

- 1. Elevator Pitch: I will go to West Bengal, India, to study the cheese-making traditions of South Asia. My goal is to move the conversation beyond paneer, and demonstrate the long non-western history of artisanal cheese production.**
- 2. Application Vision**

After spending my 20s traveling to India to learn about its food history, I came across a curious problem: when I tell people I went to research [turmeric in India](#) or [the potato](#) (a crop, for the record, which is not native to India), people do not bat an eye. But when I tell people I went to India for two months one summer to study the history of cheese in the subcontinent, they become utterly perplexed. “Cheese...in India? You mean paneer, right?”

While paneer is no doubt an important part of South Asia’s cheesemaking heritage, there is also a long history of cheese in India beyond paneer, from Jammu’s kalari (a dense cow or goat cheese patty sautéed in its own fat), to Bengal’s crumbly cow’s milk Bandel. 10 years ago, I spent a month in India working to push the conversation on Indian cheesemaking beyond paneer. This project was deeply important to me to demonstrate the vast diversity of cheesemaking practices around the world: as a food writer and historian, I was shocked that even the most educated cheese professionals thought that the cheese-making world revolved around Euro-American traditions. I wanted to show both how cheesemaking is thriving in India today, but also the long history of that heritage.

To do this, I combined historical research with ethnographic exploration. While I would have loved to focus on multiple parts of the region, given monetary and time restraints, I chose to spend much of my time in West Bengal (aided by the fact that I studied Bengali language in my 20s). I dug through the archives at the Center for Social Sciences in Bengal and found a plethora of 19th century cooking manuals, which both give instructions for different forms of cheese-making as well as use cheese in various recipes. I also apprenticed at J. Johnson Shop in New Market, Kolkata, a purveyor of Bengali cheeses like Bandel and Kalimpong. There, I learned the current art of cheese-making, and how it evolved from its earlier precedents. And, I traveled south for a week to Chennai, to learn from my friend Namrata Sunderesan, whom I met in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic while we took an online cheese sensory class together from the University of Vermont. If J. Johnson taught me the present of cheese-making, Namrata taught me the future: she runs Käse cheese, innovating on both traditional Indian and European styles to create a new and exciting vision of South Asian cheese.

After I concluded this archival and ethnographic research, I put together a few different materials that would reach three disparate (but overlapping) target audiences. First, I wanted to show food scholars—who have by and large ignored the importance of Indian cheese— its significance both historically and today. I published a peer-reviewed article for *Gastronomica* on the history and future of cheese in India drawing on this data, showing how Bengali cheesemakers in the 19th century maintained their own cultural autonomy while learning from and teaching European imperialists about South Asian cheesemaking styles. Thus far, no scholar has written on Indian cheese, and very few make use of Bengali cookbooks for any food exploration. But I also wanted to demonstrate the importance of

## Julia Fine - DZRA Application 2

Indian cheesemaking in the present-day. I pitched an episode on cheese to the Whetstone Media Collective Podcast Bad Table Manners, where I explored this history and interviewed my favorite cheesemakers in India. This podcast was consumed by foodies, as well as people in the food industry. And, finally, I presented my research to cheese-makers and food practitioners, at the American Cheese Society Annual Conference.

I do not say it lightly when I note that this project changed the course of my life. Before DZRA, my knowledge of food was limited to books- I studied fermentation, but only inasmuch as there were records of it in rare books housed in dusty archives. By interacting with cheese-makers today, I was able to weave together the past, present, and future of cheesemaking. Today, I am a food historian and practitioner, working to spread the history and living knowledge of fermentation preserved in every bite of cheese, sip of wine, and morsel of chocolate.

# Julia Fine

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## PROFILE

Food historian and writer working in museums and freelance writing for the past three years

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## EDUCATION

- Sep 2022 — Present **Ph.D. in History, Stanford University** Palo Alto, CA  
Received the Knight-Hennessy Scholarship to study the food history of the British Empire
- Oct 2020 — Jul 2021 **M.Phil in Modern South Asian Studies, University of Cambridge** Cambridge, UK  
Received the C.A. Bayly Prize for Best Dissertation in the MPhil Program, Prize for Best Overall Performance in the Course, Prize Studentship in History & Economics, Cambridge Trust Scholarship, and George Kingsley Roth Scholarship
- Aug 2015 — May 2019 **A.B. in History & Literature, Harvard University** Cambridge, MA  
Graduated *summa cum laude* with a 4.0 GPA. Minors in Social Anthropology and Hindi-Urdu. Received the Thomas Hoopes Thesis Prize, Sophia Freund Prize for graduating at the top of the class, Edward Chandler Cumming Prize for best thesis in major, Oliver-Dabney Junior and Sophomore Essay Prizes, and Detur Book Prize for high academic achievement
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## EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

- Sep 2021 — Present **Plant Humanities Postgraduate Fellow, Dumbarton Oaks** Washington, D.C.  
Write public-facing articles about the cultural importance of plants. Write, design, and code digital exhibits on topics including plants and climate change, plants and food sovereignty, and plants and legacies of enslavement.
- Jun 2021 — Aug 2021 **Project Coordinator, Folger Shakespeare Library** Washington, D.C.  
Coordinated the last few months of the \$1.5 million Mellon-funded "Before 'Farm to Table': Early Modern Foodways and Cultures." Helped design and edit an interactive website on food history.
- Jul 2020 — Nov 2020 **Writing Contributor, Our Daily Planet** Washington, D.C.  
Wrote daily pieces aggregating and analyzing environmental news content.
- Sep 2019 — May 2020 **Humanities Fellow, Folger Shakespeare Library** Washington, D.C.  
Performed scholarly research on turmeric, tea, and chili pepper as part of the Mellon-funded "Before 'Farm to Table': Early Modern Histories and Culture."
- Sep 2016 — May 2019 **Research Assistant, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study** Cambridge, MA  
Edited Professor Tulasi Srinivas' manuscript *The Cow in the Elevator: Ritual Creativity and Wonder in India* (Duke University Press, 2018) and edited her forthcoming work on history of the gin and tonic.
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## AWARDS AND PUBLICATIONS

My work on food has been recognized by the Association of Food Journalists, the James Beard Foundation, the Oxford Food Symposium, the World History Association, the Association for the Study of Food and Society, the American Folklore Society, the American Society of Environmental History, and more.

I have published freelance pieces with Atlas Obscura, Whetstone, JStor Daily, Nursing Clio, and other outlets. I have written scholarly articles and reviews for Digest and Food, Culture, & Society.

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## LANGUAGES

Bengali	Very good command	Urdu	Very good command
Hindi	Highly proficient	Spanish	Good working knowledge