

The essence of food is indistinguishable from the essence of life. They are synonymous, contributing to each-other's existence and equally representing the broadest definitions of diversity. There is an enchanting beauty elicited by both – a representation of humanity's stunning complexity and the soul spurring it on. As such, humanity's deepest and most instinctive qualities revolve around the procurement, and subsequent preservation, preparation, and consumption, of food. It is food that exemplifies humanity's trials and tribulations, its achievements and its failures, and its fears and aspirations. All of this, with each distinct quality equally represented, culminates¹ in what we refer to as "cuisine."

To understand cuisine in a contemporary context we must begin by understanding humanity's unique historic relationship with food. The evolution of modern *homo sapiens*, as well as the most interesting, complex segments of modern human culture, are inextricably linked to food. Anthropologists, linguists, archaeologists, and psychologists have posited theories which, among other things, claim that the development of language in early hominids was an inevitable result of the need to communicate and collaborate to ensure the acquisition and administration of food. Historical evidence of complex nomadic hunting practices, such as that of herding buffalo off cliffs, could only be accomplished with a complex, nuanced, and most importantly shared, form of communication. Eventually, as conversationalism developed and humans themselves became increasingly domesticated, the act of eating was solidified as a social event. Tales of the past, origin stories, folklore, and information could be shared and passed on for generations, usually facilitated by village elders during a common mealtime. The values that emerged, including the development of cultural tradition, expedited an emerging sense of community belonging on a larger scale, and a semblance of tribal identity – culture – materialized.

Writing, too, stems directly from human needs relating to food. The first instances of writing were found in the form of elementary symbols carved into a clay tablet and deposited in the Sumerian region of the Levant. This area, colloquially known as the fertile crescent, was the breeding ground for the earliest examples of human ingenuity. It was here that humans first developed agriculture, leading directly to the eventual invention of technologies including the wheel and the written word. Early symbols were created to account for food stores – a pragmatic solution which, like the wheel, could have resulted only as a solution to the tremendous task of procuring (and accounting for) enough food for a growing society.

These examples have been included, in all their insipidness, with the intent of establishing the understanding that human history cannot be divorced from the effects of food. The very basis of communication, and consequently human sociality and culture, stems directly from these proceedings. As follows, in stunning accordance, we can begin to recognize the

¹ "*Culminate* was first used in English in the 17th century, in the field of astronomy. When a star or other heavenly body culminates, it reaches the point at which it is highest above the horizon from the vantage point of an observer on the ground." I chose this word with the intention of evoking the same sense of spiritual relevance and connectedness that is present in the study of the cosmos.

manner in which food culture embodies, reflects, and manifests as, culture in all of its unadulterated forms.

Like all cultures, food culture (also *cuisine*, and henceforth *food*) exhibits traits which are simultaneously conducive and averse to experimentation. To illustrate this point we can turn to the 1920's – a time when early perceptions of Asian food, and Chinese food in particular, were developing in the United States. After entering the United States en masse, Chinese restaurateurs began creating dishes to cater to the average American's timid, yet increasingly worldly, palate. Dishes like Chop Suey, a basic dish with scarcely any Asian influence, swept across the U.S. quickly, all while an interestingly contradictory subculture of experimenting young people followed. Chop Suey joints would be full of twenty-somethings, deviously pushing the boundaries of a structured social code that the U.S. unofficially employed, dancing to fast-paced music, drinking, and letting loose – all while eating food that may be more practically categorized as Polish rather than Asian. It is the way in which a culture, food or otherwise, defines (and perceives) its propensity for experimentation, its desire to push boundaries, that truly demonstrates its limitations. These boisterous parties and their eating practices perfectly demonstrate the harmonious, ever-evolving point at which society's curiosity and anxiety meet. Risks are taken and boundaries broken, but only so far as to satisfy an itch for novelty – one can always turn around and see dry land.

Food is not always conducive to experimentation, however. The inherent historic and nostalgic characteristics of food make for a captivating contradiction (again, mirrored by society itself) between new and old (i.e., experimentation and tradition). The parts of society that exhibit reactionary characteristics, those with strong, often unwavering, traditions and habits, usually have these behaviors reflected in their food's (non)expressiveness, predictability, and exclusivity. Just as cultures establish social criteria for inclusion while dehumanizing the excluded, differences in food composition, preparation, and consumption can serve to reflect a person's worth to a larger critical group. Instances of food being used to disparage or marginalize are incredibly frequent. Examples include stories of Mexican food not being conducive to brain development and maintenance, Asian people being prosecuted based on their use of chopsticks, and the almost ubiquitous distinctions between 'High' and 'Low' cuisine (interestingly, Italy, China, and India have, for the most part, managed to avoid this trap). These embody the sociological dynamic between ingroups and outgroups, with food acting as the physical manifestation of their differences. Even if the intent isn't to disparage or dehumanize because of food, experimental or foreign food may represent cultures that feel threatening, and they also represent a tangible insidiousness alongside a perceived decay of the original culture.

Even in areas that society is approaching from a neutral perspective we can see a separation between certain groups be articulated through food. Here, the easiest example is that of the assumed difference between the tastes of adults versus the tastes of children. Certain cultures don't discriminate between the consumption habits of the two, but others, like that of the greater United States, has a largely socialized (through culturally relevant means like availability, convenience, advertising, and nutritional lore) conception that children are inherently, even

biologically, predisposed to picky eating. This is accepted as fact by most people, and they move on unquestionably, contented with the added responsibility of preparing separate meals to appease the picky child. This is but another instance of food acting as a clear reflection of social order and assumed roles, as well as a group's perspective of itself.

The perspectives gained through food serve to compartmentalize certain characteristics of a culture by defining traits that are easily recognized and differentiated. Human instinct involves the comparative analysis of fellow humans, most easily experienced in terms of what *they* have versus what *you* don't. Food is a remarkable reflection of the same comparativeness – what or how *they* eat versus what or how *you* eat. (Food was the crux of the French Revolution, as peasants grew tired of social repression and overthrew the structure that had relegated them to eating almost nothing but bread.) This comparativeness, and the ease with which we can find its reflections in our perceptions and use of food, make food an invaluable resource to the study of culture. There is nothing more culturally transcendent than food. It opens doors into areas of society that nothing else truly can.

Amidst this comparativeness comes a concept that, in effect, serves to do nothing but justify one's own prejudices regarding food while existentially diminishing that which doesn't follow. Authenticity is sought in almost every area that food is present. The definition of authenticity, however, is evasive. It is rare that a person is able to put the concept into representative prose, and even when this is accomplished, the definition is always subjective. Subjectively, authenticity may mean any number of things, usually including preconceptions that have been socialized through cultural participation and anecdotal affirmative dialogue. When taking an objective perspective, however, authenticity takes on another dimension. Instead of experimentation and tradition being at odds with one another, an objective perspective on the matter would conclude that both may be equally as authentic – people have always been forced to adapt culinary practices to changing conditions, meaning experimentation is, in this sense, one of the most 'traditional' practices one can employ. Concurrently and diametric to that, tradition only looks static when viewed backwards in time, even when relating to food. In actuality, tradition is only established at the point of acceptance of something that was once experimental.

Food's ability to divide and marginalize, as well as its innate ability to reflect and explain, allow it to act as the medium within which people relate. It doesn't matter whether it is exclusive or inclusive because they're two manifestations of the same thing: society. Whether food is edgy or it is traditional, it is always equally as authentic, just as is society. As a culture represents itself and its history through food, the sharing of food with non-members elicits the potential for cross-cultural empathy. Each culture and subsequent subculture have rules for interacting, including conduct around food. Instead of generalizing social habits and making assumptions about others, food bypasses preconceptions and provides unadulterated access into the worlds of others. It is one of the most identifiable characteristics of an individual culture, but it is also able to elicit empathy across cultural lines when nothing else is able. Food allows people existing within a culture but not within other (possibly, but not necessarily, desirable) subcultures to experience a physical, tangible, experiential form of relation and empathy, pulling

one into unfamiliar cultural territory. Arjun Appadurai writes “In a society where dining across caste or ethnic boundaries is still a relatively delicate matter, recipes sometimes move where people may not.”

In reality cuisine develops around available products, meaning styles, preparations, and textures change based on locale and heritage. Identities develop around locale and common heritage, with food serving to both embody and reflect cultural perspectives on nutrition, tradition, and taste. All cuisines, without exception, employ some combination of bitter, sour, salty, spicy, and sweet to construct flavor profiles. When people realize the similar philosophies behind food and the reflections of their own cuisine in those of other cultures, doors to the truly shared essence of food and life are opened. Take a racist to a Syrian restaurant, it's the nicest thing you can do for them.