

Sausage Party

Katie Butler's painting "Boys' Club" and a no-recipe recipe for an Oktoberfest picnic



Andrea Gyorody

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Welcome to the latest issue of Weekly Special, a food-art newsletter by Andrea Gyorody.

If you've landed here but you're not yet subscribed, you can do that right now:

Thanks to all who messaged me about the broken button at the bottom of [last week's newsletter about the lobsters of art history](#). I am now properly scared off of trying to do anything fancy with Substack buttons... and will just encourage you to leave comments when you so desire! Because of that busted button, several people emailed me instead to say that they, too, are Mayo People, which means that I have yet to encounter a Butter Person. If you prefer butter to mayo on a lobster roll (or if you, like me, think that sounds criminal), sound off in the comments [here!](#)

The lobster issue ended with Katie Butler's fabulous painting *Three Martini Lunch*, which is currently on view in the [Spring/Break Art Show](#) in New York, where you can see it alongside more of Katie's paintings and drawings. If you haven't yet made it to the fair, you've got TODAY ONLY to catch it before it closes! And if you're not in New York, then you can instead enjoy this issue of Weekly Special, which greatly benefitted from Katie's thoughtful answers to my probing questions about her approach to food-centric still life painting.

Now let's dig in!

This Week's Special

Katie Butler

Boys' Club, 2021

Oil and acrylic on canvas

When I saw Katie Butler's paintings on Instagram several months ago, I immediately added them to my growing list of "must-discuss" works for Weekly Special. I don't recall which work first caught my attention, but I became captivated by *Boys' Club*, a still life painting of a meat-cheese-and-pickle spread (what more could you want??) floating atop the signs of an interior space.



Katie Butler, *Boys' Club*, 2021

Like many of Butler's works, this one has a topsy-turvy composition, where what we would normally expect to recede into space through the illusion of single-point perspective is instead flipped up vertically in the style of a Northern Renaissance tablescape, all the better to see everything at once. This isn't the same as depicting an aerial view; the fields on the left and right of the painting, behind the sausage spread, show what look like (representations of) wallpaper and a chair rail, suggesting vertical space, whereas the picnic, in real life, would presumably be horizontal.

Referencing Cézanne's early work alongside Cubist painting and its collapse of multiple viewpoints into a single composition, Butler uses shifts in perspective to "throw a wrench in the paintings, because I want them to be kind of comfortable and kind of uncomfortable at the same time. I want them to [feel] familiar but also not make a ton of sense."



Katie Butler, *A Seat at the Table*, 2021

Butler's particular approach to painting space comes in part from toggling in recent years between the poles of abstraction and representation. She told me that she made almost exclusively abstract paintings as an undergrad, but worked her way back to representation before grad school and dedicated significant time at Kent State, where she recently graduated with an MFA, to refining her take on the still life.

To my eye, there are strong remnants of abstraction still present in her work: the gingham pattern that recurs throughout her paintings is of course lifted from real-world tablecloths or

napkins, but it's also rendered very flat in a way that shifts it closer to abstraction—to the simple repetitive crossing of lines that constitutes the grid, a recurring motif in modern art from Piet Mondrian to Agnes Martin to McArthur Binion and beyond. Fellow Midwesterner Michelle Grabner (of whom Butler is a big fan) has also specifically explored gingham-as-grid in surprising and compelling ways that comment on domesticity, found objects, originality, abstraction, and so much more, all of which finds a voice in Butler's paintings, too.

The proliferation of pattern in Butler's latest works also stems from spending so much time at home since the onset of the pandemic nearly 18 months ago, a circumstance that forced her to think more pointedly about domestic space. But that isn't the only way that current affairs have crept into her paintings: nearly all of them originate as responses to, or means of processing, contemporary politics.



Katie Butler, *The After Party*, 2021

In a handful of cases, the inciting event is referenced in the work explicitly, as in *The After Party*, where Butler has painted into the scene a copy of *The New Yorker* flipped open to an article (originally titled "The After-Party") about the fate of the GOP post-Trump. In some of Butler's other paintings, titles perform more of the heavy lifting, ultimately creating a bit more

breathing room between the work's form and its content. *Boys' Club*, for example, can be taken at face value as a kind of indoor-picnic still life, but can also be read through its obviously feminist title as a commentary on spaces that exclude and/or demean women—which gives the massive, larger-than-life knives that frame the sausages more than a hint of menace.

Butler told me, somewhat sheepishly, that she found the painting's symbolism "very silly," but I'm into it, especially because the subtle violence suggested in the work is so at odds with Butler's demeanor. "I'm a pretty soft-spoken person," she admitted, "and I want the paintings to be louder, more powerful, than I think I am as a person. That's why I like to work pretty big. I still think the paintings are kind of quiet. But I'm hoping that I can speak louder through the paintings than in person."

Thanks again to Katie for chatting with me for this week's newsletter. If you're interested in her work, check out her [website](#) and follow her on [Instagram](#)!

For Further Eating

Oktoberfest, as all the cool kids know, actually starts not in October, but in mid-September. It was scheduled to begin in Munich this year on September 18, but has once again been canceled due to COVID. All the more reason, I'd say, to take *Boys' Club* as inspiration for an at-home celebration of beer and other Bavarian goodies.

I've been to Oktoberfest exactly once, shortly after landing in Germany on a Fulbright in 2012. Two of my dearest LA friends, Erica and Danny, invited me to meet them for a weekend in Munich, and though there are many things I'd rather do than be surrounded by drunk people in a giant tent, I couldn't say no.

Unsurprisingly, I was less excited about gut-busting volumes of beer than I was about all of the food on offer. I've met lots of people who like to diss on German food, and I did my fair share of complaining about limited options while living there (I met my husband in part

because my OkCupid profile had a line about the Fatherland's lackluster burgers...), but Bavarian food is straight-up *delicious*.

When we arrived at the fairground each day, we'd pick a tent, plant ourselves at whatever unreserved table we could find, order the obligatory beer, and then wait for waitresses to make the rounds with massive, fresh-baked pretzels. Evidence:



The pretzels disappeared fast, and then we'd seek out sausages—usually Weißwurst, delicate veal and pork sausages that come in a ceramic pot of cooking water (like a little meat sauna) with a side of mustard. When we got tired of sitting around in the tent, we'd wander back to the hotel, nap, and then visit the part of the grounds set up more like a county fair, where we ate—more times than probably advisable—the most delectable rotisserie chicken I've ever had in my life. It was super salty and fatty, instantly soaking through the flimsy waxed paper it was served on. We ate it with our hands, grease dripping everywhere, and could practically feel it soaking up the liters and liters of beer we'd consumed earlier. The fact that I have no surviving photos of the chicken tells you exactly how good it was.

And there was more! In the fancy Hippodrom tent, which was decked out in a circus theme that year, we drank Sekt cocktails and ate bowls of Käsespätzle while we watched German

businesspeople sit down to banquets of cold cuts, pretzels, and radishes with butter and brown bread.



The Hippodrom tent, 2012

By the end of three days, I was done with drunk (Italian) tourists and waiting in lines and dodging scenes of public urination in what is otherwise one of the cleanest cities in Europe. But I'll always fondly remember all of the *deftig*, soul-satisfying food we ate, and how much it reminded me of the best things my grandmother made for me as a child.

Oktoberfest Picnic Spread

Serves however many you want



Inspired by Oktoberfest, and also by the Brotzeit (literally, “bread time”) platters I encountered in German taverns and wine cellars, I put together a Labor Day picnic last weekend with the works:

- two kinds of **sausage** (slightly *pikant*, pan-fried Hungarian links and *Weißwurst*, which is typically eaten for breakfast but should really be enjoyed all day IMO)
- **soft pretzels** (more on these below)
- **cold cuts** (all variations on ham, but you can do whatever makes you happy)
- **cheese** (sliced Muenster and smoked Gouda)
- **radishes** with coarse salt for dipping
- **dense “Fitness Bread”** (another brown bread that can stand up to a lot of mustard would also work)
- **pickles** (these are my fave—kinda like American bread-and-butter pickles but just better)
- **spicy mustard**

- and the **paprika-seasoned chips** that are a ubiquitous German party staple.

To find legit German ingredients, I drove an hour each way to a specialty market in Orange County, a surreal time-and-space-warp of a store that sells virtually everything you need to recreate a Bavarian spread in Southern California. Depending on what you can get and how much labor you want to perform, you can make your Oktoberfest as simple or as elaborate as you desire—if you don't care about having really specific German flavors on the table, then just play with any old charcuterie!

I'll leave you, though, with one trick worth replicating, no matter the rest of your spread. When I was in Munich years ago for a small symposium, the caterers served us soft pretzels that had been sliced in half and filled with a very neat schmear of herbed butter. I think I ate two on the spot and took another one home wrapped in a napkin for a midnight snack; they were a revelation. The German market I visited here had tubes of compound butter ready to go, but you can easily make it yourself, with whatever flavor profile you want. Slicing the pretzels might seem intimidating, but you just need to treat them like cakes being halved into layers: hold the pretzel down securely, face up, and slowly saw the knife horizontally from one side to the other, trying to keep the knife as parallel to the cutting board as possible so you get an even cut. Pop the pretzel open, schmear the butter on one side, close, chill for a bit if the butter needs firming, then eat like a sandwich. You won't regret the extra effort.

Thank you for reading!

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