10.1 Introduction

Food is a great conversation opener, whether at parties or in an academic forum, and a great topic for gathering data. It is a topic on which most people have a view, whether subjective or objective, implicit or explicit, from the inside or outside. The field of food study exists down the street or in some distant community. An interested fieldworker can gather information from friends, neighbours, in schools, supermarkets, and restaurants, or just about anywhere, asking 'What is your favourite food?' 'What did you last eat?' 'Where did you last eat?' 'Have you seen a programme about food on TV?' 'What did it tell you—what was the message?'

In this chapter we will explore 'languages of food' as they communicate variations of messages about the meanings of food. The local or internal messages, exemplified in this chapter in Marshallese (central Pacific), are contrasted with three external messages: 'civilized eating' as the concern of early outsiders such as missionary wives; economists' approaches largely concerned with production of food; and nutrition education messages about 'good' food. These alternative approaches reflect Douglas's idea that 'every spoken sentence rests on unspoken knowledge for some of its meaning' (1975: 173).

10.2 Meanings of Food

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Food can have many meanings, whether in the raw ingredients that contribute to a particular dish, in the mode in which those ingredients are assembled, prepared, and cooked, or in the occasions at which it is served. Participants sharing a haggis, for example, bring their own cultural perceptions of the dominant features, including its taste, its history as a gastronomic item, and its place in modern life. Some may question the ingredients, or its value for money, while others may question the taste or the nutritional merits (or demerits) of such a dish. Others may ask questions about the social significance of the dish in Scottish culture, its meanings, and its variations, its place in attracting tourist dollars. What are the key elements in the language of food?

The meanings of foods, particularly unfamiliar ones, bring challenges, some of which seem obvious while others are more obscure. Barthes (1997) frames his psychosocial approach to food consumption as 'a system of communication' analogous to linguistics with constituent units from which a differential system of signification can be reconstructed. The result is 'a veritable grammar of foods' (p. 22). Our introspections into the components of such a 'grammar' lead us to examine the key components that give food meaning. How we interpret food lies in our preconceptions, our biases, and our theoretical approach. The challenge lies in decoding the foods we experience while trying to find a structure that unravels some of the mysteries. As we traverse our own biases of what constitutes an 'edible' item, and thus a food, we begin to identify the differences that appear in another culture's use of 'foodstuffs'. The 'grammar' and variations clarify 'food ways' or what I am discussing here as gastronomies.

I would go further than Barthes, to emphasize the differences in signification of food that are collectively acknowledged rather than those associated 'simply with individual taste' (Barthes 1997: 22). For many communities the emphasis is on sharing food with others; thus tastes are cultivated and gastronomies formulated through household meals or communal events where tastes of individuals must be subordinated to the tastes of others. Tastes that are culturally learned are developed through the choices of foodstuffs, ways of cooking and spicing, and ways of presenting foods that fit into an overarching ideology. Mexican food, for example, differs from Indonesian food, as examples of gastronomies that are identified with particular cultures. Similarly, Dunlop (2008) offers us glimpses of some contrasting features of Chinese gastronomies as differentiated in the different provinces. The language of food is shared within communities, while also expressing unique variations.