

Food and Eating: An Anthropological Perspective

By Robin Fox

The Myth of Nutrition

We have to eat; we like to eat; eating makes us feel good; it is more important than sex. To ensure genetic survival the sex urge need only be satisfied a few times in a lifetime; the hunger urge must be satisfied every day.

It is also a profoundly social urge. Food is almost always shared; people eat together; mealtimes are events when the whole family or settlement or village comes together. Food is also an occasion for sharing, for distributing and giving, for the expression of altruism, whether from parents to children, children to in-laws, or anyone to visitors and strangers. Food is the most important thing a mother gives a child; it is the substance of her own body, and in most parts of the world mother's milk is still the only safe food for infants. Thus food becomes not just a symbol of, but the reality of, love and security.

All animals eat, but we are the only animal that cooks. So cooking becomes more than a necessity, it is the symbol of our humanity, what marks us off from the rest of nature. And because eating is almost always a group event (as opposed to sex), food becomes a focus of symbolic activity about sociality and our place in our society.

The body needs fuel. But this need could be served by a rough diet of small game, roots, and berries, as it was for several million years. Or, even more extreme, pills could be synthesized to give us all we need (except bulk). But our "tastes" have never been governed solely by nutrition. Modern nutritionists chanted the litany of the "four food types" (vegetables, grains, dairy products, meats) from which we were supposed to take more or less equal amounts daily. But dairy and domestic meat fats are now considered harmful, and a new "food pyramid" – equally misleading – is being touted.

In fact, nutrition plays only a small part in our food choices. Adele Davis, whose bossy opinions on food were to a whole generation as authoritative as Dr. Spock's on childrearing (she recommended a diet of liver and yogurt), held that European history was determined by food habits. The French ate white bread and drank wine and strong coffee, she said, and this was about as nutritionally disastrous as possible; the Germans, on the other hand, ate dark bread and drank beer – both nutritionally sound. Was it any wonder, she asked, that the Germans kept beating the French? But even if both nations were to accept this interesting hypothesis as sound, do we believe they would change their food preferences?|

Nor are these preferences solely governed by what is available. All cultures go to considerable lengths to obtain preferred foods, and often ignore valuable food sources close at hand. The English do not eat horse and dog; Mohammedans refuse pork; Jews have a whole litany of forbidden foods (see Leviticus); Americans despise offal; Hindus taboo beef – and so on. People will not just eat anything, whatever the circumstances. In fact, omnivorosity is often treated as a joke. The Chinese are indeed thought by their more fastidious neighbors to eat anything. The Vietnamese used to say that the best way to get rid of the Americans would be to invite in the Chinese, who would surely find them good to eat.

You Eat What You Are

Since everyone must eat, what we eat becomes a most powerful symbol of who we are. To set yourself apart from others by what you will and will not eat is a social barrier almost as powerful as the incest taboo, which tells us with whom we may or may not have sex. Some cultures equate the two taboos. Margaret Mead quotes a New Guinea proverb that goes, “Your own mother, your own sister, your own pigs, your own yams which you have piled up, you may not eat.” Own food, like related women, is for exchange, for gift giving, for social generosity, for forging alliances, but not for personal consumption. The obverse of this is that you identify yourself with others by eating the same things in the same way. To achieve such identification, people will struggle to eat things they loath, and avoid perfectly tasty food that is on the forbidden list. In the process of social climbing people have to learn to like caviar, artichokes, snails, and asparagus, and scorn dumplings, fish and chips, and meat and potato pie – all more nutritious, but fatally tainted with lower-class associations.

There are as many kinds of food identification as there are the same in fashion, speech, music, manners and the like. The obvious ones are ethnic, religious and class identifications. Ethnic food preferences only become identity markers in the presence of gustatory “foreigners,” such as when one goes abroad, or when the foreigners visit the home shores. The insecure will cling desperately to home food habits: English housewives on the continent even break open tea bags to make a “proper” cup of tea (the taste is identical). Popular songs attest to the food difficulties of interethnic marriages’ “bangers and mash vs. macaroni.” When various ethnic groups are forcibly thrown together, there is both an intensifying of food identity and a growing mishmash. The American melting pot is almost literally that: the food preferences of dozens of nations are put side by side, and there cannot help but be overlap and mixing. The most startling example is the popularity of the Chinese kosher restaurant, and it is not uncommon to find a restaurant advertising itself as “Chinese-Italian-American” along with the proud boast “All Our Wines Are Chilled.” The ubiquitous “diner” with its vast menu served twenty-four hours a day is a microcosm of the melting pot, having Greek salad, Italian pasta, German rye bread, Polish kielbasi, Chinese chow mein, Belgian waffles, French quiche, Hungarian goulash, Irish stew, Jewish gefilte fish, Russian blintzes, English muffins, Austrian pastries, Swiss cheese,

Mexican enchiladas, Spanish gazpacho, Canadian bacon, Japanese teriyaki, German sausages, Norwegian herring, Lebanese pita, Nova Scotia salmon and Virginia ham.

Tables and Table Manners

Not knowing how to eat “properly” is universally a sign of outsider status. Proper eating includes the kind of food used, the way of preparing it, the manner of serving it, and the way of eating it. The intricacies of the tea ceremony are known only to experienced Japanese; social climbers in the West can be spotted immediately by their inability to master the details of place settings; “using the wrong fork” is an offense as grave as spitting in public. Since anyone wishing to integrate himself into a group must eat with it, there is no surer way of marking off those who are in and those out than by food etiquette. Dipping with hands into a communal dish is *de rigeur* in some cultures, abhorrent in others. Shovelling food into the mouth with a fork would be seen as the height of indelicacy by some; the absence of forks as the height of barbarity by others. Fingers may have been made before forks, but ever since Catherine (and Marie) de Medici brought these essential tools for noodle eating from northern Italy to France, the perfectly useful finger has been socially out, except for fruit and cheese. It took the elaborate dining habits of the upper classes to refine the use of multiple forks (as well as knives, spoons, and glasses).

The timing of eating shows up class differences. In the past, as in the novels of Jane Austen, for example, the upper classes breakfasted late (about 10 o’clock), as befitted their leisure status. (This distinguished them from the lower orders, who eat very early before going off to work.) They had perhaps an informal lunch of cold meats, but the next main meal was dinner, which was eaten anywhere between five and seven, depending on the pretensions of the family. A light supper might be served before bedtime. The lower orders, meanwhile, would be eating a light midday meal and then a hearty “tea” after the day’s work was done, with again a supper before bed.

The importance of “lunch” as a main meal came later from the business community, and “dinner” was pushed back into the evening, with supper more or less abolished. The lower orders continued to make midday “dinner” and “high tea” major meals, and since dinner was pushed later for the middle classes, “tea” became an institution around four o’clock. There is no nutritional sense to the timing of eating. It could be done differently. The late breakfast was primarily a sign of status and nothing else; Jane Austen’s characters always had to kill time in some way before breakfasting, and these were good hours in which to advance the plot. In France, the enormous midday meal, with its postprandial siesta, is what the day revolves around. The entire country comes to a stop and wakes up again between three and four.

The order in which foods are eaten, which really does not matter, becomes highly ritualistic: Soup, fish, poultry, meat, dessert (which echoes the process of evolution) becomes a standard. Sweet should not be eaten before savory,

and rarely (in France never) with. The French eat salad after the main dish, the Americans rigidly before; the English, to the disgust of both, put it on the same plate as the (cold) meat. In the East, it is more common to serve all the food together, often in communal dishes, and allow a wide sampling of different items. In the more individualistic West, place settings are rigidly set off from each other, and so are “courses.” The serving of wine with food becomes even more rigidly a matter of protocol, and operates to mark off differences of status within classes: those who “know” wine and those who do not. Classes in “corporate health” in the United States now include sessions on “How to Read a Wine Label.” The rationale is that without such knowledge corporate executives may be subject to “stress,” which would impair their performance.

Foreign foods tend to be shunned by the working classes, but among the upper-middle and upper they become items of prestige. A knowledge of foreign food indicates the eater’s urbanity and cosmopolitanism. Until recently, being conversant with foreign food was a privilege of those who could afford to travel, but now the knowledge has been democratized by cheap travel and television. Julia Child taught the aspiring middle classes how to be “French” cooks, and now TV abounds with every kind of cooking course. Publishers often find their cooking list to be their most lucrative, and cookbooks of all nations now crowd the bookstore shelves. When *Joy of Sex* was written, it deliberately took its title from the hugely successful *Joy of Cooking* – which tells us something. While a lot of this can perhaps be attributed to a genuine pleasure in new tastes, a lot more can probably be accounted for by the aura of sophistication that surrounds the food “expert.” The very word “gourmet” has become a title of respect like “guru” or “mahatma.” Vast changes have occurred, for example, in English eating habits, with extended travel in Europe. Ethnic identifications in food have not by any means disappeared, and the French do not, by and large, eat fish and chips; the English have not taken wholeheartedly to escargot or octopus. But spaghetti no longer comes exclusively in cans for the English. Even so, a relative conservatism of food habits persists in all countries, particularly with the lower-middle and working classes.

Conspicuous Digestion: Eating on Ceremony

The conspicuous consumption of food has always been important as an indicator of status, from three thousand pigs at a New Guinea feast to mountains of caviar and truffles at little Max Spielberg’s fourth birthday party. Lavish food entertainment is part of the ancient tradition of food hospitality used mainly to impress strangers. This can vary from the inevitable putting on of the kettle to make tea in British and Irish homes, through the bringing of bread and salt in Russia, to the gargantuan hospitality of the Near East where if the guest does not finish the enormous dish of sheep’s eyes in aspic the host is mortally affronted. We are not only what we eat, but how well we eat. Next to showing off military hardware, showing off food is the best way to impress the “outsider.” The twenty-one-gun salute – fired with blanks – reminds the visitor that we can, but will not, hurt him; the twenty-one-course meal serves

to show him our good will and to impress him with our prosperity. Here again, the manner of serving becomes important. Whether entertaining the in-laws at home or royalty at the palace, formality and lavishness are the key. Mrs. Beeton's recipes astonish us today ("take thirty-two eggs and five pounds of butter..."), but she was in charge of entertaining at Ascot, and impressing royalty and business moguls was the name of the game. (Her magnificent *Household Management* is not only the definitive English cookbook, but what it says – a detailed and fascinating directive for young wives on everything from how to manage a large household staff to how to judge, hire, and address a second footman or upstairs chambermaid – indispensable reading for all social historians or "Upstairs Downstairs" buffs.)

The French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, like all his countrymen attuned to the niceties of food customs, notes how we reserve "rich" food for the grandest occasions. The ordinary daily menu is not served, he says, and cites saumon mayonnaise, turbot sauce mousseline, aspics de foie gras, together with fine wines. "These are some of the delicacies which one would not buy and consume alone without a vague feeling of guilt," he maintains. And this "rich food" has nothing much to do with "the mere satisfaction of physiological needs." It is food meant to be shared, and to be shared with those we wish to impress. To feed someone is one of the most direct and intimate ways to convey something of ourselves to the impessee. We are never just saying, "see how we can satisfy your hunger." We are saying more like "see how lavish and hospitable and knowledgeable we are." Of the most basic things in our behavioral repertoire, eating is the most accessible and effective for conveying our messages to others. We can, of course, offer sex and violence, and sometimes we do, but food, along with superior accommodations, is on the whole easier and safer.

Eating In: Dining Settings and Styles

Every meal is a message, and where we eat is as important as what we eat in getting the message across. Why do we not eat all our meals in the dining room? Its name would suggest that this is its purpose. But the very fact that we call it the "dining" room and not the "eating" room, tells its own story. The dining room is usually reserved for "ceremonial" meals: those involving extended families on special occasions – older relatives, in-laws, and important guests to be impressed. It is probably the most absurdly underused room in the house, and a conspicuous waste of space. Despite the modern trend to more informal dining, recent surveys have shown an overwhelming majority of home buyers requesting a dining room. When asked for what purpose it was needed, they usually replied, "to entertain the boss and his wife" – something that might happen at best once a year. This suggests that the fourteen-by-twelve-foot room with its dignified and dedicated furnishings is more a shrine to ambition and hope than a functioning part of the home.

The whole idea of separating the dining room from the kitchen was, of course, part of the general middle-class attempt to ape the upper class. The latter wished to sever their seating experience from the dirty, noisy, and smelly

process that produced it. This often meant that food had to travel literally miles from kitchen to banqueting hall. On a smaller scale, the ambitious middle class imitated this practice.

Perhaps it was because servants were relegated to the kitchen and entered the dining room only as menials, that the progressive, egalitarian members of the middle class in the 1950s and 1960s consciously revolted against the tradition of separate dining. An orgy of wall destruction ensued which erased the distinction between the kitchen and dining room. This became a popular trend and influenced new-house design, where dining rooms gave way to “eating areas” and dinner parties to informal buffets. Of course, this was done in the name of efficiency rather than ideology, but we often disguise our ideological preferences this way, even to ourselves. And it was not a universally recognized efficiency: the dining-room crowd hung in there, and with a swing back to a more conservative ideology, there has been a swing back to more formal dining.

Despite this, entertaining at home has in general become more informal, less predictable, and more fun. There is no longer a rigid formula for “perfect entertaining,” and media advice reflects this trend. There is much more room for spontaneity; more of what the hostess (or often the host) is into at the time. We no longer need to impress with the solemn procession of courses: soup, fish, meat, dessert, etc. (a system of eating that originated in Russia and was brought west by the Frenchman Careme). We can present a mixture of Japanese, Regional Italian, Vegetarian Gourmet, and Cuisine Minceur. The basic rule now seems to be: do what pleases you and is fun. The main requirement is: be innovative and surprise people. And this does not require elaborate and impressive preparation. Indeed, there is a premium on elegant simplicity: the original and unusual combination of simple elements. Thus, entertaining has become livelier, more expressive of personal style and flair, more creative, and undoubtedly more enjoyable.

Compare two different entertaining menus: one a formal dinner party of 1953, served in the dining room, with perhaps coffee and liqueurs in the sitting room; the other an informal evening buffet of 1993, served in the kitchen/dining area, with the guests ranging over the “reception” rooms of the house to eat. Both menus recognize the importance of the occasion – entertaining important guests, for example.

Despite the informality of menu 2, there are still some distinctions that are strictly observed. The essence of entertaining is still the display of concern and effort for the welfare of the guests. Despite the enormous popularity of frozen and convenience food, and of ready-made “take-out” meals, these would *never* be served to guests. The foods served on these ceremonial occasions have to be “special” – to demonstrate thoughtfulness and care on the part of the hosts, even if they no longer need to demonstrate the conspicuous consumption of time, money, servants, and energy. The food on the 1993 menu can all be made in advance, but it is all hand prepared and requires thought and effort. The mode of preparation fits the lifestyle of the new working couple, and the

new kitchen technology – particularly the food processor and the microwave oven. No one expects beef Wellington any more, but the quality, style, and flair of the chili con carne (with fresh cilantro sprinkled on top for the little extra touch) will be just as critically appraised and warmly appreciated. The content may change, but the message remains the same: You are important guests and we have taken care and trouble on your behalf.

Dinner Party circa 1953

Mulligatawny Soup	Amontillado
Sole Meuniere	Chablis
Beef Wellington	Burgundy
Brussels Sprouts	
Potatoes au gratin	
Artichoke hearts	
Salade Verte	
Tarte aux framboises	Sauternes
Assorted cheeses	Port/Claret
Fruit	
Coffee	Brandy/Liqueurs

Dinner Buffet circa 1993

Quiche Lorraine	Beaujolais Nouveau
Spinach Quiche	Australian Chardonnay
Broccoli and Ham Quiche	
Pasta Salad	Decaffeinated Coffee
Bean Salad	Fruit Juices, Perrier
Chile con Carne	
Ginger Chicken Pieces/Snow Peas	
Melon Balls with Prosciutto	
Warm Wheel of Brie with Almonds	
French Bread/Rolls	
Fresh Fruit	

Food as Fashion

The myth of nutrition is shown up by rapid changes in food fashions. Availability is of course important. As waves of different foods hit Europe, eating habits changed. At first these “foreign” foods, particularly spices, like foreign fashions were a privilege of the rich, but they soon percolated down. Giinter Grass wrote a novel (*The Flounder*) in which each section is based on a food that changed eating habits in Eastern Europe; turnips, pepper, and potatoes loom large.

But once foods become plentiful and varied, fashion takes over, and the lure of novelty – the trendy – is often disguised as concern for nutrition. Thus vegetarian diets and *nouvelle cuisine*, high fiber diets and *cuisine minceur*, all masquerade as “healthy.” In fact, they all are nutritionally suspicious, but are used like any other fashion: to show how with-it we are. Just as clothes indicate our trendiness, so does food. When *grande cuisine* French cooking was in, it too was extolled as “healthy.” Now sushi is a fad, raw fish is praised as a “high-protein, low-fat” source, ignoring the high rates of stomach cancer in Japan. When cheeseburgers were shown to produce enzymes that might inhibit cancer, a whole generation of food faddists was thrown into turmoil since the cheeseburger was decidedly out. Food snobbism has now become as refined as wine snobbism. Not knowing about kiwi fruit tart or fresh coriander or how to prepare a *ristafel* or *couscous* in the authentic fashion, marks one as a social failure. One has not kept up with the latest in food fashion. As with all fashion industries, food fashion thrives on change; it demands it. The vast industry can only survive if people’s tastes are constantly induced to change. The tremendous bombardment of food books and food programs leads educated and literate middle-class readers to feel guilty if they don’t “keep up.”

This is a considerable change from the days of servants, when how to get the best cook or chef was the issue. The upper and upper-middle classes did not do their own cooking, and at the very top even any knowledge of it was unthinkable. The middle-class housewife would have to know about it, but was not likely to practice it. She would most likely go by Mrs. Beeton and simply give instructions on menus to the cook. Since servants have almost disappeared, and madame (and monsieur) has moved into the kitchen, the snobbery of preparing something trendy and exotic with relative ease has moved with them.

Along with this has gone a reverse snobbery – a deliberate cultivation of proletarian tastes as long as they are romantic: *chili con carne*, *huevos rancheros*, pancakes – all cowboy foods and heavy with the romanticization of the Old West. Or take the tremendous popularity of Cajun cooking – essentially a peasant cuisine but “Louisiana French,” and hence romantic.

Tex-Mex is another peasant style that has taken. All this goes along with the “rediscovery” of ethnic roots after several generations of denying them, and the lure of the “regional” and quaint. But very little of this would be so organized and spread so quickly if it were not for the demands of the food-fashion industry to find novelty. “New American” cuisine is a way simply to take the homely and make it seem exotic so as to generate yet another “new” food trend. The food-writing industry dominates magazines and the “living” sections of newspapers, and it succeeds because it is available to everyone. We may not all be able to be with-it by buying into the latest ludicrously expensive fashion trends, but we can all whip up a *ratatouille*, or a green chili stew, or a spinach quiche, or stir-fried shrimp, or blackened redfish, serve it with a trendy “blush” wine, and feel right up there with the new wave.

One remarkable feature of the “proletarian chic” style of cooking is the wide popularity of the “cookout” or “barbecue,” using rich spicy sauces to baste large cuts of meat. (“Barbe et queue”? The OED says it’s from the Haitian “barbacoa” – a crate on posts. Do we believe that?) This is, in the USA, another appropriation of cowboy cooking by the middle class – which has spread beyond America (the Australians will invite you to “put another shrimp on the barbie,” if the ads are to be believed). Why, we might ask, does the man have to do the cooking outdoors and the woman indoors? Because the myths have it that cooking with fire is dangerous and should be left to the men. Again, this is probably a hangover from the romanticization of the cowboy and a way for men to feel macho while wearing aprons and preparing food.

This may explain why the working class, which usually lags in the food fad business, is right on top of the cookout. Usually the workers have neither the time nor the means to be faddists. Quantity and “tastiness” (smoked or pickled) continue to dominate their diets. The quantity is not necessary and is even positively harmful. Other workers – Chinese peasants, for example – eat sparingly. It reflects a late trickle-down effect: The conspicuous consumption of large quantities of food used to be an upper-class privilege, as did obesity. This is now reversed. The upper classes consume expensive and exotic food, but in relatively small quantities. Stoutness, once a striking advertisement for one’s well-fed status, is no longer socially acceptable. Joe Alsop, in his charming autobiography *I’ve Seen the Best of It* (New York: Norton, 1992) records what is probably the turning point here in his account of “dining out” in Washington, D.C., in the 1930s. Following delightedly the gargantuan eating customs of the capital, he achieved, through assiduous dining and scorn of exercise, a weight of over 200 lbs. and a threatening heart condition. The connection was by then obvious, and he was one of the first patients at the famous Johns Hopkins clinic of Dr. John Eager Howard, the genius who invented calorie counting combined with exercise, and thus the “Johns Hopkins Diet” – the granddaddy of them all. (The exercises were based on those used for polio victims.) When I knew the older and wiser Joe in the 1970s he was the thin and dapper dandy of his later famous years. But his book soulfully reflects his nostalgia for those great days of conspicuous calorie consumption (especially the terrapin stew, which smelled like feet but tasted like heaven).

The Quest for the Holy Quail

This goes along with the modern obsession with diets. Previously, diets were only for health reasons, rarely to do with weight and appearance as such. Now they are mainly concerned with weight reduction, significantly referred to as “slimming,” the slim figure rather than the healthy body being the aim despite pious claims to the contrary. They are a major part of the food-fashion industry. In fact, none of them work. If any one did, then there would not be so many and we would not be faced almost weekly with the announcement of a new and infallible one. They come in quick succession: the Scarsdale Diet, Nathan Pritikin’s Maximum Weight Loss Diet, the Palm Beach Diet, the Rotation Diet, the Beverly Hills Diet, Dr. Atkin’s Diet Revolution, the

Banana-Milk Diet, the I Love New York Diet, Kempner's Rice Diet, the Magic Mayo Diet, Dr. Stillman's Quick Inches Off Diet, and numerous others. (Note the use of "classy" names to attract the diet snobs. It's amazing that we haven't had the Harvard Diet yet – the Princeton Diet has arrived. The magic of California as diet heaven has given us the UCLA Diet, or the California Slim, as it is popularly known.)

In fact, in order to lose weight (and this is only "healthy" in extreme cases), the only useful diet is to exercise and eat much less food, as Dr. Howard fully understood. But the business of how not to eat too much food has paradoxically turned into one of the biggest food industries. It has become the science of what to eat and not gain weight – more or less impossible with any reasonable calorific regime. Studies have shown that diets more often than not lead to weight gain! Because the body does not know the difference between dieting and starving, once a severe dietary regime is concluded it will voraciously store food as fat as a protection against further unreasonable onslaughts. But it is with diets that fashion and fads play their largest part. Diets have replaced the weather as the basic item of polite conversation.

This is all part of a general utopianism that characterizes Western society: the search for the perfect life comes to embrace the search for the perfect food (the Quest of our section heading). And, like other utopianisms, this easily tips over into fanaticism. With the zeal of religious sectarians, people organize to hunt down restaurants that offend against the latest dietary fads. The *New York Daily News* has a full-time food reporter whose job is to make surprise visits to restaurants to test the cholesterol levels in their foods, and to award a special symbol – a heart crossed with a knife and fork – to those combining low levels with "gourmet"-quality food. In fact, there is no scientific evidence that dietary cholesterol on its own is harmful; it only becomes so when it interacts with saturated fat. But that gets too complicated for the tabloids dedicated to protecting us from the wickedness of non-cholesterol-conscious cooks. In the pursuit of perfection, to be on a diet illustrates that you are a worthy and serious person, not a slob. It is the Puritan Ethic applied to food. It has also spawned the monstrosity known as (of course) "nouvelle cuisine" in which infant-sized portions are arranged with cubist sensitivity and pastel-colored sauces, and which drive normal adults to consume huge numbers of dinner rolls to avoid a feeling of starvation.

Obesity has become for our present age what adultery was for our Victorian forebears. The real modern descent into sin and wickedness is a dieter who goes on a junk food binge. And hunting down offenders against food purity joins the list of popular witch hunts along with smokers, polluters, and people who use sexist pronouns. The State of New Jersey, in one of those frightening flashes of "Big Brother Knows Best" that frequently overtake governments, passed a law that forbade the serving in restaurants of fried eggs "sunny side up" because of the danger (slender) of salmonella poisoning. Public outcry caused it to repeal this food fascism in short order, which restores one's faith in the vox populi – a bit.

Food as Seduction

Feeding has always been closely linked with courtship. In nature this is not without its dangers. In several species of insect (the praying mantis, for example) the female devours the male after mating: he has done his job and so becomes a source of nutrition for the now expectant mother. Many species tone this down by having the male offer little packages of food to the female, who eats them and leaves him alone. The males and females of all species, including our own, seem to be involved in this mating gamble with food as the bait. Even if the male is not himself the food, he universally seems to have to make some show of feeding to be acceptable. With humans this works two ways since we are the only animals who cook: the bride is usually appraised for her cooking ability. (“Can she bake a cherry pie, Billy boy, Billy boy?”) In some cultures this is far more important than her virginity.

But food and sex are generally closely linked. They are physically linked in the limbic system of the brain, which controls emotional activity generally. It is not surprising that we not only link them but do so emotionally. Good food = good sex. It is this sensuality of eating that spurs the puritan and ascetic rejection of food pleasures. But the link makes sense. To reproduce effectively, a female needs not only insemination but also provisioning. Particularly in species such as ours, where she is relatively dependent during the suckling period, she needs a male to provide food. Thus, a male’s willingness to provide food becomes an important index of his suitability as a mate. Above all, it suggests his willingness to “invest” in the female’s offspring. Studies of mate preferences in many cultures reveal that while men universally go for looks (actually a fair indicator of fertility), women go for provisioning: a male with resources is preferred to one without, regardless of his attractiveness. Studies of Western females show that one of the most “attractive” features of a male is his willingness to “pick up the tab” for a meal. This may be an appeal to deep and atavistic survival motives in the female, but unscrupulous seducers can use it to their advantage. Courtship etiquette today seems to demand the offer of a meal by the male as part of foreplay; and the female is then supposed to cook breakfast to complete her part of the bargain. (Some modern cynic defined a contemporary “moral dilemma” as whether or not to go to bed with a man after only a cheeseburger.)

The choice of setting for food and courtship is as important as the food itself. There is a tendency to move gradually (or swiftly as the case may be) from the public to the private. For modern urban couples, “dates” usually begin in a crowded public place such as a bar or disco. On the crucial “second date,” they may move to a restaurant, where the male is able to demonstrate his “resource accrual ability” by paying the bill. This stage may be prolonged, but at some time the “your place or mine” issue will arise, with, researchers have found, her place being generally preferred. At this stage she is supposed to supply a meal – usually a “romantic” candlelight dinner – thus demonstrating her abilities as a cook and hostess. Breakfast follows the consummation, again usually cooked by the female since it’s her kitchen. But it is in order at this

point for the male at least to offer to make breakfast, thus demonstrating his egalitarian and cooperative nature.

If the relationship gets serious, then the next important ceremonial meal is likely to be with her family. Again the meal is used as a “bridge” to mark the importance of the event and as an icebreaker and demonstration of the family’s good will. The prospective mate joins her family at its most familial: eating the family meal. He can be scrutinized in this setting; his manners, speech, and behavior can be assessed. He in turn gets to see his prospective in-laws close up, in a setting which both offers information and lubricates the difficult mechanism of social interaction.

Sex and eating have perhaps never been so brilliantly brought together as in the film *Tom Jones*, where the marvelously sensual meal becomes both a prelude to, and an analogue of, intercourse. The Romantic Dinner is the form of therapy most recommended for jaded couples. Again the equation of good food, good sex, and emotional security taps very deep motives lodged in the basic mammalian search for reproductive success.

Eating Out

Most food has been made and consumed domestically throughout Western history. Eating out was for travelers, in inns and taverns where the customers were served more or less what would have been on the domestic table anyway. Regular eating out, and eating out for status with special foods reserved for the occasion, is a predominantly French institution of the Industrial Revolution. Our words for eating out are all French or translations – hotel, restaurant, café, menu, entrée, chef (chef de cuisine), wine list (carte des vins), cover charge (couvert), maitre d’hotel, restaurateur, hors d’oeuvres, hostess (hotesse) – only with waiter (and waitress) do we remain stubbornly Anglo-Saxon, “boy” sounding a bit strange in the context.

Essentially at first an upper and upper-middle perversion, and to do with the desire to move conspicuous eating and spending into the public arena, eating out has become vastly democratized with technology, affluence, and overemployment – leaving less time for preparation at home. The great chefs, who previously cooked in the great houses, moved out to the great restaurants. The French upper classes had previously made a great public show of attending court or church. When both these institutions declined in importance after the Revolution, attendance at great restaurants became a substitute. The “great codifier” Auguste Escoffier laid down elaborate and rigid rules of cooking procedure like a pope: cuisine became “haute,” and chefs ruled hierarchically organized vast kitchens like tyrannical cardinals. The great restaurants came to resemble renaissance palaces or cathedrals. The very word “restaurant” comes from the verb “to restore” and has more than practical overtones. (The original restaurants were in fact legally “health food stores.”) From these grand beginnings, eating out came to be imitated by the bourgeoisie, ever anxious to give themselves upper-class airs, and finally became general in the culture and in all Western countries.

If the rituals of eating out have become less grand for the mass of people, it still retains its aura as an “event.” The grand aspects are retained in expeditions to restaurants offensively overpriced but ritzy (after the Polish-French founders of the greatest of the great establishments). We spend not so much for the food as for the entertainment value and the naughty thrill of being (we hope) treated like royalty in an otherwise drab democratic environment. Even lesser expeditions still have the air of an event. The family outing to the local burger joint still has an air of preparation and difference; it can still be used to coax youngsters to eat, and provide a mild enough air of difference from routine to be “restorative.” Even the necessary lunch for workers who cannot eat at home has been made into a ritual event by the relatively affluent among them.

“Doing lunch” in the business world is regarded as a kind of sacred operation where, the mythology has it, the most important deals are made. A puritanical campaign against the “three-martini lunch” by the then President Carter (Southern Baptist), had Americans as roused and angry as they had been over the tax on tea that sent their ancestors to their muskets. The business-meal tax deduction was fought for with passion, and the best the government could do was to reduce its value by 20 percent. There may not be a free lunch, but it sure as hell is deductible. Very little of this has to do with business, of course, and everything to do with status. Just to be having business lunches at all marks one down as a success in the world of business, for only “executives” (the new order of aristocracy) can have them.

At the other end of the scale, reverse snobbery asserts itself in the positive embrace of “junk food,” otherwise condemned as non-nutritious, vulgar, or even dangerous to one’s health. (In fact, cheeseburgers are no more dangerous to health than strict and specialized vegetarian diets.) Junk food can be socially acceptable if indulged in as part of a nostalgia for childhood: the time when we were allowed such indulgences as “treats.” So giant ice cream sundaes with five different scoops of ice cream, maraschino cherries, pecans, chocolate sauce, and whipped cream; sloppy joes with french fries and gravy; malted milk shakes and root beer floats; hot dogs with mustard, ketchup, and relish – all these are still OK if treated as a kind of eating joke. Hot dogs at football games, or ice cream at the shore (seaside) are more or less *de rigeur*. The settings in which these are eaten vary from the simple outdoors to elaborate ice cream parlors with bright plastic furniture and a battery of machines for producing the right combinations of fat, sugar, and starch. Ostensibly these are for children, but adults eat there with no self-consciousness and without the excuse of accompanying children. But for adults, as for children, these places are for “treats,” and so always remain outside the normal rules of nutrition and moderation.

We continue to make eating out special when we can. Romantic dinners, birthday dinners, anniversary dinners, retirement dinners, and all such celebrations are taken out of the home or the workplace and into the arena of public ritual. Only the snootiest restaurants will not provide a cake and singing waiters for the birthday boy. The family outing is specially catered for by

special establishments – “Mom’s Friendly Family Restaurant” can be found in every small American town (although the wise saying has it that we should never eat at a place called Mom’s). But even in the hustle and bustle of these family establishments the individuality of the family is still rigidly maintained. No family will share a table with another. This is very different to the eating out of the still communalistic East. Lionel Tiger, in his fascinating description of Chinese eating, describes how people are crowded together in restaurants – strangers at the same table all eating from communal dishes. And far from having a reservation system, restaurants encourage a free-for-all in which those waiting in line look over the diners to find those close to finishing, then crowd behind their tables and urge them on.

The democratization of eating out is reflected in the incredible burgeoning of fast food joints and their spread beyond the United States. McDonald’s is the fastest-growing franchise in Japan, and has extended its operations to China. When it opened its first franchise in Beijing, it sold so many burgers so fast that the cash registers burned out. Kentucky Fried Chicken has now opened in Beijing, and has become the chic place to eat in Berlin. These are humble foods – a ground meat patty that may or may not have originated in Hamburg; a sausage of dubious content only loosely connected to Frankfurt; deep fried chicken that was a food of the rural American South; a cheese and tomato pie that probably came from Naples. But they have taken the world by storm in one of the greatest eating revolutions since the discovery of the potato. In a curious twist, two indigenous foods of the East are rapidly turning into the fast food specials of the yuppies who would not be seen dead eating the proletarian hamburger: the Japanese raw-fish sushi, and the Chinese dim sum (small items bought by the plate) lunch. It is the oriental revenge for the McDonald’s invasion.

The proletariat has evolved its own forms of eating out. The transport café in Britain with its huge portions of bacon and eggs; the French bistro, which was a working-class phenomenon before reverse snobbery turned it into bourgeois chic, with its wonderful casseroles and biftekpommefrit; the Italian trattoria with its cheap seafood, again gentrified in foreign settings; the incomparable diner in America; the grand fish-and-chip warehouse in the north of England; the beer-and-sausage halls of Germany; the open-air food markets in all the warm countries. If we could do a speeded-up film of social change in the last fifty years we would see a grand ballet in which eating moved out of the home and into the public arena on a scale which makes rural depopulation look like a trickle. Sociologists, as usual, have still even to figure out that it is happening, much less come up with an explanation.

Dining out became a paradise for ethnic immigrants in the huge migrations from country to country that have characterized the twentieth century. What started as cooking for each other has burgeoned into a huge industry of ethnic eateries. The Chinese led the way, usually in ports and bigger cities, Chinatowns were exotic, and it became fashionable to eat there in San Francisco and New York. Chinese cooking with its marvelous variety and use of virtually everything eatable became the rage. The quick-cook method with

small pieces of food had been a necessity in China because the use of human excrement as manure meant that thorough cooking was essential, and the lack of fuel meant it had to be done quickly. But this was a wonder to the Euro-American palate jaded with overcooking and heavy sauces. Chinese cooking spread like wildfire, and Chinese families branched out endlessly to open cafes in the most remote places.

What is more, the food was amazingly cheap. It was the first “foreign” food to capture both the gourmet market and the populace at the same time. Although the compromise “Cantonese,” or chow mein, version remains popular with the masses, the gourmets pursue the Hunan and Szechuan refined versions. Status differences assert themselves in short order in the West. If we are all going to go Chinese, then there has to be a form of Chinese that is more high class than the rest. Conveniently, northern Chinese cooking stepped into the gap. Now the cognoscenti can laugh at the vulgarity of sweet and sour pork and moo goo gai pen, while extolling the virtues of Mongolian beef with scallions and Colonel T’so’s chicken. The world remains safe for snobbery.

What started with the Chinese has spread to a wide variety of immigrant cuisines. Even small towns in Europe and America now have a huge variety of worldwide ethnic establishments. Drink has followed food, and sake and retsina, espresso and green tea, guava juice and tequila, are available everywhere. In all this eating out, food reflects the internationalizing trends in fashion generally. It gives us all a chance to show off our cosmopolitanism in a world that values it more and more. It is astonishing when we think of it. In any one month we may order food in ten or more different languages, none of which we speak, and which can be as different as Urdu, Thai, Cantonese, Italian, Arabic, Armenian, and Hungarian. There is now an industry of critics and restaurant writers as large and as attentively followed as the theater, sports, and fashion critics. To be literate in the world of eating out – to be even ahead of the trends (knowing that fantastic little Portuguese bistro that no one has discovered) – is to demonstrate that one is on top of the complex cosmopolitan civilization of which eating out has come to be a metaphor.

Eating Out: Styles and Settings

Apart from travellers, for whom eating out was first invented, few people eat out from necessity. Even more than in the home, eating out is a ceremonial event and must be considered as such. There are basically two types of eating out: entertaining oneself and entertaining others. In what sense is the family’s taking itself out to dinner ceremonial? Just as much as the family’s having the grandparents round to formal Sunday tea in the dining room. It is a special occasion marked by special dress and behavior. At its lowest level it can depart little from eating informally at home: a visit to the local burger or fish and chip joint for a quick meal, for example. But even these places usually do not allow one in half dressed. You cannot lounge around the local pizza parlor in a dressing gown or underwear. To go out in the street at all one must put on footwear. It all requires an effort that does not go into the informal home eating.

Then there is the matter of choice, usually conspicuously lacking on the home menu. Even the humblest “eat out” place has some choice, and this alone can provide an excitement that the home meal lacks. Also, however lax the standards of the eat-out joint, most of the behavior tolerated at home will not be tolerated there. Some considerable restraint is required, particularly from the young, and this again serves to mark it as special. It becomes an important socialization experience for young children, when they learn the basic etiquette of eating in public, although not fast enough to please most of the adults around. But they must learn to sit still, to keep their voices down, to wait patiently, to eat in an orderly manner and not throw their food about. Of course, they learn these things at home, but the pressures are much greater when eating out.

For the parents, or even a childless married couple, eating out is usually marked by even more ceremonial behavior. Except for the very affluent, it is usually regarded as a special event, and people prepare for it in a way that they would not do for the regular home meal. In particular, they will weigh carefully the type of setting as much as the type of food. If eating out were only about food then the setting would not matter. And of course there is again a reverse snobbery which pretends to despise the concern with setting and to praise the brilliance of the storefront operation that produces such wondrous and authentic Indian food – and so on. But if it is an event – and all eating out is expensive relative to eating in – then people usually pay great attention to setting. This is often not more articulated than a request for somewhere “nice,” but the slightest pushing on details will reveal the niceties of the distinctions. One place is too big and too garish and has noisy waiters; another is too small and crowded and the service is too slow; another is too brightly lit and there is no sense of privacy; another is so dimly lit that one cannot see the food. In the great days of the great restaurants they had to be brightly lit and large, with every table in sight of every other so that the essential business of showing off could be accomplished. The alternative was the small and exclusive restaurant which need not be super smart but which accomplished the showing off without further ado. Today the latter is preferred, but grand dining is by no means out.

When entertaining others out, setting has to be considered carefully with reference to purpose. The main purposes of eating out with others are the same as their home counterparts: to impress on the one hand, and to be different on the other – to make a change. At home we do this by departing from the normal routine in dress, setting, and cuisine. When we go out, the latter two can be taken care of for us, and we have much more choice as far as style, setting, and expense are concerned. There are relative degrees of intimacy involved. It is usual to entertain the grandparents and in-laws at home; it would be a real treat to take them out somewhere impressive, a treat we would reserve for a special occasion. On the other hand, it would be more normal to go out to eat with the boss and his wife first, and then, once intimacy had been established, to invite them to the house.

In all of this, it is the setting rather than the food itself that is considered. Of course the food has to be “good,” but the type and kind are less important than the aura surrounding the service. There used to be, in the 1950s, two Indian restaurants in London off the Charing Cross Road, in an area catering to Indian students. One was called the Agra, the other the Agra de Luxe. The same kitchen served both and the food was identical. But in the Agra students clustered around communal long tables, which were covered with oilcloth. The food was cheap and casually served, and the Indian music (recorded at local Indian films) was loud. In the Agra de Luxe there were curtains and carpets, there was a liquor license and good wine was served, there was quiet sitar music in the background, the tables had immaculate white linen, and there were uniformed, attentive waiters. The food, as we have seen, was exactly the same as in the humble next-door café, but it was four times the price. It was every male student’s aim to make it in the world so that he could take his girlfriend or mother to the Agra de Luxe.

Setting is all. The perfect business lunch requires a bright setting: papers have to be exchanged perhaps, and the faces of the parties have to be clearly visible so that moods and intentions can be read. But the tables should be relatively well spaced so that conversations do not overly intrude on each other. The romantic meal, however, is more suitably placed in the evening (closer to bedtime and hence suggestive?) and in a quiet and dimly lit candlelight atmosphere conducive to quiet, intimate conversation, and even, with its dim light, thick carpets, heavy drapes, and brocade furniture, somewhat reminiscent of a bedroom. The casual lunch with a friend, however, can well be in a fairly informal, wicker-furniture-with-ferns-and-plants kind of setting, conducive to colorful salads and bright gossip. If we do not think setting (as opposed to food *per se*) is important, imagine a man promising his date a romantic dinner and taking her to the local ice cream parlor for a hot dog and sundae, or for fish and chips wrapped in newspaper. This can only work if she has a good sense of humor and is willing to invoke reverse snobbery again.

The point here is that it almost does not matter what food is eaten. That can be a matter of personal preference. It is usual to serve more elaborate meals in the evening, but these are often not that different from the lunch menus except in size and number of courses. There are certainly restaurants that serve the same food at dinner as at lunch, except that at dinner they double the prices, light the candles, dress up the waiters, and have live entertainment. This tactic, which again has little to do with the content of the food, is based on the shrewd observation that not much business is done in the evenings; people come for entertainment and are willing to pay for it as for any other entertainment. They come to be cosseted, spoiled, smoothed down after the business of the day, made to feel like royalty, allowed to indulge themselves in a leisurely fashion, and generally to feel as far removed from eating at home as is possible.

Purists will object that there are many people who seek out restaurants purely for the food. This is doubtful. It would be possible to do an experiment in which such a purist’s favorite food was transferred from the plain little bistro

with ambiance where he usually gets it, to a completely alien setting (a stand-up stall in a fish market perhaps, or the lobby of a grand hotel at ten times the price) and judge his reactions. The little bistro will turn out to be as important to his enjoyment as the authentic *brandade de morue* he so prizes. Of course the food is important, but when entertainment or even business is the issue, it takes second place to setting. Simenon's Inspector Maigret certainly searched out fine cheap food in nondescript cafes that happened to have devoted and brilliant cooks; but he would never have taken Madame Maigret to them for dinner.

At least in Paris, wherever he ate, he would have had good waiter service. His waiter would have been trained, expert, and, what is more, professional and proud of it. This used to be true throughout Europe, but especially in France and Switzerland. All the European capitals certainly had professional waiters. And these were particularly important to the setting – to the feeling of being catered to, spoiled, and made special. The idea of waiting as a profession came, of course, with the high standards of the great establishments, but it percolated down. To be a waiter in a good establishment was to be a proud member of a proud profession. It required skills and patience – customers were notoriously difficult, but always right. It was much much more than just carrying food from the kitchen to the table. It was a combination of knowledge and social work and a canny judgement of character. And the pay-off was a big tip. There was no sense among these men of being in a menial job; quite the contrary. The aim of most of them was to save enough to open their own establishments, and many of them were very successful at it.

In England and America, however, outside the grand establishments in the larger cities which more often than not employed Frenchmen, there was no such tradition. Waitresses were more common than waiters since they were cheaper labor. But by the same token they rarely regarded their jobs as a career, and usually saw them as temporary. If they were permanent, like men in the same position, they were usually disgruntled at being in a menial, dead-end job. They often took this resentment out on the customers, and the surly waiter or unpleasant waitress became something of a cliché. Today, more than ever, the job is transient, and more and more young people take it on as part-time work between school and job or between other “worthwhile” jobs. New York restaurants seem to be staffed with out-of-work actors, dancers, and musicians, or non-English-speaking immigrants. There is never the same feeling about such a restaurant as there is about one staffed with real professional waiters, but the change seems permanent, and one of the great paradoxes of the eating-out revolution is its failure to persuade anyone that to be a waiter or waitress is a worthwhile career. And until, in the Anglo-Saxon (or for that matter the Slavic) countries, waiting tables is treated as more than a menial, low-grade job, it will remain a blot on the gastronomic landscape.

The Holy Meal

Because of its centrality in our lives, food becomes a perfect vehicle for ritual, and food rituals become central to most religions; food taboos mark off one

sect or denomination from another. There has been much study of the psychology of food taboos. Perhaps the most startling theory is Freud's concerning the ban on eating the totem animal among primitive tribes. This, he suggested, was a memorial to the primeval sin of killing and eating the father. The totem animal came to represent the father, and so could not be killed and eaten, except once a year when it was killed and eaten ceremoniously.

Modern anthropology tends to stress the usefulness of food as a marker of social boundaries. As the late Meyer Fortes said, it is not so much that food is "good to eat" as that it is "good to forbid." Catholics, for example, could find a bond between each other and a mark of difference from Protestants by substituting fish for meat on Fridays. It was probably a mistake for the Catholic Church to end the ban on meat; it had helped make Catholics feel special, and many continue to observe it voluntarily.

Freud's theory of the "sacred meal" may appear somewhat bizarre, but his concern with it was not misplaced. The sacred meal is of crucial importance in many religions, including the "advanced" ones. We are all familiar with Seder and Holy Communion. The latter derives from an actual meal – the Last Supper – but has much older roots. It goes back to the idea of sharing a meal with God, which some scholars see as the root idea of sacrifice. This develops further into the idea of eating the god to gain his strength and virtue. The Aztecs made huge loaves in the shape of the gods, and these were thrown down the temple steps to be devoured by the multitude. Human sacrifice and cannibalism come to linked again in the idea of the sacred meal, with the supreme food being used – human flesh.

There are various versions of the eating of the ancestors. South American Indians grind up the ashes and bones of dead parents and mix them in a soup which all their relatives share. This is another version of incorporating the ancestor or god into one's own body. Our funeral feasts are a pale reflection of some of these more extreme types of sacred meal. But the idea of a memorial to the dead through eating is still there, and at Irish wakes the dead body often joins in the merriment. While such feasts, like wedding feasts, serve a practical purpose in feeding the guests, they also serve the ritual purpose of uniting the celebrants in the common act of eating, with all its rich, symbolic associations.

Grace before meat is a declining civility – Charles Lamb was already deploring its decline in the early nineteenth century. But religious ideas still cling to the act of eating – or of denying food. Frugality, in some religions and secular derivatives of them, is holiness. The Calvinist ascetic version of life equates "plain food" and the "good life." Elements of this are still there in health food faddism. The antihedonism ethic aims at food and drink as much as sex. Gluttony, after all, is one of the seven deadly sins. "Carnival" in the Latin tradition is a wonderful example of a gluttonous exception to food asceticism. The fasting of Lent is violently contrasted to the excesses of Carnival. Once again, food (and drink) is used (either in its use or its denial) to

mark the passage into or out of a ritual state. The Latins tend to be more tolerant of bodily demands, and consistent food puritanism seems to be a northern and Protestant proclivity. But, as G. K. Chesterton so aptly put it:

Water is on the Bishop's board,
and the higher thinker's shrine;
But I don't care where the water goes
if it doesn't get into the wine.

(See also his marvellous "Song Against Grocers.")

There is, however, a counterbalancing epicurean tradition (of whom Chesterton was the bard) which does not see high living as incompatible with the good life, especially where the good life consists of high thinking. One of the oddities of English life is the tradition of the Inns of Court (which are so called because they started out as real inns where lawyers stayed while on the circuit) whereby eating a certain number of dinners "in hall" is a requirement for becoming a barrister. Similar communal dining requirements apply (in college) to those who would qualify for a master's degree at Oxford and Cambridge. High table in an Oxbridge college is a paradigm for the correlation of high living and high thinking. Commentators have noted the massive discrepancy between the cost of the Dons' meals and those of the undergraduates. Here the difference is used as an inducement or initiation procedure. The novitiates are deprived, but are reminded of the alimentary rewards of superior performance. But whether we are conspicuously eating well, or conspicuously depriving ourselves and others, we mark ourselves off – either as having more than anyone else, or less; and either is made a virtue. By their food shall ye know them.

The use of food as ritual is often not so obvious, but when we think of our linking of food with occasions and festivals, and often limiting it to these, it becomes clearer. Thus, elaborate fruit puddings and cakes are made and eaten by the English only at Christmas, and goose is rarely eaten at any other time; pancakes are made only on Shrove Tuesday and thrown about with great ceremony; Americans used only to eat turkey at Thanksgiving, and even now it is rare to cook the whole bird except at this family ceremonial; eggnog seems to be drunk only at Christmas in the States. Cooking the whole animal seems to be reserved for ceremonial and festive occasions. Suckling pig is only roasted whole in China for weddings and the like; whole oxen or pigs in Europe are only spit roasted at festivals. The animals could be cut up and cooked more conveniently, but there seems to be a conscious archaism involved in the spit roasting that underlines the special nature of the event. Numerous cakes, puddings, pies, and pastries are reserved throughout Europe for special occasions (gingerbread men and parkin pigs on Guy Fawkes' Day in England, and pumpkins at Halloween in the United States, for example). In all these cases, the special food serves to mark the special occasion and bring home to us its significance.

The Future of Food

Will anything stay the same in the whirligig of food faddism and ever-rapid changes in eating habits? Some things we can be certain of because evolution has built in certain prejudices to our digestive systems that will be hard to buck. Gluttony will remain with us. We are natural binge eaters, and, as the hopelessness of diets shows, only strict discipline can keep us from gorging. This probably stems from our uncertain past when food was not in steady supply, so we stocked up when it was there, never knowing when the next mammoth might happen along. Why then did we not all die of heart disease and become extinct? Because the meat had very little saturated fat on it, and we worked off the binges with a lot of exercise. But we still crave fat (which the body needs) and tend to stuff ourselves if the food is available and we are not stopped by outside pressures or the promptings of conscience.

We shall also continue, to the detriment of our systems and in particular our teeth, to crave sweet things. Again, our bodies need a certain amount of glucose for energy, and they get this by breaking down carbohydrates into sugar. But if we can get the sugar directly, this provides an immediate and less costly energy kick. It would make sense that we should be programmed to seek out these rare sources (honey was a major one) by implanting a craving. As long as they were indeed scarce, this was a fine motivator. The problem arises when human ingenuity makes them plentiful; we have no means of stopping the craving except by satisfying it. Add to this our need for salt, and it is safe to predict that we will snack eternally on pretzels and candy bars or their equivalents, and greedily consume that other producer of instant (if deceptive) energy based on sugar: alcohol.

More sinister is the vulnerability of the brain to certain addictive substances. Addiction is probably an evolutionary offshoot of the brain's own mechanism for absorbing its self-produced endorphins – the chemical substances that make us “feel good.” But evolution never anticipated such substances as alcohol, opium, nicotine, morphine, cocaine, or caffeine. These lock into the receptors intended for beneficial substances because they do momentarily make us feel good and so fool the system. But once locked in they set up a craving that nature never intended. Thus can evolution backfire, and we can predict that despite all efforts to the contrary the power of feeling good will keep a fair number of us enslaved to dangerous but seductive opiates.

Apart from the physiological prediction, we can be sure that eating as display – as a code of messages about selves and status, role and religion, race and nation – will persist in an animal that lives by symbolic communication. And as the world grows smaller and communication more immediate, we can perhaps look toward a greater homogenization of food habits. We are perhaps at the moment very lucky to be at the stage where ethnic identity is not yet blurred and the world is in an exciting state of mixing and mingling and transferring of tastes. It may not last. And always the other side of the food-as-pleasure coin looms: the possibility of mass starvation as population outstrips resources. Soon, sheer physiological necessity may overtake the

refined communicative value of food, and the only thing that will matter is whether we can get it or not. In Somalia they don't stand on ceremony: they kill you for a handful of rice.