

# I WHY STUDY FOOD?

Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1755–1826)

What is food to one man may be fierce poison to others.

Lucretius (99–55 BCE)

History celebrates the battlefields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of the plowed fields whereby we thrive; it knows the names of the King's bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. That is the way of human folly.

Jean Henry Fabre (1825–1915)

Welcome to food studies! Food is the first of the essentials of life, the world's largest industry, our most frequently indulged pleasure, the core of our most intimate social relationships. It's very hard to imagine a positive social experience that does not involve the sharing of food – whether a simple cup of tea with an acquaintance, a lunchtime “bite” with colleagues, or a sumptuous lobster dinner with a lover. On a broader level, civilization itself is impossible without food: with the invention of agriculture some ten thousand years ago came city states and empires, art, music, and organized warfare. Agriculture remade the world, both physically and culturally, transforming landscapes and geography, subsidizing soldiers and poets, politicians and priests (Diamond 1999: 236).

For French epicure Brillat-Savarin, we are what we eat – and for Lucretius, we are what we won't eat. Our tastes are as telling as our distastes. To be a member of the Parakana people of the Amazon rain forest is to relish roasted tapir and to despise monkey meat, while the neighboring Arara feel quite the reverse (Rensberger 1991: A3). Food identifies who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be. “Food reveals our souls,” sociologist Gary Alan Fine writes. “Like Marcel Proust reminiscing about a madeleine or Calvin Trillin astonished at a plate of ribs, we are entangled in our meals” (1996:1). Food is “a highly condensed social fact,” anthropologist Arjun Appadurai observes, “and a marvelously plastic kind of collective representation” (1981: 494).

Food is also the object of major anxiety, for what and how we eat may be the single most important cause of disease and death. We can't live without food, but food also kills us. As psychologist Paul Rozin puts it, "Food is fundamental, fun, frightening, and far-reaching" (1999: 9–30). And probably nothing is more frightening or far-reaching than the prospect of running out of food. "A hungry stomach will not allow its owner to forget it, whatever his cares and sorrows," Homer wrote almost 3,000 years ago. Even in good times, we are not allowed to forget our deeply rooted heritage of food insecurity. "When thou hast enough," Ecclesiasticus warned, c.180 BCE, "remember the time of hunger." As if to take advantage of the brief break from habitual scarcity, our bodies store up fat for the next famine – hence the current obesity crisis – while our prophets warn us against complacency. For much of history the search for sufficient food drove the conquest and colonization of continents – and the enslavement or eradication of entire populations. Food matters. It has weight, and it weighs us down.

And yet, until recently scholars were amazingly reluctant to study food, especially the aspect closest to our hearts (and arteries): food consumption. To be sure, food *production* has received considerable attention in established disciplines such as economics, chemistry, agronomy, engineering, marketing, and labor relations. Scientists have long explored the negative pathologies of malnutrition, hunger, and adulteration. But when it comes to analyzing the more positive and intimate features of what, how, and why we eat, academics have been considerably more reticent. Even now, with the rising interest in food studies, a serious analysis of family dinner rituals, cookbooks, or the appeal of fast food may still evoke surprise and even scorn. "Do professors really study *that*?" your friends and family ask. "If you're going to go around telling your colleagues you are a philosopher of food," philosopher Lisa Heldke writes, "you better be prepared to develop a thick skin – and start a wisecrack collection" (2006: 202).

Why this reluctance to address the wider meaning of our food behaviors? Why is food taken for granted, at least in academia?

For one thing, intellectuals are heirs to a classical dualism that prizes mind over body. In *Cooking, Eating, Thinking*, Heldke and her colleague Deane Curtin write, "Our tradition has tended to privilege questions about the rational, the unchanging, and the eternal, and the abstract and the mental; and to denigrate questions about embodied, concrete, practical experience" (Curtin 1992: xiv). Philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer agrees that "Taste and eating [are] tied to the necessities of existence and are thus classified as lower functions ... operating on a primitive, near instinctual level" (1999: 1). There may indeed be some archetypal, dualistic disdain for something as mundane, corporeal, even "animalistic" as eating. "Put a knife to thy throat," urges Proverbs 23:2, "if thou be a man given to appetite." "Reason should

direct and appetite obey," Cicero counseled in 44 BCE (Egerton 1994: 17). "Govern thy appetite well," advised Puritan poet John Milton, "lest Sin Surprise thee, and her black attendant Death" (Egerton 1994: 18). To some extent, we may still live with the prejudices of the nineteenth century, which gave birth to so many modern institutions, ranging from research universities to dinner parties. Genteel Victorians constructed such elaborate dining rituals partly because they harbored a deep suspicion of eating, which – like sex – they viewed as basically uncivilized. The novelist Joyce Carol Oates characterizes that attitude nicely: "Civilization is a multiplicity of strategies, dazzling as precious gems inlaid in a golden crown, to obscure from human beings the sound of, the terrible meaning of, their jaws grinding. The meaning of man's place in the food cycle that, by way of our imaginations, we had imagined might not apply to us" (1993: 25). In other words, food is gross.

Food scholarship has also been hindered by another Victorian relic, the "separate spheres" – the idealized bourgeois division between the private female sphere of *consumption* and the more public male sphere of *production*. While the concept did not reflect the daily realities for most women – to this day women are major food producers across the globe – the ideological polarization certainly influenced the development of middle-class academia, for it effectively segregated women professionals in less valued "domestic" disciplines, particularly dietetics, home economics, social work, and nutrition education (along with elementary school teaching, nursing, and library science). Conversely, the male-dominated realms of industrial agriculture, food technology, mass retailing, and corporate management have generally received more public respect and academic prestige.

This institutionalized bias delayed serious attention to food even after the women's movement obliterated the separate spheres. While more women began to enter all fields of academia in the 1960s, it took several decades before scholars could begin to consider the traditional female ghetto of domesticity without Victorian-era blinders and prejudices, and even today, feminists who do treasure their cooking heritage and skills may risk the hostility of colleagues who feel that women should move on to more "serious" pursuits. In recent years there have been significant and largely sympathetic reappraisals of women's food work (e.g., Strasser 1982, Cowan 1983, Shapiro 1986, 2004, DeVault 1991, Mennell et al. 1992, Avakian 1997), but the identification of food with oppression still slants the scholarship – as evidenced, perhaps, by the fact that there may be more research devoted to women's eating disorders than to women's positive connections to food.

The association of cooking with women's enslavement leads to another major reason for food's relative invisibility: technological utopianism. For millennia food has meant unrelenting drudgery, not just for cooks, but also for all food workers – farmers, field laborers, butchers, grocers, clerks, servers, and so on. Since at least

the nineteenth century many reformers have attempted, in a sense, to “disappear” food, to make it less visible and less central as a burden or concern. Progressives applauded the modern economic shift from messy food production to automated manufacturing and white collar office jobs. Feminist utopians embraced almost any idea that would get food out of the home and thus free up women: the meal in a pill, foods synthesized from coal, centralized kitchens, and “self-service” electric appliances and convenience foods. For example, in 1870, novelist Annie Denton Cridge dreamed of a large, mechanized cooking establishment that, by feeding an eighth of Philadelphia’s population at one seating, would give housewives time to read, think, and discuss big ideas – and all at a cost lower “than when every house had its little, selfish, dirty kitchen” (Belasco 2006a: 110). Similarly, farmer-utopians dreamed of push-button, fully automated factory farms as a way to save their children from back-breaking labor and rural isolation. Today we can recognize that those dreams came true; sort of. Whereas once most people were farmers, now a relative handful of highly mechanized farmers grow almost all our food, and in providing over 50 million meals a day, McDonald’s comes very close to Cridge’s “one big kitchen” vision. But the result has been further distancing from the traditional rituals, sensibilities, and practices of food production – as well as some negative consequences for our health and environment.

Even more important in distancing us from nature and tradition have been the efforts of the food industry to obscure and mystify the links between the farm and the dinner table. While these efforts were stepped up in mid-nineteenth century (reflected in the above-mentioned, gendered separation of production from consumption), they date at least as far back as the first global food conglomerate, the East India Company, which was dedicated to bringing exotic foodstuffs to European dining rooms and whose annual report in 1701 observed, “We taste the spices of Arabia yet never feel the scorching sun which brings them forth.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this food company was rather proud that thanks to its noble service in distant lands, affluent consumers did not have to experience the strenuous and often violent production processes by which their sausage got peppered or their tea sweetened. Perhaps the most vivid recent example of how we no longer have to feel the “scorching sun” of food production is the meat-packing industry, whose main thrust over 150 years has been to insulate consumers from any contact with the disassembly of warm-blooded mammals into refrigerated, plastic-wrapped chops and patties. “Forget the pig as an animal,” a modern livestock management journal advises. “Treat him just like a machine in a factory” (Byrnes 1976: 30). In his environmental history of Chicago, *Nature’s Metropolis*, William Cronon writes that the meat-packing industry of the late nineteenth century actively encouraged such “forgetfulness.” “In the packers’ world it was easy not to remember that eating was a moral act inexorably bound to killing” (Cronon 1991: 256).

By the 1920s the relationship between supplier and customer, plow and plate, was largely anonymous, as noted by agricultural geneticist Edward East: “Today [1924] one sits down to breakfast, spreads out a napkin of Irish linen, opens the meal with a banana from Central America, follows with a cereal of Minnesota sweetened with the product of Cuban cane, and ends with a Montana lamb chop and cup of Brazilian coffee. Our daily life is a trip around the world, yet the wonder of it gives us not a single thrill. We are oblivious” (East 1924: 64). If consumers in the 1920s were already complacent about what East called the “globe-girdling” food supply system, they are even more “oblivious” now, when the “forgetfulness” applies not just to spices, sugar, or meat, but to virtually everything we consume: tomatoes, bread, pasta, shrimp, apple juice, grapes, cornflakes, and so on. Food is so vague in our culture in part because, thanks to processing, packaging, and marketing, it *is* an abstraction – an almost infinite set of variations on a theme of corn, which, Michael Pollan demonstrates, is the basis of so many modern foodstuffs, from Big Macs to Twinkies (Pollan 2006: 15–31). According to farmer-poet Wendell Berry, the ideal corporate customer today is the “industrial eater . . . who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical” (1989: 126). And furthering the critical challenges to those attempting to uncover the complex commodity chains connecting field and fork is the fact that people may not eat as regularly or as socially as they used to. Given that modern meals themselves are so ephemeral, it is not surprising that it takes some effort to see food as a subject worthy of serious social analysis.

Yet, despite these difficulties and delays, there is no question that more people are studying food than ever before. While it may be premature to announce the birth of a new discipline of food studies, signs of increased activity are everywhere. In addition to the food-related papers now presented regularly at mainstream academic conventions, there have been a number of major international conferences devoted entirely to food, and these have, in turn resulted in published collections (e.g., Lentz 1999, Grew 1999, Mack 1999, Dietler and Hayden 2000, Belasco and Scranton 2002, Jacobs and Scholliers 2003). New academic journals are appearing, culinary history societies are mushrooming, and publishers are announcing food series. There is also a lively market for food-related memoirs, essays, and annotated historical recipes. Serious analyses of the food system by Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, Laura Shapiro, and Marion Nestle straddle both “trade” (general) and textbook audiences. There are dozens of excellent websites devoted to the disciplined exploration of foodways, not to mention the thousands of sites dedicated to cooking, gastronomy, nutrition, and restaurant reviews. As hundreds of professors offer undergraduate food-related courses, several universities have established food studies concentrations

and degrees, while other students seek to “do food” within conventional disciplines such as history, anthropology, and literary studies.

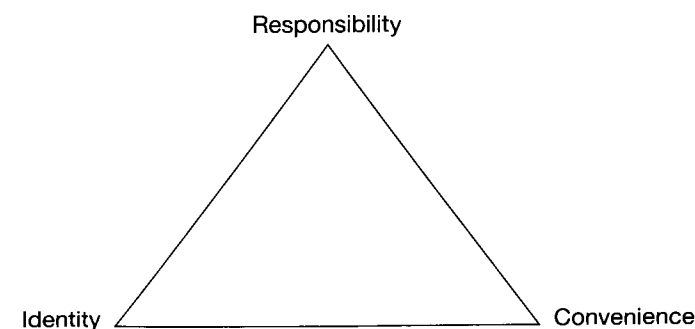
Trend-watchers might ask, why now? In part, scholarship is following wider urban middle-class culture, which, since the 1970s, has become much more interested in food-related matters of taste, craft, authenticity, status, and health. Food scholars belong to the same affluent social class that has fueled an unprecedented expansion and elaboration of restaurant and supermarket options, and that well-educated, trend-conscious public is literally hungry for analysis and perspective. Enthusiastic journalists and documentary filmmakers popularize the new work of food scholars. Socially conscious food professionals – chefs, managers, cookbook writers, etc. – also mingle and exchange ideas with food professors. Furthermore, as the world seems to spin helplessly from one major political crisis to another, large segments of the public look for ways to assert some control over their lives – and watching what you eat may be one such way to feel in charge of your destiny. Along these lines, the academic left has found food studies to be a fertile base for activist analysis of hunger, inequality, neo-colonialism, corporate accountability, biotechnology, globalization, and ecological sustainability. These concerns underlie much of the food scholarship today and animate many new food studies courses, where students often attempt to recover and illuminate the invisible links in the global food chain. Finding out where our food comes from is an important step toward taking responsibility for our food’s true *cost*, which Henry David Thoreau defined as “the amount of life exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run” (Orr 1994: 172).

So while food studies is now “respectable,” it is also inherently subversive. To study food often requires us to cross disciplinary boundaries and to ask inconvenient questions. The food supply belongs to us all, yet in the past 100 years or so we have delegated the responsibility for understanding and controlling just about every step of the metabolic process to highly credentialed experts. These specialists have managed to mystify food so thoroughly that many people simply throw up their hands in justifiable confusion when it comes to understanding essential issues of health, agriculture, and business, not to mention cooking and taste. Michael Pollan writes, “Somehow this most elemental of activities – figuring out what to eat – has come to require a remarkable amount of expert help.” Decrying “our national eating disorder,” Pollan asks, “How did we ever get to a point where we need investigative journalists to tell us where our food comes from and nutritionists to determine the dinner menu?” (Pollan 2006: 1). Yet all too often the experts have led us astray – as for example period after the Second World War, when specialists with endowed chairs at elite universities assured us that the first modern pesticide, DDT, was perfectly safe, that the Basic Four Food Groups constituted the best diet, and that in the near future we’d be defeating world hunger with steaks made from algae, yeast, and coal dust.

Specialists are useful to have around, of course, since modern life is far too complex for us to understand everything. But the problem with relying entirely on specialists is that sometimes they’re wrong. Or worse, they tend to disagree. So to help us sort out the issues and gain some needed perspective, we need generalists – people with a decent grounding in science *and* poetry, agriculture *and* philosophy, who are not afraid to question assumptions, values, and methods. True, we may not understand all the biochemistry involved in nutrition, but we can speculate about why certain foods “taste good” at particular times and to particular people. We may not be able to explain why one pesticide works better on mites than another, but we can still ask why farm workers’ children seem especially cancer-prone. We may not fully understand how genetic engineering works, but we still can wonder whether it is necessary in the first place. Such issues require that we think about matters political, historical, economic, sociocultural, and scientific *all at once*. As generalists, we study food as a *system*. Such holistic thinking actually restores our sense of power and humanity, for when it comes to eating, humans *are* generalists, i.e. omnivores.

While interdisciplinary study may entail a freewheeling crossing of disciplinary boundaries, it also requires a careful integration of themes or models on which to hang all these disparate ideas and insights. One needs to avoid the smorgasbord approach to learning – a little of this, a little of that. Or, to use another food metaphor, you can’t leave a supermarket without bags to put all the groceries in, otherwise you have a big mess on the floor. The inquiry needs sturdy containers in which to carry all that stuff away.

To organize our inquiry, this book begins with the single question, “So what’s for dinner?” Deciding what to eat may not be as simple as it sounds, for “Since Eve ate apples,” Bryon quipped, “much depends on dinner.” Eating entails a host of personal, social, and even global factors that, in their entirety, add up to a complex *food system*. To sort out these variables, imagine a triangle with one point at the top and two on the bottom. Focus first on the baseline: call the left point “Identity,” the right “Convenience.” And call the apex “Responsibility.”



### Box 1.1. So What's For Dinner?

This exercise asks you to negotiate the "culinary triangle" of contradictions. You are hosting a dinner for a very diverse group of people, including a vegetarian, a dairy farmer, a nutritionist, a hunger activist, your mother, and yourself. As a gracious host, you want to please everyone, or at the very least, you do not want to offend anyone. Everyone must eat; there cannot be any hasty, angry departures from the table. You also want to serve a meal that reflects your own tastes and values, and you don't want to spend a lot of time or money on it. What on earth can you serve? Describe the menu, taking care to show how it will appeal to each guest's sense of identity. In addition, explain how the menu is both "responsible" and "convenient."

*Note:* Try this exercise before you read the rest of this book and then again after you have finished it. Compare your answers.

For additional readings that analyze meals in this contemplative fashion, see: Visser 1986, Rozin 1994, Gussow 2001, Pollan 2006, and Kingsolver 2007.

For the most part, people decide what to eat based on a rough negotiation – a pushing and tugging – between the dictates of identity and convenience, with somewhat lesser guidance from the considerations of responsibility. (The triangle is thus not quite equilateral, though the moralist might wish it were so.)

"Identity" involves considerations of personal preference, pleasure, creativity, the sense of who and where you are. Identity includes factors such as taste, family and ethnic background, personal memories (the association between particular foods and past events, both good and bad). The cultural aspects of identity include widely shared values and ideas, extravagant notions about the good life, as well as a community's special food preferences and practices that distinguish it from other communities – for example, those tapir-relishing Parakana versus the tapir-hating Arara. Gender also matters considerably in many cultures, as foods are often grouped as "male" and "female" – for example, steaks versus salads. Deeply rooted in childhood, tradition, and group membership, the culinary dictates of identity are hard to change, because they raise questions such as "How do I eat it?" "Should I like it?" "Is this *authentic*?" and "Is this what people like me eat?" At the identity point, food choices are expressed through rituals, etiquette, symbols, and arts. In studying food and identity (Chapters 2–3), we look at what, where, and how people eat – and *don't* eat. And we examine how they represent, play with, and think about their food.

"Convenience" encompasses variables such as price, availability, and ease of preparation, which are all related to the requirements of energy, time, labor, and skill. In other words, convenience involves concerns such as "Can I get it?" "Can I afford it?" "Can I make it?" Accounting for these all-important factors of convenience will lead us to look at the global food chain – the series of steps and processes by which food gets from farm to fork. Hence, in Chapter 4 we will examine the role of the people and institutions that make food accessible to us – e.g., farmers, migrant workers, processors, supermarkets, and restaurants. By smoothing food's flow from field to plate, for a price, the food industry sells us convenience. To be sure, there are enormous differences in the degree of convenience afforded different consumers. Some of us in the world have almost instant access to an unprecedented array of meal options, while other people's choices are severely restricted by economics, environment, and social structure. Such differences are starkly presented in *Hungry Planet*, where thirty families from all over the world are lined up separately behind a week's worth of food. Families from North America, Europe, Australia, and Kuwait are almost hidden by immense piles of plastic-wrapped "convenience foods," while people from Mali, Ecuador, and India seem much larger than the baskets of unprocessed grains and produce they consume. Somewhere in between, representing the world's "middle class," families from the Philippines, China, and Egypt stand around tables covered with raw fruits and grains as well as bottled soft drinks and bags of snacks (Menzel and D'Aluisio 2005).

And then, there's the matter of responsibility, which I put at the apex of the triangle not because it is the strongest factor but because maybe it *should* be. Responsibility entails being aware of the consequences of one's actions – both personal and social, physiological and political. It can involve short-term, acute consequences: Will this meal make me sick tomorrow? And it can involve long-term effects: Will it make me sick thirty years from now? Being responsible means being aware of one's place in the food chain – of the enormous impact we have on nature, animals, other people, and the distribution of power and resources all over the globe. It means feeling that "scorching sun" of the East India Company's Arabian enterprises; or appreciating Thoreau's "amount of life exchanged" to get your meal from farm to fork; or calculating, as the Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy once attempted, "the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." In eating even the simplest dish we join a chain of events linking people and places across the world and across time, too – past and future. "We are paying for the foolishness of yesterday while we shape our own tomorrow," environmentalist William Vogt wrote in 1948. "Today's white bread may force a break in the levees and flood New Orleans next spring. This year's wheat from Australia's eroding slopes may flare into a Japanese war three decades hence." Having a sense of responsibility entails both remembering how the food got to you (the past) and anticipating the consequences down the line (the future). "We must

develop our sense of time and think of the availability of beefsteaks not only for this Saturday but for the Saturdays of our old age, and of our children" (Vogt 1948: 285, 63). Ultimately, assigning responsibility is a political process, for it entails sorting out the separate duties of individual consumers, food providers, and government. The poet-farmer Wendell Berry writes that "To eat responsibly is to understand and enact, as far as one can, the complex relationship" between the individual and the food system (Berry 1989: 129).

Although I have placed responsibility at the apex of my triangle, it is often the weakest of the three forces pulling at the individual food consumer. Still, many of us do want to be "conscientious consumers." "The unexamined life is not worth living," Socrates argued on behalf of acute self-consciousness. Also, knowing that "there's no free lunch," few of us want to be considered "deadbeats" – irresponsible people who skip out on the check, or worse, let our children pay our debts and then leave them worse off. "We're committing grand larceny against our children," was the charge put by environmental moralist David Brower when describing our reliance on wasteful, unsustainable resources and technologies. "Ours is a chain-letter economy, in which we pick up early handsome dividends and our children find their mailboxes empty" (McPhee 1971: 82). Chapters 5 and 6 survey some of the consequences – personal and political, immediate and distant – of our food choices and practices.

To illustrate the complexities and rewards of taking this type of comprehensive, multidisciplinary approach to food, let's think about the simple act of toasting a piece of sliced white bread. Start with identity: Where does toast fit in the morning meal rituals of certain peoples? Why have so many cultures traditionally valued processed white grains over more nutritious whole grains, while wholegrain bread is now an elite marker? Why do we like the crunchy texture ("mouth feel") of toasted foods – and is the fondness for toasted *bread* widespread or, as one encyclopedia suggests, "Anglo-bred"? (Tobias 2004: 122). Why is wheat bread the "staff" of life in some cultures, while others put rice or corn tortillas in that central position? "No foodstuff bears greater moral and philosophical burden" than bread, food writer Tom Jaine observes (1999: 97). Who invented the sandwich and what social function does it serve? Why do some cultures prefer wraps to sandwiches?

Then there are the convenience factors: Who grew, gathered, milled, and packaged the wheat? Who baked the bread? How did bread get so cheap? To turn the wheat into inexpensive sliced bread it required the coordinated efforts of numerous companies specializing in food transportation, storage, processing, and marketing, as well as many others involved in manufacturing and selling tractors, trucks, slicers, and so on. Who invented sliced bread anyway? When did store-bought white bread replace homemade whole wheat? When did they start putting vitamins back in white bread, and why? And who invented the pop-up toaster, and why?

And as for responsibility, think of toast's enormous "ecological footprint" (Wackernagel and Rees 1996). Growing that wheat helped some farmers pay their bills while also polluting their water supply with fertilizers and pesticides, eroding their soil, and, if they used irrigation, lowering their region's water table. The land used to grow the wheat had been acquired – or seized – long ago from other living creatures, human and otherwise, and converted to growing a grass that had originated as a weed in the Middle East and had been gradually domesticated and improved by 500 generations of gatherers, peasants, farmers, and, only just recently, scientists. By extending the bread's shelf life, the plastic wrapping lowered costs, raised consumer convenience, and increased profits for corporate processors, distributors, and supermarkets. That packaging also helped to put thousands of neighborhood bakers out of business. Making the plastic from petrochemicals may have helped to foul Cancer Alley in Louisiana, and if the oil came from the Middle East, may have helped to pay for the restoration of royalty in Kuwait, which was destroyed several years ago by an Iraqi army *also* financed by petrochemical bread wrappers. (Or perhaps the oil came from Venezuela, where it paid for Hugo Chavez's left-leaning reorganization of the oligarchy.) The copper in the toaster and electrical wiring may have been mined during the dictatorships of Pinochet in Chile, Mobutu in Zaire, or Chiluba in Zambia. The electricity itself probably came from a power plant burning coal, a source of black lung, acid rain, and global warming. And so on ... All of this – and much more – involved in making toast. And we have not even mentioned the butter and jam!

While the variables affecting our decision to toast bread are complex, they are relatively uncontroversial compared with the triangle of tense contradictions surrounding the decision to eat another central staple, meat.

Identity: The ability to afford meat has long served as a badge of success, health, and power, especially for men. Throughout the world, economic mobility has almost invariably meant an increase in meat consumption – a process called a "nutrition transition" (Sobal 1999: 178). Given the prestige accorded beef, particularly in the West, it is not surprising that the "cowboy" – a Spanish invention (*vaquero*) – has achieved mythical status. While some cultures accord culinary primacy to cattle, others prize pigs, sheep, poultry, fish, and rodents, and some eat no meat at all. Westerners have long denigrated vegetarian cuisines, and such prejudices have even been reflected in medical texts, as in a 1909 text: "White bread, red meat, and blue blood make the tricolor flag of conquest." "The rice-eating Hindoo and Chinese, and the potato-eating Irish are kept in subjection by the well-fed English," influential Victorian physician George Beard agreed. Conversely, vegetarians may frame meat eaters as less "civilized," as in George Bernard Shaw's famous prediction, "A hundred years hence a cultivated man will no more dream of eating flesh or smoking than he

now does of living, as [Samuel] Pepys' [seventeenth century] contemporaries did, in a house with a cesspool under it." Whether staple or taboo, animal foods carry significant cultural meaning throughout the world (Belasco 2006a: 8, 10).

Convenience: Biologically, meat may be prized because it offers a compact package of nutrients. It can be relatively easy to cook, especially if it is of the well-fatted, grain-fed variety produced by the modern livestock industry. Meat production has long been the focus of many laborsaving innovations – hence the early rise of the slaughterhouse “disassembly” line, which in turn became the model for so many other mass production industries. A significant proportion – perhaps even most – of modern agricultural science is devoted to devising ever more efficient ways to grow cheap corn and soy for livestock, especially fat-marbled beef. And making this meat convenient – cheap, easy, and accessible – is also a primary goal and achievement of the fast food industry.

But the responsibility considerations are enormous: acute poisoning from “dirty beef,” chronic heart disease from animal fats, the possible mistreatment of animals and workers in animal factories, the immediate and long-term impact on the environment in terms of energy, groundwater pollution, soil loss, and even climate change. The resource-intensive nature of animal production has been known for centuries. William Paley's 1785 *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* observes: “A piece of ground capable of supplying animal food sufficient for the subsistence of ten persons would sustain, at least, the double of that number with grain, roots, and milk.” In 1811, radical publisher Richard Phillips argued that British farmers could potentially feed 47 million vegetarians “in abundance,” “but they sustain only twelve millions *scantily*” on animal products (Belasco 2006a: 5).

In addition there are the conflicts ensuing from differences in diet, especially meat-eaters vs. vegetarians. In Plato's *Republic*, written over 2,400 years ago, Socrates argued that because domesticated meat production required so much land, it inevitably led to territorial expansion and war with vegetarian neighbors (Adams 1992: 115). In *Guns, Germs, and Steel* Jared Diamond suggests that Eurasia – Plato's home region – was the origin of many expansionist empires precisely because it harbored such an abundance of domesticated mammals (1997: 157–175). According to medievalist Massimo Montanari, invasion of the declining, and still largely vegetarian Roman Empire by northern, meat-eating “barbarians” brought widespread deforestation and consolidated landholding to accommodate larger herds of livestock (1999: 77–78). Following the adoption of this Germanic model, environmental historian William Cronon observes, “domesticated grazing animals – and the tool which they made possible, the plow – were arguably the single most distinguishing characteristic of European agricultural practices.” And after 1492 European livestock may have done more to destroy Native American ecosystems than all the invading armies combined

(1983: 128). “The introduction of livestock proved to be the greatest success story in the culinary conquest of America,” Jeffrey Pilcher observes in his history of Mexican foodways. “Herds [of cattle] overran the countryside, driving Indians from their fields” (1998: 30).

Differences in gender attitudes toward meat also have had important consequences. Men have long invoked their power over women as a rationalization for having the best cuts of scarce meat, and such differences in nutrition may indeed have made men more powerful than women deprived of iron, protein, and calcium. In short, with so much at stake in our steaks, there is an almost classic conflict between the rich rewards and stark consequences of an animal-based diet. Such conflicts make for exciting drama – and interesting study.

But let us not rush to the more disturbing elements of the story. Before disenchantment comes enchantment – the almost magical ways that food reveals identity and creates relationships.

## Chapter Summary

- Food matters, yet it has been little studied by academics.
- Food consumption and preparation have long been associated with women's world, and thus have been accorded less respect and attention than male activities.
- The drudgery of food production has inspired many efforts to “disappear it.”
- Distancing from food production leads many modern consumers to take food for granted.
- Studying food is interdisciplinary, respectable, and subversive.
- Deciding what to eat entails a rough negotiation among considerations of identity, convenience, and responsibility.
- The food industry's primary product is convenience.
- Responsibility entails being aware of the consequences of one's actions.
- Meat has a central place in the modern diet because it is an emblem of success and power (identity), and it is relatively convenient to cook and consume. Its “consequences” are equally monumental.