

FOOD: COMMUNICATION OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Much of the study of food and man depends upon the approach. The story or narrative of human history and the lists of food preference for each culture begins to describe how communication, culture, and food can be blended together to satisfy curiosity about what people ate, what they felt about food, how they communicated celebration, and how it varied from century to century, country to country and finally region to region. This essay will be separated into two parts. The first part will provide a chronological history of what people ate and the second part will encompass how social habits and culture have been formed around food, and finally why this is a good starting point for the investigation of how cultures have changed according to food supply.

Keywords: food service, Peking man, farming revolution, belief system, co-culture

Introduction

Even the briefest look at a collection of medieval recipes will reveal the ingenuity and creative skills of medieval chefs. But then, perhaps this should come as no surprise. In the changing history of the world, the need for food, and for certain observances tied to its consumption, has been one of the most constant elements in human life. As moral attitudes have altered, whole structures of religious, economic, social, and sexual behavior have changed with them. Food, like sleep, has remained a basic, daily human requirement: more necessary in most climates and in history than clothing and shelter. In fact in many periods food has been more important than family life, religion, love, or sex. From Homeric times onwards, most social gatherings of any importance have revolved around the dispensation of food and its often-required accompaniment or substitute, alcoholic drink. Most religions include or have included some form of ritual sacrament or sacrifice involving food, many of these meant as a direct thanksgiving for present supplies and a propitiation of the natural and unnatural forces controlling the supplies for the future (Brash 1995). The deprivation of food, by means of famine, war poverty, or neglect, is as terrible an experience today in Africa and other, disturbed parts of the world as it was for the tribesman of Palestine and Egypt in the last chapters of the book of Genesis, or for the poor in rural England and Ireland at the time of the corn shortage and potato blight of the 1840's.

The representation of food in graphic art for instance, in medieval depictions of cooking and eating in rustic feasts, can convey something of satisfying nature of life in which good, simple food is in regular supply. The emotional and social romances

connected with food which we find in novels, poetry, and drama, biography and autobiography, and diaries and letters, are more various and complicated than those found in graphic art, if in general more casually incidental to the main subject matter. Pushkin, in *Eugene Onegin*, proudly drew attention to his habit of writing about banquets and exciting things to eat, and compared himself as he did so with “godlike Homer”. Some novelists, playwrights, and poets have managed to avoid any mention of cooking and eating, or describing meals have barely indicated the presence of food on the table. It is in Shakespeare’s comedies and history plays, not in his great tragedies, that we find most copious references to food. Tolstoy, on the other hand, filled his greatest novel, *Anna Karenina* with references to food, and conveyed the character of its hero, Levin, partly by describing his simple eating-habits in comparison with those members of the Russian landowning gentry, and bringing into narrative from time to time the kind of wholesome foods which Levin most enjoyed when at home in the country (Kagen 1987).

Understanding the humanities through food, or satisfying curiosity about individual’s eating-habits is an activity that few rhetorical scholars undertake. If, however, we associate food with communication generosity, persuasion, social movements, and the basic texture of life itself, it becomes a matter of more than disciplinary interest. Much of the study of food and man depends upon the approach. The story or narrative of human history and the lists of food preference for each culture begins to describe how rhetoric, food, and the humanities can be blended together to satisfy curiosity about what people ate, what they felt about food, how they communicated celebration, and how it varied from century to century, country to country and finally region to region.

Chronological History of Humanities and Food

Why study the history of food? A number of reasons come to mind. Food is the most basic of human needs, and obtaining enough of it has been the most persuasive human activity since the beginning of humanity. No history that claims to recapture the lives of the mass populations of mankind can ignore it. Moreover, the need for adequate nutrition in our own time and in the century ahead has made the study of food more than an object of historical and humanistic curiosity. The question arises; does knowledge of the past provide us with and tools or warnings for the future? At the very least it demonstrates how our ancestors have dealt with production, distribution, and consumption of a commodity that almost always has been in short supply. Finally, for the historian, anthropologists, sociologist, and social psychologist, a study of food habits in the broader sense serves as a useful point of entry into an investigation of a wider culture. The study of food in the humanities may grant some cohesion to a very diverse group. Historians have stressed the need to establish relationships or rapports among many long-run trends in history. Food has been studied from a climatic, demographic, productive, technological and cultural perspective. Food serves as an indicator of broader social and cultural phenomena. Food habits simply reflect other situations or patterns of behavior in a given society. As an integral part of a wider popular culture, dietary customs and the attitudes and values they embody are active agents in their own right, helping to fashion the peculiar tone and direction of society. In short, food is one of the ties in the intricate seam of history. The best way to approach a chronological history of food is to outline it

from economic, nutritional, and sociological. All of these perhaps could be summed up as simply cultural history.

Almost the first thing Homo sapiens did when they appeared on the stage of history was to exterminate their predecessor the Neanderthal in disagreement about the allocation of the dwindling food supplies. The search for spices helped bring about the collapse of the Roman Empire and Western civilization. When that civilization was reborn at the Renaissance, it was to begin the process of colonization and enslavement all over again which was still on the hunt for spices. The sugar to sweeten European tea and coffee was grown only at the cost of black slavery. Indians were ruthlessly pushed off their prairie hunting grounds so that the white men could grow wheat and corn, their buffalo slaughtered to make room for cattle. Yet, though it is possible to regard the story of food and humanities as one disastrous course after another, we ought to remember that, while some of the guests have behaved very badly, the long banquet has given others an opportunity of behaving equally well. It is not what you eat but how you eat it. Or as the philosopher Epictetus remarked, even an ordinary event like a dinner can be carried out in such a way friendship and brotherhood with other men (Lowenberg, 1968).

Many of those bidden to the human feast have behaved in this spirit. Men like Sir Philip Sidney, who was offered a cup of water while he lay dying after the battle of Zutphen, but who handed the cup to a wounded soldier lying beside him said, "Friend, your need is greater than mine". We can sympathize with those who saw hunger as an opportunity for doing practical good, such as the American born Sir Benjamin Thompson, Count Rumford, who spent his life looking for ways of enabling the poor to cook their food more economically and invented packet food as a sort of by-product

process. We can certainly find inspiration in the lives of great pioneers like Captain Cook, who tried to eliminate the dreadful disease scurvy by giving seaman lemon juice and sauerkraut. Food is very much the mainspring of human watch. No one can live without eating, along with the ordinary body functions; it is the only universal attribute of all humanity. There seems some evidence that food has been a total part of all histories (Brigid 1994).

Birth of Cooking

The birth of cooking resulted from the need to start cooking meat. The wood fire that, “Peking Man” had apparently invented was a consequence of his ability to manufacture flint tools. Vegetarians had little need to cook their food. Most vegetables can be grated and eaten raw. But there arose the psychological feeling of well being engendered in us by hot food. The greatest impact in the chronology of food history was formed out of the merchandizing revolution. The aspect of food history and export truly changed the way man thought and acted on food. Originally food was consumed for pleasure and survival. With the rise of the merchandizing revolution, food became both economical and social. For many countries, however, food imports had become not a matter of customer choice, but an affair of necessity. The cooking surly improved for example Alexandria sauces for fish and gourds passed into Roman cook-books the best banquets were spectacular, and although one of the Ptolemies kept pheasants without eating one, he crossed them with quinea-fowl and ate the result instead. Egypt’s cabbage was so bitter that seed was imported from Rhodes to combat it. Greeks introduced chick-peas from Byzantium into Egypt, and better wheat almost drove out the old husked grain.

One interesting resource that was developed or cultivated in early Greece was the “olive”. Olives are delicious when eaten raw or pickled in brine. They also yield oil, rich in calories capable of enhancing the driest hunk of bread. Unfortunately, olive oil was the only illuminant known to the ancients other than candles or torches. Olive oil burned in every home in receptacles ranging from the earthenware lamp of the philosopher Epictetus (he had substituted a pottery lamp for the iron one which had been stolen. Olive oil greased the limbs of the Greek as he issued from his bath and kept his muscles supple in the gymnasium. It produced the principal fuel that burned his dead body on his funeral pyre, and was poured on his ashes in the form of perfume (Hobsbam 1983).

No wonder there was not enough olive oil to eat in Greece; but even if there had been enough oil, there was no longer enough barley bread to pour it on. Though the Greeks tried to extend their bread with dry fruits and tunny fish, it was obvious enough, by 600 B.C., that there was not enough fertile land left in the peninsula to grow barley, and hardly enough land at all suitable for raising cattle.

In an attempt to stop the food catastrophe, the Greeks started to export themselves to established colonies overseas, while they also imported food in return for their own luxury exports. These luxuries included Greek olive oil, which was of high quality, and Greek wines, which had the finest reputation of any in the Mediterranean. These valuable vintages were exported in what we would consider to be very unstable containers of glass. These glass bottles were made in very small sizes, while the wooden barrel had not been invented by the Gauls in France, so the Greeks used pottery containers for their wines from Chios and Lesbos. These pottery containers were known as amphorae

(singular: amphora), and they were gigantic man-size jars with two lugs but no flat bottom. Their pointed base had to be thrust into soft sand, or into a specially made rack.

Amphorae must have been very difficult to carry when full of wine. Corks were an invention of the Middle Ages. They were cut from the bark of the cork oak in Portugal. Before corks were invented, Amphorae were plugged with a stopper made of pottery, packed around with a rag and secured with pitch. These stoppers did not always do their job very efficiently, and an amphora of wine would be likely to arrive in Italy from its homeland in Greece, tasting both of seawater that had seeped in around the stopper and also bitter because of the product that had melted off the end of the stopper into the wine (Dalby, 2000)

It is amazing how soon food additives became an acquired taste. Because consignments of rice were held up to one Chinese city, and arrived tasting very musty, the rice consumers of this particular town acquired a taste for musty rice. Greek wine soon began to demand additives. The wine merchants obligingly added salt water or turpentine to the shipment to give it the right flavor. The resinated taste of much Greek wine, still noticeable today, is due to the resin-treated goat wineskins in which much of it was stored.

In an attempt to secure for their needy citizens the daily porridge and barley bread that were their staple fare, the leaders of the Greek city-states now gave consultation. Westland lay many countries where the Farming Revolution had not spent its full effect. Many of the people in Hesperia, as the Greeks called the west, had not evolved an elaborate agricultural civilization, or were not agricultural capable of change. So the Greeks spread to begin the wine-growing region that was in what we now call France.

This Greek expansion was necessary in-order for the Greeks to expand export of their wine.

Foods From Around The World

Culinary art is one of the most ancient forms of cultural expression. This portion of the study will examine intercultural communications and foods from around the world. A wide range of intercultural communication concepts will be utilized to examine several fascinating cuisines from Europe and North America. An intercultural communication approach was chosen for this particular food study because cultural diversity, perception, and cultural adaptation are vital components in the study of culture, food, and communication.

When choosing foods from around the world, a wide range of cultural history and individual perceptions help shape our personal eating habits. These food preferences are defined in our culture and because of this; we reluctantly explore other culture's foods. Every cuisine has some form of *art as culture*. By using artistic expression through food, we are able to see how many cultures promote their *belief systems*, attitudes, and personal values through the foods they prepare and eat. As stated previously, for most people, a *cultural history* or background of a culture has some relevance to the selection and origins of food. The selection techniques and origin of ingredients both play a major role in determining what items are considered to be popular foods within a culture. In addition, culture describes many food *rituals* by defining the regular eating habits and *roles* that are portrayed when preparing cultural foods. A cuisine may also define a

culture by communicating its rules about flavoring, preparing and combining foods, meal and table manners, taboos and ceremonial foods.

Dean C. Barnlund's article, "Communication in a Global Village" explains that individuals have a collective unconscious. Barnlund recognizes that we form *cultural norms* and *cultural myopia* because every culture has its own way of viewing the universe and forming a collective unconscious about set rules and behaviors. This collective outlook helps many cultures cope with reality. Cultural myopia occurs not so much as a coping mechanism but because of habit. Many everyday actions, such as eating, are performed as habit without any individual conscious decision being made. For British people, cereal with milk is clearly a proper breakfast item and a collective unconscious decision made from cultural history. No one needs to be reminded. Certain cultural habits and decisions are already made for us, and all we have to do is learn about them and follow *cultural traditions*.

Eating habits, as with other aspects of culture, are learned. We use cultural *filtering* and cultural *screening* when we decide what to eat. This is significant because when we filter out a culture and its cuisine, we are screening and interpreting information based on that particular cuisine. We decide before we try it if we are going to like it. Another very interesting thing we do when choosing food is practice *avoidance behavior*. This aversion to trying new cuisines has created a great deal of culinary *ethnocentrism* in the United States. While we have had increased immigration and new cuisines, many Americans are still unwilling to try these different cuisines. From an ethnocentric standpoint, avoidance behavior becomes the deciding action for many cultures when trying different cuisines from around the world. A person's cultural eating habits occur

through the process of *acculturation* or a long- term socialization and adaptation to a host culture. We initially learn this process through a family setting. Since infants and young children depend upon adults for food, the parents act as a *co-culture* by controlling the foods that the children are exposed to and consume. The parents are the dominant group or the macro-culture that acts as an important medium for communicating cultural values and attitudes towards food and cultural identity.

Integration of Historical Food Rituals

It is difficult to say where and when the luxury of eating and dining began. It has been integrated throughout history in a variety of literary contexts and individual memoirs. But, if you were to go back in Greek and Roman history, you would learn that both of these cultures had not only eaten for sustenance, they both had an extravagant and organized style of dining within their cultural framework:

There was a banquet and people were talking, and so often in accounts of banquets at this period, Socrates was there. The topic was language: the origin of words and their true meanings, their relationships with other words. In particular, according to Xenophon, who described the scene in his memoirs of Socrates, they were talking about the labels applied to people according to their behavior. This was not in itself an uninteresting subject, but failed nevertheless to absorb Socrates' complete attention. What distracted him were the table-manners of another guest, a young man who was taking no part in the discussion, too much engrossed in the food in front of him. Something about the way the boy was eating fascinated Socrates. He decided to shift the debate in a new direction: "And can we say, my friends," he began, "for what kind of behavior a man is called an opsophagos?" An opsophagos, according to this ancient authority at any rate, was someone with a distinct predilection to fish (Davidson, 1998).

The Greeks were fond of fish and integrated it into most of their meals and banquets. What the literature of pleasure for Greeks manifests time and time again is that they had a maddening addiction to and an obsession for fish. In one

particular work known as Gastronomy, Dinnerology or The Life of Luxury, written by Archestratus, the Greeks made reference to pleasure and eating fish; this delicacy was integrated and accepted as a cultural norm for all of the Greek culture.

Sicily also produced and integrated cookbooks and cuisine into their culture. Among the earliest of these treaties was one by Mitaecus of Sicily, a famous chef mentioned by Plato and described by one writer as the Pheidias of the kitchen (Davidson, 1998). The mention of fish and the custom of having fish were documented all through his writings. What this suggests is that fish had a universal identity that was recognized and organized through cultural consensus and had its appropriate place at the table. Because sufficient food is pivotal to the existence of society, most human beings have devoted a great deal of time integrating an adequate food supply into their culture. Through cultural awareness, we learn about foods through dialogues similar to those mentioned above; Socrates banquet describes such a dialogue. Food involves sharing a table with companions, that is sharers of bread. Food assembles and integrates an organized manner for the family, a class division, a religious perspective, and finally, assembly in the form of a civic banquet. Food also integrates organized cultural distinctions of status, power, and wealth. By saying this, we have made the transition from the preparation and selection of food to actually presenting it at the table. Our dining rituals arise from a unique cultural and communication perspective and expression and also, our biological necessity. In the classic formulation of structuralism, Claude Levi-Straus stated that “food and ritual

express fundamental human attitudes.” Their meanings are written in code, and to understand and integrate the code, one can penetrate the deep cultural meanings of an entire society. The cooking and food preparation of a society is a language within itself; this enables us to deconstruct a society’s organizational culture through the language of its consumption. While this may seem extreme, you can understand a culture and the way they eat by separating the way they eat and how they organize and practice both group separatedness and cultural belonging.

The structure of the Roman meal as a unit can also be deconstructed to show how the integration of food and manners are developed within this particular culture. Roman dining rituals composed food in such a way that the meal became more civilized from the beginning to the end. It begins with the Gustation, tasting of pure roots, vegetables, fish, and eggs, all the requirements of early life. Next came the Cena proper, a sacrificial meat dish; this is eaten to give thanks, and finally, the Secundae, a small pastry that the Romans referred to as the luxury reserved for peaceful nations. All these foods and rituals were integrated through organization of a culture to exhibit shared meaning. For the Romans, these rituals also suggest that parallels were made between events in citizens’ lives and the structure of Roman history.

Conclusion

While many food studies have been done in the past, and many will surface in the future, researchers should consider framing their studies through organizational and cultural methodologies. Of course, people have been thinking

about the humanities and food and how people organize their consumption of foods, but future studies could include the relationships between food and their human place within a certain time frame. The ancient Greeks or the early Romans approached their foods from their historical past and present. We can study these times and have a growing understanding of how language and beliefs influenced the choices people made. A cultural perspective, an historical perspective, a sociological perspective, and often a psychological perspective were involved in the choices individuals made. What might be interesting for future research is applying this approach to modern food rituals to see where people organize themselves in relationship to their culture.

Their differences may exclude them from the main culture; their differences may include them into the main culture. Adaptations for the purpose of inclusion or exclusion into a community may be the underlying factors when making decisions about dining rituals. This is most evident when one goes to a wedding. But that is another research project.

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