145.

elders have come to see the dish, they also see the dish as a symbol of U.S. imperialism.[162] I include this dish as an example of a cultural cuisine item because the history of its origins rather than tradition itself makes budae jjigae Korean cultural cuisine. This dish also demonstrates that community members can have conflicting views on what qualifies as cultural cuisine, but these conflicting views do not automatically eliminate a dish from being considered cultural cuisine.

Frybread, similarly, originates from oppressive contexts. When Native tribes were forcibly displaced from their lands by the American settler-colonial government, the Native American tribes used the limited ingredients given to them by the government and created frybread as a way to curb starvation and survive in the lands they were displaced into. While frybread has increasingly been involved in conversations surrounding health detriments in Native communities due to it being fried in oil or lard, this dish also remains a "material legacy of resistance and survival after forced relocation. As such, the role that frybread currently plays in American Indian communities throughout Indian Country is at once fundamental, dynamic, and disputed."[163] Frybread, as a connecting "American Indian symbol of solidarity," has transformed into an embodiment of survivance — "the realized, ongoing process of active continuation and, importantly, *presence*."[164] While this dish symbolizes colonization and colonial trauma, by reclaiming it as a part of Native communities' cultural cuisine, frybread signifies Indigenous resilience and ingenuity. I include frybread as an example of pan-ethnic cultural cuisine to demonstrate how non-traditional foods can become incorporated into cultural cuisine to celebrate their history and resilience. Additionally, this is an example of a cultural cuisine item that is contested for not only its history, but for the health ramifications associated with its

[162] Ibid.
[163] Courtney Lewis, "Frybread Wars: Biopolitics and the Consequences of Selective United States Healthcare Practices for American Indians," *Food, Culture, & Society* 21, no. 4 (2018): 429, https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2018.1480644.
[164] Ibid, 430; The emphasis is not mine but what was seen in the article.

consumption. Cultural cuisine items are not exempt from health concerns. However, the histories they embody are still significant to keep in mind when having conversations around health.

Local cuisine in Hawai‘i originated in the territorial period of Hawaiian history, particularly between the 1920s and 1930s.[165] The conditions that led into this cuisine's current conception include, but are not limited to: Native Hawaiian land dispossession, plantation working conditions for the predominant Asian migrant populations, and the militarization of Hawai‘i following the bombing of Pu‘uloa. Food historian Rachel Laudan shared that the "centerpiece" of local cuisine in Hawai‘i is the plate lunch — "large quantities of rice and meat covered with gravy."[166] She also made it a point to highlight poke ("fish cut in small chunks dressed simply with salt and seaweed or more ambitiously with chili peppers, sesame oil, or soy sauce") as a staple fish dish and teriyaki (grilling meat in soy sauce and sugar) as the "most popular way of treating all meats."[167] Spam® was mentioned twice in her broad description of what encapsulates local cuisine in Hawai‘i — as an "Island favorite" meat choice and as part of a typical snack item.[168] The typical snack item she is referring to is Spam® musubi; inspired by Japanese onigiri, this dish places Spam® either in between or on top of a chunk of rice that is subsequently wrapped in nori seaweed. Laudan also notes that "locals mix the language of creole and the language of food explicitly and continually" as they create and contribute to Local cuisine in Hawai‘i.[169] To be clear, local cuisine in Hawai‘i stems from settler colonialism. The term, "local," refers to longtime residents of Hawai‘i who are not generally Kānaka Maoli.[170]

[165] Rachel Laudan, *The Food of Paradise : Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage / Rachel Laudan.* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1996): 5.
[166] Laudan, *The Food of Paradise : Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage*, 5.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Ibid, 7.
[170] Kānaka Maoli scholars and community members, in addition to allies, have long been critical of the term "local" and its normalization of settler-colonialism in Hawai‘i. For more, please refer to:
Haunani-Kay Trask, "Settlers of Color and 'Immigrant' Hegemony: 'Locals' in Hawai‘i," *Amerasia Journal* 26, no. 2 (2000): 1–26, https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.26.2.b31642r221215k7k.

Even though this cuisine indicates the continued existence (and therefore continued survival) of a group, there is also a level of privilege (and violence) integrated into this cuisine's existence. This cuisine is thus emblematic of both the history of and exploitation embedded within plantation in Hawai'i as well as the production of new social hierarchies that further perpetuate settler colonialism in Hawai'i. Further, Laudan defines this style of food as a combination of Native Hawaiian, Asian, and Haole foods that come together. I mention this because when listing examples of certain ethnic foods becoming intertwined when forming local cuisine in Hawai'i (i.e. which foods are of Japanese origin, which of Chinese origin, etc.), Spam® gets listed under Haole, a point that I will return to later in this chapter.[171] Thus, when examining budae jjigae (for Korean/Korean American communities), frybread (for Native American communities), and local cuisine in Hawai'i, they all demonstrate a critical component of cultural cuisine. That is, cultural cuisine are gastronomical embodiments of a social group's continued existence, in which the embodiments are recognized and accepted by said community as part of their identity.

Fashioning Comfort Food

With the parameters for cultural cuisine established, the conversation can shift to comfort food. Cambridge English dictionary defines "comfort food" as "the type of food people eat when they are sad or worried, often sweet food or food that people ate as children."[172] The definition of comfort food in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is "food prepared in a traditional style having a usually nostalgic or sentimental appeal."[173] Both of these definitions incorporate an element of memory, whether it be a reference to childhood or explicitly describing the food as nostalgic.

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[171] Laudan, *The Food of Paradise : Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage*, 22; Haole refers to people who are not Kānaka Maoli or of Native Hawaiian descent. That said, this term more commonly and casually refers specifically to White people.
[172] "Comfort Food," March 5, 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/comfort-food.
[173] "Definition of COMFORT FOOD," February 26, 2025, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/comfort+food.

What foods exactly fit into the comfort label may be hard to pinpoint due to the categorization's elasticity — comfort food is subjective to the consumer thus "representing different foods to different people."[174] Although the dishes in and of themselves vary from person to person, there are some patterns that emerge when examining comfort foods. First, these foods arouse a sense of comfort by "evoking a sense of familiarity" for the consumer.[175] Second, when these dishes are acting as comfort food (versus general and casual consumption), they are eaten when people's spirits are down, in need of comfort, and/or need extra motivation to work through a task.[176] Third, while the memories that comfort food items evoke are intertwined with a social interaction of some kind (a one-on-one meal with a loved one, a celebratory party, etc.), the consumption of the comfort food is often a solitary act. However, some people disagree with comfort food being contingent on this third aspect, including myself.[177,178] While some people indulge in their comfort food when alone to soothe themselves, other people consume and share their comfort food items amongst others, whether it be to assert a specific identity or to share the connection they have with the food.[179,180]

Comfort food can be split into four distinct, but non-mutually exclusive, categories.[181] The first category is physical comfort foods. Foods under this category comfort the consumer through "their physical attributes or through the physical changes they bring about in the

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[174] Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, "Introduction," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 9, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.3.
[175] Julie L. Locher et al., "Comfort Foods: An Exploratory Journey Into The Social and Emotional Significance of Food," *Food & Foodways* 13, no. 4 (2005): 279, https://doi.org/10.1080/07409710500334509.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid, 280.
[178] Alicia Kristen, "Going for Doughboys in Little Rhody:," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 83, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.7.
[179] Kristen, "Going for Doughboys in Little Rhody," 83.
[180] Also see: Jillian Gould, "Hungry for My Past:," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 99–114, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.8.
[181] The four categories I am listing originate from Locher et al., "Comfort Foods: An Exploratory Journey Into The Social and Emotional Significance of Food."

consumer" when eating.[182] These foods are easily eaten and digestible with a complementary temperature. By complementary temperature, I am referring to the meal's temperature in reference to the setting's temperature; examples include eating a warm meal like soup on a chilly and rainy day as well as having a cold soothing treat like ice cream while enduring the blistering heat outside.

Indulgence comfort foods is the second category. The term indulgence in this context refers to satisfying a desire or craving that may be frowned upon or later incur guilt; typically, this is related to either the meal's price or unhealthiness. These foods include fast food, pizza, chocolate, to name a few. They are sought out because of the immediate gratification people have when eating the food. While guilt may seep in later, at least in the moment, the food provided a sense of comfort. When indulging in these foods, people ignore health and nutritional risks. While they are "conscious of [the potential] high fat and caloric content [in their comfort foods] they did not allow issues related to health to enter their selection decisions."[183] Folklorists Michael Owen Jones (Professor Emerita at University of California, Los Angeles's World Arts and Cultures/Dance department) and Lucy M. Long (Director of Center of Food and Culture nonprofit organization) argue that foods in this category pose a moral dilemma for comfort food. Specifically, they state:

> Comfort food also seems to be complicated by morality. Saying that an item is comfort food relieves the eater of being concerned with its nutritional or caloric qualities, suggesting that those foods in other contexts should not be eaten. This implies a moral system of 'good' and 'bad' foods or food experiences.[184]

According to Jones and Long, the guilt a consumer might feel could stem from the potential health detriments associated with the meal. While this is true, I would like to extend this to also

[182] Locher et al., "Comfort Foods: An Exploratory Journey Into The Social and Emotional Significance of Food," 287.
[183] Ibid, 284.
[184] Jones and Long, "Introduction," 7.

include meals and foods that come out of colonial or imperial trauma — foods, like frybread and Spam®, that communities indulge in yet are aware of the histories that these foods embody.

The third categorization is convenience comfort foods. Explicitly linking globalization and industrialization of the modern food system, this categorization comes as a result of these two working in tandem to create the need for comfort and immediate gratification.[185,186] Foods in this category are readily available and relatively effortless in preparation, such as packaged snacks like chips and cookies or microwavable snacks like pizza rolls or hot pockets. This application can refer to the easier process of making the food. Additionally, this categorization can apply to foods that are easily accessible, whether that be in reference to cost or to what is in reach for the individual.

Nostalgic comfort food is the fourth and final category. These foods are ones that the consumer "identified with a particular time and place in one's history" and are utilized (consciously or unconsciously) when "sustain[ing] one's sense of cultural, familial, and self-identity."[187] These foods often evoke a fonder memory, whether it be in childhood or with a loved one. Foods under this category are more likely to be eaten when feeling homesick or reminiscing on the past and seeking to alleviate that longing.

To be considered a comfort food, the food in question must fit into at least one of these four categories. While these categories are distinctions to help understand the type of comfort foods that exist and how they function for the consumer, these foods can permeate and exist in multiple categories at once. Foods like pizza and chocolate can easily be placed in the indulgence and convenience categories. A mother's warm stew may belong in both the physical and

[185] Ibid, 6.
[186] Locher et al., "Comfort Foods: An Exploratory Journey Into The Social and Emotional Significance of Food," 287.
[187] Ibid, 280.

nostalgic category. It is also possible for these foods to exist in all of the categories. For example, when discussing the prevalence of bologna (cooked and processed sausage meat typically used in sandwiches) in Newfoundland, Associate Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland's Department of Folklore Diane Tye explicitly notes how bologna manages to fall under all these categories: "calorically rich and conveniently prepared [bologna] provides both physical comfort (it is filling, often fried, and served warm) and emotional comfort (it is nostalgically linked to the past)."[188]

Additionally, it is important to note that foods classified as cultural cuisine can be considered comfort food in a variety of ways. The first cuisine to come to mind is contemporary soul food. As a cultural cuisine, soul food evokes notions of resilience, community, and joy in the face of historical and ongoing oppression. Yet, soul food remains in discussions surrounding health detriments impacting the Black community, such as diabetes, hypertension, and obesity.[189] When classifying soul food as part of comfort food, it is more clearly designated under indulgence comfort food and more debatably under nostalgic comfort food. As Associate Professor at University of Nevada, Las Vegas's Department of Interdisciplinary, Gender, and Ethnic Studies Sheila Bock notes, "soul food is constructed as a source of both comfort and *dis*comfort at individual and community levels."[190]

When discussing *viili* (traditional Finnish fermented milk product or yogurt dessert), Michigan State University Museum's Curator of Folklife Yvonne R. Lockwood and American cultural anthropologist William G. Lockwood posit that the creation and consumption of this Finnish dish is a way for Finnish Americans to reassert their ethnic identity. Yet, in tandem, both

[188] Diane Tye, "'Newfie Steak':," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 151, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.11.
[189] Sheila Bock, "'I Know You Got Soul':," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 163, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.12.
[190] Ibid; her emphasis, not mine.

authors explicitly refer to this dish as a comfort food item noting that "comfort food inevitably evokes nostalgia, a longing for the similar, and is a reminder of childhood, places, and past experiences."[191] They note that nostalgia "suggests a false sense of an idealized place or past," and with regard to *viili*, "Finnish Americans have a sense of nostalgia for some poverty foods that were eaten when money or ingredients were scarce and times were tough," still seeking these foods out even when resources are no longer scarce.[192] In this example, *viili* is both a nostalgic and convenience type of comfort food and is a part of Finnish cultural cuisine.

Similarly, Associate Professor at Memorial University's Department of Folklore Jillian Gould's discussion of hole-in-the-middles (Challah bread with an egg fried in the center) explicitly lands in the nostalgic comfort food category and implicitly lands in the convenience comfort food category. Interestingly, Gould makes a distinction that troubles the idea of hole-in-the-middles being a Jewish dish. Despite consuming and relating to this dish in a Jewish setting, Gould notes that "it is unlikely that they would appear in any Jewish cookery books" and instead suggests framing the dish as "*heimish* — a Yiddish word that conjures up comfort and home."[193] This distinction demonstrates that a comfort food item can be a common staple among a certain demographic yet remain separate from said community's own cultural cuisine.

In summation, comfort foods are those that evoke a sense of familiarity, eaten when wanting to soothe oneself, and can be consumed in solitude or with others. The four non-mutually exclusive categorizations of comfort food are physical, indulgence, convenience, and nostalgic. While foods considered cultural cuisine can be comfort food, it is better to

[191] Yvonne R. Lockwood and William G. Lockwood, "Viili as a Finnish American Comfort Food:," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 120, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.9.
[192] Ibid.
[193] Jillian Gould, "Hungry for My Past:," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 101, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.8.

approach the foods on a case-by-case basis, given the changing contexts associated with hhow people perceive these food items.

Sāmoan Cultural Cuisine

By applying a working definition of cultural cuisine onto Sāmoan food, we can now examine how it has been categorized as Sāmoan cultural cuisine and how it has shifted and/or stayed consistent over the years. When examining the older anthropological documentation of foods eaten in Sāmoa during the late nineteenth century, breadfruit, taro, coconuts, bananas, and yams were the vegetation listed — all readily available and coming from the land by way of chiefly relations and collective labor.[194] Fish and shellfish were commonly consumed, and on special occasions pigs, fowl, and turtles were also eaten.[195]

When earlier emigrations occurred to Hawai‘i through the U.S. military, Sāmoan gustatorial and gastronomical preferences in Hawai‘i were documented from as early as the 1940s in cookbooks. I utilize cookbooks to provide a snapshot into time periods and potential stories that I could not fully access through my oral histories alone. Their incorporation into my thesis is to supplement and add context to the oral histories given later in this thesis. Published in 1947, for example, Katherine Bazore's cookbook, *Hawaii and Pacific Foods: A Cook Book of Culinary Customs and Recipes*, has a specific section on Sāmoan food. When discussing vegetation, bananas and breadfruits are mentioned here in addition to taro, also considered a starch.[196] Fish and shellfish were still listed as common aspects of the Sāmoan diet. Bazore also noted that the fish tended to be descaled, cleaned of their entrails and wrapped in braided

[194] George Turner, "Food – Cooking – Liquors" in *Sāmoa: A Hundred Years Ago*, 105.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Katherine Bazore, *Hawaiian and Pacific Foods: A Cook Book of Culinary Customs and Recipes* (Gramercy Publishing Company, 1947), 44, https://www.foodanddrink.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/ucsd_TX7245A1B391947.

coconut leaves before being cooked whole.[197] Pork is highlighted as the "favorite" meat for Sāmoans, with Bazore mentioning that pork, alongside taro, may be wrapped in banana leaves and baked.[198] Bazore implicitly distinguishes pork as being consumed during more celebratory events than chicken grilled in the *umu*, which she states takes the place of pork for "ordinary guests" during feasts and is thus more commonplace.[199] There is also a brief mention of "foreign foods" that are popular amongst Sāmoans in Hawai‘i. Given this context, "foreign" here encapsulates any food not indigenous to Sāmoa, including imported foods like sugar, rice, flour, canned salmon, canned sardines, and canned corned beef."[200] Bazore then goes on to list "characteristic Sāmoan dishes."[201] *Miti* is a "sauce prepared from coconut mixed with lime juice and sea water.[202] *Fa‘i* is the Sāmoan word for banana, so dishes with fa‘i in the name incorporate banana. This includes *fa‘i tao* ("peeled green bananas baked in the *umu* or oven"), *loifa‘i* ("baked green bananas served with coconut cream"), and *poi fa‘i* ("very ripe bananas mashed, mixed with coconut cream, and seasoned with lime leaves or lime juice").[203] Eaten in times of food insecurity was *masi* — fermented breadfruit baked in banana leaves in the umu and preserved in an underground pit.[204] When serving visiting *matai* and other guests of high status upon their arrival to one's respective village, *taufolo niu* may be served; *taufolo niu* is made by peeling breadfruit and roasting it in an open fire, subsequently mashing the breadfruit into balls before mixing them with coconut cream.[205] Another dish I want to highlight is *palusami*: "taro leaves and coconut cream mixed with salt water, wrapped in a square of banana leaf, then in a breadfruit

[197] Ibid.
[198] Bazore, *Hawaiian and Pacific Foods: A Cook Book of Culinary Customs and Recipes*, 44.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid, 42.
[201] Ibid, 46-47.
[202] Ibid, 46.
[203] Ibid, 46-47.
[204] Ibid, 46.
[205] Bazore, *Hawaiian and Pacific Foods: A Cook Book of Culinary Customs and Recipes*, 47.

leaf and baked in the *umu*."[206] Other dishes listed include *fai'ai fua* ("coconut cream wrapped in breadfruit or banana leaves and baked"), *fa'alaui'a* (whole fish baked without removing scales and entrails, wrapped in braided green coconut leaf), *taufolo sami* ("prepared in the same way as *taufolo niu* except that sea water or salter and water are mixed with the coconut cream"), and *ulu tao* ("peeled green breadfruit baked in an umu or oven"). What all these dishes have in common is that the food is directly sourced from the land, therefore these dishes are Indigenous to Sāmoans.

Nearly forty years later, Ann Kondo Corum wrote her own cookbook: *Ethnic Foods of Hawaii*. Fascinatingly, this book omits local cuisine in Hawai'i, instead focusing on foods and cuisines found within various ethnic groups residing in Hawai'i, including Samoans.[207] When comparing the two books, there are strong similarities in what both considered Sāmoan cuisine yet also notable deviations on what Corum chooses to label as Sāmoan. Instead of viewing these differences as discrepancies, these differences can demonstrate how the meaning of cultural cuisine evolves over time. Just as communities and their cultures are not stagnant, neither are the foods associated with the communities.

When Corum discusses meat, pork is still identified as a favorite for Sāmoan communities.[208] Chicken, fish, and shellfish are also listed as popular within Sāmoan communities as well.[209] Besides the explicit inclusion of octopus, the main deviation included in this section (in comparison to Bazore) is the inclusion of imported meats. Particularly, *povi masima* (salted beef), canned corned beef, and various canned fish were listed.[210] While Bazore

[206] Ibid, 46.
[207] While the original print came out in 1983, I am using the 2000 revised edition for this thesis. Thus, her book will be cited as such.
[208] Ann Kondo Corum, *Ethnic Foods of Hawai'i*, Rev. ed (Honolulu, Hawai'i: Bess Press, 2000), 160.
[209] Ibid, 161.
[210] Ibid.

noted these being popular, Bazore distinguished these as "foreign foods" whereas Condo (noting the foreign origins) incorporates these foods without distinction due to their prevalence in Sāmoan communities. The vegetation remains consistent for the most part; banana, breadfruit, coconut and taro are still listed, in addition to the inclusion of fruits such as mangos, papayas, and pineapples.[211] Corum provides recipes for the following food products:

> *pe'e pe'e* (coconut cream), banana poi, baked breadfruit with coconut cream, *palusami* (taro leaves baked in coconut leaves), raw fish Samoan style [otherwise known as *oka*], octopus in coconut milk, Samoan baked fish, Samoan-style baked chicken, *povi masima* (salted beef), canned corned beef with taro leaves, Samoan chop suey, and *esi fafao* (stuffed papaya).[212]

Contextually, the dishes with "Samoan" in their name designate a style of cooking that involves the inclusion of coconut cream and/or ti leaves.

In these instances, the labeling of Sāmoan food was done by cultural outsiders looking in.[213] But what do (American) Sāmoans themselves consider part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine? What associations do they hold with Sāmoan food? What makes those foods Sāmoan to them? As I explained in the introduction, I interviewed eight Sāmoans whose ancestral ties connect them back to American Sāmoa. While age, gender, and profession vary between them, their only other commonality is that they currently live or previously resided in Southern California.

What thoughts come to mind when you hear the phrase "Sāmoan food?" I asked my interviewees. I did so to gauge the associations they held about Sāmoan food. Their answers

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[211] Ibid, 161-163.
[212] Ibid, 167-172.
[213] Even though they are not mentioned in my thesis, Sāmoan cookbooks created by the community do exist. Unlike the cookbooks mentioned in my thesis, I was unable to access these books for free. That said, from what is publicly available, none of these books mention Spam® in their recipes for Sāmoan food. For more examples, please refer to: "E-Book - Samoan Delights: Samoan Recipes Cookbook - Vol 1 - AU/NZ/USA," The Koko Samoa, accessed July 4, 2025, https://thekokosamoa.com.au/products/recipe-book-samoan-delights.
Sina Tupuola, *Samoan Cookbook - Uncover the Rich and Diverse Flavors of Samoa: The Collection of Traditional and Authentic Samoan Recipes Passed Down from Generations* (Independently published, n.d.).

varied. The two most common responses either incorporated "family" into their association or dealt with the food being considered "heavy."

Five of the interviewees directly related the food back to family — ranging from reminiscing about their grandparents and parents to recalling times when they assisted in the kitchen or served the food at family events. Natalie, a current undergraduate student attending school in Southern California, half-jokingly shared that the phrase "Sāmoan food" brings back memories of "getting yelled at by [her] grandma to sit down at the dinner table."[214] Sofia, a church auntie who works for Ventura county, said that when she hears that phrase "what comes to mind is family gathering, cultural traditions, and 'it's time to get some real good food!'"[215] Joseph, a heavily involved Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander [NHPI] community advocate, listed his associations of Sāmoan food in the following order: "lot of meat, taro, fatty, to be honest kind of bland, fish, certain foods like *fasi povi*, church, *toonai* [Sunday meal/dinner after church], my parents, my grandma, fai, koko rice, and pankeke."[216] Krystal, a former college athlete working in healthcare, connected Sāmoan food to her family, specifically her "dad's side, because [she] had to help cook [taro] with [her] auntie."[217] When Alicia, a millennial woman who works for San Diego county, heard the question, she immediately said, "fond memories, childhood memories."[218]

The other common answer was "heavy." This term encapsulates both the meat and starch used in Sāmoan foods. Both Natalie and Joseph immediately thought of meat when hearing the question.[219,220] Taro also came up as an answer, specifically from the youngest interviewees —

[214] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[215] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[216] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[217] KS, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[218] AA, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[219] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[220] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

Natalie and Krystal.[221,222] The more common association with heavy food was "fatty." Joseph, Felicia, a mixed-race creative, and Jonathan, an NHPI community organizer based in Southern California, explicitly connected the "fatty" aspect of Sāmoan food to health concerns impacting our communities.[223,224,225] Notably, Tasha, an active Pasifika community advocate, while noting that "fatty" does come to mind when thinking of Sāmoan food, she clearly distinguished that this was in reference to coconut milk, which she viewed as traditional.[226] She thus pushed back against associating Sāmoan food with health issues impacting Sāmoan communities, such as obesity.[227]

In addition to tying their associations of Sāmoan food to family and/or the food being heavy, there were two other notable common answers. One of these categories would be cultural tradition.[228] Under this label, Joseph connected Sāmoan food immediately to church, particularly *toonai*.[229] *Toonai* refers to the meal eaten after church on Sundays. This meal reinforces familial and community bonds, as well as reaffirming one's faith since it is typically had immediately following fellowship. Similarly, Jonathan noted that, in some cases, there are "cultural ties to serving food," alluding to events such as *fa'alavelave* and *toonai*.[230]

The other notable answer was in reference to outside influence. Felicia described this occurrence as "hybrid foods," indicating that these foods are a combination of Sāmoan origins and outside goods. In describing these hybrid foods, she mentioned "a lot of our foods are influenced by outside influences that historically have come and brought other things" that later

[221] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[222] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[223] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[224] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[225] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[226] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[229] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[230] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

became indigenized and incorporated into the cuisine.[231] Joseph's recollection of Sāmoan foods expands on Felicia's point by giving two specific examples: *sapasui* or chop suey and *puligi* or pudding dessert.[232] The first dish originated with Chinese laborers in Sāmoa, whereas the second one stemmed from British bread pudding.

There were a variety of dishes listed when asked what specific foods come to mind. Due to the variety, I am only going to discuss the foods that were repeated when comparing answers. The most popular answer was *palusami*, which was the only dish to be mentioned by every single interviewee.[233] *Palusami* is primarily composed of taro leaves and coconut cream. Interestingly, *palusami* is also the only dish that Bazore and Corum had in common in their respective cookbooks, giving validity to their statements when considering that even current Sāmoan communities clearly consider palusami Sāmoan food. *Palusami* is a dish indigenous to Sāmoa, one that solely uses ingredients that came from the land itself. Evocative of the motherland, it is notable that, with the various life experiences and upbringings each interviewee had, palusami was the only dish all my interviewees had in common.

The second most common answer was *sapasui*, with half of the interviewees mentioning this dish — Joseph, Felicia, Krystal and Jonathan.[234,235,236,237] Also found in Corum's cookbook as "Samoan chop suey," this dish is a cultural staple that came into existence due to outside influence and inspiration. I speculate that the "Sāmoan" aspect of *sapasui* has to do with the incorporation of *pisupo* (canned corned beef) into the noodle dish. While *pisupo* is not

[231] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[232] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[233] It was worth noting that six of the interviewees referred to the dish as palusami with the other two using luau instead in reference to the same dish.
[234] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[235] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[236] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[237] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

indigenous to Sāmoa, this food product has become claimed and viewed as a cultural staple by the community. As recipes vary from household to household, here is a recipe I got from my auntie a few years ago when asking how to make sapasui:

> "First, open two bags of noodles into a bowl of warm or hot water and let it sit for ten minutes, before cutting it short, with scissors. Second, heat your oil in a pit on medium heat. Add crushed garlic, chopped onion, black pepper, and ginger. Third, once the garlic and onions start slightly brown[ing], add pisupo (corned beef) and leave it to cook for five minutes. Fourth, add one cup of soy sauce and let it simmer for five minutes. Fifth, add one cup of water and the remaining soy sauce, and mixed vegetables then stir the noodles into the mix. Let it cook for 15 to 20 minutes, or when the noodles are fully cooked. (If needed, add more soy sauce or water to your required consistency)."[238]

The answers tied for third most common revolved around fish. Joseph, Felicia, and Jonathan listed a raw fish dish that I have heard in passing described as "the Sāmoan version of poke" — *oka*.[239,240,241] Similar to poke in Hawai'i, *oka* is diced up raw fish. However, that is where the similarities end. *Oka* is raw fish and (sometimes) vegetables mixed together in a coconut cream. Similar to *sapasui*, *oka* was also found in Corum's book, albeit under a different name, "raw fish, Samoan style." The other fish dish was *pilikaki* or mackerel, listed by Nataliie, Sofia, and Joseph.[242,243,244] Sofia even mentioned a meal that incorporates *pilikaki* in her response— *kao ipu*, described as "*pilikaki* (mackerel fish) baked in the coconut shell."[245] Other dishes that garnered multiple answers included *fa'i* (banana), *pankeke* (pancake balls), *fasi povi*

[238] Personal Communications, February 16 2023.
[239] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[240] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[241] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[242] Nataliie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[243] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[244] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[245] SFA, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

masima (salted corned beef), *pisupo* (canned corned beef), taro, *koko samoa* (chocolate rice dessert), and *supoesi* (papaya soup).[246,247]

"In your opinion, what makes those dishes Sāmoan?" I later asked my interviewees after they named the specific foods that come to mind when thinking about Sāmoan food. Alicia had solely answered with *palusami* when asked about the food. When answering this specific question, she said *palusami* is Sāmoan because it is "traditional as in "the dish we grew up with, because we planted all the ingredients for that, [and thus] it is more in line with our culture."[248] Krystal emphasized that the foods she viewed as Sāmoan were the foods that she grew up eating at church, particularly *toonai*.[249] Joseph and Jonathan, the two oldest of the interviewees, centered their answers around how setting influenced what they deemed Sāmoan.[250,251] For Joseph, these were the dishes that were eaten "during Sāmoan events and in my Sāmoan household. My Sāmoan parents would make those… [these were eaten] during church events (weddings, funerals, *toonai*). These were the dishes the elders liked to eat and make."[252] For Jonathan, what made these dishes Sāmoan is where he saw them present. He said that his conception of "Sāmoan food" came from his youth, recalling how he "noticed other [non Sāmoan] friends did not eat it" yet he always saw these foods in "his household and other Sāmoan households," as well as ceremonial practices.[253] Natalie shared that for her, "aside from ingredients, the process we go about to make the food" is what makes the food Sāmoan, viewing the cooking process in Sāmoan communities to be very communal.[254] For example, preparing

[246] Fasi povi masima is the whole phrase to refer to the meat but it is also commonly stated as either fasi povi or povi masima depending on who you are talking to. I use these three phrases interchangeably.
[247] One of the answers was "corned beef" which encapsulates both povi masima and pisupo
[248] Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[249] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[250] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[251] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[252] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[253] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[254] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

meals for weddings, funerals, and *toonai* tend to be communal due to how many people come together to split up the work. The men barbeque the meats and do most of the cooking while the women help plate and serve the meals. Felicia and Tasha further emphasized that both the ingredients and the specific ways in which Sāmoans cook and prepare the food is what makes these foods Sāmoan.[255,256] "A lot of cultures along the coast eat fish, but we eat fish differently," Felicia elaborated, making specific comparisons to how raw fish is consumed in Mexican, Sāmoan, and Japanese cultures.[257] Tasha stated that "our cuisine relies heavily on coconut milk" and that even with "inspiration from other cultures," the recipes and how the food is made is ultimately different.[258] As Sofia beautifully explained:

> These dishes are Samoan dishes because it's made from the land and sea. The Samoan people grow their food and prepare their food with all the resources they have around them to do so. For example, the coconut comes from the tree, husked and grated and made fresh. The palusami, the taro leaves are from the taro patch. Breadfruit is also grown on the land. To me, they are Samoan dishes because you don't hear of any other culture that makes such items as these.[259]

All of these answers demonstrate how Sāmoan cultural cuisine, that is gastronomical embodiments of continued existence, are composed of foods that are embedded in the land, unique to the households, and intertwined with the cultural events.

Cultural Cuisine vs Comfort Food (SPAM® edition)

In a previous section, I noted that Spam® was commonly considered "island food" and popular among Pacific Islanders, including Sāmoans. When asked, every person I interviewed recalled eating Spam® when they were younger, some mentioning that it was a staple in their households. All of the interviewees were easily able to list their favorite dishes that had Spam® in

[255] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[256] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[257] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[258] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[259] SFA, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

it. Half of those interviewed (Natalie, Sofia, Krystal and Alicia) held unambiguously positive associations with and feelings towards Spam®, explicitly using the word "love" when discussing the meat product.[260,261,262,263] Krystal even commented that she enjoys Spam® so much that she can eat it straight out of the can.[264]

The other half of the interviewees (Joseph, Felicia, Tasha, and Jonathan) held more complicated feelings about the canned meat product. Joseph and Felicia both shared that while they enjoyed Spam® growing up, their taste preferences had changed as they got older with Spam® becoming too salty for them.[265,266] Jonathan, who also enjoyed Spam® in his youth, linked Spam® to health issues impacting Sāmoans and other Pacific Islanders due to Spam® having "too much sodium."[267] After all, one can of Spam® has "4,696 milligrams of sodium," which is highly concerning in light of a positive correlation between "high sodium consumption and chronic heart diseases" that affect the Sāmoan community.[268,269] Tasha related her thoughts about Spam® explicitly to the experiences of other Indigenous people in the United States, expressing that its prevalence in the community tied back to WWII due to needing to "consume [it] in order to live" and "our way of being patriotic and doing our part to help."[270] She was not alone in highlighting the historical relevance of Spam® to Sāmoan communities. Tasha, Sofia, Joseph, Felicia, and

[260] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[261] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[262] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[263] Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[264] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[265] Josep, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[266] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[267] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[268] Swystun, "How Spam Came to Rule the World," *Medium* (blog), May 3, 2022, https://jeffswystun.medium.com/how-spam-came-to-rule-the-world-8df7800040a9.
[269] Tye, "'Newfie Steak,'" 155.
[270] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

Jonathan also noted that part of Spam®'s continued presence in both Sāmoan specifically but also other Pasifika communities traces back to WWII and the American military.[271,272,273,274,275]

Other answers in response to Spam®'s popularity in Pasifika communities echoed some of the official Hormel advertisement points. Since at least the 1940s, Spam® as a low-cost item has been plastered on advertisements.[276] In 1980, Hormel put out an advert titled "You'll Think It's Junk Food" where the bottom tagline read: "a lot of meals, but not a lot of money."[277] All but one of my interviewees connected Spam®'s popularity to it being affordable for larger families. Sofia, Krystal, and Jonathan also nuanced their comments on Spam®'s affordability when mentioning how the canned meat has gotten more expensive over the years, thus Spam®'s inexpensiveness may be slowly becoming a thing of the past.[278,279,280]

Another popular answer for why Spam® remains prevalent in Sāmoan communities involved convenience. Alicia's concise response encapsulates the convenience in a multi-faceted way by simply pointing to the fact that "[Spam®] is inexpensive, it is an easy quick meal, [and a] canned food."[281] In her response, Spam®'s convenience is easily connected to its affordability, quick preparation time, and long shelf life. The affordability of Spam® makes the meat product convenient to purchase without hurting one's wallet. The quick preparation time would be

[271] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[272] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[273] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[274] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[275] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[276] "Lot of 3 Vintage Hormel Spam® Ads Cold or Hot, It Hits the Spot!," eBay, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.ebay.com/itm/293526026053. (figure three in chapter one)
[277] "1980 Hormel Spam® Ad - You'll Think It's Junk Food," eBay, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.ebay.com/itm/402347760350. (figure seven in chapter one)
[278] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[279] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[280] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[281] Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

advantageous for people who either want something easy to prepare or are too tired to expend much effort when cooking.

Natalie also commented that Spam® is both "easy to transport" and "easy to give away" when talking about the convenience aspect of Spam®.[282] The transportation encapsulated both the ease in moving Spam® domestically, whether it is being carried to be gifted or in a car driving to make it part of the gift, and internationally on a plane. More vitally, "easy to give away" was made in reference to *fa'alavelave* — a cultural obligation during funerals, weddings, and bestowing of matai titles.

Connecting convenience to longer shelf life, Joseph highlighted that "when thinking about it being shipped to places [and] not needing to be refrigerated," Spam® is a very convenient item to have around.[283] He additionally commented that "in the island context, where storage and refrigeration is an issue, you need things that last longer."[284] Long shelf life was another aspect of Spam® emphasized in Hormel advertisements. In one of the earliest advertisements, Hormel publicized this fact with the following dialogue between two of the people depicted in the ad: "What meat needs no refrigeration? SPAM!"[285]

Felicia's response relating to convenience stood out, as she explicitly referenced Hawai'i in being a major factor in Spam®'s popularity. She highlighted that with Hawai'i situated between American Sāmoa and the continental U.S., Hawai'i serves as a port between transporting Spam® from one place to another.[286] She also mentioned how those with "family in Hawai'i are more likely to bring over things that they can bring in bulk and are relatively cheap

[282] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[283] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[284] Ibid.
[285] AxlCobainVedder, "A 1938 Print Ad Introducing Hormel's Spam!," Reddit Post, *R/Vintageads*, July 2, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/vpiucm/a_1938_print_ad_introducing_hormels_spam/ . (figure one in chapter one)
[286] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

(like Spam®, Corn Beef Hash, etc.)."[287] Her answer demonstrates how while American Sāmoa and Hawai‘i have different histories pertaining to their respective relationships to the United States, the legacies of U.S. militarization and colonialism connect the two archipelagos.

Yet, Spam® was not mentioned by any of the interviewees at any point during the interviews when discussing Sāmoan food. While palusami — the only food item that all the interviewees listed when asked what dishes comes to mind when hearing "Sāmoan food" — is a traditional dish indigenous to (American) Sāmoa and thus makes sense to be labeled as part of the cultural cuisine, there were other dishes labeled and commonly considered part of Sāmoan cuisine that were not traditional foods. For example, the second most answered dish to come to mind was sapasui. Sapasui, a dish with "highly entangled histories of labor migration, race, and transnational food culture," demonstrates that Sāmoan cultural cuisine is also open and inclusive to foods from outside influences.[288] Even canned meats in and of themselves are not excluded from being considered part of Sāmoan cuisine. Pilikaki can refer to mackerel whether the fish came out of the ocean or out of the can. Wahoo, a popular canned tuna brand in Sāmoan communities, was one of the foods listed by Felicia as a food that comes to mind when she thinks of "Sāmoan food."[289] Pisupo, both alone and as a key ingredient in meals such as sapasui, is another staple in Sāmoan cuisine. Despite its origins as an imported canned good, this meat has become prominent in Sāmoan cuisine, so much so that a PhD candidate dedicated a whole chapter to this canned meat when detailing Sāmoa's food history for his dissertation.[290] In the

[287] Ibid.
[288] Garrett L. Hillyer, "E Tuai Tuai, Ta Te Mā‘ona Ai: A Food History of Sāmoa," *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses* (Ph.D., United States -- Hawaii, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, 2023), Ethnic NewsWatch Collection (2835422672), 231, https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/e-tuai-ta-te-mā‘ona-ai-food-history-sāmoa/docview/2835422672/se-2?accountid=14512.
[289] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[290] Hillyer, "E Tuai Tuai, Ta Te Mā‘ona AI: A Food History of Sāmoa."

image that he provides in his dissertation to show the popularity of pisupo on the islands, right below the row of pisupo is a row of Spam®.[291] Spam® shares similarities with some of these products and yet is undoubtedly not considered part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine.

Why that is the case remains a mystery. Spam®'s association with being a ration might overshadow and hinder its chances of being accepted as part of cultural cuisine. After all, when Laudan was detailing local cuisine in Hawai'i, she associated Spam® with Haoles. Thus, it would not be a stretch to say that others, especially in the Pasifika sphere, generally consider Spam® to be an unmistakably American product.[292] Additionally, despite Spam® being a common presence in households, none of the dishes shared by the interviewees were specifically relevant to Sāmoans. I asked the interviewees the following question: "What are your favorite dishes that involve Spam®?" Everyone besides Jonathan included Spam® and eggs in their response. Despite his mixed feelings on Spam®, when answering this question, Joseph lit up when talking about Spam® and eggs before adding Spam®, eggs, and rice as a separate entry for this question.[293] Spam® and eggs, while popular in Sāmoan households, is not Sāmoan specific, especially when taking into account how Hormel commonly and popularly advertised Spam® with eggs in their advertisements both now and dating back to the 1930s.[294] The second most mentioned meal was

[291] Ibid, 90.
[292] Laudan, *The Food of Paradise : Exploring Hawaii's Culinary Heritage*, 22.
[293] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[294] Please refer to the following advertisements:
AxlCobainVedder, "A 1938 Print Ad Introducing Hormel's Spam!," Reddit Post, *R/Vintageads*, July 2, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/vpiucm/a_1938_print_ad_introducing_hormels_spam/ (figure one in chapter one)
Post Editors, "Vintage Ads: Meat in a Can," The Saturday Evening Post, February 7, 2018, https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2018/02/vintage-ads-meat-can/. (figure two in chapter one)
"Lot of 3 Vintage Hormel Spam® Ads Cold or Hot, It Hits the Spot!," eBay, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.ebay.com/itm/293526026053. (figure three in chapter one)
Alamy Limited, "Spam® Food Advert Hi-Res Stock Photography and Images," Alamy, accessed January 28, 2025, https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/Spam®-food-advert.html. (figure four in chapter one)
"1943 Hormel Spam Ad.," Reddit Post, *R/Vintageads*, March 24, 2024, www.reddit.com/r/vintageads/comments/1bmvpur/1943_hormel_spam_ad/ (figure eight in chapter one)
"Spam®: Sizzle. Pork. And. MMM. • Ads of the World™ | Part of The Clio Network," Ads of the World™, accessed January 16, 2025, https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/sizzle-pork-and-mmm.

Spam® musubi. Alicia added a caveat: "[Spam® musubi] is not really Sāmoan."[295] As explained earlier in this chapter, Spam® musubi stems from local cuisine in Hawai'i, so while the snack is popular within and associated with Sāmoan and other Pasifika communities, the snack itself is not of Pasifika origin.

There is another explanation that encapsulates Spam®'s popularity within the Sāmoan community while also acknowledging the fact that Spam® is not part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine: viewing Spam® as a common comfort food item for Sāmoans in the United States. Spam® can be considered a comfort food item, with even one of the interviewees describing Spam® as such when recounting how his feelings about Spam® have shifted over the years. Joseph explained:

> It has changed over the years. When I was younger all the way up through college, it was a comfort food and salty meat that went well with everything —eggs, fried rice, and sandwiches. You could just eat rice and spam. As my taste buds change, it has tasted more like processed meat and very salty. I can eat it if it is cooked in a certain way (a little sweet, if it is chopped or sliced, with rice), but I cannot eat it thick. I used to be able to eat it without having to fry it, but I cannot do that any more. Oh and ramen noodles [in reference to liking Spam® in ramen noodles]. It tastes more processed now that I am older, maybe because I have tasted more things.[296]

All of the respondents recalled moments of their childhood through coming of age in which they consumed Spam®. Natalie joked that she must have been "less than one" when she had Spam® for the first time, "guaranteed."[297] Sofia also lightheartedly responded when answering the question: "The first time I tried SPAM, hmm… must have been when I was a toddler. LOL! Who doesn't love SPAM?"[298] Sounding unsure, Joseph speculated that the first time he had Spam® occurred "probably when I was in elementary school, I was younger than ten I think."[299] Similar to Joseph, Felicia also could not recall distinctly when she had tried Spam®

[295] Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[296] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[297] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[298] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[299] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

for the first time but assumes that she was "most likely less than 4 [when she was] already eating Spam®" since the aunt and uncle she stayed with ate Spam® and eggs regularly.[300] Krystal assumed that the first time she had Spam® occurred in elementary school for her because her "grandma took [her] to school and prepared Spam®, rice and eggs for breakfast."[301] Alicia, similar to Joseph, was unsure when sharing the first time she ate Spam® was "probably when [she] was younger, five or six maybe?"[302] Jonathan did not give an age estimate when answering this question, instead sharing that for him "growing up, it was cooked for breakfast mainly."[303] The breakfast dishes he shared were "Spam® and eggs, Spam® eggs and rice, and spam fried rice," also noting that Spam® was "one of the things in cupboards alongside pilikaki."[304] His answer implies that Spam® was a normalized presence in Sāmoan households in California. The only person with a distinct memory of the first time trying Spam® was Tasha. Her first time eating Spam® was when she was five years old in Oceanside, California, with her parents, brother, sister and two cousins.[305] On that day, they "were supposed to have mac n cheese but [her] cousin burnt the mac and set the house on fire."[306]

Comfort foods evoke a sense of familiarity, involved in self soothing of some nature, and consumed in solitude or in company. The four categories of comfort food are nostalgic, indulgence, convenience and physical. For Sāmoan communities, Spam® lands in all those categories. Associate Professor of Folklore at Memorial University off Newfoundland Tye demonstrated how bologna also landed in all the categories by highlighting how the meat has a high calorie count, simple to prepare, and provides both physical comfort (via being a filling

[300] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[301] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[302] Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[303] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[306] Ibid.

meat) and emotional comfort (through nostalgically linking one to their past).[307] The exact same points can be said about Spam®.

As a physical comfort food, popularly consumed meals involving Spam® in Sāmoan households are often fried and therefore warm (Spam® fried rice, Spam® and eggs, Spam® musubi, etc.). As many of the interviewees noted, Spam® is very convenient to make and obtain, thus easily making Spam® a convenience comfort food. Spam® is also an indulgence comfort food when taking into consideration the high sodium content, with 4,696 milligrams in a single can.[308] Some of the interviewees, regardless of whether they enjoy it or if it complicates their feelings towards the meat, explicitly stated that the Spam® is unhealthy. Most fascinatingly Spam® fulfills being a nostalgic comfort food in more ways than one. The most straightforward interpretation of Spam® as a nostalgic comfort food is the common association of eating Spam® in one's youth or with family. After all, each of the interviewees have memories of eating Spam® before turning ten years old.

A more abstract way of viewing Spam® as a nostalgic comfort food is relating it back to its military origins. Many Sāmoan families were introduced to Spam® in American Sāmoa during WWII and ate it as a way to support the war effort. Sofia noted that while some may deride Spam®, they should not be so quick to dismiss the meat product as it "has a lot of history itself as it served our Military during the Great Depression and WWII."[309] Tasha also noted that Spam® prevalence in Sāmoan communities is "because historically it was the only thing we were able to eat during WWII."[310] Joseph mentioned that Spam® was one "of things introduced during the war

[307] Diane Tye, "'Newfie Steak':," in *Comfort Food*, ed. Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long, Meanings and Memories (University Press of Mississippi, 2017), 151, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5jxmmz.11.
[308] Jeff Swystun, "How Spam Came to Rule the World," *Medium* (blog), May 3, 2022, https://jeffswystun.medium.com/how-spam-came-to-rule-the-world-8df7800040a9.
[309] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[310] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

by the military [that] end up staying behind" in Sāmoan communities.[311] Jonathan commented that Spam was "part of the whole rations that came into the households [that] started with the military."[312] In this way, Spam® is also a nostalgic comfort food because it reflects a longing for American Sāmoa, particularly an American Sāmoa entangled with military legacies of the American empire.

Settling the SPAM® debate further

Through exploring what constitutes cultural cuisine versus comfort food, I asserted that for Sāmoans in the United States, Spam®, while a common household staple, would be considered comfort food. Spam® manages to fit into all four categorizations of comfort food, with the most interesting one being nostalgic. Consuming Spam® can lead to reminiscing of fond, childhood memories for the person eating. Alternatively, eating Spam® can also be evocative of nostalgia for American Sāmoa, the homeland.

Spam® is undoubtedly not considered part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. None of the interviewees listed Spam® or a dish incorporating Spam® as part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. None of the cookbooks focusing on Sāmoan food listed Spam® or a dish incorporating Spam®, and these were written by cultural outsiders. This indicates that even outsiders who are adjacent to the community can tell that Spam® is not a part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. Even in personal conversations I have had with family and other Sāmoans, Spam® has never come up when discussing Sāmoan food. Yet, Spam® remains associated with us and other Pasifika peoples. After all, Spam® is commonly considered "island food." In the following chapter, I examine Spam® in a more formal and cultural setting: funeral *fa'alavelave*. Exploring Spam® in that

[311] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[312] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

context rules out viewing Spam® as a Sāmoan cultural cuisine, further elucidating its status as a comfort food.

Chapter 3: Bridging the Diaspora Through Fa'alavelave ~~and SPAM®~~

Spam® is a comfort food for the Sāmoan community of California, the origins of which stem from a nostalgia of American Sāmoa as a cultural place and militarized site. Said determination was made in my second chapter through examining conceptions of cultural food and comfort food before subsequently bridging those conceptions with perceptions around Spam® and its place in Sāmoan cultural food conversations. I now want to explore Spam®'s presence in one of the major cultural tenets and practices in Sāmoan culture: the funeral *fa'alavelave* process. In this chapter, I focus on the funeral *fa'alavelave* process as a site to examine not only the distinction between cultural cuisine and comfort food, but to further assert that even with Spam® being popular within Sāmoan communities, Spam® is ultimately a comfort food for our community. I start by defining what *fa'alavelave* means, giving an overview of the significant process in Sāmoan culture. I then identify the food involved in the *fa'alavelave* process where Spam® is both present and absent. I am focusing on *fa'alavelave* because of how integral *fa'alavelave* is to Sāmoan culture; seeing where and how spam is seen or absent is critical in answering the question my thesis poses. Ultimately, I utilize *fa'alavelave* as a case study to illustrate the overarching argument, namely that Spam® is a common comfort food in Sāmoan communities, evoking nostalgia for a homeland that is deeply intertwined with the American military.

***Fa'alavelave*: A Cultural Obligation and Tether**

Fa'alavelave is composed of two words: "*fa'a*" and "*lavelave*." *Fa'a* means "to do/to make/to be" and *lavelave* means "to interconnect."[313] The word *fa'alavelave* in and of itself

[313] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop." Workshop part of the organization's Agava'a/ "Samoan Enough" larger workshop series, Long Beach, CA, June 2024.

means "disruption or interruption."[314] Hence *fa'alavelave* has come to signify and refer to when families halt everything and come together "during a time of crisis or celebration."[315] *Fa'alavelave* occur to commemorate a special occasion in one's life, including birthdays, the bestowing of a *matai* (chief) title, and funerals. *Fa'alavelave* are commonplace occurrences throughout Sāmoan people's lives, both at home and abroad in the diaspora.

The *fa'alavelave* process is considered a critical tenet of *fa'asāmoa*. *Fa'asāmoa* can be conceptualized as "a political and social system that is all-encompassing of meaning, culture, tradition, rituals, values, and principles… prescrib[ing] and govern[ing] Samoan life and customs, determining social interactions between kinship, and outlining behaviours and obligations."[316] The dimensions and aspects of *fa'asāmoa* that are indicative of the culture, of being Sāmoan, are "*aiga* (kin group), and the principles of *tautua* (service), *alofa* (love, care), *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *fa'alavelave* (obligation), and *pule* (authority)."[317] To further emphasize *fa'alavelave* as a significant tenet of *fa'asāmoa*, Joan Ablon, author and Professor Emerita at University of California, San Francisco's Anthropology Department, summarized the functions of the *fa'alavelave* in the American diaspora into four points: "(1) reinforcement of family and community solidarity; (2) reiteration of basic Samoan cultural themes; (3) reaffirmation of the significance of the Samoan Christian church; and (4) mutual aid for survival in the city."[318] Ablon adds that the "central themes of Samoan life are generosity, hospitality, reciprocity, and helping one another…hence the importance of ritualized presentations of money, fine mats, and

[314] Sail Lilomaiava-Doktor, "Changing Morphology of Graves And Burials In Samoa.," *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 125, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 171, https://doi.org/10.15286/jps.125.2.171-186.
[315] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop.", Long Beach, CA, June 2024.
[316] Naomi Gordon, "Sovereignty Politics in Samoa: Fa'asamoa, Fa'amatai, and Resistance to Colonial Capital and Dispossession of Customary Land and Place," in *Against Colonization and Rural Dispossession* (Zed Books, 2017), 51, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350218307.ch-003.
[317] Ibid, 52.
[318] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 220.

food, and the expected attendance at ceremonies."[319] The collectivist nature inherent in Sāmoan culture lends itself well to providing mutual aid and support because that is what was commonplace and expected both in the homeland and the diaspora.

To gain more perspective about *fa'alavelave* outside of my own lived experience, I interviewed eight Sāmoans whose ancestral ties connect them to American Sāmoa. While age, gender, and profession vary among them, their only other commonality is that they currently live or previously resided in Southern California. They were asked about what associations they hold around *fa'alavelave*, its significance to Sāmoan culture, and the process surrounding the preparation for the *fa'alavelave*.

Despite *fa'alavelave* being a fixture in Sāmoan communities, perceptions of this Sāmoan cultural practice are mixed. For some of the interviewees, they immediately think of family and reuniting with one another. As Sofia, a heavily involved church auntie who does food catering as a side job to her full time employment, said: "Whether the *fa'alavelave* is for a joyous occasion like a wedding or birthday or even if it's for a funeral, it brings together family from everywhere; this nowadays has become the more modern 'reunion' for Samoan families because for sure everyone will be present at a *fa'alavelave*."[320] Joseph, a *matai* with a full time job in the education sphere, discussed how *fa'alavelave* are a reflection of one's family. He stated:

> It is a reflection of your family… I used to think it was a shallow showing off as an overextension of what you had, but it does have something to do with pride/self worth so if you have self worth, then you should take pride in what you do and that pride should reflect in how you do things.[321]

Others were quick to comment on the stress tied to the *fa'alavelave*. Some of this stress was related to the behind the scenes labor of preparing for the *fa'alavelave*. Preparation could entail

[319] Ibid, 223.
[320] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[321] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

purchasing the food to be gifted, buying the food to be cooked, cooking and plating the food to be served, and presenting the gifts to the people visiting, among other things. Another compounding factor for stress are the expenses surrounding the *fa'alavelave*. Jonathan, a consultant with a community organizing background, half-jokingly commented on how when growing up, the *fa'alavelave* was "the real 'f' word" in reference to placing "much importance on contributing [financially] to the detriment of paying their own bills."[322] *Fa'alavelave* have put people in tough predicaments where they have to decide between contributing to a familial obligation or paying their monthly bills. Sāmoans are heavily marginalized when it comes to seeking higher education. Based on the 2010 census, only 11% of Sāmoans over the age of 25 residing in California attained a Bachelor's degree or higher, which is lower than the national state average of 30%.[323] According to the 2023 American Community Survey, the number of Sāmoans over the age of 25 residing in California with a Bachelor's degree or higher only grew five percentage points, making it 16%.[324] This is still lower than the national average, which grew to around 37.7%.[325] I bring this up due to the positive correlation between educational attainment and income brought into the household, generally speaking. The per capita income average in 2010 for those living in California was $29,188; the average per capita income for Sāmoans was $15,898.[326] Even though the average per capita income for Sāmoans grew to $27,072, this number is still far below the per capita income for those in California ($47,977).[327]

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[322] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[323] EPIC & AAAJ, *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders In the United States, 2014* [California], (Los Angeles: 2014), 12.
[324] "AANHPI Community Data Explorer," accessed July 4, 2025, https://explore.aapidata.com/?_gl=1*wc3zq4*_ga*MTQyNzY2NTM2Ny4xNzUxNjY4ODIz*_ga_N7QSZMRZ4M*czE3NTE2Njg4MjMkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTE2Njg5OTMkajMyJGwwJGgw#dashboard.
[325] US Census Bureau, "Census Bureau Releases New Educational Attainment Data," Census.gov, accessed July 4, 2025, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/educational-attainment-data.html.
[326] EPIC & AAAJ, *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders In the United States,* [California], 21.
[327] "AANHPI Community Data Explorer," accessed July 4, 2025, https://explore.aapidata.com/?_gl=1*wc3zq4*_ga*MTQyNzY2NTM2Ny4xNzUxNjY4ODIz*_ga_N7QSZMRZ4M

These statistics are just one indicator of how Sāmoans in California continue to face higher rates of socioeconomic inequality than the national average.[328] I highlight these facts to emphasize that funds can be tight in Sāmoan households. Thus, the financial contribution aspect of *fa'alavelave* often places people in tough situations, compelling them to decide between cultural obligation or basic survival. To a cultural outsider, choosing basic survival may appear to be the only sensible option, but that perspective dismisses how critical *fa'alavelave* is to one's *fa'asāmoa*.

Why is *fa'alavelave* important to Sāmoan culture? I asked all the interviewees this question. Natalie, a current undergraduate student who spent some of her formative years growing up in American Sāmoa, shared that "a lot of our culture revolves around community and [this] is the one of the many ways to congregate and come support one another."[329] Sofia highlighted that the *fa'alavelave* is "how families come together to pay their respect. This is done through presentation of customs and traditions that are dear to our hearts. It's a time of fellowship from the immediate and extended families as they come together to take on the *fa'alavelave* at hand all together as one."[330] Joseph noted in his response that we are "social by nature," emphasizing the *fa'alavelave's* importance "because nobody likes to go through tough things by themselves. Those life things like death are real lonely things."[331] Felicia, a recent graduate who works in the education sphere, also related the *fa'alavelave* to family and community as "one of the core staples of Sāmoan culture" where "your family, village, [and] neighbors have your back."[332] Krystal, a recent graduate who is a daughter of a *matai*, links the

*czE3NTE2Njg4MjMkbzEkZzEkdDE3NTE2Njg5OTMkajMyJGwwJGgw#dashboard; "U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: California," accessed July 4, 2025, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA/INC110223.

[328] EPIC & AAAJ, *A Community of Contrasts: Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders In the United States,* [California],, 22.

[329] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

[330] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

[331] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

[332] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

importance of *fa'alavelave* processions in the U.S. to its role in "preserv[ing] the traditions from back in the day" and it being a display of "respect and pride."[333] Alicia, a young church auntie well versed in *fa'asāmoa*, implies that *fa'alavelave* is an inherently Sāmoan practice in explaining that through the *fa'alavelave* process "we are able to show love and respect in the time of need towards family."[334] Tasha, an out of state community advocate and educator who spent part of her youth in Southern California, highlights how the *fa'alavelave* is an intimate process, noting that "our community has never been one to rely on others or outsiders" and that we are "careful with trust"; so to be involved in the *fa'alavelave* process is a reaffirmation of the bond between family members and community members.[335] Jonathan most explicitly connects *fa'alavelave* to being a tenet of Sāmoan culture in sharing that "it's the *fa'asāmoa* and been instilled into the culture and part of the process of being Sāmoan" and simply "one of those things you grow up knowing is the culture."[336] All of these responses demonstrate how *fa'alavelave* is an embodiment of community ties and an act of communal care.

Building up to the *fa'alavelave* process can be rather daunting for those within the Sāmoan community, let alone cultural outsiders (non-Sāmoan in-laws, friends, etc.). Sofia explained the *fa'alavelave* to help with understanding the process:

> The most simple way to understand the process of a *fa'alavelave* from its start is that whatever the *fa'alavelave* may be, the family chief will meet with the family that the *fa'alavelave* is taking place for. There, they will decide on the process, if the extended families will be notified or just the immediate family. One person will be assigned to make the calls to all family members regarding the *fa'alavelave*. Monies will be put together by the family together with cultural presentations of the ie toga (Sāmoan fine mats). Once all of this is in place, the chief and family will present this to the family that is having the *fa'alavelave*. After these presentations are made, then the two families will combine and work together to see the *fa'alavelave* through.[337]

[333] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[334]Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[335]Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[336] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[337] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

The family needs to put together money to cover various costs, ranging from covering the burial services to purchasing the food to be served to gifting those who come to show their support either monetarily or with goods. One of these goods can be the *'ie toga* (fine mats), which while still important and highly coveted, has taken somewhat of a backseat to monetary gifts.

Nonetheless, there is no set way for an individual to navigate and enact the *fa'alavelave* process. There are two reasons as to why there is not a generalized approach when doing *fa'alavelave*: proximity to the person the *fa'alavelave* is for and the roles involved when going through with the *fa'alavelave*. Proximity in this case refers to the strength of kinship ties; for example, a sibling can be closer to an individual than a cousin or an auntie. Those in closer proximity start the process. Extended families get called in at a later point, or they may not even be called in at all. Joseph gave an example of how the build up process could go if one's sibling passed:

> If it were my brother, there are three sides that start: the siblings, the mom's side, and the dad's side. The siblings get together and pooled their money to 'start' the *fa'alavelave*… buying food and [gifts such as] canned meats and mats for people coming to visit. At the same time, the dad's and mom's sides are gathering as well. At the same time is the wife's family [coming together although this is a] whole other side though because they are not part of ours. Once the siblings establish themselves, the mom's and dad's side come separately and pool their gatherings together and form one side: my brother's side. My brother's side then meets with the wife's side [composite of her siblings, her mom's side, and her dad's side]...once the wife side comes in, then it becomes one side to form the family.[338]

In other words, the *fa 'alavelave* starts with the deceased's siblings coming together first. They then bring in their maternal and paternal sides. Concurrent to this, if the deceased was married, the widow's family is also mirroring this process. From here, the siblings of the deceased (now a

[338] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

united front) meet with the widow of the deceased (also now a united front) to come together as one side to represent the immediate family of the deceased at the formal funeral processions.

Another important consideration are the roles involved. How a family's *matai* (chief) or *faifeau* (minister) navigates the *fa'alavelave* process is different from how the *le api* (the bookkeeper keeps track of the money and gift flow or the *au tautua* (composed of both *taule'ale'a* or untitled men and *auluma* or untitled women) present the gifts and food engage with the process.[339]

The rest of this chapter will focus specifically on funeral *fa'alavelave*. I want to focus on funeral *fa'alavelave* because they "are often the most elaborate" for those in the diaspora.[340]

When moving forward with a *fa'alavelave* for a funeral, a key factor for how much is pooled for the deceased was their connection to the community. Funerals for *matai*, *faifeau*, respected church elders, and those heavily involved in the church tend to have more money pooled for them and follow *fa'asāmoa* ("the Sāmoan way") more closely due to their more revered status within the community. Once the widow and siblings of the deceased come together as one unit, they decide whose family *matai* will represent them as a whole when the official funeral processions occur. Once that is settled, they have to be prepared to welcome and accept those who come to give their condolences. People who may be showing up during this time include other extended family members, different church groups, and close friends of the deceased. Typically, the visiting group will bring a gift (money, *ie toga*, etc.) to which the grieving family will acknowledge. The gifts coming from the visiting group to the grieving

[339] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop.", Long Beach, CA, June 2024.
[340] Lilomaiava-Doktor, "Changing Morphology of Graves And Burials In Samoa," 171.

family are known as *siʻi alofa*.[341] The grieving family may also give the visiting group a gift, which is referred to as the *sua*.[342]

Tension can emerge as the grieving family will either take the gift in its entirety, return the gift in its entirety, or split the gift. While taking the gift in its entirety can indicate gratitude, this can also make the grieving family appear weak because they could not pool enough money beforehand or greedy because they are taking more than needed. Similarly, while returning the gift could signify that the grieving family is financially at a strong point, this action can also come off as both dismissive and offensive. It is typically safer to split the gift, thus keeping a part of it and returning a part of it.[343] Nonetheless, with the exception of accepting the gift in its entirety immediately, returning and/or splitting the gift can lead to a back and forth between the groups before one group either concedes or further compromises. The main concern for the grieving family, aside from honoring the deceased, "is to bury the body (to cover the plot, the headstone)... once that is covered, then everything else is performance."[344]

In the United States, Sāmoan funerals typically take place over three days. The first day is the family service, with the details of the service worked out and finalized with the *faifeau* of the church that the family belongs to. Typically held in a church, this service frequently occurs "on a Saturday evening two nights preceding the funeral and interment."[345] The second day is when the opening service happens. Frequently held in the afternoon or evening at a church before the burial, this service is usually the largest of all three services.[346] After the opening

[341] Le Gafa, "Faʻalavelave Workshop." Long Beach, CA, June 2024; While I do not know the direct translation, after talking with my dad, I settled on "to lift with love" considering that *siʻi* means "to lift/carry" and *alofa* means "love." Basically, the *siʻi alofa* becomes an embodiment of the family/community coming together out of love to help carry the burden.
[342] Ibid.
[343] Le Gafa, "Faʻalavelave Workshop." Long Beach, CA, June 2024.
[344] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[345] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 213.
[346] Ibid.

service concludes, family and friends stay overnight with the body, sharing stories and reminiscing about the person who has passed on. The third and final day is the funeral service. In the morning following the opening service, the funeral service is held. This service is rather brief, so after the conclusion of the funeral service, the attendees follow "the hearse for the last ride to the cemetery" and say their final goodbyes before the body is buried.[347]

After the burial, there is a reception, typically in a church fellowship hall or a banquet hall of a larger restaurant. It is here that the last performance aspect of the funeral *fa'alavelave* takes place. The grieving family acknowledges "folks (mainly the church people and the ministers) and celebrate in honor of the deceased" through the *sua* or gifts they are giving out.[348] Here, there are two *sua* that are made visible and public: *Sua Taute* ("food to snack") and *Sua Tali Sua* ("food to take home"). These *suas*, alongside the role of Spam®, are discussed in a later section.

Not only is the *fa'alavelave* a critical tenet of Sāmoan culture, this ritual is also a cultural tether between Sāmoans in the diaspora and the motherland due to the accessibility of the ritual. In this context, accessibility does not refer to financial ability but rather opportunity access: the ability to engage with and perform cultural aspects while away from the homeland. Language, for example, is an aspect of culture that can readily travel and connect people regardless of where they are in the world. Similarly, *fa'alavelave* is a Sāmoan practice that can take place outside of the homeland. I would argue that *fa'alavelave* is more accessible than language for Sāmoans in the United States. While the financial burden of the *fa'alavelave* does take a toll and is not something to be dismissed, the *fa'alavelave* allows for those not fluent in the Sāmoan language to engage in the *fa'asāmoa*. Even though there are various aspects of the *fa'alavelave*

[347] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 215.
[348] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

process traditionally conducted in Sāmoan, there are other ways those unfamiliar with the language can still participate, especially in the *si'i alofa* and *sua* exchanges.

With *fa'alavelave* occurring in the diaspora, there have been changes and distinctions between how they proceed in the homeland and how they proceed abroad. These changes reflect adaptability; Sāmoans in the diaspora have to adapt the practices to their current environment in order to sustain the practices. Additionally, it is important to distinguish between what aspects changed abroad in comparison to what stayed consistent.

In the American diaspora context, the alterations that have occurred over time include: "(1) changes in protocol concerning prerogatives of chiefs; (2) emphasis on collection and redistribution of money rather than goods; (3) centrality of the church; and (4) extension of the network of involved persons."[349] In the United States, the family spokesperson may take on this role without a *matai* title at all.[350] Both in the homeland and in the United States "formal oration was the prerogative of the talking chiefs, as is still the custom in Samoa."[351] This change indicates that while the formal and public performance still align with traditional *fa'asāmoa* presentations, the private collection and behind the scenes actions leading up to the funeral service have been adapted to ease the burden and allow others to more readily assist. These transformations thus allow more people to support the grieving families, as well as make the *fa'alavelave* process more accessible for *matai* and non-*matai* alike.

Additionally, in both American Sāmoa and independent Sāmoa, the *matai* who represents the family traditionally is in charge of receiving, presenting, and redistributing the *'ie toga* or fine mats donated whereas in the United States any of the family members may be involved in

[349] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 218-219.
[350] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 219.
[351] Ibid.

the funneling and presenting of *'ie toga*. *'Ie toga* (fine mats) are made out of pandanus fibers. Creating *'ie toga* is an incredibly laborious process, which is what people do traditionally when gifting *'ie toga* during the *fa'alavelave* process. Once acquiring the "fine grade" of pandanus, women "dried, scraped, [and] split [the pandanus] into strips."[352] From there, they subsequently "baked, separated [the pandanus] into layers, [and] soaked [the pandanus] in the sea [before allowing the product to be] sundried."[353] Once sun-dried, the pandanus was then "split into threads and finally hand plaited into a cloth of about one by two meters, with a loose fringed border" adorned with a row of *'ula* (feathers).[354] These days, instead of making the *'ie toga* themselves, families are more likely to either purchase an already made *'ie toga* or gift one that they already own. While there are a multitude of factors for this, two of the more obvious reasons for this change are lack of time and resources.[355] Making *'ie toga* is an incredibly time-consuming labor, one that people in the diaspora may not be able to afford considering that they are often working one or more jobs to survive. The other reason is the fact that Sāmoan pandanus is not as readily available in California as it is in the islands. While it is possible to cultivate the plant in California, that requires time and upkeep — which again may not be so easily afforded. Hence, it became more convenient for people to either buy new or circulate old *'ie toga* when giving them out during the *fa'alavelave* process.

In reference to the collection and redistribution of money rather than goods, this alteration occurred due to how expensive funeral and burial procedures are in the United States,

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[352] Penelope Schoeffel, "Samoan Exchange and 'Fine Mats': An Historical Reconsideration," *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 108, no. 2 (1999): 118.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Ibid.
[355] A potential reason (contributing to *'ie toga* not being produced as much) that I do not flesh out in my thesis that I would like to highlight is the fact that colonial powers have also intervened in the production of these fine mats for varying reasons, including those connected to labor and the economy. For more, please refer to:
Jocelyn Linnekin, "Fine Mats and Money: Contending Exchange Paradigms in Colonial Samoa," *Anthropological Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (1991): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.2307/3317832.

whereas in Sāmoa there is no need to buy a burial plot and the process does not require as much money.[356] This alteration recognizes not only the practical need for cash in setting up the *fa'alavelave*, but also how costly air travel may be for those coming in to attend and show their love and respect for the deceased. In a sense, this alteration also highlights the ways in which engaging in mutual aid helps keep our community afloat while strengthening already existing bonds or creating new relations.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the role of the Sāmoan Christian church as a community connector emerged in the early 1960s for the first and second wave of Sāmoan migrations to California. The church served as a haven for the Sāmoans community who felt isolated being so far from their homeland and sought ways to build community and reaffirm their faith. An impetus for the rise of the church in Sāmoan communities in the United States was the desire to conduct *fa'alavelave* abroad. The church has filled the structural void caused by the absence of "the traditional village, district, and islands hierarchies of family chiefs" through becoming a tangible space that maintained and sustained itself through the *fa'asāmoa*.[357] The church also cultivates "a sense of cultural and social unity [that enlarges] the network of persons that one can rely on and, conversely, that one feels responsibilities toward, to include all Samoans."[358] Through the funeral *fa'alavelave*, the significance of the church and Christianity as a whole are reaffirmed as being central to the Sāmoan identity through the roles that the *faifeau* plays throughout the service, in addition to how *faifeau* receive sua from the grieving family.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted that there are four functions of the *fa'alavelave* that can be summarized as reinforcing family and community bonds, reemphasizing Sāmoan cultural values,

[356] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 219.
[357] Ibid.
[358] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 219.

reaffirming the role of the church, and engaging in mutual aid to help survive abroad. The *fa'alavelave* remains an incredibly significant tenet of *fa'asāmoa*, being an explicit and formal demonstration of Sāmoan culture. While alterations have occurred in order to maintain the ability to engage with this ritual abroad, the *fa'alavelave* is nonetheless an accessible aspect of Sāmoan culture for those in the United States to partake in. Thus, the *fa'alavelave* is a cultural tether bridging the diaspora to the homeland via the *fa'asāmoa*.

Fa'alavelave: Food Utilized as an Expression of Cultural Performance

Food is heavily present throughout the entire process of the *fa'alavelave*. When families prepare for the funeral services, they always set aside money for the food served and the food gifted. The foods offered in this space are not random but selected based on a combination of factors including tradition and accessibility. It is in this context that I want to examine Spam®'s presence in and absence from this space.

What foods are served during a *fa'alavelave* is ultimately decided by the grieving family. In Joan Ablon's 1970 article about funeral *fa'alavelave*, the dishes she noticed served were "chicken, pork, taro, bananas, salt-corned beef, a specialized dish called 'chop suey,' and potato salad," which she had labeled as traditional.[359] When asking my interviewees about the foods usually seen in this process, their answers overall were similar to the article. Sofia noted that since Sāmoan funeral *fa'alavelave* take place over multiple days, "there is a different menu set for the *fa'alavelave* to take care of the families and friends coming over to show respect"; some of the common dishes served that she listed were "*moa* (chicken), *fa'i* or *kalo* (banana or taro), *sosisi* (sausages), *sapasui* (chop suey noodles) and *'oka* (raw fish made with coconut milk)."[360] Felicia stated that the foods she commonly saw served were "*sapasui*, taro, *fa'i*, *palusami*, and

[359] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 215.
[360] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.

pig."[361] "*Fish*, *rice*, *fa'i*, *potatoes*, *sapasui*, some sort of pig, taro, *ulu* (breadfruit), *povi masima*, and chicken" stated Krystal.[362] Alicia recalled "bbq, chicken, sausage, chop suey, rice, *palusami* , *taro* or *fa'i*, *fasi povi*," with a caveat for *palusami* being included only if the family is able to provide it.[363] Similar to prior answers, Jonathan recollected "taro, banana, fish, [and some sort of] protein" as the commonly eaten dishes for relatives and guests at the *fa'alavelave*.[364] While she commented that "taro, banana, chicken, steak, and crab" were dishes she saw presented on the circle trays to be served to the guests, Tasha mentioned that what is served is ultimately dependent "on the family and their income, how well off they are."[365]

All their answers demonstrate that there was still an adherence to foods thought to be part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine when it came to food served such as taro, *fa'i*, *sapasui*, and *fasi povi masima* (salt-corned beef). Their answers align with both the anthropological and ethnographic information detailing what is considered to be part of Sāmoan cuisine in the prior chapter. Interestingly here is where Spam® is relatively absent. Despite the popularity of pork products in foods being served in *fa'alavelave* processions, as well as Spam®'s general popularity in Sāmoan households, Spam® is rarely, if ever, served during *fa'alavelave* processes. Only one interviewee witnessed Spam® being served at a *fa'alavelave*, although she noted that this typically occurs when "families cannot afford big proteins, [so] they will substitute chicken or ham with Spam®."[366] As noted earlier, Sāmoans in California face higher rates of socioeconomic inequality than average, a trend that extends across the United States for Sāmoans. While some may deride Spam®'s inclusion in being food served to be eaten during the *fa'alavelave*, some could also see

[361] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[362] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[363]Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[364] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[365] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[366] Ibid.

this as an act of resilience — balancing both cultural obligations and basic survival within one's own means.

Unlike foods served, Spam® has been more commonly spotted during *fa'alavelave* when it comes to the food being *gifted* as part of the *sua*. Being the "cultural tradition of Samoan food/gift presentation," *sua* are considered "the highest form of gift giving in the Sāmoan culture."[367,368] There are specific protocols surrounding the gifting process. The protocols are quite intensive as it pertains to clothing of the *au tautua* (composed of both *taule'ale'a* or untitled men and *auluma* or untitled women) wear when doing the gifting, how the *auluma* present the gifts, the order in which the gifts and food served are delivered, and much more. However, this section focuses solely on the gifts being presented. As referenced earlier in the chapter, the two types of *sua* are *sua taute* and *sua tali sua*.

Sua taute can consist of various items including, but not limited to: "young coconuts, tapa cloth, can of soda, bottle of wine/champagne/apple cider (cooked food/*fa'avevela*) chicken, taro wrapped in breadfruit leaves, *ulu*, corned beef, crackers, and box of sausage."[369] Traditional items in Sāmoa included in the *sua taute* are "*vailolo* (coconut with leaves), tapa cloth,, *ka'alepaepae* (uncooked chicken) and *moepi'ilima* (cooked chicken)," among other items.[370] In *sua taute* presentations in the United States, soda or wine with money attached to them takes the place of the coconut with leaves, and the *ka'alepaepae* /*moepi'ilima* can be either vienna sausages or pisupo (canned corned beef).[371]

[367] SFA, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[368] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop." Long Beach, CA, June 2024.
[369] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop." Long Beach, CA, June 2024.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Le Gafa, "Fa'alavelave Workshop." Long Beach, CA, June 2024.

Sua tali sua encapsulates the bigger gifts that are to be taken home. Traditionally, this could include *magufaua* (whole pig) and *'ie toga*.[372] In the United States, a box/boxes of *pisupo* replace the pig as the *magufaua* and while *'ie toga* may still be presented, this has largely been replaced with a monetary gift for travel.[373]

While the 1970 Ablon article does not reference the gifts as *sua*, the article mentioned that "additional wrapped packages of salt-beef, pork, or chicken may be distributed to each guest to take home."[374] Considering that this article came out after the first generation of Sāmoans from American Sāmoa migrated to California in the 1950s to the 1960s, the foods presented reflect both their reliance on traditional foods and their inclusion of processed foods due to their availability and affordability in the diaspora. When asking the interviewees what foods are gifted, the foods listed varied but their overall commonality was that they were canned. Natalie listed "canned foods, cracker foods, lil bottle of cider, and a lot of cases of chicken," then elaborated on the canned foods to include Spam®, *pisupo*, and Wahoo.[375] Joseph had a similar answer, with him listing "*pisupo*, Wahoo, Spam®, Vienna sausages, and soda crackers"; he also noted that "growing up there used to be a lot of *pilikaki* (canned mackerel)," implying that this may not longer be as commonplace.[376] Felicia and Krystal, when recalling foods gifted, solely listed the canned meat products such as Spam®, Wahoo, Vienna sausages, and *pisupo*.[377,378] Some of the other interviewees recalled other items in addition to the canned products and crackers. Jonathan commented that in addition to the cases of *pisupo* and cases of spaghetti he saw, he also

[372] Ibid.
[373] Ibid.
[374] Ablon, "The Samoan Funeral in Urban America," 215.
[375] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[376] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[377] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[378] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

noticed soda "cans with the dollar bills," commenting that it ties back to tradition.[379] Alicia's response similarly recalled the foods gifted: "a beverage with fabric material or a soda with dollar… chicken was used back in the day versus corned beef nowadays, but [what food is gifted ultimately] depends on family doing it, and canned foods," with cases of tuna and corned beef being the examples she listed.[380]

In contrast to its relative absence in food served, Spam® can be present in the food gifted during the *fa'alavelave* process. Why that is the case remains unclear. Jonathan shared that although "[the foods served have] been part of the culture… there have been substitutes as time goes on."[381] However, the responses given by the interviewees when explaining why certain foods are present in certain spaces can shed light as to potential answers for this question. When discussing the foods eaten and why those are chosen, some commented on personal preference and availability being a factor. However, most tied the foods consumed back to tradition and Sāmoan culture. Tasha commented that "*fa'alavelave* and these cuisines tie us back to the island, making you feel warm and fuzzy" which is important when one is grieving the loss of a loved one.[382] Felicia shared that the foods selected to be served are a "good tie to the traditions, a good homage to the life lost if serving the foods they grew up on and giving the grieving family something to bond over," which in this case would be the food.[383] In contrast, while some did comment on the foods being gifted tying back to tradition, more of the responses focused on availability and accessibility. Some articulations of accessibility were more straightforward. Natalie commented on how transportation is a factor to consider when selecting foods to be

[379] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[380]Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[381] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[382] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[383] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.

gifted, especially if a person is flying out for a funeral *fa'alavelave*.[384] Felicia commented on how the foods selected are the ones easier to buy in bulk.[385] A different articulation of accessibility came from Joseph when sharing how "these foods are a morph of what was actually given back in the days," ultimately being an example of "modernizations of traditions."[386] The examples he gave were for canned tuna and Spam®: "before tuna, it was actual fish; before Spam®, it was actual pig."[387]

Based on the rationalizations in place, it appears that Spam® being included in the *sua* has more to do with accessibility and availability than cultural significance. This thought is further elaborated on by the interviewees when they were asked the following two questions: "Have you ever seen SPAM present in these processes?" and "What would it mean for SPAM to be more noticeably incorporated into the *fa'alavelave*?"

In response to the first question, Spam® 's inclusion, if spotted by the interviewees, has been more of a recent occurrence in the last decade. In addition to the youngest of the interviewees, Natalie and Krysyal, making this claim, Joseph, Alicia, and Jonathan, having witnessed *fa'alavelave* over the decades, also make the same assertion.[388,389,390,391,392] Additionally, Spam®'s inclusion in the gifting process seems to occur more often in an explicitly American context, as observed by both Sofia and Felicia, implying that this may not necessarily be the case

[384] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[385] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[386] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[387] Ibid.
[388] Natalie, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[389] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[390] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[391]Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[392] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

for Sāmoans in the homeland, Independent Sāmoa, Australia, Aotearoa (New Zealand) and elsewhere. [393,394]

Answers to the second question varied greatly. Some people focused on the economic aspects of Spam®. Jonathan opened up about how Spam® is "an item that we don't need in regards to our community, but also a matter of economics" since "the offerings are tailored to economics and availability."[395] On the one hand, Spam® being involved in the gifting process has been viewed as lifting the financial burden off of families when going through the *fa'alavelave* process, as pointed out by both Felicia and Krystal.[396,397] On the other hand, Sofia, Alicia, and Tasha separately commented that as the price of Spam® rises, it may fade out from *fa'alavelave* processions.[398,399,400] Tasha's answer also creates a binary between the reaction of seeing Spam® as a food gifted versus a food served. She mentions in her answer that if Spam® is included in the sua, then "it would be a luxury," indicating that the grieving family was able to accumulate a lot of money for their deceased's funeral *fa'alavelave*.[401] However, if Spam® is in the food being served, then it could be indicative of the family being "on hard times."[402] In order to better illustrate how a seemingly contradictory statement is actually an incisive observation, I want to borrow the Realm of Culinary Experience Quadrant Model from *The Food and Folklore Reader* (see Fig.10). Paired in this model are "edible" and "palatable." While "edible" concerns itself with what is consumable, the "palatable" designation carries more of an aesthetic and gustatorial connotation. Palatable food is more than simply being edible — it is through "their selection for

[393] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[394] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[395] Jonathan, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[396] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[397] Krystal, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[398] Sofia, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[399]Alicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[400] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid.

consumption [...] on whether or not they are considered savory, appetizing, or appropriate for particular contexts."[403] It is the "appropriate for particular contexts" part that helps elucidate the statement that Tasha made. Because Spam® is affordable and edible, it is a suitable gift to be given in bulk to guests during a *fa'alavelave*. However, Spam®'s affordability contributes to its derision, as the cheapness perpetuates Spam®'s low status connotation. Hence, due to Spam®'s low status, it would be inappropriate to serve Spam® to guests during a *fa'alavelave*, thus making the canned meat unpalatable in the *fa'alavelave* context.

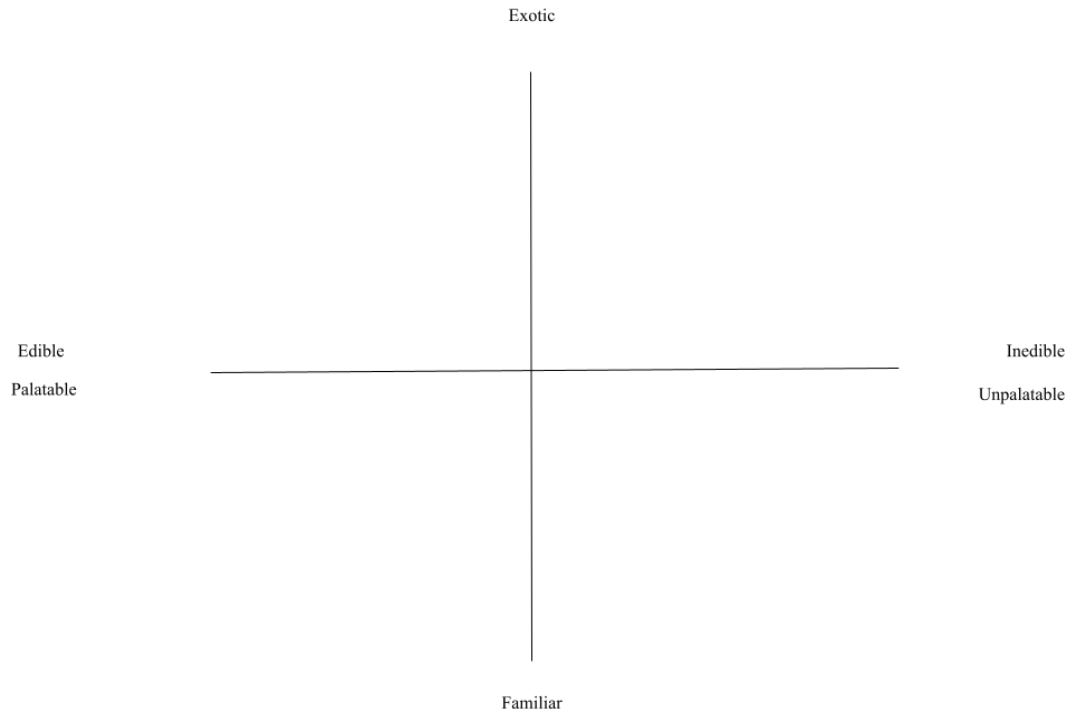


Figure 10: Realms of Culinary Experience Quadrant Model[404]

[403] Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (London, 2015), 440.
[404] Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness," in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (London, 2015), 440; I recreated the quadrant model in Google Drawing for this thesis.

Others looked at Spam® as a potential cultural product claimed by the community. Natalie held a positive outlook on the potential of Spam becoming accepted in Sāmoan cuisine, commenting that Spam® being incorporated more frequently into the *fa'alavelave* "would really solidify its place in our culture," citing *pisupo* as an example of canned food product that was adopted as a Sāmoan food staple and has become part of the cultural cuisine.[405] In contrast, Felicia noted that Spam® becoming more incorporated into *fa'alavelave* would indicate that "Sāmoans are being less prideful, because presentation of the foods and what is given to the family is a big deal."[406] Joseph dismissed the idea of Spam® ever becoming more prominent in the *fa'alavelave* process entirely. Elaborating, he clarified that "for all intents and purposes, [Spam®] still is not seen as a staple in Samoan food" and that Spam® is "not like *pisupo* or Wahoo, so it would never ascend to a cultural food or be the star of the show."[407] Joseph also noted that he thinks part of the reason that Spam® has been incorporated into the *fa'alavelave* in more recent years is due to the fact that "old school generations" would not take kindly to these new interpretations of tradition might have passed on.[408] Contextually, "old school generations" refers to those born around the same time as and those of the first generation of Sāmoans to migrate over to the United States. I imagine that when he made this comment, he thought of his mom and her siblings. To these "old school" individuals, Spam® would be seen as "kid food."[409] Therefore, Spam®'s more frequent appearance is less connected to cultural ties than what one might think. He also related this to the decreasing presence of *pilikaki* in the *sua* as people

[405] Natale, in discussion with the author, November 2024.
[406] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[407] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[408] Ibid.
[409] Ibid.

nowadays are more inclined to go with "Spam® over *pilikaki* due to more people liking [Spam®]" in California.[410]

SPAM® Case Closed via Fa'alavelave

Thus, Spam® occupies a gray area in terms of it being appropriate to appear in the *fa'alavelave* space. There seems to be a silent agreement on Spam® not being suitable to be served to the guests attending the *fa'alavelave*, due to it not being culturally appropriate or relevant. As part of the *sua*, however, it is more commonly seen. Yet, the reason for its appearance is explicitly connected to the product being relatively accessible, not because of any particular cultural relevance. In the context of Spam® as a part of the *sua*, it is more prevalent because a major factor of selecting the gifts is accessibility, which Spam® and other canned products have. However, Spam® is largely absent from being served at *fa'alavelave*. Sāmoan cultural cuisine is what is served at fa'alavelave, thus implying that Spam®'s overall absence is due to the fact that it is not indicative of Sāmoan cultural theme.

Spam®'s presence and absence in certain spaces also connects to the idea of nostalgia. Nostalgia is a sentimental longing for the past, typically associated with fonder memories. Comfort foods tend to have a nostalgic aspect; when eaten, the consumer recalls a positive memory from their upbringing. In the prior chapter, most of the interviewees had this relationship to Spam®. Yet, they also reflected on how Spam®'s presence in the community is irrevocably connected to the U.S. military, since the food was introduced as a ration during WWII . This connection elicited mixed responses, with some viewing the association positively as a form of patriotism that carries on to the present and others more critical of its origin. Joseph commented: "If you dig deeper and realize what [Spam®] is, it is a manifestation of US

[410] Ibid; One of my committee members also highlighted that Spam® is arguably of a higher status than *pilikaki*.

imperialism given to us by the US military."[411] Thus, it can be argued that the consumption of Spam® in the continental United States is linked to nostalgia for the motherland, a nostalgia embedded in military legacies. Specifically, intertwined with this notion of patriotism, the nostalgia serves as a reminder for the ways in which the military (for better or worse) offered tangible opportunities for advancement via social mobility.

Funeral *fa'alavelave* are inherently nostalgic events. While mourning the loss of a loved one, people are also celebrating their life and fondly recalling various moments and memories with the person. The foods selected can be viewed as an "homage to the life lost if serving the foods they grew up on," with the caveat being culturally relevant dishes.[412] The reasoning behind culturally relevant dishes being centered is that eating cultural cuisine abroad represents a wistful (re)connection back to the homeland. As Tasha shared, "*fa'alavelave* and these cuisines tie us back to the island, making you feel warm and fuzzy."[413] With this perspective in mind, it would be highly inappropriate to include Spam® in this space. Spam® inherently recalls an American Sāmoa undivorced from American militarization, thus implicitly shifting the focus away from the culture back to the United States.

[411] Joseph, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[412] Felicia, in discussion with the author, December 2024.
[413] Tasha, in discussion with the author, January 2025.

Conclusion

Through this exploration, I have asserted that Spam®'s prevalence in Sāmoan communities stems from its status as a comfort food and not a component of cultural cuisine. My first chapter, "SPAM® — Sāmoans and Pink American Meat," foregrounds the context in which Spam® and (American) Sāmoans are linked. My second chapter, "Cultural vs Comfort: SPAM® 's Presence in Sāmoan Communities," demonstrates how Spam® is a comfort food item in Sāmoan communities through employing a close reading and conceptualization of comfort food and cultural cuisine, in addition to analyzing community opinions and experiences with Spam® versus Sāmoan food. My third chapter, "Bridging the Diaspora Through Faalavelave ~~and SPAM®~~," further solidifies my argument when incorporating *fa'alavelave* as a site to examine Spam's absence and presence among Sāmoan communities in California. A consistent thread stitching the argument together is how nostalgia dually cements Spam® as a comfort food item and excludes Spam® from being considered part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. To conclude my thesis project, I intend to revisit and reflect on what I have written thus far. Following that, I will use the remaining space to discuss the significance of my project and the gaps in which future projects could insert themselves and improve upon this thesis.

In my second chapter, I posited that the prevalence of Spam® in Sāmoan communities was not because the canned meat product was adopted as a cultural cuisine item but rather because it was a commonplace comfort food. Cultural cuisine referred to gastronomical embodiments of a social group's continued existence, in which the embodiments are recognized and accepted by the community as part of their identity. Comfort food, on the other hand, were dishes that evoke a sense of familiarity, eaten when wanting to soothe oneself, and can be consumed in solitude or when with others. Comfort food can be placed into four non-mutually

exclusive categorizations: physical, indulgence, convenience, and nostalgic. Spam® was not recognized by any of the interviewees as part of cultural cuisine nor was it mentioned in any of the cookbooks as being part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. Yet, all of the interviewees had reminisced about Spam® in their upbringing as children, with their anecdotes connecting Spam® to at least one of the four categories of comfort food.

Spam® is unmistakably not a part of Sāmoan cultural cuisine. It is generally not included in anthropological documents and cookbooks. Spam® is also absent from all the interviewee responses when asked to recall Sāmoan food. To further illustrate this standpoint, the exclusion of Spam® from being served during *fa'alavelave* indicates that the food is not accepted as cuisine. Yet, its prevalence in our communities suggests that Spam® holds some relevance. Therefore, Spam® is undoubtedly a comfort food item in Sāmoan communities. Spam® fulfills all the requirements to be classified as such.

In addition, its recent inclusion in *sua* point to the convenience and accessibility of the product. As some of the interviewees either alluded to or explicitly stated, *fa'alavelave* can be financially draining. Yet, as other interviewees highlighted, *fa'alavelave* inherently is not costly and the financial constraint comes from a pressure to uphold appearances and thus family status. In recent years, *fa'alavelave* has become the center of many debates about its significance and if it is worth the financial turmoil for to put in more money than they can afford.[414] While some

[414] This point is something that I have observed as I was coming of age and held conversations about with my family and Sāmoan peers. That said, there have also been blog posts that also address the question of finances and have somewhat similar responses on how to engage moving forward. If curious, please refer to:
FotuoSamoa Jackson, "FA'ALAVELAVE - Building Resilience, Strengthening Family Ties and Losing Your Penti in One Single Phone Call," *Thecoconet.Tv* (blog), accessed July 5, 2025, https://www.thecoconet.tv/coco-talanoa/pacific-blog/faalavelave-building-resilience-strengthening/.
"Fa'alavelave, Financial Burden or Family Imperative?," RNZ, September 22, 2016, https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetonoon/audio/201817114/fa'alavelave,-financial-burden-or-family-imperative.
Mata'afa Keni Lesa, "How Did Our Life of Fa'alavelave Become a Source of Pain, Suffering and Sorrow?," Samoa Observer, October 8, 2018, https://www.samoaobserver.ws/category/editorial/14276.

suggest simply paying what you can and being firm in your boundaries so as not to overextend one's finances when contributing, the implicit argument against this ties into appearances and performance. That is to say, should a person or family not go "all out" during the *fa'alavelave*, then said families and individuals could come across as looking "cheap" or disrespectful. Spam®'s affordability, as well as its being sold in bulk, makes the canned meat product an attractive economic option to incorporate into the *sua* while still maintaining some respect. Even with it being too much of a low status to serve, Spam® is still well liked enough within the community to be seen as an acceptable gifting option while being relatively affordable — even more so if being bought from a commissary.

With that being said, the community is not beholden to incorporating Spam® especially with inflation raising its cost. If the canned meat product becomes too expensive, then they will just switch to another product that is more affordable. For now, Spam® is simply a convenient comfort food in our communities that links back to the militarization of American Sāmoa in the beginning of the twentieth century.

While this exploratory project provides important insights, it also has limitations. A core component of my thesis is based on nine interviewees, which is a small sample size. Nonetheless, in depth work with the oral histories provided rich material for my thesis, especially when interwoven with the other primary and secondary source materials I utilized. With respect to the smaller sample size, certain identity aspects became highly operational in the analyses being given. For example, everyone interviewed was below the age of 60 at the time of this being written. Age bias could have been a factor for some of their perspectives regarding the

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Melissa Maykin, "'They Don't Want to Be Burdened with It': The Changing Nature of Fa'alavelave Obligations," *ABC News*, November 10, 2023, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-11-11/fa-alavelave-a-manifestation-of-love-or-uneccessary-burden-samoa/103090556.

interview topics. Additionally, because of the small sample size, I did not distinguish and elaborate how one's Christian denomination influences the ways in which they perform and partake in *fa'alavelave*. Also, even though I intentionally limited my scope to focus on Sāmoans residing in California, whose heritage traces back to American Sāmoa specifically, I do recognize that there are some points that need to be nuanced. First, this thesis does not address those who may have migrated from the Independent State of Sāmoa to American Sāmoa and then to the United States. Aside from (potentially) different citizenship status, there is little cultural difference between the two groups so their lived experiences within the continental United States are often similar. Additionally, statistical data about Sāmoans in the United States aggregates the two groups, which further obscures potential nuances in the struggles faced by the Sāmoans from the Independent State of Sāmoa versus those from American Sāmoa (for example, more complex immigration processes). Second, due to my limited focus, this thesis is very much United States centric. My intention behind this was not to promote United States hegemony in any shape or form, but to be specific in my focus. Although the specificities relating to Spam® and militarization in Sāmoan communities in California may not resonate with Sāmoans outside the US dominion, the broader arguments about the development of cultural cuisine, particular food items introduced to our communities that later become attached to our culture, and changing cultural protocols to accommodate the lived realities and differences of the diaspora will hold.

Yet, all these areas of improvement do not diminish the work this thesis does and its overall significance. First, my intention behind limiting my scope has to do with the fact that I hardly came across literature about Sāmoans from American Sāmoa in California. I want to highlight the community I come from in these academic writings about my community. So, my

thesis contributes to the existing literature about the Sāmoan diaspora, adding nuance to what has already been written about us by us.

Second, my thesis explicitly positions "cultural cuisine" as an umbrella term that encompasses both "traditional food" (associated with the homeland) and "ethnic food" (food that arises either when immigrating and/or when coming into contact with an immigrant group). Although there are conceptions of "cultural cuisine" that do not perpetuate this, many conceptualizations of "cultural cuisine" combine this concept with traditional food, nearly making them synonymous, while ignoring hybrid foods that have transformed into community staples. My thesis continues an already existing conversation in the overlap of Food Studies and Ethnic Studies surrounding separating cultural cuisine from ideas of authenticity, with my specific contribution being to instead view cultural cuisine as gastronomical embodiments of a community's continued existence.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, my thesis expands upon the literature surrounding Spam®. Already established was Spam®'s relationship with the U.S. military and its association with American militarism and imperialism in the Pacific. Where I add something new is honing in on Spam®'s presence in Sāmoan communities in the United States, offering a nuanced interpretation of the canned meat. Not only is the canned meat evocative of an explicitly militarized past, Spam® has been able to reduce the financial burden that has become more commonplace in modern *fa'alavelave* processions. Due to its relative affordability Spam®, as a gift specifically, allows families to fulfill their cultural obligations without risking financial ruin. Rather than viewing this phenomenon solely as an example of the pervasiveness of U.S. militarization in the Sāmoan culture, we can also view this occurrence as an example of

resourcefulness and ingenuity from the community — a compromise created out of the need to survive both physically and culturally.

Postscript

The title of my thesis, "Evocative Comfort: Spam® in Sāmoan Communities," is an intentional title that came to me as a fleeting thought. I knew that my title needed to have "Spam®" "and "Sāmoan" but was unsure how to approach the matter. Additionally, because I was framing my argument around comfort food, I figured that I needed to allude to that in some sense. "Nostalgic comfort" was not meshing well for me, so I decided to sleep on it. It was not until I was aimlessly listening to music, pondering why certain medias I consumed so easily in my youth were evoking such strong emotions in me in adulthood that it clicked — evocative. Evocative indicates strong memories or feelings coming to mind, and this singular phrase ultimately tied everything together: Spam® in the Sāmoan communities of California functions as a form of comfort through consumption. Additionally, evocative is similar to nostalgia in terms of relating to memories with strong emotional association, yet the difference allows for nostalgia to remain in the background.

As I am writing this postscript, I realize more fully that my thesis project might seem silly or inconsequential to some readers. I could have focused my academic inquiry and interests more explicitly on the structures in place that continue to hurt Sāmoans, Pasifika, and other Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). Educational attainment barriers, environmental anxieties, gang violence, cultural erosion, and health detriments are some of the pressing issues I could have centered my inquiry on. Especially with the current climate of the world in which we live, my thesis might appear insignificant. However, I want to preemptively push back against those claims.

First, food is critical to one's identity formation. Regardless of what the United States may claim, food is a human right. Moreover, what we choose to consume is both political and a

reaffirmation of one's identity. Whether one abstains from eating due to a moral boycott or a religious practice, people indulge in food for reasons beyond pure sustenance and gustatorial preference — it has the potential to reassert who they are. In this light, I want to return my attention to Spam®.

Discussing this canned meat product has been a personal journey. Growing up, Spam® was a guilty pleasure for me, but not in the traditional sense. I openly enjoyed eating the meat yet internally resented the fact that I enjoyed it. Other people's derision aside, I hated the fact that I enjoyed it, because I so desperately wished that my community would abandon the meat product altogether and switch to a healthier alternative. This disdain increased even more when seeing how Spam was connected to U.S. imperialism abroad and specifically the militarization of American Sāmoa. I know the military is a complicated topic within Pasifika communities, let alone Sāmoan communities. I understand that the military provides financial opportunities and job stability for people to support themselves and their families. My family personally benefited from these opportunities. Yet, it is appalling to see the various ways in which the U.S. military exploits Black and Brown bodies, including Sāmoans and other Pasifika peoples. Spam, to me, is indicative of all these conflicting thoughts surrounding my community.

It was not until I read "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities" by Eve Tuck that I came to the realization that all these truths can exist within Spam. It is a delicious meat that brings families together. It is also a dubious meat with extreme health detriments. In Sāmoan communities, Spam is a symbol of the U.S. military — an institution that provided opportunity for people to forge a better life. In Sāmoan communities, Spam is indicative of the same U.S. military — an institution that thrives off exploitation and violence, an institution that can only provide these opportunities due to causing the need for these jobs in the first place.

Whether one chooses to consume or abstain from Spam is a choice they can make for themselves. It is fascinating to reflect on Spam's relationship with Sāmoan communities in this context. On one hand, I am incredibly relieved that, at this point in time, it is not considered part of our cultural cuisine. To me, its exclusion asserts that we (American) Sāmoans exist and thrive outside our relationship to the United States; it does not define who we are intrinsically. It is a really nice reminder, truly. Yet, on the other hand, what does it mean then to find comfort in a dish that embodies all this violence? To have this violence intertwined with one's cherished memories? I do not know if I have an answer for that yet.

Second, and lastly, I assert that I am adding to the growing number of Pasifika Studies literature written for *us* by *us*. In academia, I hardly ever come across narratives or scholarly works written by and for Pasifika voices. For me, this gap is more noticeable in the sense that, while I see Sāmoans in Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) organizing and community building spaces, I rarely have the opportunity to come across their work in the academic sense. Even in the department that I am getting my degree, this has been the case at times. All of this is to say that in writing my thesis, I am contributing to growth that I want to see. Could another Sāmoan read this thesis and be inspired to continue with academia to pursue a passion project? Yes! Could another Sāmoan read this thesis and realize that they would rather pursue something outside of academia? Sure! Could another Sāmoan read this thesis and be so enraged that they enter academia just to decimate my academic argument? My feelings would be hurt, but it is both valid and possible!

My intention in writing this thesis is not to necessarily encourage others to enter academia; it is an inherently exploitative and tough institution to navigate. Instead, I hope that after reading this, seeing as how I dedicated so much thought and effort into discussing a simple

food item that I have a lot of feelings about, readers will take time to indulge in the smaller things in life that stir their wonder. This was a labor of love for me, and I hope to bear witness to a future where Sāmoans and other Pasifika people can engage in their own labors of love unabashedly. I hope to be part of that future someday.

Appendix: Interview Questions

Spam & Food

1. What thoughts come to mind when you hear "Samoan food?"
2. What dishes come to your mind when you think of "Sāmoan food?"
3. In your opinion, what makes those dishes Sāmoan?
4. When was the first time you tried SPAM?
5. What are your personal thoughts on SPAM?
    a. If positive: what are your favorite dishes that involve SPAM?
    b. If negative: what influenced your perspective on SPAM?
6. Why do you think SPAM is so prevalent in Sāmoan (and by extension other Pacific Islander) communities?

Spam & Fa'alavelave

1. When you think of "fa'alavelave" what comes to mind?
2. How would you define what a "fa'alavelave" is?
3. Why is the "fa'alavelave" important to Sāmoan culture?
4. Could you walk me through the process of the "fa'alavelave?"
5. What foods are usually involved in this process?
    a. Why those particular foods?
6. Have you ever seen SPAM present in these processes?
    a. If yes: how many times and when
    b. If not: could you see SPAM being incorporated into this process?
7. What would it mean for SPAM to be more noticeably incorporated into the fa'alavelave?

a. Potential rephrasing: Would SPAM becoming more prominent in fa'alavelave mean anything for the future of the Sāmoan community?

Food Industry Specific Questions

1. How do you utilize food as a way to build/stay in community? Why is that? What influenced that perception?
2. What are some of your more popular selling dishes? What do you think contributes to their popularity?
3. Do any of your dishes incorporate SPAM? If so, which ones?
4. What are your personal thoughts on SPAM?
5. Why do you think SPAM continues to be a common presence in our communities?
6. How do you go about procuring the SPAM you use (which stores/marts you buy from, how much you buy at a time, where these stores are located, etc.)?

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