Max Amar-Olkus '19

Science Leadership Academy, Philadelphia, Pa.

My father owns a hotdog joint on 17th Street in Philadelphia. Appropriately named "Underdogs," his customers are doormen, cabbies and service workers who come in after the late shift. Though surrounded by luxury residences and hotels, Underdogs asserts its place in Rittenhouse Square as, "a place for the regular guy," my dad says, "open 'til 4 a.m." The restaurant, which offers an endless array of gourmet hotdog choices, which caters to all palates — from peanut butter and jelly to chocolate cayenne mole — became quite successful and soon grew into a second location. And so Underdogs was the backdrop for my typical American upbringing and an experience central to my creative and intellectual point of view.

In my junior year, I encountered an equally important influence: a self-described "devout carnivore" came in to Underdogs and ordered an artery-busting Philly cream cheese dog. "A bold choice," I chuckled, ringing him up for the $7 special that included a side of fries and a large soda. We exchanged some banter and I learned that he was Dominic Episcopo, an artist working on a book of photography called M.E.A.T. America. I eventually became his intern.

As Dominic's assistant, I supported him while he shot various cuts of meat shaped into American iconography: the 50 states, a bust of Lincoln, Elvis' unmistakable silhouette. One day, as Dominic coiled several feet of sausage into the shape of a serpent, he explained, "America is a young nation struggling to define itself, to write its manifesto . . . one that today will be written in animal flesh." Dominic extended his hand, signaling me to pass him a stack of salami cut outs that would garnish this masterpiece; once arranged, they read "DON'T TREAD ON MEAT." After Dominic got the shot, we did what any red-blooded American would do with the sausages: we grilled them and ate them.

Meanwhile, between photo/grilling sessions with Dominic and weekends at the hot dog stand, I wrote a manifesto of my own. For whether you eat your meal standing up at a counter or at a fine dining establishment, food is about class, connection and culture. I saw Underdogs and M.E.A.T. as tributes to the common man. Romantic heroes of the gastronomic wilderness. The Natty Bummpo or Nick Adams of American cuisine. I started to explore these narratives in my independent writing. And then, suddenly and tragically, one of my protagonists died. My father's second hotdog business went under — a devastating loss.

To lift my father's spirits, I interviewed him for a fictional radio program based on my recollections. Though recorded just to satisfy a creative impulse, and to provide a diversion for my father, I was surprised that the program drew out some serious themes. Like failure, resilience, courage. And food. Lots of food. Yet something about the program felt incomplete until we had also touched on humor and optimism, essential American traits. With Dominic's help, I finished off act three, an imaginary interview with a brisket named "Freedom." Feeling proud of the piece, I convinced a teacher to let me turn it in as a class project and received an excellent grade. (A grade that I partly attribute to my flawlessly nasal impression of Ira Glass.)

As I look forward to graduation, I'm excited to further explore my interests in American narratives, aesthetics and culture, preferably at an institution that will challenge my point of view but value my penchant for experimental work. For if I've learned anything in this brief life of mine, it's that the American experience is about playfulness and risks. I look forward to bringing to college a rare curiosity, a big appetite for learning, a taste for intellectual experimentation.