1.4: Historical Perspectives on Food

Skills to Develop
- Contrast ancient perspectives on food and nutrition with more modern explanatory systems

Throughout history, our relationship with food has been influenced by changing practices and perspectives. From the invention of agriculture to the birth of refrigeration, technological advances have also affected what we eat and how we feel about our food. Therefore, it can be helpful to examine theories and customs related to diet and nutrition across different civilizations and time periods.

Civilizations and Time Periods

Diet and cuisine have undergone enormous changes from ancient times to today. The basic diet of the ancient era consisted of cereals, legumes, oil, and wine. These staples were supplemented by vegetables and meat or fish, along with other items, such as honey and salt. During the Middle Ages, poor people consumed meager diets that consisted of small game supplemented with either barley, oat, or rye, while the wealthy had regular access to meat and fish, along with wheat. Our Food Recipes. “European Medieval Food.” © 2011–2012. http://www.our-food-recipes.com/medieval-food.html. During the Industrial Revolution, diets became more varied, partly because of the development of refrigeration and other forms of food preservation. In the contemporary era, many people have access to a wide variety of food that is grown locally or shipped from far-off places.
 Hunters and Gatherers

Human beings lived as hunters and gatherers until the invention of agriculture. Following a nomadic lifestyle, early people hunted, fished, and gathered fruit and wild berries, depending on their location and the availability of wild plants and wild game. To aid their constant quest for food, humans developed weapons and tools, including spears, nets, traps, fishing tackle, and the bow and arrow. Our Food Recipes. “Pre Historic Food.” © 2011–2012. http://www.our-food-recipes.com/pre-historic-food.html.

The Beginning of Agriculture

About ten thousand years ago, people began to cultivate crops and domesticate livestock in Mesopotamia, an area of the world that is known today as the Middle East. Agriculture flourished in this region due to the fertile floodplain between the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, and early crops included wheat, barley, and dates. The development of agriculture not only enriched the diet of these early people, it also led to the birth of civilization as farmers began to settle into sizable, stable communities. Bioworld. “History of Agriculture.” Accessed October 10, 2011. http://www.bioworldusa.com/agriculture/history-agriculture.

One of the most fertile regions of the ancient world was located along the Nile River Valley in ancient Egypt. The rich soil yielded several harvests per year. Common crops were barley, wheat, lentils, peas, and cabbage, along with grapes, which were used to make wine. Even poor Egyptians ate a reasonably healthy diet that included fish, vegetables, and fruit. However, meat was primarily a privilege of the rich. Popular seasonings of this era included salt, pepper, cumin, coriander, sesame, fennel, and dill. Experience Ancient Egypt. “Ancient Egyptian Food: The Pharaonic Diet.” © 2009–2011. http://www.experience-ancient-egypt.com/ancient-egyptian-food.html.
The “Three Sisters”

Thousands of years ago, across an area that encompasses Mexico and Central America today, Mesoamerican farmers cultivated three major plants—squash, beans, and maize (also known as corn). Known as the “three sisters,” these crops proved to be both complementary and sustainable. Corn provides a pole for bean vines to climb. The roots of bean vines provide nitrogen that helps corn grow. These vines also stabilize corn stalks by making them less vulnerable to the wind. Shallow-rooted squash vines prevent the evaporation of soil moisture, while their spiny plants discourage predators. Both of these attributes aid the cultivation of all three crops. Renee’s Garden. “Celebrate the Three Sisters,” During the post-Columbian era, Native American groups adopted the practice of interplanting squash, beans, and maize, and now thousands of years later, many small farmers continue to cultivate the “three sisters.”

Meals Determined Social Status

In ancient Rome, differences in social standing affected the diet. For people of all socioeconomic classes, breakfast and lunch were typically light meals that were often consumed in taverns and cafes. However, dinners were eaten at home and were taken much more seriously. Wealthy senators and landowners ate meals with multiple courses, including appetizers, entrees, and desserts. Rich Romans also held extravagant dinner parties, where guests dined on exotic foods, such as roasted ostrich or pheasant. In contrast, people of the lower classes ate mostly bread and cereals. PBS. “Home Life.” The Roman Empire in the First Century. © 2006 Devillier Donegan Enterprises. http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/home.html. The average person ate out of clay dishes, while wealthy people used bronze, gold, or silver.

Social status determined the kinds of food that people consumed in many other parts of the world as well. In ancient China, emperors used their wealth and power to hire the best chefs and acquire delicacies, such as honey, to sweeten food. Dishes of the ancient era included steamed Mandarin fish, rice and wheat noodles, and fried prawns. Imperial cuisine also included improved versions of dishes that were consumed by the common people, such as soups and cereals. China.org. “The History of Chinese Imperial Cuisines.” © China Information Center. Accessed December 5, 2011. http://www.china.org.cn/english/imperial/25995.htm.

The Medieval Era

The eating habits of most people during the Medieval Era depended mainly on location and financial status. In the feudal system of Europe, the majority of the population could not afford to flavor their food with extravagant spices or sugar. In addition, transporting food was either outrageously expensive or out of the question due to the inability to preserve food for a long period of time. As a result, the common diet consisted of either wheat, meat, or fish, depending on location. The typical diet of the lower classes was based on cereals and grains, porridge, and gruel. These staples were supplemented with seasonal fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Wine, beer, and cider were also common, and were often safer to drink than the unsanitized, untreated water.
The Crusades

During the Medieval Era, soldiers from Europe waged war over religion in the Middle East in military campaigns that came to be known as the Crusades. Upon their return, the crusaders brought back new foods and spices, exposing Europeans of the Middle Ages to unusual flavors. Cooking with exotic spices, such as black pepper, saffron, and ginger, became associated with wealth because they were expensive and had to be imported.

Food Preservation in the Past

During the Medieval and Renaissance eras, most meals consisted of locally grown crops because it was extremely difficult to transport food over long distances. This was mostly due to an inability to preserve food for long periods. At that time, food preservation consisted mostly of drying, salting, and smoking. Pickling, which is also known as brining or corning, was another common practice and involved the use of fermentation to preserve food.

The Modern Era

The modern era began in North America and Europe with the dawn of the Industrial Age. Before that period, people predominantly lived in agrarian communities. Farming played an important role in the development of the United States and Canada. Almost all areas of the country had agrarian economies dictated by the harvesting seasons.

People noticed that certain foods were needed for health. For example, British sailors in the 1700’s observed that limes could prevent scurvy. In the late 1700 and into the 1900s, physicians and scientists began to look at the relationship between food deficiencies and the development of disease more closely by looking at physical signs during the absence of specific foods.

In the 1800s, society began to change as new machines made it easier to cultivate crops and to package, ship, and store food. The invention of the seed drill, the steel plow, and the reaper helped to speed up planting and harvesting. Also, food could be transported more economically as a result of developments in rail and refrigeration. These and other changes ushered in the modern era and affected the production and consumption of food.

Food Preservation in Modern Times

Technological innovations during the 1800s and 1900s also changed the way we cultivate, prepare, and think about food. The invention and refinement of the refrigerator and freezer made it possible for people to store food for much longer periods. This, in turn, allowed for the transportation of food over greater distances. For example, oranges grown in Florida would still be fresh when they arrived in Seattle.

Prior to refrigeration, people relied on a number of different methods to store and preserve food, such as pickling. Other preservation techniques included using sugar or honey, canning, and preparing a confit, which is one of the oldest ways to preserve food and involves salting meat and cooking it in its own fat. To store foods for long periods, people used iceboxes or kept vegetables, such as potatoes, onions, and winter squash, in cellars during the winter months.
During the early 1900s, scientists began to identify nutrients. In 1922, McCollum showed vitamin D deficiency caused rickets in children.

**The Great Depression**

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the United States faced incredible food shortages and many people went hungry. This was partly because extreme droughts turned parts of the Midwest into a Dust Bowl, where farmers struggled to raise crops. Millions of Americans were unemployed or underemployed and were forced to wait in long bread lines for free food. This was also a period of incredible reforms, as the government worked to provide for and protect the people. Some important changes included subsidies and support for suffering farmers.

**World War II**

Food shortages also occurred during World War II in the 1940s. At that time, people voluntarily made due with less to ensure that soldiers training and fighting overseas had the supplies they needed. To focus on saving at home, government programs included rationing food (particularly meat, butter, and sugar), while the media encouraged families to plant their own fruits and vegetables in “victory” (backyard) gardens.

In the 1950s, several vitamins and essential minerals were discovered and research focused on nutrient deficiencies.

**Contemporary Life**

Today, agriculture remains a large part of the economy in many developing nations. In fact, nearly 50 percent of the world’s labor is employed in agriculture. Bioworld. “History of Agriculture.” Accessed October 10, 2011. [http://www.bioworldusa.com/agriculture/history-agriculture](http://www.bioworldusa.com/agriculture/history-agriculture). In the United States however, less than 2 percent of Americans produce food for the rest of the population. Gold, M.V. “Sustainable Agriculture: Definitions and Terms.” US Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library. Special Reference Briefs Series no. SRB 99-02 (September 1999, August 2007). [http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902.shtml#toc1](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/pubs/terms/srb9902.shtml#toc1). Also, most farms are no longer small-scale or family-owned. Large-scale agribusiness is typical for both crop cultivation and livestock rearing, including concentrated animal feeding operations. Conventional farming practices can include abuses to animals and the land. Therefore, more and more consumers have begun to seek out organic and locally grown foods from smaller-scale farms that are less harmful to the environment.

Other changes also affect food production and consumption in the modern era. The invention of the microwave in the 1950s spurred the growth of frozen foods and TV dinners. Appliances such as blenders and food processors, toasters, coffee and espresso machines, deep fryers, and indoor grills have all contributed to the convenience of food preparation and the kinds of meals that people enjoy cooking and eating.

Nutrition scientists expanded their research to include optimal nutrition, nutritional pharmacology, nutrient excesses, disease patterns, and food security.
Diet Trends Over Time

Today, consumers can choose from a huge variety of dietary choices that were not available in the past. For example, strawberries can be purchased in New York City in wintertime, because they are quickly and easily transported from places where the crop is in season, such as California, Mexico, or South America. In the western world, especially in North America, food products are also relatively cheap. As a result, there is much less disparity between the diets of the lower and upper classes than in the past. It would not be unusual to find the same kind of meat or poultry served for dinner in a wealthy neighborhood as in a poorer community.

Key Takeaways

Perspectives and practices related to food and nutrition have greatly changed from the ancient era to today. In the ancient world, location and economic status had a profound effect on what people ate. Also, societies often were based on crop cultivation and livestock rearing, which influenced how people ate, worked, and lived. During the Medieval Era, people became more exposed to food from other parts of the world because of the growing ability to ship goods and because of the Crusades, among other factors. Technological advances, such as refrigeration and the microwave, have had huge effects on the way food is produced and consumed.

Discussion Starter

1. Compare and contrast the diet of a civilization from the ancient world or the Medieval Era to the food choices of today. In what ways has our diet changed? In what ways has it remained the same?