Multiculturalism, taboo and disgust

Taboo and disgust

Every day, through the act of eating, we expose ourselves to danger. This is because, by eating, we introduce unknown, outside objects into our bodies. For omnivores such as humans, foxes, bears, pigs or rats, this danger is particularly acute. This is because omnivores need to eat a wide range of foods to survive, and this exposes them to potential poisoning. As a result, these animals tend to approach new food with caution or distrust. Consider how small children often refuse to eat new foods, or at the very least touch and smell before agreeing to chew and swallow.

In the mind

The connection between food and disgust may have its origins in our biological makeup, but psychological factors also play a major part. Deep emotional reactions to food are often caused by subconscious associations – memories of uncomfortable experiences in early childhood, connections with the smells of places we have disliked.

Cultural taboos

But matters of taste are not only personal - they are also cultural and social. The eating practices of different cultures may seem ‘strange’ to outsiders, but for many cultures around the world, food taboos are used to bond people together and set people apart. Judaism’s kosher rules and the Islamic laws of haram and halal all dictate the foods believers can and cannot eat. The cow, central to American fast food culture, is given holy status by Hindus in India, and is therefore protected there. The Roman Catholic Church asks believers to abstain from eating meat on Fridays and during Lent.

The unfamiliar

Very often it is the unfamiliar (even the thought of the unknown) that can turn our stomachs. Many British people love the taste of Marmite – but try giving marmite to other European nationals and you’ll find the smell alone will turn them off. In Iceland, putrefied shark is served during the midwinter festival of Thorrablót - putrefaction was once a commonly used method of food preservation across Europe - but most visitors to Iceland today would probably decline the invitation to eat rotten fish. Would you be willing to eat rats in Togo, cats in Guangdong, sheep's brain salad in Turkey, elephants in West Africa, guinea pigs in Peru, frogs in France, silk worms in Vietnam, veal in Denmark and beef testicles served as Rocky Mountain Oysters in the American west? What foods do you eat that others might find difficult to swallow?
**Multiculturalism**

What we eat, and how we eat it, is central to our sense of identity and belonging. Food and its traditions affirm who we are - and who we are not. However, curiosity, travel and migration have through centuries ensured that traditions continuously change. Our local cuisines and national identities are constantly evolving through the discovery and integration of new ingredients and flavours.

**Identity hotchpotch**

Imagine an everyday diet without the potato, first introduced to Europe from South America in the 1500s by Spanish soldiers. Tea was only brought to Europe from China in the 1600s. The British taste for curry can be traced back to 18th century English trading ships. Cheese making originated 5000 years ago in the Middle East. So through centuries of exchange, British food has become a culinary patchwork of cultural traditions and tastes. We bring food home from the places we visit, and we take our food to the places we go.

**Eating the world**

The British attitude towards food from abroad has fundamentally changed over the last fifty years. In the 1950s and ‘60s, as disposable incomes rose, more and more people spent their money eating out and travelling abroad. While holidays overseas introduced the British to new foods and flavours, increasing numbers of restaurants selling ‘foreign’ foods opened in UK cities. Wimpey bars sold ‘genuine’ American hamburgers, Italian style coffee bars served cups of hot espresso, and pasta restaurants helped the British to forget their fears of strange, new ingredients like garlic and olive oil. As hundreds of thousands of people emigrated to Britain, Indian, Chinese, Greek and Turkish restaurants increased in number and popularity. It is important to remember that while the British were happy to accept these new foods, many were unwilling to accept the communities themselves - numerous minority ethnic restaurant owners have suffered over the years from the racist comments and actions of their customers. The famous Goodness Gracious Me comedy sketch ‘Going for an English’ cleverly highlights this tendency.

**Global network**

Today, as never before, the speed and reach of globalisation, travel and trade, bring all kinds of diverse foods together - and this unsettles our definitions of particular national food cultures. We only need to walk down a city street or glance at a supermarket shelf to witness the influence of travel and migration. Most high streets in the UK today include a rich mixture of nationalities. Most of us do not need to look far to find Polish delis, Indian curry houses, Jewish bagel shops or Thai takeaways to name a few examples. The ‘traditional’ English breakfast is on the menu at many cafes, yet - and with increasing ease - we absorb, adopt or adapt the food cultures of others thus changing our own traditions. Today chicken tikka masala is thought by many to have overtaken fish and chips as the British national dish.
But, as we continue to exchange tastes, traditions and recipes in an ever globalised world, how much closer does it actually bring us? How much do we truly know of someone simply by eating their food? Do our diverse supermarket shelves show that British society embraces all people from different cultures and traditions, or do we just like to try new things to eat?