

# Foods' Meaningful Cultural Loads

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## Abstract

Nourishment is essential for life from a biological viewpoint; but the food one takes in is not devoted to that purpose, alone. A certain kind of food or the circumstances surrounding the eatery of a certain sort of food or habits of feeding oneself; often convey a lot of hidden transcript, or connotations; which are indeed based on deeply-rooted historical and cultural understandings and practices pertaining to a given human society.

**Keywords:** Food; Meal; Eating; Culture

## Introduction

The foods a society relies on represent much more than satiating the feelings of hunger. Foods and rituals<sup>1</sup> associated with getting one's hunger satisfied, are full of social interpretations of various sorts.

Bread being the main staple for many cultures, literally satisfying one's hunger is usually associated with bread. In economical sense, as well, phrases like "under the bread line" are common in various languages. It is known that during the French revolution the masses were shouting for bread. The queen is reported to have given the advice.

"If bread is not available, let them eat cake, instead!" Television Program-maker Ayhan Sicimoğlu, in one of his recent voyages to France (May 2015), showed a boulangerie (bakery) shop, where many kinds of sweet-smelling and fuming fresh bread samples were on sale. He said that a French-gastronome would judge the true worth of a dining-table merely by the quality of the bread present. If the bread is good, to begin with, chances are high that all the meals will also be good.

## Historical Highlights

We know that ancient Romans used to eat in a lying position. [Though it may look like a comfortable position] actually; it was difficult and tiring to keep leaning on one's left elbow. Problems also occurred when employment of both hands were required. Besides, too much space was occupied by lying, which caused a restriction on the number of invitees on certain occasions [1].

Invitees used to attend to feasts in their tunics and some even kept changing their tunics throughout the eatery session (as singers on the scene would do, nowadays). One used mainly his hands, since eatery utensils were not much developed (except for a few instruments like minute harpoons for oysters). An aspect of Roman food culture which is not agreeable at all, is vomiting [into specially designed pools by tickling the throat with feathers] so that more food could be gulped [1].

During the middle ages, the inequality between the nobles and the serfs is also visible in the eating etiquette of the times. Meals were distributed according to rank and social position. In a similar manner; in regular Ottoman high level assemblies (Divan) the high state-debates

<sup>1</sup>Here; rite de passage applications of certain "primitive" tribes come to mind, the most striking example of which would be cannibalism. Eating human flesh in such tribes did not have the purpose of satisfying one's hunger. This is an over-simplification and a slander on the part of the exploiting-white-man. Such a ritual /ceremony have to do with acquirement of the victim's extraordinary qualities through tasting his dead body parts: If the victim had tremendous biceps, tasting his bicep-muscles could help in that respect, for instance. Despite the shallowness of the pagan creed; at least the aim was not getting a full stomach; but rather it was a session involving sacred tasting activities.

were sealed with the Sultan's food-offer. Notables were sitting on the floor in three-person groups. The first offer came to the grand vizier and his associates in a round tray. Once they were fed, the same tray would now be carried to other groups successively [1].

The first fork was used in Venice. The Mediterranean Sea was obviously the center of the world and Italian city states were accordingly wealthy and important. After the geographic discoveries Atlantic coasts were to "inherit" the economical and political significance of international roles and the sophisticated Italian food culture was to shift on to France, in due course. Meanwhile the tremendous amounts of spice consumption would diminish substantially, giving more "room" for the taste of the main food [1].

## Trying different foods on occasion

For a healthy person who is on travel; the most delightful moments of new experiences must be exploration of exotic meals. In an environmentalist adventure-novel, as a sub-theme, we encounter some Arabic delicacy in a hotel's restaurant in Cairo:

Pitt orders the appetizers: Ground sesame with squashed eggplant; a plate containing mainly yoghurt and called Leban Zabadi; as well as vegetables and flat bread. Pitt recommends Eva to try Leban Zabadi, which is good for digestion also. She likes it but complains that the green spinach-dish is very sharply aromatized. Pitt answers that it is called Moulukeyh and one should first get used to<sup>2</sup> it before appreciating its true worth (Cussler) [2].

Obviously; novelist Cussler is a person who appreciates good nourishment of all sorts. In another work of his, his hero Pitt treats his female friend senator-Loren to dinner in an exquisite Washington restaurant, where the delicacy of the western cuisine is referred to.

<sup>2</sup>Certain tastes are like that. They sort of require incremental adjusting or "acclimatization". We had a Hawaiian English teacher who once talked about the primary Polynesian staple-food called poi, made from the taro plant (Figure 1). It is supposed to be a paste-like stuff with no discernible keen taste and a foreigner should be first exposed to it for a certain time on his table, in order to perceive its latent taste.

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“The bowels of vichyssoise<sup>3</sup> were set before them and they savored the taste. ‘The stewed rabbit was an excellent choice,’ Loren said between mouthfuls. Pitt had an expression of ecstasy on his face. ‘When I’m served sweetbreads<sup>4</sup> from a master chef, I hear bells with every bite. The brown butter sauce is a triumph’. The portions were not as large as dishes served in lesser restaurants, and they did not feel stuffed when it was time for dessert. Pitt ordered the peaches cardinal: poached peaches with raspberry puree” [3].

Let us specify that many dishes, especially dessert (Nachtisch) types were merely invented by ingenious cooks sometime along the course of food-history: It is told that a young [Turkish peasant] wife once injured the feelings of her husband. Later she regretted it and attempted to make a delicious and unprecedented sweet-dish. She roasted some flour with butter and mixed it with cream and powdered sugar. The husband, upon return from plowing his field, began to gobble spoonfuls of it and forgot all about the morning quarrel. The woman asked with delight: (Figure 2). Is it pleasant, my man? (hoş mu, erim?). The sweet dish thereby acquired the name “hoshmerim” (Uras) [4].

### Interesting ways to abuse cookery

In some cantons in Switzerland, foreigners applying for citizenship are subjected to the test of fondue. Those who can not cook good fondue (Figure 3), are considered unfit to become Swiss citizens. Comte cheese, Emmenthal cheese and Gruyere cheese slices are made into a cream in a vessel with white wine. Then the mixture is cooked over a light flame and cherry liquor (Kirsch) is added. The food is eaten with long forks and by dipping dry bread pieces inside the bowl (Milliyet Newspaper-Foreign News Section, October 24, 2000) [5].



Figure 1: Hawaiian poi (from the Internet).



Figure 2: Hoşmerim Turkish dessert (from the Internet).



Figure 3: French fondue (From the Internet).



Figure 4: Black Wine (from the Internet).

Taşkın [6] mentions about a “fascist” eating house in Italy dedicated to Duce (Benito Mussolini). It is called Federale (fascist officer) and it is a place located near Rome. Here is the menu: Zuppa del Federale (the soup of the fascist officer), Far Falle Tricolore (macaroni at the colors of the Italian flag), Cannolicchi del Balilla (special meal dedicated to the little scout with the black cap), Vinoo Nero (black wine) (Figure 4) and sugar coated with a Mussolini package.

### The melting-pot and its nourishment

American cuisine does not entirely consist of hamburger, cola and finger potatoes. It is actually a synthesis of various new-comers. All immigrants contributed to its formation. An Italian who eats the same meal in America can not obtain the same taste there since the mission of the American kitchen is to convert all those tastes into the sheer American taste, as Chef Derrick Chaulk says so. He gives a short summary by emphasizing words like “heavy”, “oily”, “fried” and “barbecued” [7].

What reflects the airs of a big city best is the food peculiar to that city. For example, when one says Chicago, we remember pizza prepared in a pan and when one says New Orleans, then we remember Gumbo (Figure 5) Turgut [8,9]. Nevertheless; in America Mexicans are called bean-eaters and Italians are called spaghetti-eaters<sup>5</sup> in a pejorative manner (Figure 6).

### Sheer ethnical traces versus “modernism”

Acıka Restaurant in Bostancı neighborhood of Istanbul is an ethnical kitchen consisting of Abkhaz cookery. (All Caucasians are not of Circassian origin, as some tend to think so, by the way). No frying

<sup>3</sup>A soup made with potatoes, leeks, and cream and typically served chilled.

<sup>4</sup>A culinary name for the thymus (also called throat, gullet). The Turkish equivalent is called “uykuluk” and is a famous dish in Sütlüce district of İstanbul.

<sup>5</sup>German author Günther Wallraff, in his undercover-journalistic-masterpiece (Ganz unten) (Figure 6) (literally; at the lowest of all levels) [9] mentions xenophobic employers and foremen who regard Turkish guest workers.



Figure 5: Gumpo of New Orleans (from the Internet).

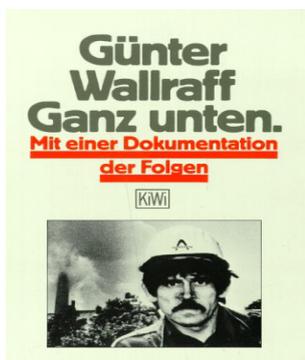


Figure 6: The book where it says that some pejudiced German foremen (Meisters) call guest Turkish workers merely "shish kebab eaters" (From the Internet).

and grilling is present. Meat is either boiled or else dried over soot; which may be related to the longevity of life spans of those folks [10].

In the countries of the European Union, consumption of giblets (variety meat, les abattis) is forbidden on the grounds of being hazardous to human health. In Turkey, tripe soup and kokoretsi —a Byzantium food adapted by the Ottomans, grilled lamb intestines (Figure 7) will be banned in the near future. Indeed, in Greece kokoretsi was also banned [11].

Many historians assert that desserts (Figure 8 and 9) were excluded in ancient Turkish food culture. The reason why? It was softening the warriors and diminishing their belligerent qualities. Traveler Ibn Battuta of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Figure 10) has a book narrating the strange aspects and curious beliefs of tribes, at his times. The author, while mentioning about Crimean Turks, says that it is a shameful act for them to indulge in eatery of sweets. Turks' meeting with sweets came after their conversion into Islam [12].

The main staple of Turkish people is bread, be it made of wheat flour or any other cereal's flour. In a counter-intelligence class at the School of Reserved Officers; the instructor-officer once said that Turks have fondness (faible/Schwäche) for bread. Accordingly; an effective booby-trap targeting the Turkish soldier could probably be planted in a weighty piece of fresh, fuming bread<sup>6</sup> which would constitute quite a temptation for him to resist!

<sup>6</sup>"As for the typical American soldier", he said, "since he cannot do without a proper rest-room, the booby-trap would probably be set in a clean toilet". Indeed, in America a person who relieves himself in open air may get arrested easily. A Ph.D. student once said that even a cruel gangster would always flush the toilet in America. In a gangster movie the gang members assemble in a deserted factory site. One asks where the rest room is. Another makes a sweeping motion of his hand and replies: "Everywhere!" In an American movie theater, while watching this episode, the spectators burst into a loud laughter. Later I watched the same movie in Istanbul and the joke went almost unnoticed.

## An all-embracing Balkan culture

While in a Balkan tour, "in the city of Skopje good meat-balls are cooked" they said to us. Then we were told to try dry beans and pump-sweets. The waiter at the meat ball shop was not a Turk. But we could communicate in Turkish. He calls soda "bitter water" in Turkish (aci su). This place is Roumeli. Those beautiful countries are born from among the ashes of the Ottomans, just like the Turkish Republic itself [13].

The book with the title "The Only Lobster of Our House" is in a sense also a biography of the author, Selim İleri [besides being a recapture of the old tastes of Istanbul]. I wonder about the taste of Cinderella-rice. I wish I were near the aunt of the author while she cooked this special dish. Watching somebody's cooking must be one



Figure 7: Kokoretsi (grilled lamb intestines/gegrilltem Lamm darm) (from the Internet).



Figure 8: An elderly peasant man peddling his village's produce, sweet yellow gourd (winter squash), to city-women in front of a pharmacy, in the Turkish city of Edirne (photo by the author— S.Ç.). (The mere attire of the peddler reveals his peasant origins: Riding trousers (culotte de cheval) with buttoned legs made of very thick felt-cloth. A commonplace sight about half a century ago, those pants now constitute an extremely rare sight).



Figure 9: Sugar-coated chick peas, a Turkish candy for children (scanned by the Author).



**Figure 10:** A representative picture of 14<sup>th</sup> century traveler Ibn Battuta, who mentions in his written work that Crimean Turks were ashamed to eat sweetsies (from the Internet).

of the best actions a person can ever achieve in his life. Cooking itself is a unique field of action especially for women, whereby they can repair and rebuild themselves and make all their hatred, bitterness and happiness come into a sort of expression by deeds rather than words! [14].

### Food-Sharing is a Sign of Comradship

Sharing food with a person conciliates a solid comradeship and is known as the right of bread-and-salt in Anatolian culture. Years ago, I had an academically very poor student in my class at a boarding school. The Administration once ordered that all faculty members will attend the collective lunch at the tables of the students. That student of mine happened to be at the table where I was assigned to. Moreover, it was he who was in charge of soup distribution. He was delighted to see me there, probably a vague hope stirring up within his mind. Indeed; I could not flunk him. An undeserved passing grade was accorded by my hand at the very last moment, while issuing the semester-grades.

### Food and creed

Vegetarians of Hindu faith refrain from animal-origin-food while Jews and Moslems condemn pork. Moslems consider animal blood filthy and let it drain until the last drop, while cutting animals. Flesh of dead animals is also forbidden for believers of Islam. In a spiritually sense; food gained through illegal acts is also unclean and not worthy of passing through the food-pipe.

### Food and status

The nourishment of the poor is cheap while that of the rich is costly. The respective prices, however, do not always reflect the face value of the bought nourishment. Sometimes nominal or titular values associated with a particular item do alter the actual market price. In many occasions the relative abundance or rarity is a factor, of course. As in conspicuous consumption, a concept coined by American Sociologist T Veblen, sometimes the idea of showing off or boasting is also involved in determining the price of certain nourishment.

### Healing effects of foods

(In comparison to syringues, inhalations or rubbing on the skin) the great majority of medicaments are administered into the body through the digestive system. Certain ingredients, mostly of herbal nature, are matched with certain diseases. For instance; as Acıpayaml [15] puts it, in the region of Acıpayam, if the menstrual cycle is cut off [at a young

age] the patient drinks a boiled extract of harmful plant (üzzerlik) seeds; a coughing patient drinks the hot extract of elder (mürver) tree flowers.

The recipes of the Western Anatolian folk remedies mostly come from herbs and plants. Most are to be swallowed; some involve fumigation like inhaling the vapor of beneficial herbs (thyme, cinnamon, oath, orties, garlic etc.).Some foods are not considered proper for pregnant women: It is a coon belief that eating rabbit-meat will cause the child to have parted lips. Sheephead (kelle) will give you a snotty (sümüklü) child (Nicolas) [16]. On the other hand; it is told that if the pregnant woman eats quinces, the child will have dimples on the cheeks, a desirable trait. Apples, pomegranates, grapes and milk-curdle /crème (kaymak) are in respective order associated with red cheeks, long life, large and beautiful eyes, white skin complexion. Actually; the pregnant woman should be offered everything she feels like eating or every delicious delicacy she just happens to cast her glance on. It is considered the lawful right of the eye (goz hakki) [16].

As a common measure against difficult baby-deliveries; the patient may swallow pulverized egg-shells. This is a symbolic ritual, since a chicken also hatches from an egg, by breaking the shell (ibid.).

Nourishments like onions, liver, boiled corn, figs boiled in milk, salty almonds, salty sun-flower seeds, viscous raisin-syrup (pekmez) increase the mother's milk production [16].

### Conclusion

It is said that one is what one eats. That much of a claim is sheer exaggeration, let us make it clear. But; food is a significant item for mankind, both in the literal and the figurative senses. After all, one carries on his profession essentially for the sake of making a living, i.e. feeding himself (and his family). But on the other hand; food is much more than a stomach-filling. Many meals are prepared in an elaborate manner, reflecting vestiges of a high and rich culture, deeply-rooted in history.

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