

For some people food is a utilitarian, simple, unquestionable part of daily life. To others it is a cultural pillar that can be shared and enjoyed across all generations, opening a complex, indicative window into the past while forging new ideas and conventions for the future. It has the unique quality of being simultaneously nostalgic and contemporary. To me, food is the epitome of indulgence and class, yet it remains non-judgmental- a microcosm of the times, cultures, and individuals that came together to create an experience, without any negative connotations stemming from the struggles that were almost inevitably part of the dish's introduction into mainstream society.

The inevitability of a civilization's food culture is an incredible thing. Throughout any time in history, one can look to the foods a group of people ate to determine their societal practices, hierarchies, priorities, and more. Food's pervasive, necessary qualities afford any observant person a window into the past in a way that no anecdotal stories or historical documents truly can. Every culture has different food-based traditions, centering not only around the styles of food, but also the methods of consumption. Communities formed around agricultural centers (early lectures). People ate, and continue to eat, in groups -- sharing stories and reflecting on their days, thoughts, hopes, and dreams. Different conditions regarding availability, climate, desires, and historical culinary trajectories are all relevant when studying the food practices of a civilization, and all give us simplistic, yet wholly indicative and relevant, information regarding who the people were and where some of their strengths, weaknesses, and priorities lied.

Food culture developed because of the significance of food itself. The excessive, primal need for it resulted in entire communities assembling around the common goal of securing their next meal. The rich and poor ate differently then, as they do now, but history shows that both classes found ways to prepare their food innovatively, so it could be enjoyed. While the rich required variety and complexity, the poor ate scraps of meat and anything that provided a prolonged satisfaction, like potatoes and bread. The culinary desires of the rich, and the agricultural surpluses, resulted in a gluttonous, indulgent style of food and eating. The poor, on the other hand, were left with the bland and preserved, incentivizing an extremely creative and innovative style of preparation that was cheap and delicious, even if stigmatized. Each society had their own conventions regarding luxury, indulgence, and enjoyment, and their food reflected this. As towns grew, surpluses allowed trade and access to a diversity new and exotic foods and spices. The reach of these foods was still limited to larger regions, though, and this created the conditions for the regional cuisines that persist today.

The traditions that evolved alongside food culture are also themselves reflections of food culture. Many societies developed religious traditions involving fasting, ceremonial eating and drinking, ritualistic idolatry of certain animals, and avoidance and stigmatization of other animals. Most of these religious traditions mimic the traits of the food culture in the society present before the adoption of such religious practices, but the religious aspect served to perpetuate and moralize the participation of such practices. Religious gatherings also adopted

specific foods simply because of their practicality and availability, many of which persist to today, such as the Christian ritual of bread and wine.

Beyond the connections between human history, culture, and tradition, it is also necessary that we understand the nutritional qualities of food and seek to improve upon our intake. There are many food products that are consumed regularly that serve no nutritional purpose, and an excessive amount that is actually detrimental. Nutritional sciences can help to eliminate the diseases that correspond to, and usually result from, cultural habits of consumption. Nobody has discovered a one-size-fits-all diet, because needs are dynamic. Food sciences can get us closer to understanding deficiencies and preemptively circumventing serious medical issues that are compounded by diet.

The necessity of studying food is quite apparent to those that study archaeology, anthropology, history, religion, and more. Food provides an understanding, provided we are willing to see it, of people that are different than us. It is a commonality that every person shares. It is this fact that allows us to learn about others while also realizing they are a reflection of ourselves, and realizing these similarities open an empathetic door that is difficult to accomplish otherwise. Food has brought people together across families, villages, nations, and conflict for the entire length of human civilization. There are tons of anecdotal stories from soldiers on opposite sides of civil war dropping their partisanship and gathering around a fire, sharing food and stories and games, before waking up and doing their jobs, separately, again the next morning. There is something hidden deep in the human spirit, constantly calling for people to share experiences, traditions, discussions, arguments, and politics while using food as the medium. It truly is an invaluable tool across all aspects of society, past and present.