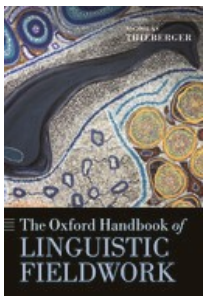

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CHAPTER

10 The Language of Food

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Abstract

Food is a great conversation opener, whether at parties or in an academic forum, and a great topic for gathering data. The language of food 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?' and so on. This chapter explores the 'languages of food' as they communicate variations of messages about the meanings of food. The local or internal messages, exemplified in this article in Marshallese 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'. In order to focus on significant differences in approaches to food and eating that anthropologists have brought to the fore, the concept of gastronomy is elaborated upon stating that gastronomic protocols that govern the use of chopsticks or serving food on a palm leaf, or serving food in the correct hierarchical sequence, are all notable features that send messages about the wider society.

Keywords: food, nutrition education messages, gastronomy, language of food, civilized eating

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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.

In order to focus on significant differences in approaches to food and eating that anthropologists have brought to the fore, I use the concept of gastronomy, as Brillat-Savarin (1970[1825]) elaborated it. His much-
p. 237 quoted epithet 'Tell me what ↳ you eat and I will tell you what you are' suggests that food conveys messages that provide identity. It expresses several layers of meaning, whether in its material manifestations, social commitments, or spiritual values. Some foods become formal symbols, for example a roast suckling pig in Tongan rites of feasting, while snacks or sweets may be more informal.

Anthropologists of food have pursued several alternative modes of analyses, borrowed from related disciplines. Initially they focused on food production as it had a place in local economics (Firth 1936), as a political entity (cf. Mintz's 1985 study of sugar), as 'a highly condensed social fact' (Appadurai 1996: 494), or as a set of components such as animal, vegetable, minerals, or carbohydrates, fats, etc. (Jerome 1980).

As an introduction to a range of anthropological studies of food, Belasco (2008) proposes a perspective on a food system through food concepts. These consist of three key elements: identity, convenience, and responsibility, which he derives mainly from an American perspective in order to encourage his students to think beyond food as a material item. I prefer to look at food concepts as they represent the basic values which a household draws on when choosing foods. A gastronomic picture emerges from observations and from questioning people about what they eat and why.

The aim is to compile a broad cultural perspective on the place food holds in social life, and the values so expressed. While Belasco's view of the American food system presents food concepts in terms of three basic elements, other gastronomic approaches underline the variations in the meanings of food that communities share when choosing foods that bring mental or physical satisfaction.

Fisher's (1954) *The Art of Eating* discusses the interactions and bonds between those who produce the food, as well as its many meanings, while *The Gastronomical Me* (Fisher 1997) stresses that the presence of food in the bowl leads to nourishment in the heart and feeds wilder and more insistent hungers. 'We must eat ... There is a communion of more than our bodies when bread is broken and wine drunk' (p. vii). Fisher thus alludes to several layers of meanings and metaphors that anthropologists seek out in order to expand their comprehension of the place of food in society.

There is a wide diversity of symbols attached to food, as well as diverse ways in which food contributes to well-being. The biological is closely intertwined with the psychological and sociological in a gastronomic approach. While early Victorians viewed any matters associated with eating as 'unmentionable', food has emerged from 'the darkness' as a subject of wide debate and media attention. As 'domestic science', taught mainly to female students, it ranked among the 'lesser' sciences. Awareness of the diversity of beliefs and practices associated with food has exposed us to a wide understanding of cultural interactions, and the sense of well-being involving food (Belasco 2008: 3). Thus those writing about the anthropology of food
p. 238 address topics ranging from the politics of food and hunger on a global scale, ↳ as set out in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (2000), to empowering households' access to foods as a step to freedom (Sen 1999), to local ethnographies in which food restrictions are seen to dominate life, for example, in a Papua New Guinea Highland society (Meigs 1984).

An evolutionary interpretation of human history differentiates hunting and gathering as the dominant means of food provisioning from the subsequent stages of sedentary agriculture, plantations, and modern 'grazing' practices, including fast foods. The dominant contrast today lies between those societies that rely largely on growing their own food (subsistence) and those societies that use cash to buy their foods. Both means of access require choices that differentiate and cohere into distinctive gastronomies. Ethnic differences, and local cuisines have emerged, as well as 'slow food' cooking, alongside McDonalds and Coca Cola, as globalizing consumables.

To construct a picture of food consumption and the production criteria that lead to that end, we will illustrate how the language of economics differs from the language of nutrition, and that of social science. Economists have approached food largely through production, as it contributes to concepts such as wealth, capital, and labour. Nutritionists have added medical and chemical analyses to our understanding of food as more than a biological necessity. Social scientists approach food as it contributes to well-being through the principle of sharing at both the household and community levels, as well as across national boundaries. The stark gastronomic realities for communities considered 'food-poor' reveal a whole range of complex considerations.

All three approaches converge when we consider consumerism, marketing, and globalization and the neologism 'glocalization'. Cuisines, gastronomies, and food cultures all bridge the nature/nurture dichotomy. Anthropologists draw attention to foods/gastronomies as a means of communication shared across communities, whether in the form of mangoes or McDonalds, haggis or sushi, and whether in less-industrialized settings or within Britain, Europe, Asia, or America. The positives of 'good foods' are contrasted with taboos on particular foods, or items deemed unclean, and thus 'inedible' (e.g. Douglas 1982: ch. 4). The material aspects of food are embedded in social values and ideological concepts about well-being.

10.3 Food From an Economic Perspective

Early anthropologists included their discussions about food within chapters on economics, i.e. how resources regarded as food were produced and exchanged. Authors described how food crops were
p. 239 cultivated, including who was responsible ↳ for which tasks, such as planting, weeding, and harvesting, as well as the performance of rituals to increase fertility. Malinowski, an anthropologist teaching at the London School of Economics, devoted *Coral Gardens and their Magic* (1922) to describing how Trobriand people met their food needs through gardening as practised through appeals to the gods.

Political dimensions of food production have emerged strongly as concern mounts about the viability of food production in developing nations. The politics of hunger is based in assessments of food adequacy and food security. Trade imbalances that include a high proportion of food imports, particularly in Pacific societies, have been castigated as leading to a high level of dependence on aid from former colonial powers, i.e. industrialized nations. For those nations who have little to export—whether minerals, industrial manufactures, or cash crops—food imports are considered a drain on their economies. 'Import substitution' messages sought to encourage governments to find ways to increase self-sufficiency, i.e. the amount of foods grown locally. Ironically this reversed history, as many of these nations had been self-sufficient until colonial powers imposed the need to grow cash crops, such as sugar, or coconut for oil, on lands dedicated to subsistence foods. The costs of imported foods over local foods present households with dilemmas of choice. Access to cash presents difficulties in provisioning households.

A Marxist approach to food as it contributes to capital and wealth has helped to broaden anthropologists' views of humanitarian concerns behind trading foods. Labour inputs necessary to produce foods were documented as mainly men's work, whether hunting or growing field crops, with women's work being considered 'domestic' and thus not contributing to the economy. The male bias of 'Man the Hunter' (Lee and DeVore 1968) as distinguished from 'Woman the Gatherer' in early economic literature has since been radically re-evaluated. Such gendered language of labour was vehemently contested in the latter part of the twentieth century, with female anthropologists questioning the biases in the early literature. For example, Weiner's (1976) reevaluation of Malinowski's account fifty years earlier of Trobriand men gaining prestige by filling their yam houses revealed that women's work was equally prestigious. Trobriand women contributed bundles of banana leaves that were essential to kin relationships between those contributing yams. As 'women's work', the banana leaf bundles had been overlooked by Malinowski with his focus on

male labour. The cautionary message emerged that women's contributions to the economy, whether in the fields of Ghana or in rice paddies in Southeast Asia, must be taken into account if all dimensions of labour inputs into an economy are to be taken into account.

Anthropologists have also raised concerns about the place of food as a trade item. Early discussions of the complex Kula 'ring' of exchanges of necklaces and armbands, together with food, between several neighbouring Trobriand island societies (e.g. Malinowski 1922) have drawn attention to whether trade for
p. 240 prestige differs fundamentally from trade for wealth. Status achieved by giving away a ↳ prestigious object amidst a feast of food may be considered irrational in an economic analysis that stresses accumulation and sale for profit rather than giving. Trading rings such as the Kula and the Potlatch in northwest America have stimulated much debate as to whether they illustrate pre-capitalism, or emerging capitalism, or whether they are economically 'rational'. The question of who profits from such transactions is countered by those who ask whether profit is the dominant value.

Frequent exchanges of food represent dynamics of social relationships that are difficult to assess in strictly economic terms. Contributions to a feast, or a plate of donuts given to auntie's family, meet social obligations, but are difficult to represent in economic terms. The value added accrues at a number of levels as different kinds of reciprocal obligations, whether it involves those donating food to a feast, a woman buying some cabbages from a stall at a marketplace, or a family filling their supermarket trolley. Tracking such food exchanges tells us the values of the foods in terms of the social relationships involved. The 'economy' of any community, whether local or national, would collapse if such exchanges were overlooked.

The values of particular foodstuffs are similarly a matter of concern when assessing poverty. Subsistence activities that provide foods for households from their own lands and with their own labour have been notoriously omitted from assessments of economic well-being. Grain crops are given a monetary value, as they contribute to assessments of Gross Domestic Product—and only five grain types are included (wheat, rice, corn, barley, and rye). Root crops, such as potatoes or taro, and many other foodstuffs are omitted because their monetary contributions are too small. Thus anthropological descriptions of a productive economy differ from economic assessments, as they stress the great variety of foodstuffs and the ways they are used, whereas the economist looks at the proportion of the trade figures attributed to grain crops.

Thus we are faced with a range of alternative views on the adequacy of food supplies for growing populations. Since Malthus (1999[1798]) first suggested in the 1700s that food supplies may not increase as fast as populations, the notion of 'food security' has been added to the language of food. Whether assessments focus on food production or on consumption, our quantification of food output or usage should include both general and particular features. For anthropologists, households consist of both consumers and producers, to which members contribute their labour. Households are enmeshed in an ongoing network of exchanges of foods for both social and economic ends. The adequacy of food production systems to meet community needs is regarded as a step forward to 'freedom' (Sen 1999).

Food poverty and hunger is as much a humanitarian as it is an economic issue. To take steps to improve the poverty situation for large numbers of people around the world, the United Nations has set eight Millennium Development Goals (2000) that encompass a wide range of humanitarian concerns. Food
p. 241 poverty is the first priority, with nations expected to reduce by half by 2015 the number of their people ↳ living on less than $1.00 per day. Supporting goals include increasing awareness of women's health issues, political awareness, and education. But without adequate access to food, communities will not be able to achieve the other seven goals.

Food security is a major target in economic development in the new millennium. It is a euphemism for adequacy, for how a nation's political economy is working, or for where a nation stands on any global assessments of comparative standings such as the Human Development Index.[1] Economists such as Stiglitz

(2006) underline the need for new directions if national economies are to overcome the limitations that exist on access to food.

10.4 The Nutritional Language of Food

Nutritionists have their own terms for food, particularly ‘good food’ and how it contributes to health and well-being. They have introduced concepts such as calories, carbohydrates, and anti-oxidants to the language for talking about food. Their concern is to show the health risks associated with poor food choices and ways of consuming food. They calculate the various elements against standard quantities of each in order to assess levels of inadequacy. They start from a biological perspective on the human body as an organ that requires inputs of food and outputs of energy, with the aim of calculating where supplements are needed to improve intake that will achieve a balanced diet and good health.

An adequate diet is assessed against Recommended Dietary Intakes (RDIs) that have been calculated to achieve the best intake for mid-latitude western consumers. Measurement against these standard figures is based on an adequate caloric intake for men and for women, by age bracket, together with the suggested adequate levels of vitamins, minerals, and anti-oxidants. Nutritionists collect data from their patients/clients in order to calculate an alternative pattern of food intake. Where specific intakes are difficult to assess, an overall programme of less salt, fat, and sugar and more protein is recommended. Transferring those ideas to non-English speaking communities is difficult, in particular where the chemical components of local foods have not yet been analysed. The language of nutrition education is especially difficult for people whose food concepts differ markedly from those in the English-speaking world. A complex dish such as a pizza may have been given a ‘standard’ composition of elements in an appropriate table of food components, but for any of the side dishes that are served in Chinese gastronomy the
p. 242 ingredients are often very unfamiliar, and have not been analysed. For the Gurage of Ethiopia's ↳ diet of *ensete* bananas (Shack 1966) or taros eaten in Pacific communities (Pollock 1992), there are questions about how to determine the adequacy of their diet. Recommendations to improve such diets require analysis built on ‘insider’ knowledge.

‘Good food’ is a local concept embedded in social values as well as in the material aspects of particular foods and their combinations. Those bananas, or taros, or that rice have gained their cultural values within the local gastronomic settings. The food pyramid developed by Euro/American nutritionists places carbohydrates at the base of the pyramid, with protein, particularly meats, at the apex. The tapering nature of the model is also designed to indicate relative amounts of foods, with more vegetables and carbohydrates allowed than meat and eggs. But that model has proved difficult for nutritionists working in communities where food values have their own weightings. For the Inuit, fish and seal blubber dominate their food landscape, while for many other communities, any form of protein is hard to obtain. In urban settings the cost of supermarket meat is beyond the pockets of low-income consumers, so they fill up on rice and potatoes and bread (Pollock, Dixon, and Leota 1996).

The place of meat in these recommended diets is derived from what Smil (2002) refers to as the American ‘excessive carnivore’ diet. Although the recommended quantities of meat as the main source of protein have been reduced in the last twenty years from 75 grams per person per day to 30 grams, the amounts are still unattainable for two-thirds of the world's population. Not just the meat itself, but the concepts behind meat eating are being challenged: ‘man the hunter’ has lost many chances to bring home the kill, and with those the prestige and status that used to be given to the ‘breadwinner’. Prestige foods in the form of meat, fish, or chicken may be given prime place when guests are present, but such feast occasions are rare. Smil advocates moderation in the amount of meat eaten, and adds environmental concerns, suggesting that of all the meat types, chicken is the most sustainable (Smil 2002). Similarly, Pollan (2006) has demonstrated the

inefficiencies of meat production, as the animals consume five times more grains and water than the weight of meat produced.

10.4.1 The meal

Concepts of meals, as the main means of food consumption, have undergone rethinking on two fronts. Not only has it become apparent that affluent westerners set their own eating schedules to fit their work/life situations, but individuals are developing divergent tastes, so that the family meal may no longer meet their needs. Home cooking may be acceptable once in a while, but as households in the western world have reduced the amount of cooking, family dishes and recipes may disappear.

p. 243 The meal has been transplanted from western gastronomical practices into other parts of the world, but with local variations. One meal a day may be feasible, rather than the nutritionist's recommended three meals a day. In many communities like those in the Pacific, that transplant is recognizable in the terms for meals, food in the morning food at noon, food in the evening (Marshallese *manga in jibon*—'food in the morning' etc.). Previously they ate when food was available, such as when fish came ashore, and waited until the next cooked food appeared. Such irregularity was deemed 'uncivilized' by missionaries, who tried to teach local women 'how to cook' and the 'proper' way to serve food (Pollock 1986). Similarly, English missionaries advised that the meal should consist of meat, potato, and vegetables, with bread and wine added by French arrivals. These ideas were often neither feasible nor acceptable in relation to plenty of local foods. New ideas have been equally difficult when they come from nutritionists using a foreign language. Indigenous nutritionists and dietitians brought up in their local food traditions and undertaking nutrition training have elided the two, so that a food pyramid that contains both local foods alongside western foods has carried the message more successfully (Sio 1995).

Nutritionists have faced difficulties in trying to establish individual intakes when many people eat meals in family settings, where the individual has little choice in the contents of the meal. Elaborate methods of measuring individual portions by weighing them before they are consumed, and assessing any wastage, have proved intrusive, and the results are thus considered unreliable (Pelto, Pelto, and Messer 1989). Data can be collected in this way for only two or three days. Anthropological methods of gathering food data have focused on access to foods as they have been recorded over a year-long cycle. Necessarily, only a limited number of households can be included in such longitudinal approaches, but that is considered preferable to the very short survey method.

One advantage of a year-long study of food is that is that it reveals a wider gastronomic picture. It brings out reasoning behind particular food choices and tastes, as well as rejections of and adjustments to the acceptability of foods. Availability of fuelwood is a key concern that distinguishes cooked food from raw food. Foods such as taro may be inedible in their raw state because of acrid substances; thus ways of cooking in earth ovens have been devised that lessen the demands on fuelwood when this is scarce. Fermented foods may suit local palates whereas they are rejected by those unfamiliar with, for example, rotted corn, or fermented breadfruit or taro. Fermentation may provide additional flavors to bland foods, as well as provisions for seasons when food is short.

The concept of food applies to only some resources, while others are rejected. Those rejections are based on cultural rather than biological concepts. Pork is rejected by many who believe it to be an unclean meat (Harris 1985), while many in Euro/American countries reject horse, dog, and whale for emotional rather
p. 244 than biological reasons. Nutritionists have added to these features by assigning negative ↳ values to too much salt, or sugar, or alcohol, giving as their reasoning that they are associated with high risks to health (Coyne, Badcock, and Taylor 1984). But those negative values may be invisible, and thus rejected by those who enjoy their donuts, or their rum. Similarly reducing intake of calories has been a hard message for

nutritionists to convey, especially in those communities where large body size has traditionally been valued (Pollock 1995).

Nutritionists and anthropologists continue their dialogue about food and its wider importance, leading to a wider range of ideas for nutrition educators on meal structures, variations in eating, cooking, and gastronomic principles, as well as to new ideas about the links between food and health.

10.5 The Social Language of Food

The social language of food incorporates not only the material entities of foodstuffs but also the wider place of food in social interactions. Food 'communicates' through a set of categories in which values are embedded. As a code, 'the message [that food] encodes will be found in the pattern of social relationships being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries' (Douglas 1975: 249). Following Lévi-Strauss's use of binary pairs, such as raw and cooked foods, Douglas draws a contrast between the food categories of meals and drinks as social events, in order to ask whether 'a correspondence is found between a given social structure and the structure of symbols by which it is expressed, the question of consciousness' (p. 251). Alternatively, Barthes argues for:

> the (necessary) widening of the very notion of food…as more than a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour…Food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. (Barthes 1997: 21)

The importance of understanding food in its social setting is that it takes us beyond material elements, such as price or chemical components, to discern another layer of categorization. Material objects, whether rice or haggis, embody a range of gastronomic features that include the esteem associated with those foods, the value of labour inputs, the 'proper' foods appropriate to a specific occasion, the ideological principles meeting commitments through sharing, and the panoply of ideological factors behind food sharing.

p. 245 The many dimensions of food sharing are well illustrated by the multivalence of the Tongan concept of *kainga.* Literally it refers to food (*kai*) for the group (*nga*). But the term is used most frequently to refer to a family group including the space around the household. Tevita Ka'ili (2005) explains the many spaces (*va*) that are alluded to when the term *kainga* is used, whether physical or social spaces. It may refer to a household, or to a church group that shares food and a place to stay, particularly for Tongan groups overseas in California or Maui (p. 101). This multi-layered concept signifies the multitude of ways in which food sharing reinforces social bonds.

Sharing food across national boundaries has increased exponentially around the world in the last forty years (Pollock 2009). As families and individuals establish new communities in metropolitan settings, the foods they share reinforce wider social networks, as they exchange news and ideas and refurbish their national language. Nostalgia for a former way of life is evoked by the tastes and smells of 'home', even if alternative foods, or means of cooking, must be substituted for the 'real thing' (Kolo 1990). Trying to recreate experiences associated with cooking in an earth oven in an urban environment beyond the islands can meet with social disapproval of the new host community—as in suburbs of New Zealand towns, when a Pacific island church group wishes to warm the ties with home through the smell of cooking from an *'umu* (earth oven). The joy of meeting and exchanging news of others is strengthened by familiar tastes and smells, despite the restrictions.

Giving and receiving food, whether to relatives or to strangers, is generally recognized as a mark of positive social encounters. But differences between practices of cooking and eating can also offend, as when cooking smells offend neighbours, or, for example, Japanese were repulsed by the smells from a Maori *hangi* (a feast prepared in an earth oven), prepared by a group of Maori visiting in Japan. The wider significance may be lost in the reaction to an unfamiliar smell or taste. To offer a bear's paw as food to someone with strong conservation values sets up tensions in that relationship that have to be worked through. Misunderstandings through inadequate knowledge of local food ideology can even harm social relationships. When early visitors to the Pacific such as Captain Cook offered some of their prized meat (dried) to their Tahitian noble guests, the honor was misunderstood, since the foods were new to the guests' palates. Similarly, when a visitor to Indonesia is offered durian fruit, she is likely to question the edibility of something that smells so offensive. Learning other people's tastes is part of the social dimension of gastronomic experience.

Foods shared at household meals are cooked and presented in familiar ways. But the protocols of serving food may be unfamiliar to an outsider, as when she is served alone, while the rest of the family waits to eat later; the 'honor' may seem otherwise. The order of foods, whether sweet before savory, or separate foods served in courses, French-style, is passed on through the generations. Shared tastes, perhaps idiosyncratic
p. 246 to particular households, continue over time as well as being ↳ modified. A child learns the tastes of different foods from adults and siblings in the household, along with principles that establish certain foods as 'good' foods, or special treats, but then develops their own taste as their experience widens. Chicken and ice cream are no longer the birthday foods they used to be for English children. Instead, a birthday boy may request a party at McDonalds. For some families, a variety of tastes are cultivated in the process of sharing daily meals. For others, access to a variety of foods is limited by availability, whether because of distance from a market or supermarket or other supplier, or because of lack of cash.

Feasts are often occasions at which the range of food available is greater than that used daily in the household. Households may be asked to contribute particular foods, such as specially prepared combination dishes not usually eaten at home. In the Pacific, leaf packets of taro, corned beef, and coconut cream, baked in the earth oven, are offered as 'feast' foods. Similarly, haggis in Scotland used to be a shared communal dish, though now it is available in supermarkets, and even tinned. Thus the foods presented at a feast may be an important signifier of the success of that social event in terms of foods the participants approve of, usually the familiar, and those they consider to be unusual. Sharing ethnic dishes across national boundaries enlarges horizons, as when pizza were first introduced by Italians resident in the United States. But a pizza base topped with bananas and maple syrup indicates adaptation to the new host community.

Religious beliefs can contribute to differentiating 'good' foods from those not to be eaten. All communities select those items from their environment that they consider edible, while rejecting those they deem inedible for various local reasons. Chinese claim they eat anything, a factor that others consider unusual (Chang 1977). While pork is unacceptable to strict Muslims for religious reasons, horse or dog meat is unacceptable to many Europeans for emotional reasons. The association between a particular foodstuff and the ancestors may be a strong reason for not eating it, and for signifying it as a totem. For the Hua community in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, many rules govern the production, preparation and consumption of their food. According to Meigs (1997), the act of eating connects the Hua to the world, and emphasizes relatedness. They view foods as possessing the vitality and dynamism of living beings, but they also fear certain foods as carrying ill will, or pollution.

Ongoing exchanges of foods between households can be both a social responsibility and a practical exchange. When visiting for any length of time in another community, for example in a Jamaican village, the anthropologist is challenged by the simple need to eat, and thereby faces a complexity of social issues. To understand the relationships expressed by the plate of donuts, or fried fish, that a young girl brings to the door requires many questions. And to return that plate empty is a social offence. The relationships

expressed may range from a man's responsibility to ensure his sister is taken care of in a matrilineal society
p. 247 to a wish for a political ↳ favour. Food exchanges are the cement of social relationships, whether sharing a family meal or entertaining guests with a banquet in a smart hotel.

To understand the diversity of food concepts, both those expressed and those shared unconsciously, we must go beyond our own biases. What is 'good' food for one community may not be high priority for another. Belasco (2006) has led his students through a process of awakening their minds to five factors they should consider when studying the diversity of American cuisine: 'basic foods, preparation techniques, flavor principles, manners and the food chain' (pp. 16–20). He places beef at the centre of the plate, as he considers protein essential, with starch as a side dish, and vegetables as 'embroidery'. However, when we consider the 'cuisines' or gastronomies of non-American peoples, those categories are highly debatable. For Fijians, taro is their basic, i.e. essential food (*kakana dina* 'food real'), a root starch that satisfies as well as fills, but only when well cooked and eaten with an accompaniment of fish or a piece of coconut and eaten in the company of others. For the Gurage of Ethiopia, *ensete* is their main food (Shack 1997: 127). To identify 'staple' or 'basic' foods we must distinguish outsiders' perspectives from those of insiders. Linguistic clues may help. In the Marshall Islands in the central Pacific, as we learn the language we learn to use a unique possessive adjective for food (*kij-*) and another possessive for drink (*lim-*). Those possessives guide us to what is included in the category 'food'. I learned that Marshallese include cigarettes in their concept of food, using the food possessive *kijo jikka* when talking about cigarettes they are smoking.

The range of food preparation techniques around the world is vast. As Belasco (2006) argues 'humans are creative in devising numerous ways of turning raw foods into cooked foods' (p. 18). From the distinction that Lévi-Strauss drew between the 'raw' and the 'cooked' to separate uncivilized eating from civilized eating, we have come to recognize that the application of heat is only one way to render foods edible; application of lime juice to raw fish (*ceviche* in Mexico) is widely regarded as a form of cooking. And to preparation techniques we must add preservation techniques including salting, or fermenting, or more localized forms such as long cooking (see Pollock 1984 on breadfruit fermentation). Cooking with added spices, or mixing foods, or making bread, all require certain techniques which must meet local flavor principles. Understanding how communities satisfy their particular gastronomic preferences for certain flavors, and reject others, is integral to understanding food concepts, and how food meets social criteria.

Good manners are an integral part of social food rites. Mennell's (1985) historical account of how English and French table manners have changed over time draws our attention to the evolution of criteria of what are considered civilized manners. The gastronomic protocols that govern the use of chopsticks or serving food on a palm leaf, or serving food in the correct hierarchical sequence, are all notable features that send messages about the wider society.

p. 248 To Belasco's five factors of food concepts we must add the link between food and health that has become so important in recent times. As the Millennium Goals (mentioned earlier) remind us, the ideal of $1.00 a day for accessing food will improve the health status of those in poverty. The hunger concept as addressed by Lappe and Collins's (1986) 'Twelve myths of hunger' reminds us how some deeply entrenched—often ethnocentric—concepts prevent us from understanding how the devastation of world hunger can be addressed. Negative concepts that ban excessive food consumption because of its links with obesity and other non-communicable diseases have been widely addressed from many viewpoints (e.g. Sobal 1999). The links between obesity and desired images of body shape as promoted in Western media suggest that bulimia could now be included as a food concept.

Food metaphors as used by particular language communities underlie the variety of perspectives on the place food plays in society. Appreciating the many levels of those metaphoric uses takes us way beyond food as a material item. Chinese metaphors, widespread for several thousand years, have been written down as aphorisms to guide 'the right way of living' (Chang 1977). In the English-speaking world, bread as the staff

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
p. 249 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/