Changes in eating habits

Over the last century, eating habits in Britain have changed dramatically. Our diets have been influenced by all kinds of factors: by the technologies in our kitchens, by the modes of transport supplying our shops, by the media and the government, and by trade and migration. The eating habits of our parents, grandparents and great-grandparents would be completely unrecognisable to many of us today. Our experiences of shopping and cooking have been transformed, as have our attitudes towards health, table manners, ‘foreign’ foods, waste, and choice.

Repetitious flavours

For many British families, up until the last few decades, household eating patterns varied little from week to week. A Sunday roast would be followed by a few days of recycled leftovers - for example cold meat might be crafted into shepherd’s pie or rissoles. Fish was traditionally served on Friday, at the point that the leftover meat had run out. Today many of us enjoy a greater range of foods than ever before. The idea that by 2007 raw Japanese fish would be sold in British supermarkets and widely enjoyed by people around the country would have been laughable to our grandparents’ generation.

Globe-snacking

Nowadays in the UK we are used to eating food from around the world. A lunchtime snack might include sandwiches, samosas, spring rolls or pizza. Supermarkets stock food from across the globe - think of tropical fruit like mangoes or passion fruit, sold side-by-side with British apples. Many of the foods we take for granted, such as curries or kebabs, have only been widely available for the last thirty years or so. Migrants to Britain have helped introduce new flavours and recipes to the country, while the rise of affordable air travel and the fact that people travel long distances for their holidays have helped create an appetite for foods from other countries.

Instant gratification

Today, fast food chains are a global phenomenon - fried chicken, burgers and submarine sandwiches are available on the streets of New York, Edinburgh, Paris and Shanghai. While food shortages are still widespread in many parts of the world, for many in the West the idea of eating only three meals a day is a thing of the past. We graze our way through the day, nibbling on crisps or chocolate to keep us going between meals. Obesity is on the rise in Britain and in many other developed and developing countries. At the same time, the number of vegetarians is increasing, and the health and organic food markets are growing. Where once these eating trends were regarded as alternative, now they are mainstream. From cookery programmes on television to recipes in magazines and on websites, we’re bombarded with advice as to what and how to cook. But
who are these programmes and publications aimed at? Do you think these phenomena are an indication that people spend more or less time cooking than in the past?