The social roles of food: We are what we eat

This is the first in a series of 15 articles ex-ploring Food and People. This series was writ-ten for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, with Junding from the National En-dermit for the Humanities. The Course of the University of Cal-ifornia, with Regents of the University of Cal-ifornia, when the Regents of the University of Cal-

By Christine 8, Wilson

For all humans, food is, of course, a necessity for survival, the source of nutrients to meet our physi-

survival, the source of nutrients to meet our paysical needs.

But food also has important pyschological and
social meanings. In primitive cultures, the entire
social meanings. In primitive cultures, the entire
social meanings has present to the content of th

THUS, FOOD IS a central element of every culture. Indeed, it is culture that determines what we regard as suitable food to nourish us.

The body is not particular about how it gets its necessary sugars, fats and amino acids, but the mind is. Few populations eat all potential edibles in their environment. Instead, they eat what has been defined for them as food by the culture to which they belong.

defined for them as food by the culture to which they belong.

For example, snails, eels, insects and blood pudding are not common fare in America, although all provide good animal protein and are highly prized as foots by other societies. On the other hand, the majority of Americans have no tabooc against beef (as do Hindus) or against pork (as do Moolems).

The material culture, the tools and equipment available to prepare food, may affect what we eat. Chinese food, for instance, is cut fine and stif-ried quickly over high heat to maximize use of limited cooking fuel. But local or economic availability has less' effect on what people eat than what their

THESE QUALITIES or beliefs about foods form

THESE QUALITIES or beliefs about foods form the basis of our traditions about what to eat and how to eat it. Such "rules," often suspoken but learned in childhood, govern our eating behavior more than we might suspect.

Like less sephisticated peoples, we find our custom decrees some foods are chiefly suitable for women (salads and tea cakes) or children (animals crackers and peanut butter sandwiches), while others are more appropriate for more representative food and the people suitable for women appropriate for men (red meats, erronecely) thought our to "feed a cold, starte a fever." (bleken sough to sovereign remedies we still recommend for common illnesses.

Some of these ideas, which may be called modern

recommend for common illness. Some of these leas, which may be called modern folk beliefs, are descended from medieval European theories that assume foods and the control of the control

is still observed Latin Americans, who maintain that a woman who has just delivered a child should avoid the "cold foods," fruits and vegetables, for fear that "cold" would enter the body and harm the uterus and the child through the mother's milk. Some beliefs about the properties of food have basis in fact. Certain foods that are high in protein stay with 'you because protein is more slowly digested than 'carbobydrates. Eating "hot" chill peppers can make one sweat. Some "cold" ruitia and vegetables contain chemical or biological compounds that may cause discomfort to a sensitive digestion.

NOT ONLY DOES culture determine what indi-vidual foods we should eat, but it also determines

what combination of foods make up a meal and what is appropriate for supper or lunch but unsuit-able for dinner.

An outsider might define the American cuisine as an outsomer migat detune the American cuisine as meat, potatoses and a vegetable for the main meal, with juice, eggs and cereal for breakfast, and hamburger or sandwich and milk shake for lunch. Obviously, this is an oversimplification, and there are regional variants as well: breakfast in the Southeast traditionally included grits, in the North fried potators.

Southeast traditionally included grits, in the North Friespostate of the combinations of food may well be based on real nutritional values that have become integrated into the culture. The staple and its accompaniments often provide complementary amino acids, with one providing what the other lacks, making the resulting mixture a complete protein. Bread and cheese, lox and bagels, or fortillas and beans are examples.

So strong are these traditions among many ethic groups that if part of a meal is unobtainable, the rest may not be eaten because what is left is no longer considered a "meal." For example, the Irish potato familie of the 19th century had such disastrous consequences partly because many Litsh would not eat fish without the potatoes to go with his

ORSERVING SUCH cultural beliefs about the OBSERVING SUCH cultural beliefs about the properties of lood gives people feelings of belonging and security. Indeed, food acquires emotional autributes for an individual in earliest life, when the infant equates food with the giver as an expression of love. If food is withheld, or something less liked is substituted, the child reacts as though affection recognitishers.

is substituted, the child reacts as though affection were withdrawn.

Thus food becomes a symbol of security. For some it substitutes for love, producing compulsive eating or obesity. For most, however, offering and accepting food is an expression of friendship and once. Food reinforces a sense of belonging and provides assurance about our place in society. Eating together is an expression of solidarity; we seldom break bread with our enemies.

Families eat together less often in our society today than they did formerly. However, we still celebrate important occasions from holidays to weddings with food; the serving of food often makes an occasion social.

FOOD SERVES to establish or renew social ties; we gather to chat over a cup of coffee or cocktails. Indeed, we attach different social significances to a sandwich lunch as opposed to an elegant sit-down dinner.

At such private meals, some people may use food as others use automobiles: to show rank or status. Even nursery school children value food for social archange and rank them according to their exchange value. What is searce and expensive is more desirable than what is plentiful and cheap. Food may also be used to assert or affirm identity. Turkey served on Thanksgiving is a symbol of our identity as Americans. But various ethnic groups may choose different 'trimmings' according to their heritages; these dishes reaffirm their cultural backgrounds, and the familiar flavors are reassuring.

THESE EMOTIONAL and social meanings of food make food habits slow to change. In general, new foods are more readily accepted if they are introduced into meals with less emotional significance, such as breakfast or lunch, rather than diner, which has a more central role in our culture. For the most part, people like what they are used to eating. Tastes may, of course, be acquired, many of us enjoy the various ethnic restaurants to be found in this nation of immigrants.

But generally, tastes and customs are intervined. Custom forms habits, and so our eating patterns become a central part of our lives.

Next Week: Food columnist and journalist Waverley Root discusses "The History of Food."



Christine S. Wilson is in the Department of Epidemiology and International Health and a lecturer in the program in medical anthoropology at the University of California, San Francisco. A specialist in nutrition and nutritional anthropology, she is associate editor of "Ecology of Food and Nutrition" and contributing editor to ...
"Nutrition Reviews." She is the author of several bibliographies on food customs and nutrition and of numerous articles and book chapters.

Tips for eating out wisely

trum toway's usey intestynes, resultantias and fast foods seem to be taking over a good time of our meal-times. Many restaurants serve large portions (more than we'd eat home) and offer high culonic sections and sugar.

But according to susan Rapoport, author of "Cooking Your Way To Better Nutrition and Weight Control," you can still control what you

eat as well as influence your family in the right direction by making wise food choices from the menu. Mrs. Rapoport, a registered dieti-cian, is nutritionist for the Execu-tive Health Section of the Depart-

tive Health Section of the Department of Health at the Cleveland Clinic Foundation in Ohio.

She believes that how wisely we eat and drink can greatly affect the quality of our health.

HERE ARE SOME of her com

mon suggestions to obtain the most nutrition as well as avoid extra calories when dinning out: • If you plan to eat out, make a special effort to eat wisely the rest

If you put to eat wisely the rest of the day.
Don't select a restaurant that conflicts with your commitment to healthy eating. "All you-can-eat yous allows always guarantee that you will eat more than you should.
Select plain foods from the menu without sauces and gravies.

ROSE-O-LEE DONUT SHOP AT INC. PROC. OF THE DOMUTE AT INC. PROC. OF THE PROCESS geometres a



Beef Pasties 4 for 89¢ Ang Wit 500 Mexican Turnovers • All Pre-Baked Great for Microwaving Turkey Turno

Center

Frozen Food Center Livonia - 425-0282 Mon.-Sat. 9-6

. . each Monday

in the

Shopping Cart section of your

& Eccentric.

Observer

Having A SuperBowl Party? Let us provide your beverage needs

> DELIVER Simply call or stop by:

CONTINENTAL PARTY SHOPPE

210 S. Woodward • Birmingham 646-1750

PROWN STREET MARKET

WHERE SERVICE & QUALITY OUTSELL THE REST MINEOLA ORANGES STRIPS \$2.99 5 for 99°

Jarlsberg SWISS CHEESE \$2.89_{lb. min.}

Grade A • Extra Large

EGGS 89¢

LIVE LOBSTERS

FRESH FISH • QUALITY MEATS & PRODUCE open M-F til 8 p.m., Sat. til 7 Delivery Service 642-0450



meat market **Boneless Rolled** \$1.39 lb PORK ROASTS

\$1.39 lb. LEAN SLICED BACON \$1.39 lb. CHICKEN BREASTS \$3.99 lb. N.Y. STRIP STEAKS

WEDNESDAY ONLY WHOLE BEEF TENDERLOINS

\$2.99 lb.

COUNTER DELI YOUR CHOICE!
KOEGEL HOT DOGS or \$1.99 lb. \$**1.89** lb. MUENSTER CHEESE

GROCERY BIN Wilson's LOW-FAT MILK plas. gal. \$1.59

89° doz. LARGE EGGS 10% WINE SALE OFF

EVERYDAY! Prices good at Birmingham store only. Exp. 1/24/82

5713 Dixie Hwy. Waterfall Plaza Waterford, Mi 623-7768



Liquor • Beer • Wine • Mix - FRESH POPCORN -

Little Tony's Italian Bakery, Inc.

24101 Orchard Lake Road (at 10 Mile)
Hours: 8 am to 9 pm Monday thru Saturday - 8 to 5 Sunc
"HOME OF THE SQUARE PIZZA"
474-17 474-1720

Bordens Homo Milk \$1.89 · Lowfat \$1.59

| Bordens Homo Milk & Pase | Department | Bordens | Bord ppersel, Secon, Hamberger, Green Pepper, And cree, Onione, Stack Offree, Italian Seusege. Baked et no extra channa

24101 Orchard Lake

We now have prime and choice meat and fish

474-1720 ********

Baking Instructions: Non 20 minutes, belts 425 degrees for 20 minutes. 88 the lowest prices in town.						
MONDAY SPECIALS Boiled Ham		TUESDAY SPECIALS 1 DOZEN OF OUR FRESH DONUTS		WEDNESDAY SPECIALS Buy 1 Homemade Italian		
		Reg. \$2.39 \$ 149 All Homemade Cod	Ooz. Save 90* kies 20% OFF	Bread get 1 FREE Whole Chicken Legs 49¢ ib.		
		All Gourmet Coffee 25% OFF Freshly Ground FREE!		Fresh Every Day Reg. Shrimp \$599 lb. 1614 lb.		
From our Meat Dept.		From our Fish Dept.	coupo	From our Bakery	COUPO	From our Deli
USDA CHOICE WHOLE BEEF LOIN 70-85 lb. arg. Cut & wrapped free. \$ 149 lb. Secretary of the choice	COD FILET \$ 199 ib. \$2.59 ib. Good thru 1-31-32 COUPON- OCEAN PERCH FILET \$ 0.19 Reg.		Buy 2 loaves of ITALIAN BREAD Get one FREE Good thru 1-31-82 COUPON S 1 00 OF F When you buy one large pizza		GERMAN BOLOGNA 59¢ 1/2 lb. Good thu 1-31-92 ——COUPON———— Hoffman Hard Salami \$4 49	
SLICED BEEF LIVER						
79° lb. Good thru 1-31-82 COUPON		\$219 lb. 2° ib.	any combin Good thru COUPO	I-31-82		N
CONTINENTAL CORNED BEEF BRISKET 1 129 lb.	OCTOPUS \$ 199 lb. Good thru 1-31-82		\$ 100 OFF. our famous LASAGNA Reg. \$9.49 Serves 8 Good thru 1-31-82		LIVER SAUSAGE 69¢ lb. Good thru 1-31-82	
Good thru 1-31-82 Orc		10 Shopping			pen Sun. 8-5	

EAT. STARVE. HUMAN CHOICES.

villions eat well while half a billion others go hungry. That's life today for many

Why? Find the answers in the winter/spring 1982 Courses by Newspaper ries, "Food and People," running each Monday in the Shopping Observer & Eccentric.

earn the problems. Think about solutions. The illuminating articles by leading authorities are iterally food for use ight.

