In this paper drawn from his in-progress book manuscript, Yuppies: Wall Street and the Remaking of New York (Harvard University Press), Dylan Gottlieb examines yuppie gourmet culture, revealing how it emerged from the increasingly-unequal consumer landscape of the 1970s and 1980s. In those years, shifts in the American economy (as well as in family structure and gender relations) split the once-broad middle class in two: an upwardly-mobile metropolitan professional class on the one hand, and a downwardly-mobile class of workers on the other. Even as most Americans' real wages fell, yuppie households saw their income, and, more importantly, their levels of disposable income, soar higher. A chasm—a disposable income gap—now divided the American middle-class market.

This paper explores how that divide remade the world of food and restaurants. It discusses retailers' efforts to segment and pursue the yuppie consumer. It charts the rise of New York gourmet outlets like The Silver Palate, Food Emporium, and Dean & Deluca. It tracks the emergence of a new sidewalk café culture. And it recounts how the Zagat guide—created by two corporate lawyers in 1979 to “democratize” fine dining—became a way for professionals to demonstrate their expertise, high salaries,
and education. (It is no accident that the guide was designed to fit in the pocket of a business suit jacket.) Ultimately, yuppie gourmet culture was far from democratizing: it erected new hierarchies of taste that reflected and reinforced broader inequalities in late-twentieth-century America.

Amy Bentley of New York University will provide introductory comment.

Attendees are encouraged to read Gottlieb’s paper, “Good Taste: Yuppie Gourmet Culture in the Age of Inequality”. The paper will be sent two weeks prior to the seminar to those who have registered--registration for this event is via Eventbrite. A Zoom invite will be sent to registrants a day before the seminar. Questions—contact Carol Lockman at clockman@hagley.org.