

The history of food

Many factors contribute to eating habits

This is the second in a series of 15 articles exploring "Food and People." In this article, food columnist and international journalist Waverley Root discusses the factors that have shaped various diets throughout history, particularly the American diet. This series was written for Courses by Newspaper, a program of University Extension, University of California, San Diego, with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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By Waverley Root
special writer

People are creatures of habit, and of their habits, few are more firmly fixed than those pertaining to eating.



food and people

In western Sicily, for example, chick peas are cooked by being stirred briskly in a kettle with heated pebbles. It would be much easier to set the peas over the flame on which the pebbles are heated, but this habit has been ingrained since pre-Neolithic times.

In Apulia, in southern Italy, baby eels are placed in shallow pans of sea water and set in the sun until the water has evaporated, when they are deemed to be cooked. This habit dates to the period before men had learned to cook with fire.

And yet, despite resistance, people's eating habits do change; otherwise we would still be feasting on pebble-baked chick peas and sun-simmered eels.

Eating habits may be shaped by basic geographical factors, by such factors as snobbery, by movements of people and goods, and by economic forces.

GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Most important, of course, is the kind of food available. This is determined chiefly by geographical factors, especially temperature, altitude, soil quality, precipitation and location.

In the temperate zones, populations tend to be omnivorous. Move toward the hotter tropics, and vegetarian diets become adequate; move toward the colder poles, and people become carnivorous. Eskimos eat mainly fish and mammals, not only because that is what they have but also because they need a heat-generating diet to keep warm.

Mountaineers eat more heavily than their neighbors on the plains below; they need more fuel to heat themselves and to supply energy for the heightened effort of working in a thinner atmosphere.

Soil quality, too, is important. Those bright green fields of Ireland, so beautiful to the eye, offer poor nourishment for most plants, but sufficient for the potato, which became the national staple.

Rainfall also affects diet: the people of monsoon countries eat rice; those of arid regions eat millet.

Populations of the interior eat differently from those of the coast.

PIRATES AND PRIDE

Of course, you will say that dwellers on the coast eat seafood. It's not necessarily so. Solenzara, in eastern Corsica, lies on waters teeming with spiny lobsters. But if you want to eat one, place an order the day before; a boy will be dispatched to Bastia, 65 miles to the north, to buy one for you.

Solenzara has not eaten a lobster since its inhabitants retreated into the brush several centuries ago to escape pirate raids; Bastia, a large city, was strong enough to defy them.

The ancient Greeks held fish in little esteem, through snobbery. Any serif with a hook could easily take a fish; it was therefore considered unworthy of their betters.

Sardinians shunned their coasts because of pirates and malaria; today, though their island has given its name to a fish, they eat little seafood. They simply never acquired the habit.

Eating habits, it seems, may be formed by such secondary factors as fear of pirates and of disease, as well as by basic geographical factors. And these secondary factors are even more important in changing eating habits, if only because geographical factors — with a few exceptions, such as the abrupt temperature drop about A.D. 1000 — do not themselves rapidly change.



Waverley Root has been a freelance writer since 1967. He spent much of his career as Paris correspondent or editor for various newspapers and news services, including the Chicago Tribune, the Chicago Times, United Press, and, from 1958 to 1967, the Washington Post. He has also been a syndicated columnist and a radio news broadcaster on international affairs. His books cover a wide range of interests from the World War to sports and travel guides, and they include "Eating in America," "Herbs and Spices" and "Food."

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

Some of the most important changes in eating habits have been caused by movement — of whole populations, of their armies, or of their merchants.

Mass migrations do not really change eating habits; they merely move them from one area to another. Over time, the invaders may impose their eating habits upon the invaded; or the invaded may seduce the invaders into adopting their foods. The two cuisines may long coexist, as when the Arayan invaders of India brought wheat and butter to a country addicted to rice and vegetable oils, because the conquerors forbade their own people to stoop to the base foods of a defeated race.

The Saracens, in their southern drive, pushed through North Africa to its Atlantic coast, and into Spain, southern France and Italy, and in their northern drive to the walls of Vienna. They left behind new foods (spinach) and new techniques, including distilling and the art of making the fine, flaky many-leaved pastry found today in Austria as strudel.

Military movements have often changed eating habits — of both the conquerors and the conquered. In 185 B.C., for example, the Roman Army returned from the East with an acquired taste for Oriental dishes and Greek cooks to make them, thus replacing Stoic simplicity with imperial extravagance.

But when the barbarians toppled the Roman Empire six centuries later, they destroyed the lines of communication which had been bringing to it the foods of the whole known world. Nowadays, the factors that affect our eating habits are chiefly economic. These factors tend to debate the quality of our food, obliging us to resign ourselves to dependable mediocrity; but they do not change its nature.

AMERICAN CUISINE

American eating habits, indeed, are of a nature resistant to change. English-speaking colonists brought them to America from the British Isles, where the influences described above, among others, had crystallized over the centuries into a stable and consistent cuisine, deeply embedded in the national character.

America inherited them at a propitious period, that of the Tudors. Tudor cooking was sturdy, even lusty, unlikely to develop delicacy or subtlety for at least two reasons: first, England did not produce wine, so it ate food that went well with beer and whiskey (to

which America added rum); and second, it smothered its dishes under too much salt and sugar (to which America added maple sugar and molasses).

Spices were rampant, too, as were the more assertive herbs and condiments. It was a period not much given to vegetables — though fruit was much eaten — but the consumption of meat, poultry and game was heavy.

These English habits were passed on intact to America, where their spirit has prevailed to this day, virtually unaltered by the numerous foreign influences to which the national cuisine has been exposed.

New foods did not change the nature of American cooking; it was the nature of the new foods that was changed in the crucible of the American kitchen, to make it conform with the dominant spirit.

The Anglo-American cuisine barely registered the existence of American Indian cooking, though its contributions were not negligible: hominy, clam chowder, oyster stew, Boston baked beans, and after the settlers imported the pig, Smithfield ham, a Cherokee invention.

The South absorbed easily the new foods imported from Africa by Negro slaves: okra, black-eyed peas, collard greens, the watermelon.

Successive waves of immigration brought European cuisines to America, but they seldom entered the mainstream unchanged. They tended instead, when they succeeded in retaining their individuality, to remain confined to culinary enclaves: German cooking was confined to the Pennsylvania Dutch in Lancaster County; Chinese cooking by Cantonese in San Francisco's Chinatown, and even that home-made mixture of exotic contributions, Creole cooking, stayed in New Orleans.

There has been no lack, in the nearly four centuries since the Pilgrims of New England and the Cavaliers of Virginia brought Tudor eating habits to America, of assaults by foreign eating habits on the citadel of Anglo-American cooking; but the fortress has held firm. The American cuisine remains basically the English cuisine.

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FOOD & PEOPLE

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