

We Are What We Eat



Introduction – Theme Information

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

1. *Chocolat*, by Joanne Harris
2. *Choice Cuts: A Savory Selection of Food Writing from Around the World and Throughout History*, by Mark Kurlansky
3. *Climbing the Mango Trees*, by Madhur Jaffrey
4. *Food: A Love Story*, by Jim Gaffigan
5. *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel
6. *My Year of Meats*, by Ruth Ozeki
7. *The American Plate, A Culinary History in 100 Bites*, by Libby H. O'Connell
8. *The Dirty Life, A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*, by Kristin Kimball
9. *The Language of Baklava*, by Diana Abu-Jaber
10. *The Mistress of Spices*, by Chita Banerjee Divakaruni
11. *We Are What We Ate: 24 Memories of Food*, by Mark Winegardner

Theme Essay

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, wonton 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.