Food and Culture, Fifth Edition (2008)

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*Each American ethnic, religious, or regional group has its own culturally based food habits. Many of these customs have been influenced and modified through contact with the majority culture and, in turn, have changed and shaped American majority food habits. Today, a fast food restaurant or street stand is as likely to offer pizza, tacos, egg rolls, or falafel as it is hamburgers. It is the intricate interplay between food habits of the past and the present, the old and the new, and the traditional and the innovative that is the hallmark of the American diet.*

WHAT IS FOOD?

Food, as defined in the dictionary, is any substance that provides the nutrients necessary to maintain life and growth when ingested. When most animals feed, they repeatedly consume those foods necessary for their well-being, and they do so in a similar manner at each feeding. Humans, however, do not feed. They eat.

Eating is distinguished from feeding by the ways humans use food. Humans not only gather or hunt food, but they also cultivate plants and raise livestock. Agriculture means that some foods are regularly available, alleviating hand-to mouth sustenance. This permits the development of specific customs associated with foods that are the foundation of the diet, such as wheat or rice. Humans also cook, softening tough foods, including raw grains and meats, and reducing toxic substances in other items, such as certain root vegetables. This greatly expands the number and variety of edible substances available. Choosing foods to combine with other foods follows, and prompts rules regarding what can be eaten with what and creating the meal. Humans use utensils to eat meals and institute complex rules, commonly called manners, about how meals are consumed. And significantly, humans share food. Standards for who may dine with whom in each eating situation are well-defined.

The term food habits (also called food culture) refers to the ways in which humans use food, including everything from how it is selected, obtained, and distributed to who prepares it, serves it, and eats it. The significance of this process is unique to humankind. Why don’t people simply feed on the diet of our primitive ancestors, surviving on foraged fruits, vegetables, grains, and the occasional insect or small mammal thrown in for protein? Why do people choose to spend their time, energy, money, and creativity on eating? The answers to these questions, according to some researchers, can be found in the basic biological and psychological constitution of humans.

THE OMNIVORE’S PARADOX

Humans are omnivorous, meaning that they can consume and digest a wide selection of plants and animals found in their surroundings. The primary advantage to this is that they can adapt to nearly all earthly environments. The disadvantage

is that no single food provides the nutrition necessary for survival. Humans must be flexible enough to eat a variety of items sufficient for physical growth and maintenance, yet cautious enough not to randomly ingest foods that are physiologically harmful and, possibly, fatal. This dilemma, the need to experiment combined with the need for conservatism, is known as the omnivore’s paradox. It results in two contradictory psychological impulses regarding diet. The first is an attraction to new foods; the second is a preference for familiar foods. The food habits developed by a group provide a framework that reduces the anxiety produced by these opposing desires. Rules about which foods are edible, how they are procured and cooked safely, how they should taste, and when they should be consumed provide guidelines for both experimentation (based on previous experience with similar plants and animals or flavors and textures) and conservatism through ritual and repetition.

SELF-IDENTITY

The choice of which foods to ingest is further complicated, however, by another psychological concept regarding eating—the incorporation of food. Consumption is understood as equaling conversion of a food and its nutrients into a human body. For many people, incorporation is not only physical but associative as well. It is the fundamental nature of the food absorbed by a person, conveyed by the proverbial phrase, “you are what you eat.” In its most direct interpretation, it is the physical properties of a food expressed through incorporation. Some Asian Indians eat walnuts to improve their brain, and weight lifters may dine on rare meat to build muscle. In other cases, the character of the food is incorporated. Some Native Americans believe that because milk is a food for infants, it will weaken adults. The French say a person who eats too many turnips becomes gutless, and some Vietnamese consume gelatinized tiger bones to improve their strength.

It is a small step from incorporating the traits associated with a specific food to making assumptions about a total diet. The correlation between what people eat, how others perceive them, and how they characterize themselves is striking. In one study researchers listed foods typical of five diets: vegetarian (broccoli quiche, brown rice, avocado and bean sprout sandwich), gourmet (oysters, caviar, French roast coffee), health food (protein shake, wheat germ, yogurt), fast food (Kentucky Fried Chicken, Big Mac, pizza), and synthetic food (Carnation Instant Breakfast, Cheez Whiz). It was found that each category was associated with a certain personality type. Vegetarians were considered to be pacifists and likely to drive foreign cars. Gourmets were believed to be liberal and sophisticated. Health food fans were described as antinuclear activists and Democrats. Fast food and synthetic food eaters were believed to be religious, conservative, and fond of polyester clothing. These stereotypes were confirmed by self-description and personality tests completed by people whose diets fell into the five categories.

Another study asked college students to rate profiles of people based on their diets. The persons who ate “good” foods were judged thinner, more fit, and more active than persons with the identical physical characteristics and exercise habits who ate “bad” foods. Furthermore, the people who ate “good” foods were perceived by some students as being more attractive, likable, practical, methodical, quiet, and analytical than people who ate “bad” foods. The researchers attribute the strong morality–food effect to several factors, including the concept of incorporation and a prevailing Puritan ethic that espouses self-discipline.

Food choice is, in fact, influenced by self-identity, a process whereby the food likes or dislikes of someone else are accepted and internalized as personal preferences. Research suggests that children choose foods eaten by admired adults (e.g., teachers), fictional characters, peers, and especially older siblings. Parents have little long lasting influence. Group approval or disapproval of a food can also condition a person’s acceptance or rejection. This may explain why certain relatively unpalatable items, such as chile peppers or unsweetened coffee, are enjoyed if introduced through socially mediated events, such as family meals or workplace snack breaks. Although the mechanism for the internalization of food preference

and self-identity is not well understood, it is considered a significant factor in the development of food habits. A study on the consumption of organic vegetables, for example, found that those who identified themselves as green (people who are concerned with ecology and make consumer decisions based on this concern) predicted an intention to eat organic items independent of other attitudes, such as perceived flavor and health benefits.

Food as self-identity is especially evident in the experience of dining out. Researchers suggest that restaurants often serve more than food, satisfying both emotional and physical needs. A diner may consider the menu, atmosphere, service, and cost or value when selecting a restaurant; and most establishments cater to a specific clientele. Some offer quick, inexpensive meals and play equipment to attract families. Business clubs feature a conservative setting suitable for financial transactions, and the candlelit ambiance of a bistro is conducive to romance. The same diner may choose the first in her role as a mother, the second while at work, and the last when meeting a date. In Japan restaurants serve as surrogate homes where company is entertained, preserving the privacy of family life. The host chooses and pays for the meal ahead of time, all guests are provided the same dishes, and the servers are expected to partake in the conversation. Ethnic restaurants appeal to those individuals seeking familiarity and authenticity in the foods of their homeland or those interested in novelty and culinary adventure. Conversely, exposure to different foods in restaurants is sometimes the first step in adopting new food items at home

SYMBOLIC USE OF FOOD

The development of food habits clearly indicates that for humans, food is more than just nutrients. Incorporation has meaning specifically because people are omnivores and have a choice regarding what is consumed. Humans use foods symbolically, due to relationship, association, or convention. Bread is an excellent example—it is called the “staff of life”; one “breaks bread” with friends, and bread represents the body of Christ in the Christian sacrament of communion. White bread was traditionally eaten by the upper classes, dark bread by the poor, but whole wheat bread is consumed today by persons concerned more with health than status. A person with money has “a lot of bread.” In many cultures bread is shared by couples as part of the wedding ceremony or left for the soul of the dead. Superstitions about bread also demonstrate its importance beyond sustenance.

Greek soldiers took a piece from home to ensure their safe, victorious return; English midwives placed a loaf at the foot of the mother’s bed to prevent the woman and her baby from being stolen by evil spirits; and sailors traditionally brought a bun to sea to prevent shipwreck. It is the symbolic use of a food that is valued most by people, not its nutritional composition.

CULTURAL IDENTITY

An essential symbolic function of food is cultural identity. Beyond self-identification, incorporation can signify collective association. What one eats defines who one is, culturally speaking, and conversely, who one is not. In the Middle East, for example, a person who eats pork is probably Roman Catholic or Orthodox Christian, not Jewish or Muslim (pork is prohibited in Judaism and Islam). Raviolis served with roast turkey suggest an Italian-American family celebrating Thanksgiving, not a Mexican-American family, who would be more likely to dine on tamales and turkey. The food habits of each cultural group are often linked to religious beliefs or ethnic behaviors. Eating is a daily reaffirmation of cultural identity.

Foods that demonstrate affiliation with a culture are usually introduced during childhood and are associated with security or good memories. Such foods hold special worth to a person, even if other diets have been adopted due to changes in residence, religious membership, health status, or daily personal preference. They may be eaten during ethnic holidays and for personal events, such as birthdays or weddings, or during times of stress. These items are sometimes called comfort foods because they satisfy the basic psychological need for food familiarity. For example, in the United States one study found comfort foods for women required little preparation and tended to be snacks, such as potato chips, ice cream, chocolate, and cookies; men preferred foods served by their mothers, such as soup, pizza or pasta, steak, and mashed potatoes. Occasionally, a person embraces a certain diet as an adult to establish association with a group. A convert to Judaism, for instance, may adhere to the kosher dietary laws. African Americans who live outside the South may occasionally choose to eat soul food (typically southern black cuisine, such as pork ribs and greens) as an expression of ethnic solidarity.

The reverse is also true. One way to establish that a person is not a member of a certain cultural group is through diet. Researchers suggest that when one first eats the food of another cultural group, a chain of reasoning occurs, beginning with the recognition that one is experiencing a new flavor and ending with the assumption that this new flavor is an authentic marker of other group members. These other individuals may be denigrated by food stereotyping, and such slurs are found in nearly all cultures. In the United States, Germans are sometimes called “krauts,” Chinese “cookies” or “dim sums,” Italians “spaghetti benders,” Mexicans “beaners,” Irish “potatoheads,” Koreans “kimchis, ” and poor white Southerners “crackers” (possibly from “corncracker,” someone who cracks corn to distill whiskey or from early immigrants to Georgia who survived on biscuits).

Foods that come from other cultures may also be distinguished as foreign to maintain group separation. Kafir, a derogatory Arabic term for “infidel,” was used to label some items found in areas they colonized, including the knobby Kaffir lime of Malaysia, and Kaffir corn (millet) in Africa. Similarly, when some non-Asian foods were introduced to China, they were labeled “barbarian” or “Western” and named after items already familiar in the diet. Thus, sweet potatoes were called “barbarian yams,” and tomatoes became “barbarian eggplants. Less provocative place names are used, too, though the origins of the food are often incorrect, such as “Turkey wheat” (the Dutch term for native American corn, which was thought to come from Turkey) and “Irish potatoes” (which are indigenous to Peru, but were brought to the United States by immigrants from Ireland). The powerful symbolic significance of food terms leads occasionally to renaming foreign items in an attempt to assert a new cultural identity. “Turkish coffee” (it was the Ottomans of Turkey who popularized this thick, dark brew from Africa and spread it through their empire) became “Greek coffee” in Greece after tensions between the two nations escalated in the 1920s. Examples in the United States include renaming sauerkraut “liberty cabbage” during World War I, and more recently, calling french fries “freedom fries,” when France opposed the United States in the invasion of Iraq.

Specific foods are not the only way food can symbolize cultural identity. The appropriate use of food, also known as etiquette, is another expression of group membership. In the United States entirely different manners are required when lunching with business associates at an expensive restaurant, when attending a tea, when eating in the school cafeteria, when drinking with friends at a bar, or when dining with a date. Discomfort can occur if a person is unfamiliar with the rules, and if a person deliberately breaks the rules, he or she may be ostracized or shunned.

Another function of food symbolism is to define status—a person’s position or ranking within a particular cultural group. Food can be used to signify economic social standing: champagne and caviar imply wealth, mesquite-grilled foods and goat cheese suggest upward mobility, and beans or potatoes are traditionally associated with the poor. Status foods are characteristically used for social interaction. In the United States a girlfriend appreciates a box of chocolates from her boyfriend, but not a bundle of broccoli. Wine is considered an appropriate gift to a hostess—a gallon of milk is not. In general, eating with someone connotes social equality with that person. Many societies regulate commensalism (who can dine together) as a means of establishing class relationships. Men may eat separately from women and children, or servants may eat in the kitchen, away from their employers. In India the separate social castes did not traditionally dine together, nor were people of higher castes permitted to eat food prepared by someone of a lower caste. This class segregation was also seen in some U.S. restaurants that excluded blacks before civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

DISCUSSION

What arguments, statistics or points in the article stood out to you? Are there foods and cuisines that you “hate” or consider “weird”? Why does food trigger such visceral reactions: warm memories, revulsion, etc.? Is gustatory pleasure cultural? Why do you think this is so? How would you define your cultural and culinary membership? What foods and cuisines are “home” for you? What are some of your fondest and most revolting food memories?