Are We What We Ate?

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"Each half of this relationship—food and memory—is something of a floating signifier, although in rather different ways. As for food, we may readily define it in a strictly realist sense—that stuff that we as organisms consume by virtue of requiring energy. Yet it is an intrinsically multilayered and multidimensional subject—with social, psychological, physiological, symbolic dimensions, to name merely a few—and with culturally constructed meanings that differ not merely, as we naturally assume, in the perspectives of our subjects, but indeed in the perspectives of the authors who construct and construe the object of food in often very different ways, ranging from the strictly materialist to the ethereal gourmand." (Holtzman, 2006, p. 362)

Food is part of all our lives in one way or another. So are memories. If we believe in the statement, that our past experiences contribute to the people we become in the present, than in this respect memory is a key signifier for our personal identities. However, if we also consider our emotional attachment to food for a variety of possible reasons (stemming from gender, culture, ethnicity, religion, economic wealth, mental health, body image etc.), than the connection between memory and food becomes essential from an early childhood. As babies, the milk provided from our mothers is fundamental for survival and healthy development. For those of us who had the privilege to be fed breast milk from our own mothers, breastfeeding is also a vital component in creating an intimate bond that establishes the connection for life. Subsequently, throughout an early and later childhood, in most households we might experience that it is still predominantly the mother who prepares at least some meals for their infants. Therefore, food in the majority of occasions becomes closely related to a parental figure who provides comfort and safety, not only in terms of feeding, but in other aspects of life as well.
In an ideal childhood, a lot of the significant memories are related to meals, such as: birthday parties, national and religious holiday feasts, weekend comfort foods, sweet treats received as rewards or at specific excursions.

Nevertheless, for some children eating can be a source of frustration if some kind of traumatic event has shifted their relationship to eating for an act linked to anxiety, rather than comfort and satisfaction. Upon such examples, the reaction of the parent(s) is crucial, as their attitude towards the child can either soothe the trauma or catalyse it. If a child feels othered from a young age, due to the fact that for some factors they cannot participate with ease in such a primal activity as eating, that can potentially stigmatise their sense of identity. From a social aspect, childhood 'picky eaters' can become adults in the future, who might suffer from eating disorders to some extent that can impact their integrations within their micro and macro communities. The feeling of exclusion from a social group that we are emotionally attached to can also lead to depression or other mental health issues, at worst. On the other hand, if a child has had a positive experience with food and could successfully participate in sharing the activity of eating with others from a young age, than dining can become a pleasurable habit, that one holds cherished memories of and a routine that can be anticipated in the future.

Nonetheless, the obvious question might still arise: Why are we so accustomed to eating communally? If we look at social eating from a health perspective, than it does not seem to be the best choice. Interacting with others can be quite a distraction from tuning in with our bodies so we can fully enjoy the meal and only eat to the point of satiation. This also relates to our mental state; instead of paying attention to the food and meditatively consuming it, our attention is repeatedly shifting to the people we share the experience with. Correspondingly, the preoccupation with others also plays a massive role in the amount we consume in one sitting.
As we get constantly distracted we pay less attention to our brain signals of physical fulfilment, therefore, are prone to eating and drinking more, than if we were to consume in a sole, peaceful environment.

Eating habits (in terms of choice, modes, relations to time) are a fascinating area of food studies, as they not only relate to the very human nature of our species, but also to the abstract ways we see eating within accentuated or, in some instances, even sacred ceremonies. When the quality, mode or timing of eating becomes so valued in an individual's life, than perhaps the power given to the meals can have even a more pressing impact on our wellbeing and thus, our identity.

(Note 1: In respect to the volume restriction of this essay, I didn't go much depth into the psychoanalysis of food and its role from birth in identity development, but that could be further assessed through referencing various psychological studies written on the topic and the properly examined process could serve as an adequate introduction)

(Note 2: In respect to the volume restriction of this essay, I will only propose the possibility of further research and elaboration that could be made in regards to ancient medicinal practices, such as the Indian Ayurveda, that sees energy and food to be interconnected and from examining each individual's energy flow, assigns set meal plans that best compliment their lifestyle for a healthy physical and mental balance)
The key reference in the focus of this essay is Warren Belasco's *Food: The Key Concepts* (Berg, 2008). In the book, Belasco extensively examines different aspects of food through personal, socio-political and economical perspectives. However, for the sake of my writing I only studied the first (*Why Study Food*?), second (*Identity: Are We What We Eat*?), and third chapter (*The Drama of Food: Divided Identities*) of the book. The title of the essay is a clear homage to the second chapter, even though it has been rephrased to a past tense, as a query to the significance that food memory plays in our identity construction. Belasco confirms that the identity that our culinary experiences and traditions shape in us is very difficult to change, however, in order to gain understanding and achieve good health, it is most efficient to examine it consciously and eat responsibly, instead of neglecting it overall. According to Socrates, "The unexamined life is not worth living." (Belasco, 2008). This could be even further expanded to, 'an unexamined food is not worth eating'. As a self-educated vegan on food-related areas, I consider a great importance to learning about the complexities of the contemporary food system and acknowledging the consequences of our food choices, not only on personal, but social, cultural and environmental health. Nonetheless, it is imperative to remark, that many humans on this planet face several restrictions of choices, due to economical, environmental and social structures. The key factor in such decision making, therefore, has become convenience. Energy, time, labor and skill are the main requirements to preparing food with the general 'more for less' attitude. (Belasco, 2008)

The quality and quantity of what we put in our mouths are inevitably influential to our health. Yet, what about the 'Why' and the 'How'? Roland Barthes remarked in 1979, that food can be seen as a way of communication. Eating is a very complex system that also entails imagery, protocols, environments and behaviours. People use this system to establish both interpersonal
relations and a pattern of rules that makes navigation through the process much easier and
democratic (imagining the hypothetical consequences if there were no protocols to eating; most
likely the primal rules of the 'strongest gets to eat' would be used and quickly turn our society
into a chaotic mess) (Barthes in Belasco, 2008). Our eating habits undoubtedly reveal who "we
really are", as they directly indicate our culture, religion, economic and educational
background. What and how we eat has enormous importance in not just personal, but collective
identity. The fashion in which certain cultures chose to eat contribute to their expression of their
social ideals and aesthetic style (Visser in Belaso, 2008).

Culinary historian, Elisabeth Rozin sees cooking ('kitchen work') as a theatrical performance,
that can be either highly praised or critically bashed. It begins with the selection of specific
ingredients, or "a limited set of basic foods" and by taking into account the different manners
of preparing food, she identifies an array of "manipulative techniques" for carrying out the act
of cooking. These include particulation (cutting), incorporation (mixing), marination,
application of wet or dry heat, or frying for e.g. (Rozin, 1982 in Belasco, 2008). The dramaturgy
of dining, is therefore a set of carefully chosen deeds (from selecting the recipe and the required
ingredients, through deciding on the preparing method, to design the decor/garnishing). The
main act of the experience is, of course, the consumption of the food, that is being presented to
the audience (either loved ones, guests, customers etc.). From this standpoint, dining becomes
a social performance, that is beyond fueling the body with nutritious substance, but rather about
the abstract gastronomic experience in both an intellectual and sensory level. The end result or
the finished menu can then also be perceived as an artwork.

Sophie Calle, a highly acknowledged French writer and artist, mainly working with
photography, had a fascinating project in 1997, titled, *The Chromatic Diet*. In the series, Calle
created a week-long menu, assigning a specific colour to each day that would only allow foods to be eaten that match that hue. The final prints then depicted the monochromatic meals for each day of the week, accompanied by the detailed foods that can be seen in the pictures. 'The Chromatic Diet' is based on a fictive character, Maria Turner, that Calle was trying to resemble, from Peter Auster's novel *Leviathan* (1992). Turner as a character was formed based on Calle's personality, so the work itself becomes even more intriguing, as Calle in real life was aiming to create a work, that her fictional persona, Maria would make. In Auster's novel, Maria is a photographer herself, who has various projects that are lead by compulsive elements, for instance, eating foods of a certain colour on assigned days of the week; or curating her life around one specific letter of the alphabet each day. It is important to note in this context, that Calle, as an artist, often blurs fiction and reality in her projects and shifts between different identities herself. Some of her works have an investigative approach to them, where as a meticulous observer she invents sets of rules and rituals as to fit the personas that she becomes slightly obsessed with or those that become her. (Martin, 2000)

This seamless play between reality and fiction, identities through food choices - resulting in sophisticated colour prints displayed with the menus - acts as a gentle reminder to let ourselves be playful with food and enjoy the aesthetics of it. Taking a break from counting calories, calculating nutrients and weighing portions, such artworks may allow us to be children again and rediscover the fun aspects of food consumption. 'The Chromatic Diet' is one of personal favourite photographic series, both aesthetically and conceptually, as it stirkes home. As a person, who is very sensitive to colours and can be quite obsessive about coordinating them, there are very few things more visually pleasing to me, than a monochrome meal palette.
MONDAY : ORANGE
Menu imposed:
- Poached eggs
- Baked potatoes
- Carrot soup
Paul, you forgot to mention:
- Skull cream
- Orange juice
I completed the menu with:
- Catholic soup

TUESDAY : RED
Menu imposed:
- Tomatoes
- Steak sauce
- Pomegranate
I completed the menu with:
- Roasted red peppers
- Latte de Persimmon, domaine de Vaud, 1990

WEDNESDAY : WHITE
Menu imposed:
- Flounder
- Peas
- Portuguese Hake
I changed the menu, because I was not satisfied with the yellow color of the potatoes, and added:
- Rice
- Milk

THURSDAY : GREEN
Menu imposed:
- Cucumber
- Broccoli
- Spinach
I completed the menu with:
- Green bean salad
- Grapes and fava beans
- Meat pate

FRIDAY : YELLOW
Since no color was prescribed:
- I chose yellow
Menu:
- Asparagus
- Pasta salad
- "Young Quo's Drum"
(Peach, mango ice cream)
- Pecan fudge lemon drink

SATURDAY : PINK
Since no color was prescribed:
- I chose pink
Menu:
- Hires
- Caramels
- Strawberries in cream
- Red wine from Pogumata
Dessert

Mindfulness, as a meditation practice can be equally integrated into our eating habits, as it is an act that would naturally require awareness, focus, silence (internal and external). By observing the ways that different environments, circumstances, but most importantly, emotional states affect the way we feel during and after a meal, could be a first step in the journey of experiencing this eating technique. Paying attention to what makes us comfortable, how and where we like to consume food, and how we usually feel around meal times is a base for understanding wellbeing. That being said, creating a harmonious and safe space for dining can also help in tapping into food related memories.

According to John S. Allen, "we all have our food memories, some good and some bad" (Allen, 2012). When thoughtfully paying attention to the smells, textures, flavours of our foods, certain experiences might come to mind from the past. However, if one is already aware of the specific foods that are related to well-kept memories, then these aliments can be used as triggers (both consciously and subconsciously). The part of the brain that is responsible for memory is the hippocampus (one in each hemisphere). It has the main role of forming long-term memories, whilst also having connection to other parts of the brain that are important for smell and emotion. This explains why the smell of particular foods can evoke such vivid memories.

My personal 'food identity' has a evolved a lot, since I started feeding myself, instead of relying on my family and school to provide my meals. Even though my diet is an entirely plant-based one, most of my deep-rooted food memories contain animal products. Interestingly, their thought, however, does not provoke any sense of disgust. My favourite food while growing up was a simple spaghetti dish that my Mother used to make. It contained wheat spaghetti noodles,
mixed with a typical Hungarian sour cream (‘tejföl’) and pieces of ham, served with grated Trappist cheese on top. This meal is not part of the national cuisine (however, it does have similarities with a typical Hungarian dish, called 'túrós csusza'), it is just a simple and cheap dish that lower or middle-class, working adults might cook, in a diversity of versions. However, when I visualize the meal or think of the smell of the freshly cooked pasta, my whole childhood comes back to life. The times when I was really hungry and my Mom, as a loving surprise, would quickly whip up this favourite meal of mine. The long minutes waiting by the white, round dinner table in the kitchen, and when the food was finally served, the pleasure of stuffing my face with the saucy, cheesy pasta, that had lovely savoury bits of cold cut ham.

In the quest to evoke negative food memories, only two smaller ones come to mind. One is my repulsion towards blue slushies, that made me very sick to the stomach on one occasion as a child. The other one is with a specific type of plain wheat biscuits ('háztartási keksz' in Hungarian), that I was given to eat after I had food poisoning and could not keep any solids down. Without giving a vast description of my past with eating disorders and body dismorphia, I have to say that I am aware of the complex relationship I have with eating. It is something I am constantly aiming to understand and come to terms with, so it can become a positively integrated part of my identity, as well as a meditative, enjoyable everyday activity that fuels both body and spirit.
Bibliography


List of Figures

Figure 1. (Cover image):

Figure 2.: