

of life has been supplanted by notions of 'fast foods' or 'drug foods' (Mintz 1985) or snacks. To decode these in Douglas's terms, we need to study the social language of food.

10.6 Conclusions

Food communicates between people, but in ways as complex as language itself. When we refer to food as a language, we recognize that it carries many meanings that are open to diverse interpretations. Douglas, Lévi-Strauss, and other anthropologists constructed a grammar of food around rules of eating that included table manners, cooked vs. raw foods, and sequences of foods in meals as general structural features. Barthes and others stressed the significations embedded in sharing food. Subsequent studies of the culture of food and gastronomy have shown the diversity of practices and ideologies over and above those regularities, emphasizing the many ways in which food is used to maintain social relationships.

Food is analysed and discussed using very specialized concepts pertinent to specific academic disciplines, such as economics, nutrition, and social science. Foodways are presented either in terms of production output units, such as Gross Domestic Product, or labour inputs to assign a dollar value comparable across nation-states. Alternatively, nutritionists approach gastronomic practices through measures of caloric intake and the chemical elements of food, with such terms featuring in their nutrition education messages suggesting changes to intake in order to improve health. Social scientists present gastronomies as reflections of sharing food that facilitate social relationships. The concepts used by each discipline may differ but the underlying message is similar: that gastronomies are a key element of social communications. The concept of 'good food' has many cultural manifestations that indicate why people choose certain foods over others, and the diversity of tastes that must be met to satisfy the criteria of well-being.

The language of food intertwines the symbols associated with material foodstuffs and the social situations in which communities employ them. A feast or party is socially embellished through the choice of foods on offer. Whether benefits are assessed in terms of the dollars spent, the nutritional value of the foods, or the contributions by fishermen, the success of a social event depends on the right balance of messages conveyed. Foodstuffs, and the gastronomies of which they are a part, have some generally recognizable features which are used in particular cultural context to convey messages of social well-being. They are culturally bounded, and yet tasted beyond those boundaries.

Notes

- 1 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/indices/>