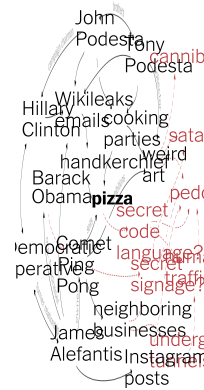


- [Share](#)



By GREGOR AISCH, JON HUANG and [CECILIA KANG](#) DEC. 10, 2016

How the #PizzaGate conspiracy theory evolved

- ❶ WikiLeaks began releasing emails hacked from the account of John Podesta, Hillary Clinton's campaign chairman, a month before the election.
- ❷ Social media users on a popular Reddit forum dedicated to Donald J. Trump and 4chan's far-right fringe message board searched the releases for evidence of wrongdoing.
- ❸ Within the emails were discussions that include the word pizza, including dinner plans between Mr. Podesta and his lobbyist brother, Tony Podesta.
- ❹ A participant on 4chan connected the phrase "cheese pizza" to pedophiles, who on chat boards use the initials "c.p." to denote child pornography.
- ❺ Following the use of "pizza," theorists focused on the Washington pizza restaurant Comet Ping Pong. The WikiLeaks emails revealed that John Podesta corresponded with Comet's owner, James Alefantis, who had connections to Democratic operatives.
- ❻ The theory started snowballing, taking on the meme #PizzaGate. Fake news articles emerged and were spread on Twitter and Facebook.
- ❼ The false stories swept up neighboring businesses and bands that had played at Comet. Theories about kill rooms, underground

tunnels, satanism and even cannibalism emerged in fabricated stories and on social media.

- On Dec. 4, Edgar M. Welch, a 28-year-old from North Carolina, arrived at Comet with a military-style rifle and a handgun. The police said he fired the rifle inside the pizzeria, hurting no one, and surrendered after finding no evidence to support claims of child slaves being held there.
- The shooting did not put the theory to rest. Purveyors of the theory and fake news pointed to the mainstream media as conspirators of a coverup to protect what they said was a crime ring.

The conspiracy theory took the internet by storm. YouTube clips pushed the false story, racking up hundreds of thousands of views. Tens of thousands of individuals subscribed to message boards, feeding into theories with fake news reports and crowd-driven detective work. The police refuted the claims of an online pedophile ring running out of Comet Ping Pong, but the theories continued. Here are eight that gave #PizzaGate momentum.

Claim: Podesta's leaked emails contained secret code language.

Combing through John Podesta's leaked emails, members of a far-right fringe community on the social media site 4chan and Trump supporters on Reddit pulled out a number of emails unconnected to politics. Several of them mentioned pizza or other Italian food.

Did you leave a handkerchief

FROM: Susan Sandler 09-02-2014
TO: John Podesta

The realtor found a handkerchief (I think it has a map that seems pizza-related. Is it yours? They can send it if you want. I know you're busy, so feel free not to respond if it's not yours or you don't want it.

Source: [Wikileaks](#)

FROM: John Podesta 09-04-2014
TO: Susan Sandler

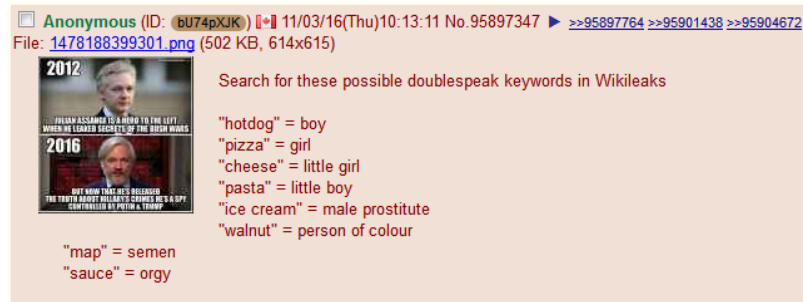
It's mine, but not worth worrying about.

Source: [Wikileaks](#)

The most cited email revolved around a handkerchief left at a house Mr. Podesta visited with a real estate agent. It led to speculation that the handkerchief and map on it were clues to some sort of wrongdoing.

Claim: The emails contained coded messages about pedophilia.

The term "cheese pizza" had previously been used on 4chan as code for "child pornography." An anonymous user speculated that other food-related terms could also have double meanings.



An anonymous post on 4chan's "so-called alt-right" discussion board in November.

This interpretation spread, and other emails containing supposed code words were reinterpreted as evidence of pedophile activity. For example, this 2015 email was taken as an inquiry about providing sexual services.

Walnut sauce?

FROM: Jim Steyer
TO: John Podesta and Mary Podesta
04-11-2015

Hey John,

We know you're a true master of cuisine and we have appreciated that for years ...

But walnut sauce for the pasta? Mary, plz tell us the straight story, was the sauce actually very tasty?

Source: [Wikileaks](#)

FROM: John Podesta
TO: Jim Steyer and Mary Podesta
04-11-2015

It's an amazing Ligurian dish made with crushed walnuts made into a paste. So stop being so California.

Source: [Wikileaks](#)

The Podesta brothers were famous in Washington circles for their Italian cooking and big salon and fund-raising dinners, [often cooked by their mother](#).

Claim: Comet Ping Pong is at the center of it.

Some pizza-related emails mentioned a Washington pizzeria, Comet Ping Pong, whose owner is connected to prominent Democratic figures. An email about a pizza fund-raiser there fed speculation about sex parties.

Comet Ping Pong and OBAMA...and Podesta?.

FROM: James Alefantis
TO: John Podesta
09-27-2008

Hello. Some young lawyer type friends of mine are hosting an Obama Fundraiser at Comet Ping Pong on Thursday Night and then watching the debate. Should be about 150 people and they are raising between 25 and 35 thousand dollars. Would you be willing to stop by around 8 o'clock or so and make a little speech. They (and I) would be thrilled to have you of course. I understand if you are not available.

Also, I saw that you are reading at Politics & Prose soon. What can we do afterward? Would you like to have a dinner at my places!?

Big or small. What do you think?

The pizza parlor owner was swept into the rumormongering on message boards. Amateur online sleuths linked the pizzeria's signage to satanic symbols. Fake stories emerged putting the restaurant in the center of a child-trafficking ring.



A conspiracy theorist analyzes Comet Ping Pong's signage. DC PizzaGate

Claim: An Instagram photo is proof of a link between Obama and Comet Ping Pong.

A photo of President Obama playing table tennis was used by conspiracy theorists to connect him to the pizza restaurant. In a video, this photo is introduced with "here is Obama at Comet Ping Pong."



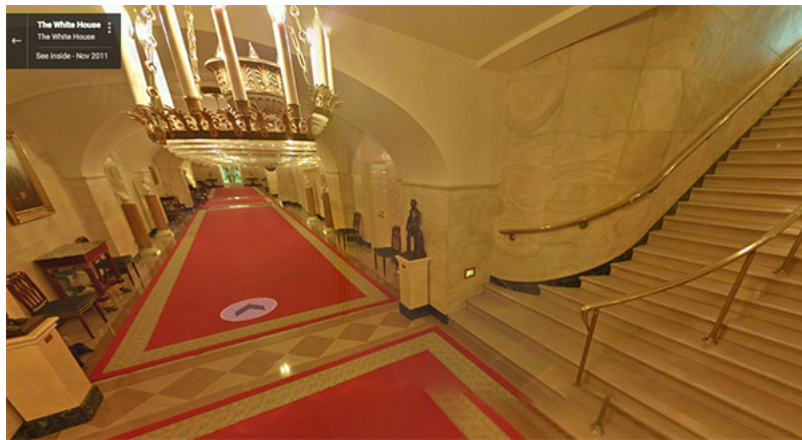
Scene from the "#PizzaGate - What We Know So Far" video YouTube

However, this photo is of a framed picture within the White House, and the original photograph was taken inside the White House, not the Comet Ping Pong restaurant. Mr. Alefantis took the picture of the photograph at the White House and posted it on his Instagram account, according to a spokesperson for the restaurant.



From "Celebrities Playing Table Tennis," original submission by Timmy La

Inside the White House, where the picture was taken.



[Google Streetview](#)

Claim: Comet Ping Pong and other nearby businesses use pedophile symbols in logos.

According to an F.B.I. document [released by WikiLeaks](#), the following symbols are used by pedophiles to identify sexual preferences.



"Boy lover"



"Girl lover"



"Little boy lover"



"Child lover"

Conspiracy theorists claimed that other design elements used by businesses near the Comet Ping Pong restaurant also resembled pedophile symbols.



Besta Pizza logo



Icon found on Terasol website



Comet Ping Pong logo



Symbol found in Comet Ping Pong menu

However, countless other major American brand logos contain similar shapes. Hearts, triangles and spirals are widely used symbols in business

logos.



AOL



Wall's ice-cream

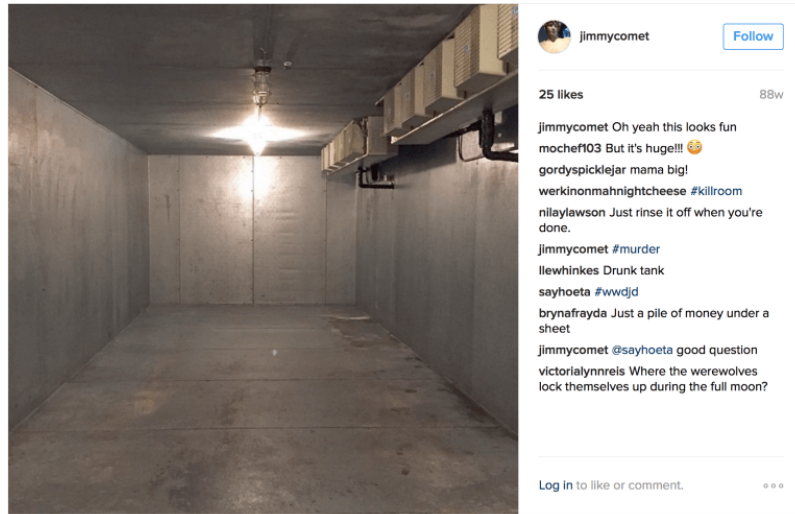


Time Warner Cable



MSN

Claim: Comet Ping Pong had a secret kill room and posted a picture of it on Instagram.
Fake stories claimed underground tunnels and child trafficking in the basement.



Instagram

The photo shows a walk-in refrigerator supposedly in the restaurant, described as part of a network of underground facilities. However, a reporter can confirm that there is no basement in Comet Ping Pong.

Comet's spokesperson said the photo was taken during a visit to a restaurant Mr. Alefantis was considering leasing. Comet uses a low-slung refrigerator at Buck's Fishing & Camping, Mr. Alefantis's other restaurant two doors down on the same block, to store produce, cheese and proofing dough.



The walk-in refrigerator filled with Comet's ingredients. Photo by Cecilia Kang

Claim: The owner of Comet Ping Pong admitted he was a pedophile – on a T-shirt.



Instagram



This photo was found on James Alefantis's Instagram account, and #PizzaGate believers claimed it as proof that he is a pedophile.

However, the man with the black T-shirt was not James Alefantis. It was a co-owner of a different restaurant in Washington, named [L'Enfant Cafe-Bar](#).

(And in case you're wondering, that restaurant was named after [Pierre Charles L'Enfant](#), an American colonist from France who served under George Washington during the Revolutionary War.)

LivingSocial Presents: L'Enfant Cafe



Claim: John and Tony Podesta personally kidnapped Madeleine McCann from her bed at a Portugal resort in 2007.

Another part of the conspiracy theory was a supposed link between the Podesta brothers and the child abduction case of Madeleine McCann on May 3, 2007. Two e-fit (electronic facial identification technique) photos released by British detectives were repeatedly used as evidence.



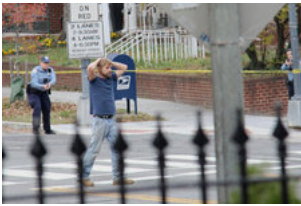
A conspiracy theory poster comparing the Podesta brothers and police sketches. This version has been edited to remove Madeleine McCann's image.

However, the two e-fits were based on descriptions of a [single suspect](#) by two witnesses, not two different suspects, a crucial detail that was left out.

According to The Guardian, the witnesses described the man as “white, aged between 20 and 40, with short brown hair, of medium build, medium height and clean shaven.” In 2007, Tony Podesta was 64 and John Podesta was 58.

The information that the Podestas were in Portugal is solely sourced to “FBI Anon,” quoted in Victurus Libertas, a conspiracy-minded news site that suggests, among other things, that the Titanic was deliberately sunk and that the queen of England is a reptilian alien.

More on NYTimes.com



[In Washington Pizzeria Attack, Fake News Brought Real Guns](#)

[DEC. 5, 2016](#)



[Man Motivated by ‘Pizzagate’ Conspiracy Theory Arrested in Washington Gunfire](#)

[DEC. 5, 2016](#)



[Fake News Onslaught Targets Pizzeria as Nest of Child-Trafficking](#)

[NOV. 21, 2016](#)



[Donald Trump Ties C.I.A. Reports on Russian Meddling to Democrats’ Shame](#)

[Dec. 11, 2016](#)



[Trump, Mocking Claim That Russia Hacked Election, at Odds with G.O.P.](#)