

The Cultural Context of Food

Foods create a “Sense of Identity” and a “Sense of Comfort”

What Nationalities & Cultural backgrounds are you?

What foods does your family consider traditional?

Summary:

Traditional foods vary by culture...why?

Holiday foods often include Special Foods...Why?

What you and your family consider “normal” can differ greatly from other families

First a Bit of Nutrition to explain why certain foods are “traditional”

*All prevent Famine or Illnesses which Weaken the Body
and allow Other Diseases to easily kill a person*

Fat provides calories for hard work or cold weather

Vitamin C - Vitamin D & Calcium - Iron - Iodine

Protein from meat, fish, eggs, cheese, soybeans, combo corn & beans: Vitamin B12 only in animal products

Many small amounts of micro-nutrients: vitamins & minerals

Why your ancestors ate nutritious foods or foods that supply a good source of:

- **Vitamin C** (to prevent scurvy)
 - lemons, limes, pine-needle teas
 - sauerkraut and cabbage, rutabagas & turnips
- **Iron** (carries oxygen in blood)
 - meat & organ meats
 - dark green vegs.
- **Fats and Oils** provide Calories for energy, to keep warm, to work hard and body growth
- **Iodine** (prevents child mental retardation, goiter-thyroid issues, miscarriages in women)
 - ocean seafood & fish
 - Illinois & many inland Nations (not near the oceans) are in the “goiter belt”, our land & pond fish do not have Iodine in them, so we supplement
 - during WW I: US Army & a salt manufacturers “gentleman’s agreement” to add Iodine to salt to help the war effort by preventing weakness from thyroid
- **Many minerals & vitamins** are needed in very small amounts B-vitamins, Vit E, fluoride
 - Organ meats (liver, sweetbreads, kidneys, sausages) - Oxtail & bone-based soups & stews
 - Brans or husks of seeds (wheat flour, brown rice) - Yeast in making bread & beer
 - Insects & bugs (accidentally in food or deliberately eaten as food)
- Our body makes Vit. D through exposure to the sun, which helps us absorb Calcium for stronger bones & teeth

- **Proteins** are very important **plus Vit B 12 & Calcium** are needed for bones, teeth
 - _ “Complete proteins” are Fish, Poultry, Meat, plus Milks & cheeses from goats, cows, horses, soy beans, fish, dogs, chickens
 - However, combining two “incomplete proteins” such as corn/maize plus beans/legumes will also form complete protein
 - Insects & bugs unintentionally left in foods or can be eaten as a protein source (provide Vit. B12 to Vegetarians)

Eleven Reasons why certain foods are associated with certain nationalities or ethnic groups?

1. **Locally available - Easily grown or naturally grow in a certain area:**

fish, soybeans, horse, beef, pork, goat, poultry, escargot snails
 different herbs & spices
 milk & cheeses from cows, yaks, horses, goats, camels, water buffalo

2. **Seasonal foods that will grow in your area**

3. **Climate & Geology** How hot is it in summer? Is there a hard winter, when ground freezes? How much rain & what months does it rain? How many sunny days? Too foggy or cloudy? Soil too dry, too rocky, too sandy, too swampy?

Liquors (when water is contaminated): make beer, wine, apple cider, fermented wheat, potato or rice, vodkas

Root Vegetables: carrots, turnips, tapioca made from cassava

Starchy: rice, pasta or noodles (wheat, rice, millet, etc.), tapioca, or potatoes

Breads, tortillas, cereals, dough products: rye, wheat, corn, rice, millet, tapioca

Gruels or porridge: potato, oatmeal, wheat, rice

Fruits: Temperate: pears, apples, berries, cranberries, etc.

Semi-Tropical: citrus

Tropical: papaya, pineapple, dates

4. **Will it keep** (so you do not starve) **until the next crop is harvested or through the winter?**

In “food insecure” parts of the world Spring is known as “the killing time” because food stores are depleted.

- Cool weather crops (*can keep in the garden over winter*): brussel sprouts, cauliflower, broccoli, kale
- Root vegetables (*keep a long time*): turnips, rutabagas, swedes, carrots, parsnips, garlic, onions, and cassava
- Pickled foods (added to vinegar will keep a long time): beets, onions, pickles, eggs
- Dried fruits & meats: apples, berries, prunes, plums, dates, grapes (raisins), beef jerky,
- Smoked meats & fish: do you have wood or dung or peat to burn to smoke the food?
- Fermented foods: cabbage w/salt added becomes sauerkraut or kimchee (high in Vit. C)

- wines and beers: safer to drink than local water spice & provide micro-nutrients
 - Salted foods: Corned beef, hams, codfish, soybeans, tongue, sauerkraut
 - Sugar: jams, preserves, jelly
 - Nuts
5. **How safe is the water to drink?** America was about the only place in the world where our ground & steam water was safe to drink! Many other countries made liquors that made water safe to drink and contain micronutrients.
 Can ferment soybeans, peanuts, rice, corn, cassava, taro, cacao beans & many grains
 Can boil and/or ferment water to make beer, wine, liquor, hard apple cider, etc.
 Can make herbal teas/coffee/ chocolate that you boil the water which kills bacteria.
 Soups and stews that are cooked a long time kill many bacteria
6. **Ethnic foods often change when food is easily traded or imported into a country or area:**
 Places near a shipping port have more access to food (Africa has almost no good harbors, compared to Europe or Asia which have many rivers that create basins with good seaports).
 After 1860 areas near railroad tracks saw changing diets due to trade and imports.
 Ancient Spice routes: Europe from Middle East to Asia: Tea from China to England, to India, & northern Europe.
 Foods from the Americas: potatoes came to Ireland & grown on farms owned by British, cultivated by their serfs, the Irish - Coffee and Chocolate from Central America to Spain to Turkey to Austria & France - Tomatoes from South America to Spain & Italy & Mediterranean
7. **The Area was invaded years ago by another culture** Romans brought grapes & wine, cheeses, apples, nuts & spices to southern & central Europe (but not Northern Europe). Moors brought to Spain dates & almonds. Herbs and Spices change food tastes rapidly in many areas.
8. **Traditionally Inexpensive Foods, but often very nutritious**
 organ meats: liver, kidney pie, tongue, sweetbreads cuts of bones: pig hocks, oxtail soup, beef marrow, chicken feet fish: in coastal areas
 small or leftover cuts of meat: made into sausages, hotdogs, hamburger
 root type crops: turnips, rutabaga, carrots, potatoes
9. **Perceived as a “Higher Status Food” OR rated a “Less Desirable Food”**
 white bread compared to rye or wheat or millet (since the Romans)
 gravy since the Civil War Corn in Europe still considered low status food, for animals only
 “edible by me” or “not edible by me” – for example: bugs, organ meats

10. Religious restrictions or traditions

11. Why Holiday foods are Special – each holiday has its own traditions

- Sweets** made from expensive white, rather than brown sugar: wedding cakes, sugary treats
- Rare or Seasonal food** (truffle mushrooms) Hard to find or Not Available in large volume
 - caviar/fish eggs
- Expensive** Imported foods

Do You Want to know more: find old cookbooks at home and from public library

- most travel guides will talk about ethnic or local foods found in the nationality or country you are interested in
- talk to your family & friends about ethnic and “weird but wonderful” food

- **Encyclopedia of Food and Culture, 3 volumes, publ. 2003** REF 394.12 **available at these public libraries and probably more: A GREAT Reference!!**

Calumet City, Dolton, Hillside, Lansing, Lombard, New Lenox, North Aurora, Oak Brook, Oak Lawn & Worth, Illinois (used to be in Schererville Library but now in Lake County Indiana Public Library system is an e-book source only)

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