

# We Are What We Eat

## Overview

Food is one of human beings' favorite obsessions. Most people spend a great deal of time physically and mentally preoccupied with food: we organize and prepare meals, we daydream about what's for lunch or dinner; we eat. Beyond simply an enjoyable, necessary human pastime, though, eating has important



implications for how we think of ourselves, and how we relate to the larger culture.

*"We are What We Eat" theme materials created by Susan Swetnam, Idaho State University, 2007.*

## Book List

- *Chocolat* by Joanne Harris
- *Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing from Around the World and throughout History* by Mark Kurlansky
- *Climbing the Mango Tree* by Madhur Jaffrey
- *The Language of Baklava* by Diana Abu-Jaber
- *The Mistress of Spices* by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni
- *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki
- *The Tummy Trilogy* by Calvin Trillin
- *We Are What We Ate: 24 Memories of Food* by Mark Winegardner

## Theme Essay

Food is one of human beings' favorite obsessions. Most people spend a great deal of time physically and mentally preoccupied with food: we organize and prepare meals, we daydream about what's for lunch or dinner; we eat. Beyond simply an enjoyable, necessary human pastime, though, eating has important implications for how we think of ourselves, and how we relate to the larger cultures of which we are a part. The books in this series invite readers to consider food as a serious topic, one that touches on some of the most important questions that we can ask about what it means to be human in general, and to be ourselves in particular.

Human tastes in food vary widely—virtually every nonpoisonous potential foodstuff (and a few that are poisonous unless prepared in a particular way)—is fare for some culture. Which foods people prefer is connected not only with what grows well in a particular place, but also with tradition, ritual, even scarcity, for rarity can make foods desirable. A foodstuff which is beloved in one place may be considered appropriate only for animals in another (as corn once was), or even disgusting (some cultures relish sea creatures and insects that make most Americans blanch). The way that meals are arranged, too, varies by culture. What is appropriate to eat for breakfast? Cereal? Rice and fish? Blood-sausage? Only a very sweet roll? What time do you eat lunch, and is that the main meal of the day? Do you dine at 6 p.m., as many Americans do, or wait until 9:00 p.m., like Spaniards? What do you serve at particular festivals, and how does that fare vary from everyday meals? What kinds of food would be inappropriate to serve for a particular festival—would your guests look at you aghast, for example, if you offered Buffalo wings and beer for a bridal shower, or a dainty pink cake and watercress sandwiches for the Fourth of July? And who makes that food, and how much time are they expected to spend? The name of the delicious Italian dish, Spaghetti Putanesca (with its sauce of tomatoes and capers) actually means “prostitute’s spaghetti,” reflecting the culture’s suspicion of any woman who would whip something up as quickly as this dish can be made. What was she doing with the rest of her time, people might ask, the hours that most good women spent in the kitchen showing their love for their families through food?

Whatever and however people eat, food inevitably becomes a marker of who they are (or were), reinforcing membership in a particular group. The wide variety of ethnic and regional traditions which persist in America reflect this—tamales, manicotti, latkes, fried clams, collard greens and ham, conch chowder, falafel, won ton soup, ramps, barbeque, cracked Dungeness crab. The combination of ethnic and regional foodways can place families in a very particular time and place, as happened in my own childhood, where Pennsylvania Dutch treats like shoofly pie and mustard pickle shared the table with 1950s cuisine (hamburger and soup casseroles, pot roast with dried mushroom soup as a flavoring, Velveeta cheese sandwiches on white bread). We also (in a weird application of the now hip term “eat locally”) ate foods that identified us as loyal Philadelphians: Tastycakes, cheese steaks, hoagies (not “subs,” and with Italian dressing, not mayonnaise, please!). However weird these combinations, whatever the quality of the

substances themselves, people tend to develop great affection for the foods of their childhood, for they remind us of a time when life was less complicated and we knew that we belonged with the people who nurtured us. As the books in this series affirm, particular foods can inspire vivid memories. One taste or smell can transport us back to a particular room in a particular season; can bring us into the presence of someone we loved deeply. The way that food binds us to our roots is so strong that one scholar has even called eating “a vehicle for the performance of group identity.”

And yet food can also remind us of struggles against our traditions or our families, as several books in this series also document. Immigrants’ children sometimes shun the “weird” food of their parents and embrace mainstream eating patterns with pride, even when the food isn’t nearly as good. As people grow up and begin to craft their own identities as separate from their parents’, they frequently change the way that they eat as a symbol of that difference. My baby boomer generation, for example, brought up on all those soup-based casseroles, was the one that fueled the whole-foods-based eating, that deliberately sought out small ethnic restaurants that encouraged supermarkets to stock odd vegetables that were never seen there before—avocados! radicchio! fennel! And yet many people still retain affection for at least a few foods of their childhood, or return to them later: I know more than one baby boomer who eats Velveeta sandwiches and Campbell’s tomato soup when he or she is sick.

Food also reflects our broader values, our politics. How our food is grown, gathered, and marketed to us inevitably effects the earth and the people involved in the process. How we prepare and consume our food suggests what we value. Is saving time important to us? Economy? Is self-discipline an important value in our homes? Or are we more concerned with indulging our senses, or eating healthily (according to whatever defines “health” to us)? Is food an opportunity for demonstrating our connoisseurship? Our skill? Or is it deliberately simple, a rebellion against yuppie pretense or pressure on women to be domestic goddesses? I know women who brag about how much time they spend on meals, and other women who brag about how little. I know people who drive across town to shop at bulk stores, for whom saving money is a virtue, and others who just as virtuously spend a great deal more money for organic produce at the farmers’ market. Such choices say a great deal about individual politics and values. Changes in food practice and sudden widely-embraced enthusiasms within a culture can also be significant, signaling deeper sorts of evolution or even anxieties. I’d suggest, for example, that Americans’ current fascination with previously obscure regional food traditions and folksy food festivals reflects a longing for authenticity and simplicity in our lives.

It’s important to remember, as you read these books, that there are no intrinsically right ways to eat—everybody, in fact, considers his or her way “right,” though it may seem bizarre to the neighbors next door, not to speak of the neighbors across the planet or in the previous century. However we eat, though, it is clear that food matters a great deal in human culture. For what we eat and how we eat reveals a great deal about us—what our assumptions are, what our history has been, even who we, as individuals, seek to be.

## Discussion Questions for Series

1. What specific cultural assumptions are reflected in the ways that people eat in the various books in this series? How do eating practices reflect cultural differences? How do your own eating patterns reflect the various cultures of which you are a part?
2. Where in these books do you see food taking on a spiritual dimension? Why might food be connected in people's minds with something beyond physical nurturing? Do you ever consider eating as something spiritual?
3. Where in these books do characters make choices about food that symbolize their own individual values (as opposed to the mainstream ones of their cultures or families)? Where do you see people using food to recreate themselves or to set themselves apart? Have you ever done anything like this?
4. Several of these books comment explicitly or implicitly on the ethics of eating. What issues of sustainability, labor, health, ethics of food production concern you most? Do you believe that individual consumers can do anything about these problems? What?
5. Food serves as a locus on memory in many of these books, emotionally binding people to times and places that they loved. Why does food have such power, do you think? What food memories do you have that bring back important moments in your past?
6. If the group wishes, it might be fun one night to invite each member to bring a dish for a potluck that is important to that person because it symbolizes something about his or her identity and/or sparks a particular memory. As you eat, share that symbolism with each other. Recipes would be appreciated, too! This session might even be an extra sixth one, after all of the books have been discussed.

## For Further Reading

***Aphrodite: A Memoir of the Senses*, by Isabel Allende.**

A lusty memoir by one of Latin America's most revered novelists, with recipes. Food as aphrodisiac.

***The Debt to Pleasure*, by John Lancaster.**

A complex, highly literate book, part novel, part philosophical treatise, with a self-obsessed and twisted narrator.

***Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*, by Janet Theophano.**

An interesting historical study of women's recipe books, ranging from handwritten collections from the 17th and 18th centuries, to printed books in which women made personal notes, to recent community cookbooks. Such books, the author demonstrates with ample examples, can tell us a great deal about women's friendship patterns, relationships to their families, ethnic identifications, and even self-image.

***Everybody Eats: Understanding Food and Culture*, by E. N. Anderson.**

An accessible overview study of why people eat what they do, with a global perspective. Good introduction to the kind of topics that food scholars discuss.

***The Gastronomical Me*, M. F. K. Fisher.**

Delightful autobiographical essays, funny and thoughtful, from one of the queens of food writing.

***Kitchen Confidential*, by Anthony Bourdain.**

A frank and funny expose of what goes on at the country's top restaurants. Not for the faint of heart.

***La Cucina*, by Lily Prior.**

A murder novel with rich characters set in Sicily, full of food and sex.

***Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel.**

A magic realism novel set in turn-of-the-twentieth century Mexico that focuses on the lives of three sisters, especially the youngest, Tita, who is frustrated in love but gifted as a cook. (In the Let's Talk About It Collection)

***My Life in France*, by Julia Child.**

A memoir of the great chef's discovery of French food—and her vocation—as a young married woman.

***Never Eat Your Heart Out*, by Judith Moore.**

An autobiography of bittersweet food-based memories from the author's childhood to adulthood.

***The Omnivore's Dilemma*, by Michael Pollan (nonfiction)**

Presents a hard look at three alternative methods of procuring dinner: through the practices of agribusiness (including feedlots); through modern commercial organic farming; and through individual and local hunting/gathering.

***Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*, by Laura Shapiro.**

An entertaining, revealing look at the way that white middle class home economists ("domestic scientists) shaped American eating patterns in the early twentieth century and set the stage for American housewives' love affair with convenience foods.

***Pomegranate Soup*, by Marsha Mehran.**

Three Iranian sisters flee a revolution to settle in Ireland and establish a café in this novel of cultural difference, food, and belonging.

***Secrets from the Tsil Café*, by Thomas Fox Averill.**

The son of two dueling chefs grows up with their bickering to found his own restaurant, the One World Café. A novel.

***The Sociology of the Meal*, by Roy C. Wood.**

An accessible introduction to academic discussions of food. Discusses choices that people make (mainly in Britain) about what, where, and how they eat, and connects those choices to larger structures of social, class, and gender behavior.

***Stand Facing the Stove: The Story of the Women Who Gave America "The Joy of Cooking."* Anne Mendelson. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996.**

A thoroughly-researched, very readable biography of Irma Rombauer and her daughter Marian Becker, "unabashedly amateur cooks," who were responsible for one of America's most beloved cookbooks. Fascinating information about the politics of various editions, and about how the book fits into evolving American culture. Required reading for anyone who loves Joy.

## Web Sites

<http://www.foodtimeline.org>

**The Food Timeline** is a collection of related Web pages compiled by Lynne Oliver, editor and researcher. "Food history presents a complicated buffet of popular lore and contradictory facts. Most foods and recipes are not invented; they evolve."