

HUNT: This is Scandalized. A podcast of political impropriety. I'm Charlie Hunt.

KETTLER: And I'm Jackie Kettler. We know a lot of you are hungry for more Scandalized, so we're really excited to share that in 2026, we're coming back with a full second season. You'll get eight new jam packed episodes of sometimes serious, sometimes silly missteps by politicians that offer valuable lessons about American politics. As always, we'll dish the details through our expert lens as political scientists.

HUNT: In the meantime, we thought we'd offer, appropriately enough, a few appetizers while you wait -- five shorter episodes to whet your appetites while we work on the main course. This week, our first installment, where we'll be diving into just a few of the many ways politicians have embarrassed themselves with food on the campaign trail and in-office and what these food faux pas tell us about politics and what voters really care about. Let's get into it.

HUNT: So we're going to start things off today with a couple examples of politicians using, or maybe we should say, misusing food as a way to signal closeness or affiliation with a particular place, the place they're representing or are running to represent. Different places are famous for different kinds of foods and food cultures. So it's not so surprising that candidates and elected officials would use food as a way of trying to appear relatable, or maybe authentically local to the people who live there and whose votes they are trying to win in the election.

KETTLER: Right. We often talk about the nationalization of American politics on this podcast, this idea that our elections are centered less and less on specifically where you're running and more around national issues, ideas and party loyalties. There are also arguments that we increasingly have a monoculture, that regional and local culture is diminishing and kind of disappearing. For example, we're losing some regional or local accents.

HUNT: Which is a tragedy. Jackie, especially if you've ever met my dad.

KETTLER: He does have an excellent accent. I always enjoy listening to it. But there are still some areas, for example, maybe some parts of Rhode Island where there are still some local norms and accents, things like this that are really important to follow, especially for candidates. Dealing with food, seems like one really tangible way where politicians might be wise to follow these local customs.

HUNT: Exactly. And so we're going to start with what in my book is the pitch perfect example of this phenomenon. It's a story so perfect that I have included it in a peer reviewed journal article of mine. And so this is literally kind of a textbook example of this. It's actually the most recent one we're going to cover today from just a couple of years ago during the 2022 congressional elections. This is a race for the US Senate in Pennsylvania, the swingiest of swing states, and it's an open seat race.

KETTLER: Most members of Congress running for reelection win their race, so open seat races are generally the opportunity for Non-incumbents to win a seat in Congress.

HUNT: Right? And so as a result, there's a lot of interest in this seat from candidates and from the media. There are competitive primaries for both the Democrats and the Republicans, and there's lots of drama. John Fetterman, for example, who at the time was the lieutenant governor, had suffered a stroke just days before the Democratic primary. But he won anyway. By August, he's beginning to recover and make a couple of video appearances, but he's clearly not really able to actively campaign at this time. But fortunately for Fetterman, he drew a very flawed Republican opponent who already had some of his own name recognition: Mehmet Oz, more widely known as Doctor Oz, the television doctor and daytime talk show host.

KETTLER: And we should note, even before what we're going to talk about here today, Oz had plenty of baggage. No prior political experience, something political science tells us matters in campaigns and some maybe not so medically sound practices on his television show, where he was often hawking supplements and remedies for things like weight loss that didn't really have any expert medical backing.

HUNT: On the other hand, though, Oz clearly did have some communication experience and charisma from his TV career. And with that, of course, comes name recognition, which we also know matters a lot in down ballot races like these. Especially to your point, Jackie, where there's no well-known incumbent. But all this didn't really do him any favors after he released this video from his campaign, where he's seen in a Pennsylvania grocery store doing a little shopping.

OZ: I thought I'd do some grocery shopping. I'm at "Wegner's" and my wife wants some vegetables for Crudit , right? So here's a broccoli. That's two bucks. Not a ton of broccoli there. There's some asparagus. That's \$4. Yep. Carrots. That's \$4. That's \$10 of vegetables there. And then we need some guacamole. That's \$4 or more. And she loves salsa. Yeah. Salsa there. \$6. Must be a shortage of salsa. Guys. That's \$20 for crudit .

And this doesn't include the tequila. I mean, it's outrageous. We got Joe Biden to thank for this.

HUNT: Jackie, I've watched this video so many times. I'm pretty sure I could quote it by heart.

KETTLER: Yeah. You know, as a piece of campaign content, it's pretty entertaining. But let's take this piece by piece here. Charlie, what is it about this video that created such a big headache for Oz's campaign?

HUNT: So first of all, you know, we talked about accents before. Listeners may have detected Doctor Oz's New Jersey accent, and that's because he's actually from New Jersey. This is not ideal for a Senate race that obviously is taking place in Pennsylvania. We talked about this a little bit last season with our old friend Tommy Tuberville. Even though Oz was eligible to run for office in Pennsylvania using another address there, his Jersey roots clearly slipped through a few times. Like, for example, when he recorded one of his campaign commercials at his home in New Jersey. And in this particular video, he really steps in it by referring to the grocery store he's in as Wegner's. The problem here, Jackie, is that there is no grocery store called Wegner's.

NEWS ANCHOR: First, there's no store called Wegner's, which is what he says he's at, Oz probably meant to say Redner's, which is a Pennsylvania-based supermarket chain, but got it confused with Wegmans, which is a fancier grocery chain in Pennsylvania and throughout the northeast, with many locations in New Jersey where Oz, of course, actually lives. And so Redner's and Wegmans became Wegner's.

KETTLER: Okay, so this isn't ideal. There's already a narrative out there about him being from New Jersey and without these Pennsylvania roots what he's essentially done here is showcase this weakness.

HUNT: Yeah, exactly. And there's another element of this that I think compounds the situation and makes it even worse. And that's the really kind of out of touch way in which he's picking out the groceries and trying to make his point about inflation. I think actually, that Oz's issue here is summed up pretty well by one of my favorite moments from one of my favorite TV shows, "Arrested Development."

ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT: You're the one who charged his own brother for a Bluth frozen banana. I mean, it's one banana, Michael. What could it cost, \$10? You've never actually set foot in a supermarket, have you?

KETTLER: So clearly, there's the concerns about not being from Pennsylvania. But now it also seems like he may just be out of touch with people in general. I mean, he is estimated to be worth between \$100 million and \$300 million. So perhaps he's not someone who regularly shops for his own groceries.

HUNT: Yeah. I mean, I think the use of the term crudité really drives this home. I have to say, before this whole incident, I had never heard the term crudité in my entire life.

KETTLER: I will say it was not one that I commonly use either.

HUNT: Yeah, and I think there's also this weird choice of ingredients, right? Guac and salsa as the only two ingredients for a veggie tray. Like he's grabbing with what to my mind is more carrots and asparagus than any person could ever eat. And I'm also really wondering where the tequila fits into this situation.

KETTLER: I mean, it's an interesting collection of items that you could make an interesting and delicious dinner with. It's just a weird packaging in the moment.

HUNT: Tequila and asparagus, my favorite combo. Uh, and Oz actually offers his own explanation for mixing up Redner's and Wegmans.

NEWS ANCHOR: And I mean to fixate on it. But just for those watching in Pennsylvania, you know how particular many people are about their groceries. What happened with Wegman's and Wegner's? Can you explain that to them?

OZ: Yeah. I was exhausted. When you're campaigning 18 hours a day. Listen, I've gotten my kids names wrong as well.

HUNT: What's your take on this explanation, Jackie? I mean, these are pretty intense campaigns, right?

KETTLER: Yeah. I mean, these types of mistakes can definitely happen after a long day of campaigning. And Doctor Oz would not be the first to struggle with a minor slip up of one sort or another, especially in a contested race. I mean, they're just going, going, going all the time, right? Like, it's this high stress environment. So I do have some sympathy for how mistakes get made.

HUNT: But on the other hand. Right. This is a prerecorded video that they put out, right? It wasn't live streamed. This wasn't part of an interview. And so, you know, one thing here is that if you had a campaign with locals, with people from Pennsylvania on it, surely this is something they would have caught and recognized that Wegner's is not a grocery store that exists in real life.

KETTLER: Yeah, that's pretty bad. It definitely seems like a rookie mistake.

HUNT: Now, before we leave this story, Jackie, I have to ask. So we're both in Idaho. We're on Boise State Public Radio. If someone's running for office here, like, what's the version of this mistake that they could make here? And maybe what's the best way they could, you know, make a good choice with the grocery store they're going to if they're recording their own version of the Oz video?

KETTLER: Well, I'm not entirely sure what grocery store they might make up, since that seems to have been part of Doctor Oz's problem here. I could see, you know, candidates being like, okay, Albertsons is going to be our where we're going to go. It's an Idaho company based here in Boise. But I think if you really want to connect with a lot of us common voters, it's WinCo that you really want to want to go to.

HUNT: It's got to be it's got to be WinCo. I think, you know, growing up in Rhode Island, there's my own version of this, which is sort of, you know, you've got Stop and Shop all around the area, which is kind of the Albertsons of, of New England. But if you really want to sort of go for the common man, you got to go to Shaw's. As long as we're not going to Whole Foods, probably not the best, uh, the best choice for a campaign.

KETTLER: So, Charlie, for another example of this, I'm going to bring us to a place where residents take their food choices very, very seriously. New York City, as a variety of politicians have discovered, New Yorkers have strong opinions about the right way to eat local cuisine, which of course includes the food most Americans associate first with NYC pizza.

HUNT: I'm going to try to get through this segment without desperately wanting a slice of pizza, but go ahead.

KETTLER: So in January 2014, in his first month of his tenure as mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio ate with a group of constituents at Goodfellas, an Italian restaurant in Staten Island. However, when the pizza arrived, he ate it with a knife and fork.

NEWS ANCHOR: This scandalous picture mayor Bill de Blasio caught on camera eating pizza with a fork and knife. The horror. Ladies and gentlemen.

HUNT: I can already see where this is going. Does not seem ideal. And speaking of the common man, maybe not the way everybody eats a slice of pizza.

KETTLER: Yeah, so hashtag fork gate quickly went viral with numerous media posts mocking de Blasio. According to USA Today. He, quote, committed a cardinal sin.

HUNT: Harsh.

KETTLER: New York Post wrote that he quote, shunned years of Big Apple custom and you might enjoy this pizza chain Sbarro posted on social media that de Blasio, quote, violated New York City pizza code.

HUNT: I have to say, this is a little rich coming from Sbarro, which although it was started in New York, it is like it's the pizza chain that.

KETTLER: It's like in malls.

HUNT: Yeah. I recently got a couple of slices at an airport in Iceland, so I don't think most residents would go there for a New York slice. It is actually where Michael Scott goes to get a New York slice in the office when he visits the Big Apple, which should probably tell you everything you need to know about Sbarro's authenticity.

Michael Scott: I always like to come to New York a little bit early and hit some of my favorite haunts, like right here is my favorite New York pizza joint, and I'm gonna go get me a New York slice.

HUNT: But Jackie, they might still have a point, right? Like, these are food dishes that are part of what makes these places what they are, right? They're a source of identity and identification. So if you do, you know, violate the pizza code in some way, then maybe it's a kind of a giveaway that you're not an authentic member of the community.

KETTLER: Following up on that point, a friend of the mayor and resident of Staten Island who was also at the restaurant, told The New York Times that eating pizza with a fork is blasphemy and then shared, quote, he's from Boston. He doesn't know any better.

HUNT: Ouch.

KETTLER: Which is true. De Blasio was born in Manhattan, but mostly grew up in Boston, then moved back in the 1980s. Much of the reporting about the pizza eating gaffe also brings up that de Blasio is a fan of the Boston Red Sox.

HUNT: So, okay, like de Blasio, I also grew up a Sox fan, so I have some sympathy for aspiring mayors of of any cities who aren't Yankees fans. Obviously, that would be the biggest scandal of all because the Yankees are terrible. But we can see right how this likely annoyed many New Yorkers. It's not just that he wasn't raised in New York and on New York sports, it's that it was the worst city imaginable, this rival city of Boston.

KETTLER: You know, perhaps because I'm a midwesterner, but beyond frequently recommending that people should dip their pizza in ranch dressing, I don't really have strong personal views about the correct way to eat a pizza. Charlie, why was this such a terrible misstep? It really seems like a minor gaffe. So why can committing a faux pas like this become such a firestorm?

HUNT: Well, I have to start by saying that I hate ranch dressing and think dipping pizza in it is really gross.

KETTLER: But to be fair, I don't always do it. It's just, you know, sometimes a nice extra treat.

HUNT: Sure, sure. Um, but, you know, on this question of whether this was really a big misstep, it can make you look, as we talked about, kind of out of touch and inauthentic, uh, maybe not so much a man of the people, which was a problem, maybe, since the major focus of de Blasio's campaign for mayor in 2013 was addressing income inequality and representing all New Yorkers instead of just a few. This served as a pretty significant contrast with the person who was mayor before him, someone we might remember, Michael Bloomberg, who was and is one of the wealthiest people in the world. And for whatever his strengths as a politician and mayor was not someone we would exactly think of as the as a man of the people. And so, you know, one of the ways you can demonstrate this kind of relatability with people, this idea that, you know, I am one of you is by having deep local ties or at least performing them well if you don't have them. And this could have been a way to do it. And he kind of missed the target.

KETTLER: So when I think about local politics and elections, like running for mayor, serving as mayor, it's really easy to see how those deep local ties plays a role. But it could be a little challenging for candidates campaigning for like, an office with a bigger

geographic jurisdiction. Right, Charlie? I mean, what about I mean, what are some of the challenges for presidential candidates that need to travel across the country.

HUNT: Right. So, I mean, presidential candidates are swinging through a ton of these states. They're usually doing so quickly, and they need to engage immediately in these places' food cultures. So, you know, one example that comes to mind that folks old enough will certainly remember is, uh, John Kerry, who we talked about last season campaigning in Pennsylvania. Uh, he ordered a Philly cheesesteak, and he asked the person serving it if he could have it with Swiss cheese. Uh, the steak joint said they didn't carry Swiss and instead just gave him a classic Philly cheesesteak, which would be described by Philadelphians as a whiz wit, meaning cheese whiz with onions, and in this case, right. So just like the cheesesteak is sort of a food icon for Philly, like it's something we think of when we think of Philly. So is pizza for New York City. And so if you're going to go for it in this situation, especially if you're on camera, you'd kind of better get it right.

KETTLER: And speaking to your point about authenticity and local roots, the New York Daily News wrote that, quote, the mayor of New York City eats his pizza like a tourist. Jon Stewart, a well-known New Yorker, expanded on this in his animated response.

Jon Stewart: Look, I understand there's a learning curve to being a mayor, but here's lesson number one: learn how to eat your city's signature dish. If you were Mayor of Philadelphia, would you eat a cheesesteak with a knife and fork? If you were mayor of Buffalo, would you eat chicken wings with a knife and fork if you...

KETTLER: So what is the right way to eat a slice of pizza in New York, Charlie?

HUNT: Yeah. So apparently the right way is, I mean, with your hands above all else, right? No knife, no fork. And if we're talking about sort of a classic, really big New York slice of pizza, you are going to want to fold the pizza pretty much in half lengthwise so that the narrow end of the pizza, the part away from the crust, doesn't just flop over, right? So it's easier to eat. This generally is how I eat any pizza, though. My main reason for doing so is that it allows you to fit the maximum amount of pizza into your mouth at one time.

KETTLER: I like that there's some sort of geometry taking place, like how much pizza can I get in my mouth?

HUNT: That's simple math at the end of the day. Yes. So one of our regular segments on the podcast, Jackie, is what were they thinking? How did de Blasio defend himself in eating pizza with a fork and a knife?

KETTLER: Well, he pretty quickly provided an explanation. Here's de Blasio sharing with the news crew why he eats pizza with a fork.

Bill de Blasio: In my ancestral homeland, it is more typical to eat with a fork and knife.

KETTLER: It may not surprise you, Charlie, that Jon Stewart wasn't too impressed with that response.

Jon Stewart: I get it, I get it. You're Italian.

Jon Stewart: I get it, you're Italian. You're just respecting your native lands customs. One thing, though, were you elected the mayor of Italy? No. Look out the window of the pizzeria you are currently shaming. Did you see a Sistine Chapel or Leaning Tower of Pisa out the window? You don't. You see several junkyards and a tanning salon. You know why? Cause you're in Staten Island.

KETTLER: So what do you think?

HUNT: Well, I actually have maybe a pretty hot take, which is that this was maybe not politically wise, but is also, I think, actually a perfectly defensible way of eating pizza. First of all, like, he's not grabbing a giant slice and taking it on the go, as often happens in New York City. He's sitting down for lunch with a sort of classic 12 inch pie. Second of all, lots of other people at the table who are all, you know, probably pretty authentic. New Yorkers are also using a fork and a knife. I'm also not sure I really buy his explanation about his Italian heritage, but he is not wrong that it is a lot more common in Italy to use a fork and a knife on their pizzas, which are usually in this single pie style, rather than like one giant New York slice.

KETTLER: And to de Blasio's credit, he went on The Daily Show a few weeks later, eating pizza with Jon Stewart and poking fun at himself for eating pizza with a knife and a fork.

HUNT: And this is, I mean, a good way. I would say generally to deal with scandals or gaffes like these, sort of deflecting criticism and trying to connect with the audience by using humor, sort of owning up to the mistake and going on a show like The Daily Show.

HUNT: This episode was written by me, Charlie Hunt, and my co-host Jackie Kettler. It was produced and edited by me. Our theme music is by Dear Room with incidental sound from Shutterstock music. For more sources and info on all of our episodes, head over to www.scandalizedpod.com Next time on scandalized.

Unknown: I love hot dogs. I love them in buns. I love them outside of buns. I love them with baked beans. I just like hot dogs. It's the best meat there is, without question.

HUNT: Our culinary journey continues with some more embarrassing mishaps with food.

Seth Meyers: Rising Republican party star Senator Marco Rubio gave the rebuttal to the state of the Union on Tuesday. But all anyone is talking about is this moment here when he awkwardly took a drink of water.

HUNT: Including some with an international flavor.

NEWS ANCHOR: Just repeating word in only seconds ago, US President George Bush has collapsed during a state dinner in Tokyo and was rushed to hospital.