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The Importance of Food and Feasting around the World

Helen R. Haines and Clare A. Sammells

When I (Haines) first got the idea for this book, I was part of an archaeological field project living in Mitla, a modest-sized town in the western part of the Tlacolula Valley in Oaxaca, Mexico. It was late in the afternoon on a hot Saturday and my colleagues and I had just finished visiting the ruins of Cuilapan in the Valley Grande and were on our way back to the Tlacolula Valley. We had been living in Mitla for almost three months and were wrapping up a somewhat long and arduous field season. Consequently, we decided to extend our day off and stop in the capital city of Oaxaca for a drink and something to eat. Although Mitla boasted a lovely ruin that attracted many visitors, the alcoholic beverages offered to both tourists and locals alike were limited to mezcal,¹ beer, and the occasional bottle of surprisingly good Chilean red wine. While I was generally quite happy with the wine, it was not in regular supply and there is only so much beer I can drink. Mezcal, I discovered, was an acquired taste—one I never quite managed to master.

Tired of our usual fare, I was convinced that *somewhere* in Oaxaca City I could get a gin and tonic. I will readily admit that I have a weakness for gin, specifically gin and tonics. While I do not consume them often or in excess, I must confess to a fondness for unwinding over a lovely lowboy filled with a shot of

Tanqueray,² topped with tonic water, two cubes of ice, and a double twist of lime. Although I was raised in a British-Canadian household, it was not until I studied for my doctoral degree in “London over home” (as my grandfather called it³) that I truly developed my passion for gin. Gin and tonics were the quintessential drink of the British Empire in the nineteenth century. Not only was it “medicinal,” in that the tonic water contained quinine powder (a malarial prophylaxis⁴), but gin and tonic water is also amazingly relaxing and refreshing on a hot afternoon. The late Queen Mum (the mother of Queen Elizabeth II of England) was famous for her fondness for a good gin and tonic. As for myself, I have since gone to great lengths, incurred large expense, and suffered through some truly awful beverages to satisfy my occasional craving for a gin and tonic during my travels.

On that particular day I was quite ruthless as I dragged my colleagues up and down the streets of Oaxaca City, obsessed with finding a place that could make me a gin and tonic. I finally found a place on the north side of the main plaza, a bar in the lower level of a hotel that catered to tourists. The bartender assured me they had gin (*ginebra*) and tonic (*amarillo lata*⁶) and that he could fashion me the drink I so ardently craved. The gin turned out to be a local Mexican brand called Oso Negro (Black Bear). While a bit strong, it was quite palatable, and as the bartender had no trouble supplying us with plenty of lime to “take the edge off,” it turned out to be quite a pleasant concoction.

We sat basking in the warmth of a bright and sunny afternoon, enjoying the glories of a refreshing gin and tonic, and looking out over the colonial construction of the *zocalo*. It was there we were spotted by a colleague from another archaeological project. After he joined our merry band, our minds (and stomachs) turned to thoughts of food to accompany our drinks. Our colleague, a long-time researcher in Oaxaca, was shocked to discover we had yet to try the local delicacy *chapulines*. These are small grasshoppers dry-roasted with salt, chilies, and lime that are commonly available in the *zocalo*. Women carry large platter-like bowls filled with them around the plaza. They scoop them into little bags much like chestnut vendors do, and happy patrons pop them into their mouths as they walk, in a manner reminiscent of people consuming popcorn at a fair.

As insects are not normally on the menu in Belize, where I conduct most of my research, let alone in Canada, where I live, I was quite happy to avoid this dish. I had (naively perhaps?) believed I could make it through my postdoctoral tenure without consuming it. Needless to say, before I could stop him, my colleague called one of the women over and purchased a large bag of chapulines for us to share. This involved him shouting out across the street and then haggling for them over the patio railing, so it was not long before all the patrons in the bar knew that I was about to try my first chapulines. The local patrons



1.1. Plate of chapulines. (PHOTO BY H. R. HAINES)

and staff cheerfully gathered around, exuding the open hospitality and friendliness that is a hallmark of public drinking in Latin America (see Palka, this volume). Others, who judging by their clothing and reticence were tourists, merely turned to watch the goings-on. Based on the joking and smiles, I was guessing they all thought I would refuse, or perhaps gag on the insects.

Had my colleagues been the only witnesses I quite likely would have refused to eat the chapulines. Despite being an anthropologist and knowing that insects are a great source of protein consumed by many people around the world, the idea of consuming them myself was something at which I balked. However, I was not given the luxury of refusing. Surrounded by the staff of the restaurant who had oh-so-helpfully brought us a plate on which to spread the delicacies (Figure 1.1) and watched by the women who were selling them, my only option was to eat. If I refused, I risked not only losing face in front of my colleagues but, more importantly to me, insulting the local people. Fortunately, the anthropologist in me rose to the occasion and, following my friends' instructions, I poked through the plate, picked a plump one up by the leg, and tossed it into my mouth.

A long time ago my finishing-school teacher taught me the importance of always being gracious and to smile regardless of how you feel. That lesson



1.2. Haines washing chapulines down with liberal amounts of gin and tonic. (PHOTO BY JILL SEGARD)

has served me well as an anthropologist. Sitting on that patio, surrounded by expectant faces, her lessons came flooding back me. While I am positive she had not envisioned me eating insects, I was grateful nonetheless for her instructions. A smile firmly fixed to my face, I chewed and swallowed the chapuline and then quite confidently pronounced it “delicious”—a declaration that met with laughter and applause from the crowd.

Once the crowds dissipated, however, so did my smile. In truth I found chapulines to be even more of an “acquired taste” than mezcal, and I did not hesitate to tell my Oaxacan colleague so in no uncertain terms. I remember very little about the actual taste. What I do remember was a distinct crunch followed by a wet squishy sensation that shot across my tongue. I did try a few more (each hastily washed down with liberal amounts of gin and tonic [Figure 1.2]), but I could not get past the crunch *then* squish. I think perhaps if it had been one or the other sensation, I might have fared better.

It was my confession that chapulines were perhaps the worst thing I had ever eaten that led to a discussion comparing food horror stories. Competing for the most nauseating, exotic, or unbelievable eating experience is a popular sport among tourists and anthropologists alike, but our discussion focused on how our positions as anthropologists obligate us to accept any hospitality

offered, no matter how shocking or unappealing, lest we seem to be criticizing or passing judgment. We all noted that while our courses taught us to be culturally sensitive, nothing in our training ever addressed the reality that we might have to eat things that we would not normally expect or, in some cases, not even think of as food. Despite being trained anthropologists, we were like any other tourists arriving in a new country unprepared to deal with the most basic and necessary requirement: food. But unlike tourists, we frequently lack the freedom to refuse something we find unappetizing. It was from this realization, and a desire to share our unexpected and often humbling experiences with new anthropology students, that this book was born.

As the dawning of the twenty-first century has seen the Western world proclaim the idea of its own multiculturalism, it seems oddly appropriate that this book was born over British gin and tonics and Mexican chapulines on the side of the Oaxacan zocalo replete with Spanish colonial architecture. The inhabitants of North America see themselves as living in the ultimate global village, one that is not solely the result of technologically enabled instantaneous global communication, as envisioned by Marshall McLuhan (1967), but also a very real cultural microcosm of the world. On a personal level, this means that we believe that we are now exposed to more “cultures” than our grandparents, and possibly even our parents, ever dreamed possible. For those of us who live in North America, this seems self-evident from our own daily experiences. The United Nations estimates that in 2005, 3 percent of all people in the world lived in a nation other than where they were born, but in the United States that number was closer to 10 percent.

Even beyond interactions with people from elsewhere, residents of the North Atlantic have access to technologies that bridge physical distances. More than half of U.S. households have at least one personal computer, and access to the Internet is widespread, allowing individuals to interact with others around the world. The Zapatistas’ declaration of war against the Mexican state in 1994 was the first political movement to seek international allies through the Internet. Web pages, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter are commonly used to show support for social movements across national boundaries, while e-mail, instant messaging, and Skype allow people to communicate cheaply on a global scale.

This multicultural milieu is also apparent in the food we eat. In Chicago one can purchase Thai sauces from California-based Trader Joe’s (distributed from their Massachusetts warehouse). Hanukkah holiday crackers, modeled after English Christmas crackers, are sold in Crate and Barrel stores throughout the United States. Both items would have required some searching to find in the United States in the 1980s. Chinese and Thai have become synonymous with

take-out food, and virtually every North American home has been exposed to Italian cuisine, courtesy of the local pasta aisle at the grocery store. Tortilla chips sit comfortably beside bags of potato chips at the corner store, and the appetizer menus of many bars and pubs list Indian samosas or Mediterranean calamari alongside American buffalo wings.

This is not new, of course. People have long indulged in luxury foods from faraway places, combining the exotic with the local and purchased imports with homegrown staples. Exchange networks have long brought goods far from where they were produced for consumption. Sidney Mintz (1985) shows how the industrial revolution in England, supported by slave labor on Caribbean plantations, made sugar the mainstay of the masses in both locations and linked diverse populations together through the movements of goods and capital. Chocolate was brought from Mexico to colonial Spain, where it quickly transitioned from a medicine to an elite drink and acceptable pre-Mass beverage and then to a childhood snack, while simultaneously shifting from a beverage to a solid (Coe and Coe 1996). Coffee moved from Africa, to Brazil, to Starbucks. None of these trajectories are singular; following the movements of global products like sugar, chocolate, or coffee would create weblike networks covering much of the globe.

This multiplicity of conversations about food and food networks has allowed our dinner plates to acquire the veneer of global cosmopolitanism. It has also led anthropologists to consider globalization and how world systems are created and reproduced not only through the movements of people but also by foods-turned-commodities. Plantation cropping as an agricultural system allowed for foods to become commodities on a global scale. Colonial powers often went to great lengths to move crops from their places of origins in order to capitalize on their economic value; botanic gardens arose for economic, not aesthetic, reasons and were intimately connected to structures of power (Brockway 1978). Mintz's seminal work on sugar (1985) gave rise to a large corpus of literature on systems that link people through agriculture and the processing, transporting, and distributing of food (for a literature review, see Phillips 2006).

Despite the interconnectedness of our food, global cuisine remains delightfully diverse. Nevertheless, anthropologists have found that even the most powerful symbols of the supposed homogenization of global food, such as the "meta-commodities" of Coca-Cola and McDonald's, turn out to be not so uniform after all when considered within specific local contexts and quotidian patterns of eating (Miller 2005; Watson 1997). The culinary patterns of individual households are themselves flexible, accommodating new knowledge from friends, cookbooks, and TV shows. All these media and networks of culinary knowledge can expand food horizons, even while sometimes simul-

taneously serving to delineate the boundaries of regional, national, or ethnic cuisines (Appadurai 1988).

These global movements are not uncontested. In the twenty-first century, environmentalists encourage people to think of “food miles” in terms of the fossil fuels needed to stock their refrigerators, leading to a new category of “locavores,” who privilege the consumption of locally grown, in-season foods. North Atlantic consumers worry about the slave or child labor that may have produced their candy bars. Meanwhile, farmers exoticize the familiar and invoke visions of an authentic rural United States by selling heirloom-variety tomato plants to aspiring urban gardeners. These counter-discourses about food, while largely about taste, also revolve around issues of forms of production and use of resources, claiming a certain kind of relationship to food and expressing specific lifestyles through eating. These discourses are framed within a global context where consumers can choose between Washington State or Chilean apples, between cheap candy or fair-trade chocolate based on geography and economics. Seasonality at many North Atlantic supermarkets is often expressed (if at all) more through price than availability, since fruits and vegetables can be transported from other regions when not available locally. Modern locavores find that simply discovering where their food comes from is often a lengthy research process.

What is perhaps more surprising is that we increasingly travel to our food rather than the other way around. Secure in a sense of worldliness and aided by increased disposable incomes and the ease of international travel, North Americans are traveling to more, and more far-flung, locations around the globe than ever before. The anthropology of tourism talks about the “democratization of travel” after World War II, but North Atlantic citizens have been traveling since the end of the 1800s. At the close of the nineteenth century, mass travel became both possible and more accessible. Companies, such as Thomas Cook’s, offered travel opportunities to groups previously excluded from this activity by virtue of either their economic position or the social morals of the day, such as single women and the middle class (Ingle 1991; Hamilton 2005; Urry 1990:24).

Today, tourism is not only a common pastime of the North Atlantic middle class but is also increasingly linked specifically to the experience of food. A brief glance at any tour book will show how important eating well is to tourists while traveling; nearly a third of most travel books are dedicated to dining options, restaurant descriptions, and culinary vocabulary. An increasing number of tours focus specifically on experiencing local food by touring farms and marketplaces, tasting wine, and taking cooking lessons in places like Italy, Thailand, and France. Such tours bring to mind Thorstein Veblen’s classic work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, where he noted:

The quasi-peaceable gentleman of leisure, then, not only consumes of the staff of life beyond the minimum required for subsistence and physical efficiency, but his consumption also undergoes a specialization as regards the quality of the goods consumed. He consumes freely and of the best, in food, drink, narcotics, [etc.] . . . In the process of gradual amelioration which takes place in the articles of his consumption, the motive principle and proximate aim of innovation is no doubt the higher efficiency of the improved and more elaborate products for personal comfort and well-being. But that does not remain the sole purpose of their consumption. The canon of reputability is at hand and seizes upon such innovations as are, according to its standard, fit to survive. Since the consumption of these more excellent goods is an evidence of wealth, it becomes honorific; and conversely, the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit. (Veblen 1899:73)

Today it is the mark of a well-educated, middle-class North Atlantic citizen to know how to eat with chopsticks, where to pour soy sauce for sushi, how to pronounce the names of Italian dishes, and how to properly consume a taco.⁵ This is not to say that all people know all these things but that such types of knowledge mark a level of sophistication in North Atlantic cultures, one that indicates the wealth to dine out and perhaps even to travel to distant locations. Eating is not just about sustenance but also about indicating one's position in society. Dining therefore forms an important marker of class (Bourdieu 1984; Goody 1982).

For many in the North Atlantic (who we suspect make up the majority of our readers), international culinary knowledge demonstrates world citizenship. As tourists, they are sure of their own cosmopolitanism, confident that wherever they go they will gain weight on foods either familiar or exotic, but (almost) always palatable. But this veneer of global cosmopolitanism is often superficial. It is rare to find a dish on North American restaurant menus that is unpalatable to Western culinary tastes, such as fried scorpions, durian fruit, and freeze-dried potatoes. Most ethnic dishes pass a series of unannounced tests of cultural acceptability before becoming widely served in their new homelands. Consequently, the shock of being served food that we have never seen before, let alone even imagined, can be a challenge for even the most daring traveler. Even the most extreme guidebooks lack answers to such questions as, What do you do if asked to kill your own dinner? They usually fail to say how to relish a dish that is considered a rare delicacy in its own country but for which most North American health inspectors would arrest the cook. Most travelers have the option of saying "no thanks" when presented with unappealing culinary offerings. But what does one do when saying no is not the best option?

Food and feasting, as many anthropologists will tell you, forms an important part of social integration (see Dietler and Hayden 2001). It is used to create and cement alliances among the living, assure a peaceful transition into the afterlife for the dead, and induce the gods into bestowing their blessings. People in many cultures consider offering food to a guest the most fundamental form of hospitality, and the refusal of food may be considered a grave insult to the host (Sahlins 1972). Food can even be used by the cook to send important messages to diners about their interpersonal relationships (Stoller and Olkes 1989).

Yet for all anthropologists' awareness of the importance of food and their extensive training in the cultures in which they specialize, they are frequently presented with unexpected dishes and faced with unfamiliar dining customs. For anthropologists, refusing to partake is often not an option, and even when it is possible, such refusals must be negotiated with care. This book is a collection of stories from anthropologists and archaeologists who have come up against these finer points of culinary differences. The chapters in this volume span many years of anthropological research and encompass much of the globe. They are intended not only to demonstrate the importance of food and feasting activities in cultures around the world but also to show that perhaps the world is not as small as we sometimes like to think.

METHODOLOGIES, OR WHAT FOOD CAN TELL US

This volume is not just about food. It is also concerned with anthropological method, and not just for those anthropologists specializing in foodways. Eating is one of the basic things that anthropologists do in the field and one of the major ways of interacting with informants. Mintz and DuBois (2002), in their review of the subdiscipline of the anthropology of food, point out that food has long been important to anthropologists not only because it is central to human existence but also because of the larger methodological questions it illuminates. And Holtzman (2006) demonstrates that food is often integrally linked to memory—something that is as true for anthropologists as it is for the peoples they meet in the field. Food memories are often linked to important realizations, relationships, moments, and fond (and not so fond) memories during fieldwork. The chapters here explore those kinds of events and their importance in the production of anthropological literature.

We have to learn to listen with our taste buds and our stomachs. Stoller and Olkes (1989), in the first chapter of *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*, give a wonderful example of how food can speak. As guests, they put the household where they stay in the spotlight as neighbors come to partake in the hospitality offered to them. This becomes the stage for the cook of the house—a

daughter-in-law who married into the family against the wishes of all but her young husband—to serve bad sauce. This bad sauce is not a reflection of her skills as a cook (she has already proven she *can* cook delicious sauces if she chooses to) but a deliberate message sent to the authors and the other members of the household about her frustrations. Stoller and Olkes use this example as a call to a “tasteful ethnography”:

In tasteful fieldwork, anthropologists would not only investigate kinship, exchange, and symbolism, but also describe with literary vividness the smells, tastes, and textures of the land, the people, and the food. . . . In this way, seemingly insignificant incidents as being served bad sauce become as important as sitting with a nameless informant and recording genealogies—data—that eventually become components in a system of kinship. . . . A tasteful ethnographic discourse that takes the notion of *mélange* as its foundation would encourage writers to blend the ingredients of a world so that bad sauces might be transformed into delicious prose. (Stoller and Olkes 1989:29, 32)

Holtzman (2006:364), in his discussion of Stoller’s book (1989), notes that it is unusual in that it focuses on unpleasant eating experiences rather than the more common “ethnography of tasty things—food-centered analysis that feeds on Western epicurean sensibilities, popular culture notions concerning how foods serve as markers for immigrant communities, the nostalgia that wafts from home-cooked broths, and the connections forged between mothers and daughters through food.” Our volume is not dedicated to analyzing intentionally “distasteful” food or lauding mouthwatering exotic dishes. Instead, we focus on the tense and awkward moment of discovery—the initial encounter of the unexpected that forces the anthropologist to reconsider accepted boundaries, both social and culinary. Some of these encounters are instantly delicious; other tastes must be acquired. All are productive in learning about cultural practices. These are experiences that all anthropologists have; knowing how to make such moments meaningful is an important skill in our discipline.

The literature on food is vast, and we could never hope to address it all in our brief introduction here (for more complete literature reviews, see Holtzman 2006; Mintz and DuBois 2002; Phillips 2006). The goal of this volume is to consider the questions of what food means beyond the immediate experience of eating it and how anthropologists learn from meals in ways that go beyond the dinner table. We hope this volume will serve as an introduction to newer anthropologists on how to approach the delicate matter of eating in the field—and how to turn food into food for thought for both oneself and the discipline.

SETTING THE TABLE

A brief summary of this volume is in order to “set the table,” as it were, for the feast to follow. These chapters have been chosen to show a variety of perspectives, regions of the world (Figure 0.1), subspecialties in anthropology, length of time in the discipline (from advanced graduate students at the beginning of their careers to tenured professors), ages, backgrounds, and personal eating habits. Not all these authors consider themselves to be specialists in food; nevertheless, as anthropologists (cultural, archaeological, and physical) and as humans who eat, they all have interesting observations about how food, eating, and commensality affected their fieldwork in productive and sometimes unexpected ways.

At the beginning of each chapter, we have provided a brief biography of the author so that the reader can get a sense of each writer’s perspective as both an academic researcher and an individual. Anthropologists are not objective recorders of culture (and never were, despite pretensions to such); they are people. As people, they have experiences, preferences, religious taboos, and food allergies, as well as simple dislikes. These are not obstacles to be overcome but rather part of what actually creates the data of anthropology.

We have titled the first section of this volume *Main Courses*, which for many of the cuisines of the world involve meat. Certainly in North Atlantic society meat is seen as the central part of the meal and its defining feature. This is true in many other parts of the world, where meat often has an importance disproportionate to its consumption. Fiddes (1991) discusses how meat is an object of both desire and revulsion; for most North Atlantic peoples, inappropriate animal products cause disgust. The true contents of sausages, as Otto von Bismarck once remarked, have long been a matter that most omnivores would care to know little about. Ground beef was once viewed with such suspicion in the United States that *White Castle* launched a publicity campaign in the 1920s to counter its image as something of low quality and easily contaminated, thus paving the way for fast-food hamburgers in general (Schlosser 2001:197–198). In contrast, vegetables may be disliked but are rarely a cause for true concern. Although the U.S. salmonella outbreaks of 2008 are worrisome from a health standpoint, few are concerned about eating tomatoes *per se*. There is something about meat that carries special meanings, and as such the essays included in this section focus on the consumption of meat in different cultures.

Lohmann begins this discussion by telling us about eating sago grubs and fertilized eggs with the *Asabano* of Papua New Guinea, and how he learned to enjoy only one of these delicacies. Meanwhile, he considers how the recent conversion to Christianity of his informants changed their eating patterns in ways that were not seen the same way by all, especially across gender lines. One

of his friends assures him that this was not a loss of tradition but the very condition of possibility that allowed him to conduct his fieldwork without being cannibalized!

In her chapter Haines recounts how, as an archaeologist working in Belize, she managed to avoid the meat of the locally prized gibbon until an end-of-excavation party, when she realized that she had been missing out on a delicious treat all along. She comes to realize that her reaction to the “jungle rat” had more to do with the linguistic associations of the term “rat” for North Atlantic English speakers, who assume that rats are not “good to eat,” than it did with the nature of the creature in question. Her realization serves as an important lesson for anthropologists in the field to first consider why they react to something as “distasteful” before condemning it out of hand.

Goldstein’s contribution also revolves around the issue of eating rodents, in this case, the Andean guinea pig. He is confronted with the challenge of not only learning to accept a rodent as a valued food but then telling his U.S. friends that he essentially eats their pets. His chapter recounts with amusement the horrified reactions of many North Americans to his eating guinea pig and the difficulties of trying to explain that in the Andes, these animals are domesticated raised entirely for meat. He also describes the challenges he faces when he tries to raise guinea pigs himself in order to compare the resulting material remains to those in the archaeological record.

Cattell describes for us how to eat termites after acquiring a reputation for liking them in Kenya. She gives a wonderful description of how the consumption of food and the meals offered to visitors change in the face of economic difficulties. Her long-term research gives a unique perspective on how to use unexpected methods—such as the “soda test”—to gauge peoples’ overall well-being. Most food researchers see soda consumption as part of the increasing consumption of sugar and indicative of declining well-being, since these drinks provide only empty calories (Mintz 1985). But Cattell suggests that for those who are enmeshed in a cash economy, the need to forgo markers of hospitality, such as offering soda to guests, indicates serious economic difficulties. Even foods with no nutritional value still have social value and can be worth purchasing and gifting. One is reminded of Schepher-Hughes’s realization while working in Brazil that baby formula was a way for fathers to socially acknowledge their children, not just to provide for them (1992:316–326).

The second section of this volume turns to Side Dishes and Condiments, those foods that are sometimes so central to cuisine that they often escape notice. Sammells’s chapter on chuño, the freeze-dried potatoes that are a staple in the Bolivian Andes, muses on how anthropologists can acquire a taste for the unfamiliar, and why tourists are not encouraged to do the same. She finds that the unusual taste of chuño, combined with it being misunderstood as

“just a potato,” makes it far less interesting to foreign tourists seeking authentic Bolivian food than llama meat, which tastes like other red meats but transgresses North Atlantic food categories.

McBrinn’s hilarious contribution describes her encounters with durian, “the King of Fruits,” while on a short trip in Malaysia. In her discussion she recounts her numerous attempts to find a manner of eating durian that was pleasing to both her palate and her gastrointestinal tract. While she admits to not exactly acquiring the taste for it, she ends her chapter (and her trip) with a grudging respect for this unusual fruit.

Marte discusses the challenges of conducting fieldwork with a serious food allergy, a consideration rarely addressed in the literature on conducting anthropological fieldwork. Her frank discussion of her allergy, like Haines’s contribution, serves as a platform for reflective discussions. Rather than allow her allergy to become an insurmountable obstacle, she uses it to find multiple solutions, including challenging some informants to cook differently, or in other cases leaving time to deal with adverse affects. Her chapter demonstrates that anthropologists sometimes must refuse foods and suggests ways that one can do that without detracting from fieldwork.

Our section on Table Manners is meant to highlight that *how* one eats is often just as important as *what* one eats. It is one thing to be willing to consume unusual foods, but knowing in what order to eat things, what utensils to use, and with whom one can eat is often essential. There are also intricacies involved in the roles of “guest” and “host” (to invoke Smith 1989 [1977]) and questions of whose morals take precedence when offering and partaking food offerings. Food is never just food, mere calories for the body. As a social act that creates a bond of commensality, and can just as easily breach those bonds, the consumption of food is always a multilayered, meaningful event.

In his chapter, Aimers describes how being served whale as food challenged not just his palate but his understandings about why Japan engages in whaling despite international pressures to end the practice. He starts by discussing his refusal to eat whale meat on moral grounds while he was a young man visiting and working in Japan, and the social tension that results from his choice. He contrasts his youthful position with his later, more mature perspective born from a greater understanding of cultural diversity as well as international whaling laws. Aimers’s contribution highlights the fact that perhaps the moral high ground is not as clear-cut as many North Atlantic activists make it seem.

Chaiken writes about her food experiences while conducting her doctoral dissertation research on Palawan Island in the Philippines. Her chapter details how, over the course of the course of the two years she spent working there, she defined her own personal food taboos. Chaiken relates how she gracefully avoided eating chicken heads and dog meat and learned the valuable lesson of

“to each their own taboos”—an axiom crucial for living and coping in today’s multicultural world.

Contrary to North American dining traditions, pasta is not the main course in Italy, and Black discusses her discomfort at realizing this too late. Fortunately, while she fears she might be noticed for eating too much (often an unspoken social taboo for North American women), her Italian fiancé instead compliments her on her appetite. Documenting her time in Italy, she admires the Slow Food movement as a response to the homogenization of cuisine and the rise of fast food, even as she recognizes that many women do not wish to forgo careers in order to spend most of their time cooking for and feeding their families. This dichotomous position mirrors the dilemma felt by some working women in North Atlantic societies.

Zyberman addresses an issue that will resonate with many North Atlantic residents—how to remain a vegetarian while conducting ethnographic fieldwork among people who do not see that as a logical approach to food. Instead of abandoning her own culinary commitments, she instead discovers that what others might see as a disadvantage to her research becomes something of an advantage. Her dietary restriction becomes a catalyst that motivates her Argentinean informants to explain the importance of meat in their lives, precisely because she cannot partake herself.

Johnston’s chapter ends this section by talking about her long-term research with the Blackfeet, a Native American group in northern Montana. She demonstrates that the presence of the anthropologist is never neutral and that moreover this position affects not only our relationships with people but also what is put on our dinner plates. Giving a history of how Blackfeet cuisine has changed as a result of their confinement on an U.S. reservation and involvement with the cattle industry, she shows how national discussions about the relationship between health and cuisine filters into Blackfeet understanding of their own eating and well-being.

In our section on beverages, Reminick discusses a favorite North Atlantic beverage—coffee—from the point of view of its place of origins (as well as possibly our own origins as humans), Ethiopia. There coffee cements friendships between humans as well as between humans and their ancestral *zar* spirits. He also touches on another favorite topic of anthropologists—sickness. It is a common experience to become ill while traveling, and illness is often the result of food-borne organisms. Reminick treats this ubiquitous, although frequently under-discussed, subject with commendable honesty and humor.

On the other side of the world, Palka also discovers that drink can be as much a means of building social cohesion and friendship as food. In his chapter, Palka address the language and codes of behavior associated with alcohol consumption among young Honduran men and notes how this compares

familiarly in some regards and contrasts sharply in others to the beer drinking of young men in North American culture.

Finally, Chaiken provides the Last Course—whether that is dessert, cheese, or coffee we leave to the reader. She rightly suggests that this volume might fit into the larger American genre of shocking people through eating foods seen as liminally edible (and we will not deny that this is often a good opener for college class lectures!). But this is not the deeper purpose of our book. We might shock our readers, but our aim is to encourage them to reconsider their own definitions of “real” food—of what, literally, qualifies as dinner. We want to prepare students who are considering anthropological fieldwork for those very real, and sometimes very awkward, situations that arise—and to think of these awkward moments not as mere “problems” to be overcome (although often they seem that way in the short term) but as methodologically crucial moments when the friction between anthropologists’ assumptions and informants’ cuisine can produce new understandings. Anthropologists know that discomfort during fieldwork is often the sign that one is on to something—a new understanding that challenges one’s own view of the world. It is those understandings that we hope to bring to the larger audience of anthropology and invite our readers to explore—even if we cannot invite them over for dinner to discuss it!

NOTES

1. Mezcal is a beverage produced from agave, an indigenous plant well-suited for the arid environment of the valley and a relative of the better-known tequila. It is generally stronger in both alcoholic content and taste than tequila and often has distinct smoky overtones from the slow roasting of the agave hearts prior to distillation.

2. Tanqueray is my favorite gin, although I have been known to drink Bombay Sapphire and even Beefeaters in a pinch.

3. The “other London” referred to here is London, Ontario, which was distinguished from London, England, by being referred to as “London in the bush.”

4. Even today good tonic, such as Canada Dry Tonic Water, still contains real quinine, although only for taste and not in sufficient quantities to protect one from contracting malaria.

5. The term literally means “yellow tin can” and refers to Canada Dry Tonic Water, which comes in a distinctive yellow can.

6. The globalization of food is a worldwide phenomenon. Non-North Atlantic cultures are equally well-versed in the niceties of other cuisines and many of our comments may apply equally to other cultures. However, we have chosen to stress North American behaviors as the purpose of this book is to make anthropology students, and other readers, in North America aware that very real differences still exist among cultures when it comes to ideas about food.

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