It’s dinner time at Professor Beth Wilensky’s house, and all of the food is spread out on her dining room table. Wrap sandwiches are identifiable by color-coded toothpicks, and a nearby sheet of paper lists all the ingredients. Given the discussion that’s about to take place, the food labels are very important—almost as important as the food itself.

This is no ordinary dinner party. Wilensky is hosting an in-home mini-seminar at her house on Ann Arbor’s north side; the topic is food and the law. This is one of several mini-seminars that 2Ls, 3Ls, and LL.M. students can take for one credit and a pass/fail grade. The popular courses allow professors to step outside of the boundaries of their normal course offerings, and for students to learn about everything from medical ethics to legal issues in Bollywood films to legal practice during the Civil War.

And, of course, food. More than a dozen students take their wrap sandwiches to the comfy green sofa and the dining room chairs circling Wilensky’s living room. They dive into the discussion about food labeling between bites. Italian prosciutto laws—let’s start there. European Union law protects the name of a specific type of the meat, so that something sold as prosciutto di Parma must in fact come from the Parma region of Italy.

“Can you make the argument that it’s for the protection of the consumer, and not just the manufacturer?” asks Wilensky,
clinical assistant professor in the Legal Practice Program.

The conversation soon turns to the labeling of food allergens, organic products, kosher food, Kobe beef, and—a topic close to many college students’ hearts—beer purity. Should the government be in charge of these labels, or should private organizations? How much faith should consumers place in the labels, and how much should they rely on their own research?

“If you’re really passionate about buying organic or buying kosher,” says 3L Joseph Jones, “shouldn’t you do your own research?” Asks 3L Joseph Wang: When does the government’s labeling become shorthand for people who would rather not take the time to do their own food research?

In the middle of the discussion, Wilensky’s 5-year-old daughter, Josephine, makes an appearance. With wet hair and Dora pajamas, she’s not the typical visitor to a law class—but she is a welcome one, it is clear, when the students gush over the paper bracelets she has made for them.

That kind of personal touch is common at the mini-seminars, which Dean Evan Caminker asked faculty to teach. “We already have close relations between students and faculty with lots of out-of-class interaction, but given that so many students and faculty live near campus, I thought we could improve even on a strong base and really take advantage of our geography,” Caminker notes.

“We also have so many faculty from whom students should really take a class, but that often doesn’t work because of scheduling conflicts or lack of interest in the particular courses that faculty teach. I thought this was a way to enable students to spend a little time getting to know various faculty in an informal, personal way without having to take a substantial course with them.”

Not all the classes occur at professors’ homes. Professor Vikramaditya Khanna taught “Hollywood, Bollywood, and the Law: The Globalization of the Entertainment Industry” in classrooms at the Law School because he needed access to the technology and big screens to show movies. But these courses, too, had a personal touch. Khanna brought in Indian food for the lectures, including chai that was redolent of cardamom, samosas, and fried vegetable pakoras with chutneys on the side.

Sound good? It did to the students, who returned for second and sometimes third helpings during the discussion about the way Bollywood movies are distributed. Khanna explained that the amount spent on marketing is a small part of the system for movies in India, comprising only about 10 percent of a film’s budget compared with as much as half the budget of a Hollywood film.

He also described 800-seat movie houses once common throughout India, in which rickshaw drivers would take the front rows—the cheap seats—and proposition the heroine as soon as she appeared on screen. Families and ladies, meanwhile, would sit in the balcony. All of that is changing now with the prevalence of cinema halls at shopping malls, complete with sit-down food service and reclining chairs.

Hutchins Hall 138 didn’t have quite the same amenities, but the students didn’t seem to mind. They intently listened to Khanna, then settled in for the night’s film, A Wednesday, a suspenseful story set in Mumbai. Khanna had to teach two make-up Enterprise Organization classes the next day, but at this moment, the fun class was his top priority.

“It’s a guilty pleasure,” he says. “How often do you get to do this in law school?”