How food shapes everyday life

Microwaves and Poptarts

The way we eat and prepare food has changed hugely for the average family over the last few generations. When our parents and grandparents were children, food was generally prepared by the woman of a household. The family was expected to eat whatever was provided - rather than being choosy about special likes and dislikes. Today, packaged foods such as crisps or string cheeses, ready meals and new kitchen technologies such as microwaves have changed things dramatically - in many homes different family members help themselves to food throughout the day, often preparing it themselves. Even young children can work microwaves, and will make a ‘poptart’ for breakfast or a hot snack when they return home from school. The old fashioned ritual of eating as a family round the dinner table has been replaced in many families with separate snacks eaten in front of the television, or standing in the kitchen.

Food and time

And it’s not just how we eat today that’s new, it is also what we eat. Up until a few decades ago, many families kept to a weekly food pattern, eating the same foods on the same day of the week most weeks of the year. What was cooked each day depended on the leftovers that needed using up or whether it was a pay day or a work day. Old fashioned housekeeping skills - the ability to run a household cheaply and simply - were central to the kinds of foods that were prepared.

Today we are surrounded by choice. Takeaways, fast foods, packeted snacks and ready meals have completely changed the way we prepare and eat food. Many people have not acquired the culinary skills that their parents had. However, the rising interest in cooking marked by the many TV celebrity chefs and best-selling cookery books, may be the first sign that things are changing once again. Similarly, a growing awareness of health issues connected to diet, such as obesity and heart disease, may encourage people to leave McDonalds and go back to the kitchen.

Surviving the everyday

It must be remembered that for millions of people throughout the world, each day is shaped by the struggle to find enough food to survive. Whether this means walking miles to collect wood on which to cook, trying to feed a family on low payments for cash crops or searching for food among a city’s rubbish tips, the possibility of hunger or starvation is an ever present threat. For most people in the Developed World the ways that the everyday is shaped by food are very different. More than 30% of food in Britain is thrown away, and it’s more likely that a British person is faced with too much choice than too little.