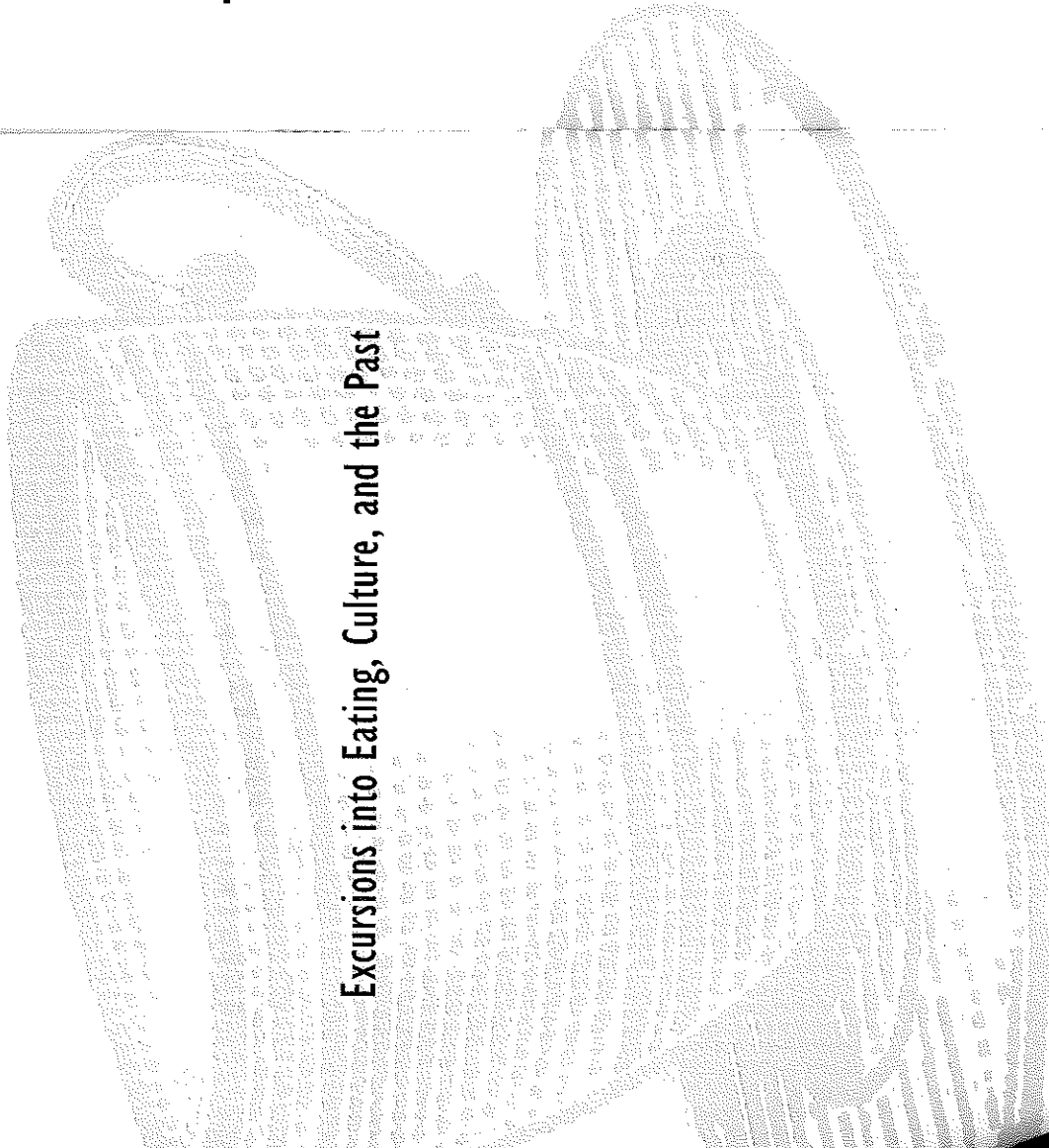


# TASTING FOOD, TASTING FREEDOM

SIDNEY W. MINTZ

Beacon Press, Boston

Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past



6. Color, Taste, and Purity	84
7. Cuisine: High, Low, and Not at All	92
8. Eating American	106

Notes	125
-------	-----

Works Cited	135
-------------	-----

Index	145
-------	-----

## Preface

**My father was a cook.** One of my sisters corrected me for years, insisting that he was a restaurateur. But I know that he was a cook. Only by the oddest of routes—the sort people made rootless by circumstance must sometimes take—did he arrive at cooking for a living.

When my parents, not yet married, reached New York City from the village slums of eastern Europe at the start of this century, my father, Shlomo (“Solomon”) Mintz, was a diemaker, freshly discharged from the Czarist army, after six years’ service in a signal battalion. My mother, Fromme Leah (“Fannie”) Mintz, who had been in the Bund, a Jewish socialist organization sternly proscribed by the Czarist government, became a seamstress in a New York sweatshop. Soon enough she joined the In-

dustrial Workers of the World, or "Wobblies," as they were called, as an organizer in the New York garment trade. Her parents did not approve and the job did not pay well.

Nor did men's work. According to my father, diemaking was paying \$3.50 a week in New York City in 1901. He took a job as a clothing salesman on Canal Street, working for a distant relative, and apparently hated every minute of it. But that is a different story.

When my parents decided to get married—they were first (cross) cousins, and it was a common Ashkenazic practice—my mother made emigration to a small town far from New York City a precondition, saying that she didn't want to raise children in a city. In response my father wrote to an old army friend, Ben Dorfman, who at that time was washing dishes in a diner in Dover, New Jersey. Ben, an orphan, had played the tuba in the military band quartered in the same divisional headquarters as my father's signal corps battalion.

They were a strange pair. My father was not much interested in books, words, or most ideas, while Ben was interested in little else; but they were close friends. As it turned out, the owner of the diner needed a dishwasher on the night shift. My father left his Canal Street haberdashery sales job, and joined Ben Dorfman at the sink, in Dover.

After their wedding in New York—my mother was ashamed to invite any of her IWW comrades because marriage was a bourgeois institution—my parents took the train to Dover, and a horse and carriage from the train station to their new home, a rented house, with Ben Dorfman as a permanent houseguest. He stayed with us until he died of cancer, during my childhood. Dover, New Jersey, is where my siblings and I were born and grew up.

It was perhaps ten years after my parents moved there that the owner of the Lackawanna House—the diner, that is—bought a Ferris wheel, sold the diner to Ben Dorfman and my father, and went off with a carnival. I know that sounds made up,

but it isn't, at least not by me. Ben and my father, who had both been saving money since my father moved to Dover, ran the diner until they were able to replace it by building a big restaurant and hotel. How they came to that course of action I never learned, but it coincided almost perfectly with the sinking of the *Lusitania* and U.S. entry into World War I. Since Dover, New Jersey, was blessed by having both a government arsenal and a powder works in nearby towns, the restaurant and hotel business flourished, and my father became a restaurateur, just like that sister kept telling me. He also became convinced that he was a financial genius. He remained a restaurateur until about 1929, when he lost his shirt, along with everyone else. Overnight, he became a cook, but now he was back to a diner again. He remained a cook almost until the day he died.

I barely remember him as a restaurateur, but I came to know him well as a cook. I ate most of my meals in the diner; and it retained the name of the Lackawanna House. My father would make my "lunch" during the summer months when, home from college, I worked swing shift at the nearby arsenal. We had twenty minutes to eat, from 4:00 A.M. until 4:20 A.M., and in that time I would matter-of-factly consume the two sandwiches, two pieces of fruit, and thermos of coffee he packed for me each evening. Around 8:20 A.M., I would arrive exhausted from work once more at the diner, and, after a few minutes' respite on the floor, I would be seized by gnawing hunger and help myself to a proper breakfast. That usually meant a large glass of freshly squeezed orange juice, three fried eggs over lightly, a ham steak, a grilled banana, toast, and coffee. My father, who would arrive around 11:00 A.M. (by which time I was comfortably asleep at home), is reported to have complained regularly that our financial security as a family would remain at risk until I moved out or lost my appetite.

My father did not like my mother's cooking and competed with her quite nastily whenever she tried to cook. But it would have been surprising had she been able to cook better than he,

since she could do practically everything else better. She spoke and wrote English much better; she was excellent at arithmetic, and he was not; her powers of reasoning were clearly superior. My father, in contrast, was a superb gardener; he had unusual mechanical abilities; and he was—I think—a great cook. He was also a profoundly sensual man.

My mother's attitude toward food differed entirely from his. She was a spiritual creature, in her own way. Her conscientiousness was so preempted by political affairs that she scarcely knew what she was eating, and cared less. Rosie Isadorczyk, one of the waitresses, used to say that Fannie's idea of a good meal was a cup of black coffee and an editorial in the *Freiheit* (a left-wing Yiddish newspaper). In contrast, my father loved birds, animals, women, babies, and melody. He liked the feel of leather. He played the ocarina, danced the *Kasatski*, and sang beautifully. He collected and repaired cuckoo clocks; there were dozens of them in our house. For years he carried around with him a tiny bit of that fine sandpaper called crocus cloth, with which he polished the oaken panels in the foyer of the house until they shone with a cathedral-like light. He was not interested in intellectualizing anything; quite the contrary. He distrusted words and believed in feelings. My mother's indifference to food filled him with emotions akin to horror. She would quite innocently read the newspaper while dining on a plate of cold cooked turnips, then complain bitterly of indigestion afterward. On being told what she had eaten to produce this effect, he would look as pained as he was repelled.

My father's approach to food was idiosyncratic, but basically convincing. He had, after all, learned to cook only by watching the people who, over the years, had cooked for him. Toward the end of his career as a restaurateur—the truly bad years, when he still had a big establishment, but no customers in it and no liquid capital at all—he hired a Chinese cook to "attract business." It was as ill-fated a move as any other, for there was no business to attract. People had no money and did not eat out. Cheng Dai Mo,

the Chinese cook, was anxious to return to China, hoping to become a pilot in Chiang Kai-shek's air force; but he hung around for a year or so, during which time my father learned all that he could about Dai Mo's cooking. When Dai Mo finally quit—there were no customers, and he must have been paid a pittance—my father continued for some time thereafter to advertise his oriental cuisine. Somewhere in the family trash, there is a photo of him, taken by his friends. He is wearing his chef's hat and smiling at the camera. Someone has written in ink above his head "Sol Min, Chinese cook." His finesse in this culinary sphere was pitiable. People would bring him fresh noodles from New York's Chinatown, which he would deep fry; he added MSG (called then "epicurean powder") to his chicken soup; he learned to make egg foo yung and some version of that appalling dish called chop suey, and a noodle and chicken soup combination I knew as yat gaw min. Clearly, my father's expertise as a chef lay in other directions.

I remember in particular his soups: sorrel soup, made with fresh sorrel, sour cream, hard-boiled egg, and scallions; *kapusta*, made with slightly fermented cabbage, brisket of beef, tomatoes, and the spectacular dried Russian *Boletus*, called *gribi*; beet *borscht* and meat *borscht*; clam chowder (both versions of which represented a sharp turn away from the food of his immediate ancestors); *kholodnik*, "the little cold one," his name for a traditional Polish soup made with fresh garden vegetables, sour salt (citric acid), and boiled dilled and buttered potatoes steaming on the side; lamb and barley soup; white (marrow fat) bean and ham bone soup, oxtail soup—they were all unexpectedly rich because of his intensely concentrated stocks. So, too, were his stews and steaks. He would cook anything from any animal. He made a marvelous kidney stew, and I became quite fond of a peppery lung stew he created. We ate kidneys, oxtail, sandwiches of marrow and black bread, brains. His french fries were excellent, but he hated to make them because he thought they were indigestible. When a customer ordered them, he was wont to come out of

the kitchen wiping his hands on his apron, in order to lecture the unfortunate client on the error of his ways. (Some customers said his was the only restaurant in the world where the customer was always wrong.)

He favored smoked fish, as do so many people from eastern and northern Europe. We had a bit of herring to start each meal. I once complained about the herring because invariably it was there. "Don't make fun of the herring," he said. "If there hadn't been any herring, there wouldn't have been any Jews." I recognized instantly what he meant. The rural poor of eastern Europe were chronically starved for animal protein. A piece of chicken, perhaps once a month, was supplemented by the herring; dried beans probably supplied most of the protein they got. Doing fieldwork on Puerto Rican sugarcane plantations fifteen or so years later, I learned to enjoy the stewed red beans or pigeon peas served over white rice, and flavored with coriander, garlic, and perhaps a sliver of smoked pork—the herring's equivalent. Years later an anthropological colleague talked about his Irish grandfather describing what he called a "famous Irish dish" named "potatoes and point." One boiled up a pot of potatoes, then hung a bit of salt pork on a string over the table. Then one stuck one's fork in the potato, pointed it at the salt pork, and ate the potato. I learned over the years that, except for the vegetarian regions, poor people the world over had suffered from the same lack of animal protein; most poor people in the world today still do. But my first lesson about it came from my father.

Though he had been raised in an average Jewish home—he would probably say "orthodox" now—just before the start of this century, my father had turned his back on religion while still an adolescent and quarreled violently with his father. (I suspect that he was influenced by the enlightenment movement among east European Jews called the Haskalah, but I do not really know that.) His food habits revealed how firm the break had been. He learned to eat and to cook shellfish, to mix milk and meat, to forgo the separation of dishes and silverware, to enjoy pork

(which he cooked marvelously well) in its many variant forms. He never made his children eat anything they did not want, but he did coax us to *taste* everything he made. A sound practice—for the next time he cooked the dish, it would seem less exotic and much more appetizing. He thus successfully raised four children, all of whom became gluttons (and several, good cooks) and none of whom has an allergy to any food (except me, at times, to clams).

He ate sparingly himself, hated deep-fried foods, and leaned toward the kind of diet now popular with young middle-class people—no red meat, little fat of any kind, lots of fruits and vegetables steamed or boiled, substantial complex carbohydrates (including such "lost" foods as buckwheat groats, lentils, and barley), and no foods to which sugar was added. He ate lots of dairy foods and eggs—they had not yet been found wanting—and he said that the medical insistence that he give up salt near the end of his life proved to be the worst burden he'd ever had, a far harder chore than forgoing cigarettes. At times, after having cooked for his growing family—by then, and with in-laws and grandchildren, some twenty of us, all told—a six-course dinner starting with a handsome hors d'oeuvre and ending with homemade baked cakes and pies, he would join us at table with his own meal. It usually consisted of a toasted bagel, cream cheese, a sliced tomato, sprinkled with dill or basil, and some smoked salmon or whitefish or salmon caviar. My sister Ev would exclaim, "God-damn it, no matter what you give us, what *you* eat always looks better!"

We drank at every meal but breakfast: beer with certain dishes, but a shot of whiskey—sometimes two—before each lunch and dinner. I was put on that regimen when I could not have been more than about ten years old. He viewed this dose of whiskey—he called it *schmapps*—as a healthful stimulant to appetite. There was absolutely no negative feeling in my family about drinking. The first time I got drunk was at age eight, on Passover wine, and I recall my mother thought it pretty funny, as

we walked home from her parents' house. But my parents felt a profound horror of alcoholism. My father would not serve alcohol in the restaurant before Prohibition. After its repeal, and once he was installed in the diner, he felt he had no choice. But he hated to deal with people who were drunk. I can remember him on occasions sobering up some over-refreshed customer in the diner with a whiff of newly grated horseradish.

When I was about eleven, my father came down with a bad case of shingles. He was quite unable to cook, and I was sent to him so he could tell me how to do it. It turned out that I was going to prepare a vast quantity of tomato sauce and meat balls. He gave me instructions, which I carefully recorded, and then I went into the kitchen and followed the instructions. I cannot remember now why I, rather than someone else, was chosen—but it was probably just for my benefit. I can remember the wave of solid satisfaction I felt from cooking this food. It was not easy for me to please my father at anything, but this time I felt reassured that he was hinting he could depend on me.

My attitudes toward food, and my esteem for it, come from my father. This book would never have been written but for him. My best memories of him are associated indissolubly with the kitchen. He didn't think much of me in the kitchen, to be sure. He would watch me carving a standing rib and would say: "How is it that you have a Ph.D. and you still can't carve a standing rib?" I imagine that he is up there now, looking down, and saying to his friends, "Look, there's my son. He makes his living *writing* about food!"

**I**n writing this book, which includes several new essays and some previously published papers, I benefited from the help of many friends and colleagues. I thank them all: Jeff Brooks, Sid Cantor, Elizabeth Dunn, Harriet Friedmann, Enrique García Galiano, Ashraf Ghani, Judy Goldstein, Jerry Hangelberg, Françoise Héritier, Jeff Horn, Phil McMichael, Luciene

Pisa, Paul Rozin, J. B. Schneewind, Rebecca Scott, Brita Servaes, Dale Tomich, Immanuel Wallerstein, John Walton, Eric Wolf, the editors of *Etnofoor*, the Wenner-Gren Foundation, and the Collège de France. As always, Marge Collignon has done yeoman work in putting the manuscript in order, not once but repeatedly, tracking down efficiently those things I managed to misplace, throw away, or file incorrectly. Also, as always, all of my colleagues in anthropology, and our students, give meaning to one's life as a teacher and as a learner. They make "book-writing" fun.

"Pa koké makout," say the Haitians, "pi ro pasé mē ou." Don't hang your basket higher than you can reach. I forgot that advice while working with these essays, and a number of kind persons did what they could to rescue me from my own hubris. I am grateful to Nancy Harmon Jenkins for her astute eye, and to Darrell Corti for incisive questions. My colleague and chair, Gilian Feeley-Harnik, provided acute observations on many parts of the text, and much enlightenment during our frequent talks about food. Ann Finkbeiner generously agreed to make a rapid reading of the penultimate draft, and gave me the benefit of her critical acumen. I am grateful to Lindee Chin, who prepared the index with her characteristic celerity and intelligence. Deb Chasman of Beacon Press has worked with me fruitfully for some years now, and it was she who gently but decisively nudged me toward the cobbling together of so many scraps. My wife, Jackie, never fails to give me reassurance, strengthened by both good taste and absolutely dependable criticism. She has had to read some of these essays too many times. For persisting errors, both of fact and of judgment, it is my cruel misfortune to have nobody but myself to blame.

## chapter one

# INTRODUCTION

In his first book, *The Palm-Wine Drunkard*, the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola [1953] introduced his readers to a set of mythical characters, all of whom are described by the chief character himself, a drunkard with an utterly insatiable thirst for palm wine. After other adventures, the palm-wine drunkard marries; the firstborn child of their union is born from his wife's thumb. This exceptional baby comes into the world already speaking like a ten-year-old and grows to more than three feet tall within an hour of his birth. But what is most remarkable about him is his eating behavior.

The little boy tells his parents his name is ZURRJR ("which means a son who would change himself into another thing very soon" [1953, 32]), and he is endowed with a mighty appetite. He

eats and eats and eats, and if people try to keep him from eating, he thrashes them and continues to eat. His strength is great, his appetite infinite:

[A]s he had eaten all the food which had been prepared against the night, then we began to cook other food, but when it was the time to put the food down from the fire, he put it down for himself and at the same time, he began to eat that again as it was very hot, before we could stop him, he had eaten all the food and we tried all our best to take it from him, but we could not do it at all. [1953, 33]

This wayward son does much mischief besides. To get rid of him, the drunkard finally decides to burn his house down. The son is burned up, too, to everyone's vast relief. But his mother pokes around in the ashes to find a bauble she had forgotten, saying "and there I saw that the middle of the ashes rose up suddenly and at the same time there appeared a half-bodied baby, he was talking with a lower voice like a telephone" [1953, 35]. This half-baby with the voice like a telephone, whose name means something that will change into something else—what could he possibly represent? Whence this utterly insatiable hunger, in a baby born of a thumb, now reduced to a half-baby, his hunger unassuaged?

Tutuola has been analyzed by a score of literary critics, but the themes in this story do not seem frighteningly complex. Most of us have no difficulty imagining a desire, a *hunger*, so intense that it brooks no opposition. Nor is it difficult to conjure the thought of a hunger so painful that one might fight, even kill, in order to be able to satisfy it. And the voice like a telephone—we forget how different we sound on such devices because we are so used to them. But everyone is aware of the *modernity* that electronic media carry; a "lower voice like a telephone" sounds like life today. Changing from one thing to another is what so

## introduction

many wish, and indeed it does happen—but mostly we do not change into what we wish, but into something else. This book about rural Nigeria on the eve of independence lets us confront a raging desire: an insatiable, aggressive appetite embodied in a powerful—indeed, indestructible—spirit. I think it sounds very modern.

I begin in this manner because what follows is a book about food, and so a book about hungers as well—hungers and their satisfaction. It is also a book about change, aspiring to link together through its themes the past with the present. To some extent, it is about the emergence of modernity, and what modern life has meant, in relation to food.

What was written about food and eating by anthropologists more than a century ago dealt mostly with feast and sacrifice—people's food relationships with their gods; with food taboos and injunctions, usually religious in nature; with the role of foods in how people were ranked socially; with cannibalism, and why people engaged in it (if, though some have denied it, they indeed did); more superficially, with foods considered by most Western cultures especially disagreeable, exotic, or repulsive.

Anthropologists who began to study such things in the field at the start of this century went from their own large, urban, Western societies to others, then still numerous, in which people were consuming foods they had produced (or gathered, or caught) themselves, most of them relying relatively little on distant exchanges for any important things that they ate. Women in such societies commonly did much of the labor to collect or grow food, as well as nearly all of the cooking. Most anthropologists were men, and didn't find such matters especially interesting. Hence it would probably be accurate to say that food and eating got much less attention in their own right as anthropological subjects than they really deserved. They were more interesting if they offended the observer, baffled him, or were ceremonialized, than if they simply pleased those who were doing the cooking and eating. Food was an instrument for the study of other things.



That it cemented loyalties, reminded people who they were in relation to others, fortified them for their tasks, and linked them to their gods, were all known aspects of eating behavior, and these features were studied. It was not the food or its preparation that was of interest, so much as what, socially speaking, the food and eating could be used for.

There were exceptions. One thinks, for instance of Franz Boas's amazing volume of recipes (mostly but not only for salmon), collected by George Hunt from the Kwakiutl people of the Pacific Northwest [Boas 1921, 305-602]. But male anthropologists generally preferred to study war, initiation, trials by ordeal, even kinship—over skinning rabbits, drying gutted salmon on racks, beer-making, or pots and pans. Bronislaw Malinowski's beautiful studies of the Trobriand Islanders, which brought together yam cultivation, feasting, magic, and chiefhood, were certainly much involved with food; but they were really concerned with what food did for the social order.<sup>1</sup>

Underlying the rich symbolic universe that food and eating always represent, however, there is the animal reality of our living existence. It is not separate from our humanity, but is an integral part of it. Only because most of us eat plentifully and frequently and have not known intense hunger may we sometimes too easily forget the astonishing, at times even terrifying, importance of food and eating. That becomes clear as soon as we give the subject of food a moment's serious thought. Without at least minimal access to food and water, we die. Except for the structurally determined irritability of all living matter and the organism's built-in drive to reproduce, nothing defines our nature as living creatures more dramatically than our ingestion. A principal source of human suffering in the modern world is still—as it has for so long been—hunger. Hunger, however, has many uses. Fasting, for instance, is a dramatic means by which to discover the power of food, as is obvious to anyone who has fasted for even a single day. But people who fast for some larger good are moved by a moral desire; they *will* against their own hunger. Be-

## introduction

ing starved by someone else, as happens still to so many people, is a more dramatic—and demoralizing—way to discover hunger's terrible power.

Food is something we think about, talk about, conceptualize. But we more than abstract it and desire it—we really must consume it to stay alive. Our desire for it can grow far beyond anticipatory pleasure; desire can turn to pain. When we get some, we must put it inside our mouths to be processed there so that it can enter digestibly into our bodies. Because of the satisfaction of hunger, as well as for many other more complicated reasons, the feeling of eating can be intensely pleasurable.

Yet eating can also excite deep ambivalence because the act of eating seems so animal. That ambivalence has characteristic cultural markings: not all societies feel the same way about food, and the food itself can be many different things. People eat just about anything that won't kill them, and even a lot of things that will. Attitudes about food are just as varied: about even such basic things as what it means to eat; what eating has to do with being human; and what it means to eat properly.

A clear if extreme sign of human ambivalence about eating is revealed by the symptoms of food-related pathologies, such as anorexia and bulimia. Though these pathologies are by no means limited to the Western nations, they are far more common in the West than elsewhere, accompanying as they do an overabundance of food. They are also far more common among women than among men. One way to think of such infirmities is as strange kinds of overcompensation—not eating, even when hungry; or gorging, and then vomiting—overcompensation, that is, for the persistent desire that hunger excites. Being overcompensatory does not make them one whit less real torment to their sufferers. The ill are obsessed about food; they suffer over food. It is food, or what food means to them, that makes them sick. But what food means to them is itself a cultural product; that the principal sufferers of such illnesses should be young white Western middle-class females is a powerful cultural signal. If anorex-

ics may be said to misperceive their own bodies, if they feel they must "punish" themselves accordingly, then that is food-related behavior. Similarly food-related is the feeling bulimics have that they must pay up for their inability to control rampant desire. But these conceptions of desirable but unachievable equilibrium, the moral investment that food and its rejection come to represent, the social structure of societies within which women of this status come to suffer in these ways, are distinctly culture-specific, not general to our species. Nourishment, a basic biological need, becomes something else because we humans transform it symbolically into a system of meaning for much more than itself. That seemingly needless overcomplication is a distinctively human undertaking, which every culture embraces, but each somewhat differently.

The propensity to expunge and suppress our "animal" need to eat (or at least to worry about it and verbalize it), somehow to inform it morally, is probably not universal. But it figures importantly in North American culture as a conscious, ever-present idea. Ingestion's consequences and its accompaniments, noises and smells, can be a source of social discomfort (at least for many Americans). The way people feel about such things varies from class to class, and from one ethnic group to another; but digestion must at least be treated as a source of humor, lest it be taken as seriously as it sometimes is. Earthy people and earthy cultures may vaunt how readily they accept bodily functions and dysfunctions as integral parts of our human natures; but in the West, at least, these things, whatever else they may be, are often seen as uncomfortable manifestations of our animality.

In the United States, other phenomena associated with food and eating have been aggravated in modern times by a compulsive concern with the way the body is seen and assessed. The extent of the individual's ability to control and manage and discipline the body—not in all societies can such verbs be applied so matter-of-factly—is considered a reflection on individual self-control. Every act of eating can thus be made into a test of will.

## introduction

Since eating is morally colored, it is not surprising that half of the American people—and 90 percent of American women—are said to be on diets at any one time. To the extent that this is a gender-marked phenomenon, anorexia and bulimia may come to look like no more than merely the flip side of the self-constructed beautiful You.

From this example it should be clear that food and eating afford us a remarkable arena in which to watch how the human species invests a basic activity with social meaning—indeed, with so much meaning that the activity itself can almost be lost sight of. In the United States, the rituals of courtship afford a provocative instance. Several years ago I urged one of my students to write her term paper on the preparations young college females make before going on a dinner date with a male, and on the food-related behavior exhibited by males and females on such dates. There is no need here to review her findings at length: the meals covertly eaten *before* going out, and the oil drunk to slow or forestall intoxication; the remedies intended to prevent nausea, flatulence, or bad breath; the careful investments in posture and gesture to conceal, or to distract the eye of the other; the striking differences in food-related intent, as in the manner of "ad-dressing" the food before one; and how culturally specific maleness and femaleness can be given solidity, by the different ways in which males and females behave around food. The paper gave real substance to the argument I mean to make here. If we were not human, things would be different. But if we weren't human, I wouldn't be writing this down.

For us humans, then, eating is never a "purely biological" activity (whatever "purely biological" means). The foods eaten have histories associated with the pasts of those who eat them; the techniques employed to find, process, prepare, serve, and consume the foods are all culturally variable, with histories of their own. Nor is the food ever simply eaten; its consumption is always conditioned by meaning. These meanings are symbolic, and communicated symbolically; they also have histories. These

are some of the ways we humans make so much more complicated this supposedly simple "animal" activity.

In one sense, the symbolic investment of meaning in food has little to do with the food itself. I am reminded of a Beatles song that tells of a cleaning woman in church, who cleans up the rice thrown at a past wedding. To get from that rice to what the story tells us is a long enough trip to make the specific character of the food seem hardly relevant. But in fact what the food is, how people come to have it, how it is prepared, whether it is plentiful or scarce, under what circumstances it is available—all of these circumstances, and many others, are integrated into what the food means. This was the way the early anthropologists thought about food, most of all; it continues to be what's most important about it for anthropology.

No other fundamental aspect of our behavior as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating; the entanglements of food with religion, with both belief and sociality, are particularly striking. A familiar illustration involves those peoples who first domesticated, then herded and cared for (and lived off) the sheep. They were its shepherds for millennia; and then one day the lamb of God became *their* shepherd. A particular god, at a particular time. The paschal sacrifice is a name for Passover; the term "paschal" comes from the Hebrew word for Passover; it is also the word meaning Easter. The paschal lamb is the paschal sacrifice. The lamb of God died for our sins, we are told. The Last Supper, the Eucharist, the Passover feast, suggest the intricate mixing of food with belief. Here, crudely simplified, are the kinds of associations early anthropologists recognized and studied. There seems to be no end of them.

Ingestion and sexuality, both intimate manifestations of our nature as living creatures, and equally remote in our case from their roles in the lives of other species, stand in different but parallel relationships to our human consciousness. Their twin importance is revealed to some degree by their common equation in popular language. The "coarse language" of everyman—in

## introduction

which desire, substance, act, and satiation, whether in eating or in sex, may be described with the selfsame words—is still alive, despite the heavy taboos surrounding deliberate and poetically startling confusion. "It must be jelly, 'cause jam don't shake like that" is not considered Shakespearean prose. Because of their thinly veiled unity, sexual idioms in food's language are doubly discomfiting. Novelists, filmmakers, poets, and songwriters take common advantage of the fact that food and sexuality lie close together.

In contrast to the unending need for food, the sexual drive is subject to enormous cultural manipulation. To be sure, within limits, so is the need to eat—but only within limits that are frighteningly clear. In the case of mammalian behavior generally, sexual and food-seeking behavior are usually easy to distinguish: sexual activity is periodic, seasonal, hormonally regulated. Not, however, in the case of the human species; for human beings (and like hunger), sexuality is sempiternal. Yet these hungers are differently subject to social control, and are differently managed in different societies.

If we leave aside the food enthusiasts, ordinary mortals do not enshrine food in some special niche of the sort we save for love. People can—indeed, often do—have intense feelings about food, even those persons who have never been truly hungry. But they do not openly concede to food the deep importance they accord to love, and for obvious reasons: love has to do with other persons, in a different way from food. The ordinariness of food, its accessibility, our everyday need for it, and its physiological consequences may sometimes make it seem less important than it is. Yet food has a special status in our spectrum of sensory experience. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu [1984, 79] has suggested why, eloquently:

It is probably in tastes in *food* that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or col-

lapse of the native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it. The native world is, above all, the maternal world, the world of primordial tastes and basic foods, of the archetypal relation to the archetypal cultural good, in which pleasure-giving is an integral part of pleasure and of the selective disposition towards pleasure which is acquired through pleasure.

I think that food remains an odd subject, at least in the United States, because its sensory power often conflicts so jarringly with our strangely disembodied, rather puritanical and very American, conceptions of ourselves.

Anthropologists have always been interested, at least in a general way, in how societies (especially nonmachine societies) provisioned themselves. Even though there were not many good early studies of how food was prepared, distributed, and eaten, there was a long-standing preoccupation with what needed to be done to keep the society functioning, and of course food figured centrally in answering that question. In the United States, anthropologists such as Otis T. Mason and Clark Wissler charted the lifeways of Native American peoples in terms of their basic subsistence, for example, and spoke of "salmon areas" and "maize areas" and "bison areas" in describing Indian life. But pioneer fieldworkers such as Boas and Malinowski dealt with societies that were economically more self-contained, at least so far as their traditional foods were concerned. In the last hundred years those economies have almost entirely disappeared. Anthropology today deals with a world in which, more and more, people do not consume what they produce and do not produce what they consume, even much of their food.

In this world, anthropologists have begun to think about international issues involving the differential food productivity of different continents, the spread of new foods, and especially, food supplies in relation to the growth of world population. Because food is, so to speak, the "bottom line" in maintaining life, and

though famine has now become relatively rare, the world food picture is still immensely important politically; a news report on any troubled area is almost certain to touch on issues of food and food availability.

This is one of the fundamental ways in which food is now connected to issues of power. The connection is certainly not new. But some of the ways in which food and power are linked today are themselves new. People in distant lands now often decide by their actions who will continue living and who will have to die. Hardly any aspect of power could be more awful than that. Yet in the modern world this development is rarely recognized as power. The decisions are often collective and procedural, as in legislatures, say, ruling against foreign aid; or made by large corporations, deciding to produce their bananas on island A, and to stop producing them on island B. The result is that some people are likely to die; and neither they themselves, nor those who are responsible, know who killed them. The most profound ethical issues are raised by the assertion that every living human being has a sacred right to eat because decisions are being made all the time that—by their inevitable consequences—end up causing people to die of hunger. Establishing the linkages between such decision-making and its victims, exposing those linkages so that the decision-making itself becomes ethically visible, may be a task remote from anthropology's older concerns. But it is well worth any anthropologist's time today.

Such linkages can be studied historically, and many anthropologists have learned from social historians how they can reveal the political and economic significance of past events connected to food. Though not his central theme, when Redcliffe Salaman wrote *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* [1949], he devoted considerable space to the Irish potato famine or "Great Hunger" of 1845-49. Cecil Woodham-Smith, in *The Great Hunger* [1962], made that catastrophe her particular subject: a million dead, another million who emigrated, all because of a diseased crop. The potato itself, that strange member of the deadly night-

shade family, had been imported to Europe from the New World where it was first domesticated. Because it was finally turned into the principal nutritive mainstay of the Irish people, the potato had a leading role in the tragedy. But this was not the potato's fault; it was a man-made tragedy. The power both of the landowners and of the state entered actively into the story. The near-total dependence of the people on one single food and the unpreparedness of the state to assist them were both aspects of Irish colonial history. The potatoes merely rotted; but too little was done by the society's rulers to avert the disaster, once the tragic dependence of an entire people on a single crop had become a reality.

There have been other stories. A decade ago I attempted to describe what happened when sugar became an important item of European diet [Mintz 1985]. Unlike the potato, however, sugar was a luxury food that gradually worked its way down the European class ladders, starting as a plaything of royalty and becoming a necessity of working people only much later. Its generous use in hot, strong tea marked the first time a working class anywhere became deeply dependent upon foods—in this case, produced mostly by mass coercion—shipped to them from the ends of the earth. Power was quite visible in the story of how all of this had happened.

In that instance it seemed to me that power could be conceptualized in two strikingly different ways. The first and more obvious expression had to do with who produced sugar, seized the needed land, assembled the necessary machinery and labor (at the outset and for a very long time, enslaved labor), saw to shipping and marketing the product, and so on. But the other, less obvious form of power had to do with what consuming sugar came to mean. As a rare and costly substance, its very consumption expressed a kind of power—much as our consumption of costly caviar or fresh abalone or fine wine does so, today. The king's ability to display and consume sugar was one of the ways for defining his power. Over time, as the production of sugar

*What is the point of this? - The idea is to show that the state is not just a passive observer but an active participant in the process.*

## introduction

rose, its price fell and its consumers multiplied. There was no longer any need for the power of the king to be signaled by the foods he consumed. Such power now inhered in the commercial ascendancy of the state, its colonial dominions, its power to tax, the benefits of the trade it oversaw, protected, and benefited from.

But for those millions who had not eaten sugar before, or had lacked the means to offer it to their loved ones or guests in various forms, the earlier and older sense of power in consumption could hang on. Not surprisingly, it does still, in every towering wedding cake, St. Valentine's Day candy box, and favorite dessert. The American G.I. in World War II with his chocolate bars embodied a modern rendering of that centuries-old form of power. For most Americans, the high point of the meal is the dessert, and even very good restaurants in this country show deference to our renowned sweet tooth.

For many people, eating particular foods serves not only as a fulfilling experience, but also as a liberating one—an added way of making some kind of a declaration. Consumption, then, is at the same time a form of self-identification and of communication. The employment of food to achieve a feeling of well-being or freedom is widely felt and understood. Much of the symbolic overloading of food rests particularly in its utility for this purpose. The satisfactions seem modest; the meal one eats in confirming that "you deserve a break today" may be neither expensive nor unusual. And yet this act of choosing to consume apparently can provide a temporary, even if mostly spurious, sense of choice, of self, and thereby of freedom.

The idea of *choosing* to consume lay behind giving this book its title. The essays themselves, of which the book is composed, were written at different times and for different purposes. But they all deal with the ways that human beings eat, investing their acts and the substances they consume with their history, their hopes, and their persons.

In chapter 2, I try to explain how the exercise of power af-

facts what gets consumed, and under what conditions. In this instance, war is the background constant against which people—both soldiers and nonsoldiers—are enabled to stay alive. In doing so, they become identified with the foods they learn to eat. The core question this poses is: how do we apprehend or come to know foods (including here processed foods and brands, such as cheeses, soft drinks, breakfast cereals, salted dry “munchies,” ice cream), then turn them, conceptually as well as physically, into parts of ourselves? By what means do those who make and sell us what we consume affect our symbol-making so that their products “become us”?

In chapter 3, I take up a special instance of the right to eat, in which the background constant is enslavement. The use of cooking by slaves as a means to escape the definition of themselves imposed on them by others is a case of tasting freedom.

In chapter 4, I attempt to show how the history of food is not simply one of successive changes unfolding through time, but something more. The triumph of sugar, the product of extraction, over honey, the product of living insects, is an unfamiliar chapter in the history of foods, and is documented here.

The next two essays explore other meanings of sweetness. In chapter 5, tasting freedom takes another form. Orwell's language, in which slavery is freedom, may be relevant. The sweet taste seems to awaken moral sentiments, at least in Western societies.<sup>2</sup> Because sweet foods are thought to be particularly fattening (as well as particularly tempting) in the United States, their place in the thinking of people intent upon losing weight can be much exaggerated, and the moral worth of self-restraint may come to turn on the dessert course. In this chapter, the moral or ethical positioning of sugar in modern society is assessed. Freedom for some people means becoming what one wants to be; dieting and exercise are thereby changed into the keys to a certain kind of freedom. I mean to raise questions here about the possibility of a morality so individualized as to make relatively

## introduction

little reference to society, except in the ways that the individuals themselves construct. How do self-fulfillment and social fulfillment fit together?

Chapter 6, “Color, Taste, and Purity” is a historical essay about a special sweet product, marzipan, which evolved from the combination of almond paste, sugar, and other ingredients. The whiteness of almonds and sugar is viewed here as part of their secret: whiteness is seen as equalling purity. Such an equation apparently has a special history in the West.

Chapter 7 is concerned with how one defines cuisine. Like the previous chapters, it is concerned with eating and with how human beings view eating. Who has a cuisine? How can we tell? This is not so obvious as it may seem; I try here to explain why. Having a lot of different ethnic foods to eat is not the same as having a cuisine; eating out a lot is not the same as having a cuisine. What does it take to have a cuisine? And does it matter?

The final chapter is a kind of extension of the discussion of cuisine: an attempt to talk about how we Americans eat. It is not a “scientific” essay—mostly a look at American food habits from the perch of one American. But I try here to take up once more the link between food and power, in reflecting upon where the U.S. food system may be going, during the next generation or so.

Many of these essays, as I have already indicated, were taken out of a body of work carried out over a number of years, and selected as the most relevant or useful in a collection of this sort. My hope is that they will make people think more about what they eat and why they eat it: about this amazing, everyday activity by which we stay alive. I am myself regularly astonished by what seems to me to be the un-self-reflective manner in which so many Americans eat what they do, under the conditions they do. I wish from time to time that they would do otherwise. My reasons for thinking that way are merely a personal legacy from my father. Eating can be—should be—one of our greatest joys, I think. For fifteen-year-olds, it usually is; but lots of people who

## chapter one

are older than that somehow manage to lose their joy in eating, and never even know how and why it happened, usually attributing it simply to aging. If eating is anything less than joyous for you, I hope you'll think about why. And if by some special circumstance this book helps you to revise or rethink your opinion, then I shall not have written in vain.

## chapter two

# FOOD AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CONCEPTS OF POWER

**H**ow does a society learn to consume food differently: to eat more food (or less), to eat different food, differently prepared, in different contexts; to revise or modify the social (and perhaps even the nutritive) purpose of the consumption itself? This chapter has two aims. I want to block out the kinds of constraint that can define the situations where people accept the necessity of changing their food habits. Then I want to illustrate how, having changed their food habits, people try to cope with the changes in their own ways by creating new consumption situations, endowed with new meanings which they themselves have engineered.

The use and application of power frequently enter into changes in a society's food consumption habits. Where this power

originates; how it is applied and to what ends; and in what manner people undertake to deal with it, are all part of what happens when food habits change. We do not understand these processes at all well, even though they are of immense importance to the world's future. Nor do I believe that much of the research on changing food habits addresses the cultural aspects of such changes. I think that group values and past practices can figure significantly in what changes, how much and how fast. Thus culinary history enters into the success and failure of new applications of power in the sphere of food and eating, but not in readily understood or carefully studied ways. I attempt here to explain, though only in a preliminary fashion, my own ideas of how power serves to advance (or retard) changes in food habits.

## SUGAR, TEA, AND THE BRITISH WORKING CLASS

In my book *Sweetness and Power* [1985], I contended that the heightened use of tea, sugar, tobacco, and a few other substances which came to typify the spending habits of the eighteenth-century British working class probably provide us with the first instance in history of the *mass* consumption of imported food staples. The hope in that book was to be able to explain the peculiar attraction these novelties had for new consumers. But the argument remained incomplete in part because I found it impossible to locate and isolate some specific single cause for this new consumption. Many explanations had turned up in the literature; none seemed to me particularly convincing. Two historians, sniffing the air anew, have recently settled on "the quest for respectability" as *the* cause [Austen and Smith 1990; Smith 1992, 1995]. Respectability, concrete and specific as it sounds, takes us part of the way, by building on the path-breaking work of Norbert Elias.<sup>1</sup> Yet we still do not really know why so many English people so rapidly became such eager consumers of sugar and tea, for exam-

## food and its relationship to power

ple. The term "respectability" can be an umbrella for such things as hospitality, generosity, propriety, sobriety, social rivalry, and much else. The unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) question persists, if what we aim at explaining is the peculiar power of a *specific* food (or even some category of foods) over consciousness and will. I earlier noted that possible factors influencing the British adoption of sugar included: the powerful stimulant contained in tea and other new beverages, coffee and chocolate, with which sugar was consumed; the common malnutrition of the British working classes at the time, such that the caloric contribution of sugar would matter unconsciously as well as consciously; the apparently universal predisposition of the human species toward the sweet taste; the readiness of people in most (if not all) societies to emulate their "superiors" if permitted; the possible significance of the element of novelty; and the usefulness of tobacco and the stimulant beverages in easing the industrial work day [Mintz 1985]. Faced with such a list, it becomes harder to talk about the relationship between some specific food and the exercise of power in society.

The emergence of British sugar-eating and tea-drinking took place against a background of overseas expansion and colonial conquest, which brought about a mounting commerce in enslaved Africans, and a growing number of plantations in the colonies. At home British society was undergoing increasing industrialization, the dislodgment of rural populations, and urbanization. Sugar, earlier a rare and precious imported medicine and spice, became at this time cheaper (at first rapidly, then more gradually); and while its cost went down, the uses to which it could be put proliferated. Sugar's increasing availability facilitated the increase in contexts within which it was used.

Once sugar began to be consumed by those of modest income, its employment for new uses increased swiftly. It entered into the rhythms of daily life particularly in its association with three new stimulant beverages: chocolate, coffee, and tea (in Brit-



ain, tea soon emerged as most successful). Much later and by a series of successive steps, sugar became important in its own right—that is to say, other than in association with these beverages.

## MEANING

In studying materials dealing with home and work conditions in Britain in relation to sugar and other substances, I found it useful in 1985 to separate the broad changes in background that made access to sugar easier, on the one hand, from the circumstances of daily domestic life and work, within which consumers installed sugar in their everyday routines, on the other. On this basis I proposed two terms to simplify discussion. The daily life conditions of consumption have to do with what I called *inside* meaning; the environing economic, social, and political (even military) conditions with *outside* meaning.

*Inside* meaning arises when the changes connected with *outside* meaning are already under way. These grand changes ultimately set the outer boundaries for determining hours of work, places of work, mealtimes, buying power, child care, spacing of leisure, and the arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy. In spite of their significance for everyday life, they originate outside that sphere and on a wholly different level of social action. In consequence of these changes, however, individuals, families, and social groups must busily integrate what are newly acquired behaviors into daily or weekly practice, thereby turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, imparting additional meaning to the material world, employing and creating significance at the most humble levels. This is what happened to tea-drinking, once people tasted tea and were learning to drink it regularly; and what happened to pipe-smoking, once tobacco had been tried and was liked. People alter the micro-conditions as much as they can and according to their emerging preferences—the where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why—

## food and its relationship to power

thereby changing what the things in question signify, what they *mean* to the users. New behaviors are superimposed upon older behaviors; some behavioral features are retained, others forgone. New patterns replace older ones.

This happens, however, within the widest constraints that *outside* meaning allows for. I have just suggested that the processes that endow behavior with *inside* meaning unfold in relation to what I label “grand changes.” But of course for the participants the micro-conditions themselves are, or become, grand—it for it is out of them that the routines of daily life are fashioned. This interior embedding of significance in the activity of daily life, with its specific associations (including affective associations) for the actors, is what anthropologists often have particularly in mind, I think, when they talk about meaning in culture.

Some of us tend to be inordinately moved by the power of our species to invest life with meaning on this intimate, immediate, and homely level. Of course it is essential to stress the remarkable—even distinctive—capacity of our species to construct, and act in terms of, symbols. But in the case of the large, complex societies with which we deal today, it is at least as important to thorough understanding to keep in mind that larger institutional subsystems usually *set the terms* against which these meanings in culture are silhouetted. In daily practice, for example, job opportunities tell people when they can eat and how long they can take to do it; to a noticeable extent they also therefore tell people *what* they can eat, where, and with whom. Individuals are thus presented with a series of situations within which they may begin to make meaningful constructions for themselves, as long as such constructions do not violate the outer situational boundaries that have been established for them. But the job opportunities are determined by forces that transcend the means and wills of those who become the employees—as anyone who has lost a job recently knows.

In contrast to *inside* meaning, it is those larger forces expressed in particular subsystems, together with the state, that

have to do with what I mean by the term *outside* meaning. Thus, *outside* meaning refers to the wider social significance of those changes effectuated by institutions and groups whose reach and power transcend both individuals and local communities: those who staff and manage larger economic and political institutions and who make them operate.

In the case of the history of sugar in Britain, these larger institutions were the servants of the imperial political and economic system, who carved out the West Indian colonies and gave them governments; who saw to the successful—immense and centuries-long—importation of enslaved Africans to the islands; who bequeathed land wrested from the indigenes to the first settlers; who financed and managed the ever-rising importation of tropical goods to Britain, including chocolate, coffee, cotton, and tobacco, as well as sugar, rum, molasses, tea, and much else; and who levied taxes at all levels of society, to benefit its servants and the state. It will soon become clear that these background arrangements of conditions against which *inside* meaning can take on its characteristic shape—what I call *outside* meaning—are cognate with what Eric Wolf [1990, 586–87] has labeled “structural power.”

Using the word “meaning,” rather than “power,” in the first of my labels (*outside meaning*) may have been somewhat misleading, but there was a reason for it at the time. During recent years many anthropologists have been abandoning an older interest in how things are caused—no longer trying to explain why *this* happened, rather than *that*—in order to interpret events in terms of what they were supposed to mean. Such a shift in emphasis is thought to have brought the fieldworker into view, to have humanized anthropology while demystifying both the fieldworker and the fieldwork situation.

Yet this stress on meaning has also led us away from seeking to explain what happens (or happened) over time. We know that particular events often *mean* different things to different persons or groups in the same society. The slave trade and slavery

“meant” that the British factory and farm workers would get their sugar; but the meaning of slavery and the slave trade to plantation owners, bankers, and the Colonial Office was entirely different. (One need hardly add that, for the slaves and their descendants, it also “meant” quite different things.) Anthropologists who are still interested in how things happen and the consequences of events, more than in what things may mean, need to be able to distinguish among different meanings, and different sorts of meaning, in order to continue to study causes and causation.

The abstract system we call “a culture,” and the abstract system of meaning that is thought to typify the members of the society who “share” that culture, are neither simple coefficients of each other; nor two sides of one coin; nor merely the active and passive aspects of one system. To treat them as if they were is to bypass the complex nature of any society, and to impute to its members a homogeneity of value and intentions they almost certainly lack. *Outside meaning* is a term invented to avoid the imputation of any such homogeneity.

As for *inside meaning*, the use of “meaning” is entirely appropriate here, I think. Those who create such *inside* meaning do so by imparting significance to their own acts and the acts of those around them, in the fashion in which human beings have been giving their behavior social significance as long as they have been human. The gradual emergence of a food pattern called “high tea” among working-class Britons, for instance, was the work of those who eventually came to take this meal regularly; it was they who created the pattern. But they did so inside the constraints of work and income and their own available energy, constraints over which they themselves had hardly any control at all.

The connection between outside and inside meaning can be exemplified with a more modern case than that of sugar and tea in eighteenth-century Britain. But before looking at this case, we need to take note of a general paradox having to do with the whole issue of food and food preferences. On the one hand,

food preferences, once established, are usually deeply resistant to change. We cannot easily imagine the Chinese people giving up rice to eat white bread, or the Russian people, black bread to eat maize. Such deeply cherished tastes are rooted in underlying economic and social conditions, and they are surely far more than simply nutritive. But they must also be viewed in terms of the equally telling fact that *some* preferences, even in diet, turn out in fact to be quite readily surrendered. To be sure, it is far more common to add new foods to one's diet than it is to forgo old and familiar ones. The readiness of the North Americans to become eaters of *sushi*, which surely could not have been predicted in 1941—and not only for political reasons—is an apt example of an unexpected, even unpredictable adding-on. Somewhat more interesting in the present argument is the gradual decline in the consumption of complex carbohydrates by North Americans over the past seventy-five years, which has meant not just the addition of new foods, but also a palpable decline in the consumption of certain once-prized old ones. But in any event, these additions-on and gradual eliminations are often hard to explain, for they proceed against a substantial, persisting stability of diet at the same time.

We do not understand at all well why it can be claimed both that people cling tenaciously to familiar old foods, yet readily replace some of them with others. Hence situations of rapid change in food habits deserve a much closer look than they have received. We need to know far better than we do now why some food habits change easily and swiftly, while others are remarkably enduring. We are inclined to view this contrast as between basic or essential foods on the one hand, and less important or peripheral foods on the other. But this is not adequate to explain all particular cases of rapid change. When much else is changing, food habits may change, too, and such changes are often unpredictable. Where and how power comes to permeate these processes of change, projected in part against continuing stability, is not always apparent.

## A CASE

Here, then, is one example of how power enters into the changes that affect food choices; but it is a large-scale and general case. It has to do with war. War is probably the single most powerful instrument of dietary change in human experience. In time of war, both civilians and soldiers are regimented—in modern times, more even than before. There can occur at the same time terrible disorganization and (some would say) terrible organization. Food resources are mobilized, along with other sorts of resources. Large numbers of persons are assembled to do things together—ultimately, to kill together. While learning how, they must eat together. Armies travel on their stomachs; generals—and now economists and nutritionists—decide what to put in them. They must do so while depending upon the national economy and those who run it to supply them with what they prescribe or, rather, they prescribe what they are told they can rely upon having. During World War II, upwards of fifteen million Americans were brought together in uniform, many millions more in mufti. The service people ate together, in large camps. They ate what they were given; what they were given was decided by powerholders who functioned outside the army and outside their direct experience.

Among other things, service personnel were given meat twenty-one times a week; even the Friday dinner had an alternate meat course (though it was usually cold cuts). For most soldiers (but only irregularly under combat conditions), never before had so much meat been thrust before them. They were also given vast quantities of coffee and of sweets of all sorts; there were sugar bowls on every table, and twice a day, without fail, the meal ended with dessert. (As it happens, soldiers were also given free cigarettes while standing in line for their paychecks each month.) Though the food habits of the civilians may not have been altered

so radically, certain things did happen, about which much is known. They got too little meat; and the wartime media were full of stories and jokes about romancing the butcher. They got too little sugar, too little coffee, and too little tobacco. Their food habits, too, were being radically affected. Hence North American food preferences—though “preferences” is more than a little misleading, under the circumstances—were significantly reshaped by the war experience.

Among the things that soldiers and civilians were *not* given was Coca Cola; but careful arrangements were made to allow them to buy it. George Catlett Marshall, chief of staff during World War II, was a Southerner. It was soon after Pearl Harbor that General Marshall advised all of his commanders and general officers to request the building of additional Coca Cola bottling plants in order to get the product to the front. By his letter Marshall gave Coca Cola the same status in the wartime economy as that occupied by food and munitions. Coca Cola was thus spared sugar rationing. In all, sixty-four Coca Cola plants were established in allied theaters of war, including the Pacific theater, North Africa, Australia, and elsewhere. The Coca Cola Company was asked by the armed forces to supply technicians to run the production; 148 bottling plant technicians were sent; three were even killed in theaters of war during World War II [Louis and Yazijian 1980].

In the light of Coca Cola's status by the time the war ended, it is noteworthy that, before the war, Coke was not a truly international drink—I would claim it was not yet even a really national drink.<sup>2</sup> Though Coke had traveled early in its career to Cuba, it was still principally a U.S. beverage, mainly consumed in the South. There were foreign countries where it was sold, but it was not yet well known internationally. I suspect that its most numerous consumers in the U.S. were high school students who laced their Coke with Southern Comfort whiskey so that they could get publicly (yet covertly) intoxicated at the senior prom. Indeed, it is probable that most people outside the South didn't

drink Coke, but “mixed” it instead. During the war, the fact that the United States professional officer corps was largely Southern may have played a role in this story, as well.

How *outside* meaning influenced the spread of Coca Cola is easy to discern. The rapid proliferation of Coca Cola bottling plants in allied theaters of war had much to do with its growing popularity. Power over labor and resources employed in the production of food undergirded the unhampered operation of the corporate system, closely coordinated in this instance with the will of the state. Even in times of politico-military crisis—some might say particularly in such times—corporate power neatly integrated with the state bureaucracy firmly underwrites the successful execution of what are defined as broader societal tasks. At such moments, the power of the state itself seems far less irksome to corporate America. The deployment of resources for food production is linked to conceptions of consumer choice as well. But in this instance the choices were managed in a specific fashion: 95 percent of all soft drinks sold on American bases during the war were products of the Coca Cola Company. There was choice; but one company only was accorded the right to specify its limits.

In contrast to *outside* meaning, *inside* meaning in a case of this kind has to do with what foods come to mean to those who consume them. The symbolism connected with Coca Cola, as it took on its national stature during the war, and as documented by such writers as Louis and Yazijian [1980, 50–67] and Pendergraft [1993, 199–217], was utterly astonishing. It may be relevant that soldiers overseas have not only been stripped of almost all of the marks of their individuality (clothing, jewelry, coiffure), but because they are in a remote land, they also feel bereft of those material representations of their culture that are embodied in architecture and in linguistic forms (familiar buildings, signs, advertising). Under such circumstances, which can be alienating, objects that can “carry” a displaced sense of culture, such as foods and beverages, take on additional potential power. Coca Cola turned out to be a nearly perfect symbolic repository. It was not

unusual to find in the letters that servicemen wrote home the assertion that they were fighting for the right to drink Coca Cola. The *inside* meaning of Coca Cola is certainly revealed in the emotions of a soldier who fights—among other things—“as much to help keep the custom of drinking Cokes as I am to help preserve the millions of other benefits our country blesses its citizens with”—to quote from one of many such references to Coke in the censored mail of wartime. Thus it was that Coca Cola was enabled to become a symbol—a veritable national symbol—among the warrior youth of the 1940s generation.

War, then, is a setting in which the exercise of the power behind *outside* meaning readily applies. Such examples do not have to do with the intrinsic nutritive significance of food. They help to explain, rather, how outside processes serve to impose many of the conditions within which *inside* meaning can take shape and manifest itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

In his lecture to the American Anthropological Association annual meetings some years ago, Eric Wolf [1990] enumerated four sorts of power. By Wolf's reckoning there is, first of all, personal power, of a sort comparable to *charisma*. Second, there is the power of persuasion, by means of which one person exacts conformance of some kind from another. Third, and on a broader canvas, there is the “power that controls the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interact with others” [p. 586]. This “tactical or organizational power” is “useful for understanding how ‘operating units’ circumscribe the actions of others within determinate settings.” Tactical power can be used, for example, by organized business entities, such as multinational corporations, banks, and conglomerates. The exercise of such power is tightly linked to the background social conditions

## food and its relationship to power

which affect food habits. But even more important is Wolf's last category. He writes of:

a fourth mode of power, power that not only operates within settings or domains but that also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the distribution and direction of energy flows. I think that this is the kind of power that Marx addressed in speaking about the power of capital to harness and allocate labor power. . . . I want to use it as power that structures the political economy. I will refer to this kind of power as structural power. This term rephrases the older notion of “the social relations of production,” and is intended to emphasize power to deploy and allocate social labor. These governing relations do not come into view when you think of power primarily in interactional terms. Structural power shapes the field of action so as to render some kinds of behavior possible, while making others less possible or impossible. [pp. 586–87]

When this perspective is applied to the subject of food habits, it is easy to see how structural and tactical (or organizational) power aligns the institutional frameworks that set the terms by which people get food, maintain or change their eating habits, and either perpetuate their eating arrangements and the associated meanings, or build new systems, with new meanings, into those arrangements.

All living organisms are faced with an imperious necessity: not to eat is to die. But beyond this, foods have meanings that transcend their nutritive role. Just as our species seems always to have made food carry symbolic loads far heavier than those of simple nutrition, so, too, the symbolism seems ready to spill over into even wider fields of meaning. The place of rice in Japanese culture, of bread in the West, of maize to many Native American

peoples—these significations clearly surmount any literal nutritive significance the foods themselves might have.

It might seem acceptable to say, then, that food exercises “power” over people in terms of what it means to them. But that is *not* the sort of “power” with which I am dealing; and it is important to be clear in this regard. The material world is invested with meaning. Because people act in terms of understood meanings, meaning can be said to effectuate behaviors of certain kinds. And power and meaning are always connected. “Power is ... never external to signification,” Wolf writes. Power “inhabits meaning and is its champion in stabilization and defense” [Wolf 1990, 593]. But the symbolic power of foods, like the symbolic power of dress or coiffure, is different from (even if related in some manner to) the tactical and structural power that sets the outermost terms for the creation of meaning. The power resting within *outside* meaning sets terms for the creation of *inside*, or symbolic, meaning.

Turn again to the words of that earnest GI who fought to preserve his right to drink Coke. There is no question about *inside* meaning in this instance. Such *inside* meaning is linked to *outside* meaning because what Coke means is coefficient with its history as a commodity, with the steps taken to ensure its availability, with the history of those very decisions by which Coke could become the purchased soft drink, the tie to home, the ex-citer of nostalgia, a very symbol of America. What I call *outside* meaning and *inside* meaning are clearly linked in Coke’s story. But they are also quite different from each other, and they do not stand in any simple relationship.

In his own work, Wolf has set apart the issue of meaning from the issue of power. But he sees them as inextricably connected. He writes: “Meanings are not imprinted into things by nature; they are developed and imposed by human beings. Several things follow from this. The ability to bestow meanings—to ‘name’ things, acts and ideas—is a source of power” [Wolf 1982, 388]. As this essay attempts to suggest, the ability to “supply”

things, in the broadest sense, is also a vital source of power, not only because it may include some ability to bestow meaning, but also because meaning coalesces around certain relationships. Objects, ideas, and persons take on a patterned structural unity in the creation of ritual, as happened, for example, when “high tea” became a working-class eating custom. But it was the purveyors of the foods, the givers of employment, the servants of the state who exercised the power that made the foods available.

If we return briefly to the case of sugar in eighteenth-century Britain, we may inquire of the material to what extent the creators of background conditions can be said to set the precise terms for the emergence of *inside* meaning. Emulation, for example, played some role in increasing and in shaping food use; so, probably, did medical advice. The conditions under which landless people worked were determined by others: the hours when they might eat or rest, where they took their food, how they got to and from work. At the level of daily life, the customary practices that working people developed in order to deal with the newly emerging industrial society in which they found themselves were answers, or “solutions,” to conditions over which they had no real control. In these ways, *outside* and *inside* meanings are linked through the conditions created and presented to potential consumers by those who supply what is to be consumed.

This chapter has aimed at clarifying these questions. But what is needed is a concerted effort to study the various ways in which stable food habits can be called into question. We may also ask ourselves *why* they are called into question. Some answers may have to do with poor nutrition, overeating, or inordinately expensive cuisine, relative to available resources. But other answers may have little or nothing to do with health or economy, even though people are being subjected to intense pressures to forgo some parts of their diet in favor of different foods. At times, as has been suggested here, large-scale structural changes, such as war and migration, may change the rules of the game, so to speak, compelling people to reorder their categories of mean-

## chapter two

ing in new ways, and to eat (and drink) differently. How this is done, and why it succeeds, urgently need to be understood. So, too, do all the means used to persuade people that what they are eating now should be replaced with something else. I think that it is within anthropology's capabilities to confront these issues solidly; but so far it has not done so. Until anthropologists try to find answers to these questions they will not be able to contribute in full measure what they can to our understanding of the world food problem.

## chapter three

# TASTING FOOD, TASTING FREEDOM

**T**o understand the meanings of food in slave consciousness in Caribbean societies, one needs to examine the slaves' lives, and the lives of their descendants, on a level of detail that may capture the imagination of neither scholar nor reader. Yet such detail is significant. I believe that the homely, everyday experiences of the slaves bore importantly, if indirectly, upon bigger issues—perhaps even on the abolition of slavery itself, and the eventual realization of freedom in different epochs and countries.

The crowning achievement of the struggle to end slavery was freedom itself. But freedom of what, and freedom for what? The enslaved knew what it was to be free, before they were enslaved; they were captives who could remember freedom.<sup>1</sup> Their chil-