CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Social Life of Food

Food must not only be good to eat, but also good to think.
Claude Lévi-Strauss 1968a

The wonderful thing about studying food is that one cannot unravel the biological aspects of food use and traditions without considering the cultural aspects as well. Food is a principal medium for social interaction, for human comfort and reassurance, for anxieties and fear; it is at the heart of ideological construction. It is difficult to separate the economic uses of food from the political or individual customs from those of one group. The study of food production, of cuisine, and of meals, of preparation and presentation, gives rise to grand views of regional economic production or intimate portraits of families sitting around hearths. Food, curiously, also brings into focus the hidden aspects of power relations and social life, as well as the production of social facts and people. These are just some of the reasons anthropologists are drawn to the study of food – it is indeed the definitive anthropological topic reflecting our fundamental natures, those of sociality, transformation, and sharing.

Although there are many ways in which one can study the past, in this book I explore the past using social and cultural approaches to food traditions. One of the goals of this book is to unravel the way food creates identity. I want to explore how food traditions energize and naturalize power differences, what roles cuisine plays in social discourse, and the signification of food in social contexts, reflexively creating the person, the family, and the group. I attempt to do this by focusing on what food activities look like today as well as what they looked like in the past.

How does archaeology participate in food history and social theory? Traditionally archaeologists have theorized about food in terms of its use to stave off hunger, by studying calories, effort, and carrying capacities or

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

land and technological productivity. Social anthropologists and sociologists, on the other hand, tend to theorize about food by considering health, consumption, social practice, personhood creation including the desire for and valuation of food, and its contexts and meanings. I want to bring this theorizing into archaeological inquiry while also opening up food theory to include archaeology. Throughout this book I make what might be called sweeping statements about cultural manifestations. These ideas might at first appear to belong to one specific time or place, but I expressly leave these statements open, hoping that readers will decide for themselves if they fit in other settings, allowing us to make them "good to think with."

How do we begin to think about eating in the past? We know that food and shelter are necessary for humans to stay alive. Eating, in fact, is so basic to life that we at times overlook its centrality in our studies of the past. We often enter the past through plant and animal taxa lists, both of which provide substantial information and represent much work. But as the British archaeologist Andrew Sherratt aptly noted, "we do not eat species, we eat meals" (1991:50). The creation of food is an act of cognitive as well as physical transformation, signaling many layers of meaning while being an agent in our lives. We must recognize the powerful forces of production operating before food gets to the table, as well as the significance of food's capacity to create culture in such a mundane act. Eating is both banal and fraught with emotional consequences (Fishler 1988:279; Rozin 1976).

Emotions around food can run high, as one person's aphrodisiac gourmet meal of raw oysters is another's horror of incorporation. As do all animals, we assign categories to food options that identify what is edible and what is not, making some perfectly edible food items unacceptable for consumption while other, even poisonous foods are sought after. Food does not exist without classification and identification, like all of our symbols and things that receive meaning. Ingredients must be identified as edible before they are consumed or cooked. This requires a cognitive transformation. This categorization process engages with the agency of food, as food alters our bodies and experiences. Food therefore reflects embodied practical knowledge of people engaging with their environment. In the archaeological record, food remains have a materiality that archaeologists harness to gain an understanding about the past. Tracking abstract cultural concepts that are made visible through storage, preparation, and eating practices brings the web of meaning and signification into the realm of interpretation through this materiality of food remains.

I begin with the concept that food is a social fact. I assume that it is a transformative agent operating in all societal processes, both materially

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

and psychologically (Gell 1998; Latour 1993). Looking at food this way, in modern and in past settings on group, family, and individual scales, heightens one's sense of the active role food has in creating, enacting, and sustaining cultural and social processes. It highlights food's agency – not only with the possibility of being entrapped by and even addicted to some foods but also being enchanted by them. Equally important is the active role of the associated objects within these processes. People express their agency through food as the cultural act of eating brings the diverse material and social aspects of life together in a unified framework, as cultural worlds are reconstructed through material spaces, architecture, and the consumption of new objects. A meal condenses social life, which is then amplified outward. Thus we engage with practice and agency when we study meals. In fact, one of the main tensions in this discussion is whether food reflects social life or are foods active agents in social life. This tension is present throughout this book, as we tack between different theoretical approaches to the past. I side with food being an agent in social life, as you will see, but you will find places where the other dynamic also operates.

Food is also engaged with identity. It is ultimately social, the first and most quintessential gift, and the glue that forms interpersonal relations: mothers feeding children, families eating together, communities gathering to celebrate or mourn (Mauss 1980 [1925]). Food sharing is therefore a nexus for giving; the locale where social life is formed and renegotiated, where inequalities are materialized and persons are formed. Societies are made manifest in their food traditions, recipes, and the daily cycles that meals create, formed in the sharing of meals and dishes. These actions create society, which in turn becomes the milieu of identity formation (Simmel 1992 [1910]). It is this dense web of social life and agency that we delve into.

Food cultures are created through memories. Recipes and cooking methods passed down from grandparents, parents, and other relatives evoke and maintain the memory of the family, with cooking becoming an identity-making experience whatever the emotional associations (Sutton 2001). There is a cultural importance to food that participates in creating the largest society as well as the individual. Eating is associated with evocative and emotional experiences and memories, but constructed appetites are what drive people to complete tasks that will result in a particular taste and sensation. Proust's memory of the smell and taste of the *madeleine* cookie in tea evoked such an emotive memory of his childhood that it formed the core of his four-volume *Remembrance of Things Past* (1934) and launched modern social theory disciplines.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

Food sharing is probably the most common social act in human history. "... those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation ... We are to remember that the act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all those who share the meal are brethren (Robertson Smith 1889:247). In some societies eating alone is considered inappropriate, even sinister; in others, it is a requirement. Identifying eating habits can convey views about social interaction as well as personhood. How one shares food speaks about the place of the participants in society, their age, status, and situation.

The Classical Greeks called food *trophe*. The same word root is in their concept of nurturing people, *anatrepho*, which includes raising children and making kin through feeding, but also teaching them manners and enculturing them into society (Stella Souvatzi 2003, pers. comm.). Commensal or communal sharing and eating therefore intimately interweaves the individual into society at all levels. Many archaeologists have begun to use the term *commensal* to mean communal eating, especially eating at feasts, after Dietler's important 1996 article on political food. In Middle English it means sharing a meal at a table, from the Medieval Latin *commnslis* (*com*, "with," and *mnsa*, "table"). Commensality therefore infers eating together. The word also has a second meaning, as an unequal symbiotic relationship of two species that is beneficial to one party while the other remains unharmed and unaffected. This might be a concept to think about in some social settings.

The Place of Food in Archaeological Research

Food-related archaeological studies have tended to emphasize diet, efficiency, and production rather than food and its expansive social field. Diet and subsistence questions, plant and animal husbandry, and evolutionary modeling have been core topics in processual and environmental archaeological approaches, to great effect (e.g., Gremillion 2011; Khare 1980; LaBianca 1991). These studies concentrate on where edibles were procured, their health benefits, eating costs, and what was consumed. We will spend some time looking at what such studies have brought to our understanding of the past, especially the particular success of the newer, microanalytical work of organic molecules, phytoliths, isotopes, pollen, starches, stable isotopes, bones, and parasites. These remains and the methods to identify them can enable us to direct archaeological inquiry toward the social questions of people and their lived values. This trajectory is complex

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

and requires the weaving together of data and perspectives, perhaps in a more multifaceted manner than that with which most archaeologists are comfortable. Working with these approaches and data sets precludes focusing on one thing, for as you pull at one data thread you unravel others. This exercise is messy, rich, and complex, like a dense midden.

The materiality of food allows us to complete an archaeology of human experience, as both material and emotional aspects of a lived life surround food. What are the materialities of meals, food traditions, and cuisines? Our word for "meal" comes from the Old English for ground cereal grains, but its meaning has been transformed to an eating occasion, at a specific time and place. A meal can be composed of several dishes, but it need not be. How do the different parts of a meal, currently called "dishes," something prepared to be eaten, link people to ingredients and ingredients to society? How many linking arguments are sufficient for the identification of a social trend in the material data? Vestiges of past repasts are present in the archaeological record and can be investigated, but we are on slippery ground if we want the full picture. Food traditions are repeated ingredient combinations of meals. Cuisines are styles of cooking and preparing food, their temporal and contextual placements. Can we study food traditions and cuisines, especially their social dimensions, without a full range of the material correlates in the archaeological record? The objects that we dig up are part of a larger system of cultural entanglements. We can make these links between object and meaning because of the embodied practical knowledge that food activities encompass. Whereas social relationships are not always recoverable from archaeological data, human experience can be materialized. Given our expanding research capabilities and an emphasis on the new results that can be gained, these networks of interaction deserve to be explored.

A social approach to studying past culinary traditions should be able to incorporate all of these approaches while offering insights into past cultural and political dimensions of social life. Food's capacity to order experience and to direct courses of action grows out of its ubiquitous presence in social life as much as its materiality. The most prominent archaeological hesitation to incorporating a social approach has been the lack of tight correlates between the social aspects of food traditions and the material record; archaeologists can never watch people of the past cooking or eating. It is through our own food experiences that we can begin to trace food culture as it permeates social life in the past.

Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics and Power (Dietler and Hayden 2001) framed the debate between ecological

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

functional approaches and the culturally constructed meanings of large meals and their contexts. As this debate gathered momentum in archaeology, archaeological examples on the study of past foodways present issues of cultural identity, cultural change, and meaning (Gerritsen 2000; Gosden and Hather 1999; Hagen 1992, 1995; Hamilakis 1999; Jones 2007; Miracle and Milner 2002; Parker Pearson 2003; Stroeckx 2005; Twiss 2007; van der Veen 2003, 2008; Wright 2004). In these works we can see the value in how archaeologists are opening up cultural vistas about the past through food archaeology. These publications illustrate how humanistic archaeology can be while applying rigorous scientific methodologies. Food has become a point where archaeologists can cross over into other disciplines because it is a quintessential interdisciplinary topic, harnessing many disciplines while also requiring multiple data sets and scales of analysis. We increasingly see articles that address values at the same time as they apply molecular or isotopic data.

Do we accept that studying food and cuisines moves us closer to lived lives and that studying eating in archaeological settings can provide insights into the past? The subdiscipline of food archaeology is not yet ubiquitous in current archaeological practice, although it is increasingly becoming so. It is exciting to read articles in which the authors use food to think critically about the past (e.g., Dietler 1996; Hard et al. 1996; Haaland 2007, Hastorf and Johannessen 1993; Hayden 1996; Jones 1999; Klarich 2010a; LeCount 2008; Lightfoot et al. 1997; Mills 2004; Potter and Ortman 2004; Scott 2001; Thomas 2007; Twiss 2012a; Wright 2000). Topics such as cuisine, appetite, taste, food preferences, and disgust have been harnessed to study identity in the past, as in the studies about group identity by Gasser and Kwaitkowski (1991), Johannessen et al. (2002), and Smith (2006), senses and taste by Hamilakis (2004), or cuisine by Atalay and Hastorf (2006) and Stahl (2002, 2014). Some ask whether these topics can be addressed in archaeology. In this book I propose that these avenues of inquiry can indeed be pursued in archaeology.

This accent on the social aspects of food is channeled by our sister disciplines in which food is an increasingly important investigatory lens. In addition, the social theory momentum in archaeology opens space for theorizing about food in past social formations. Although the ecological constraints on what people ate are significant and form the basis of our investigations on food, there are also strong sensory traditions and symbolic codes that influenced eating habits. Highlighting these social, cultural, and historical aspects of the past can open up questions about our hard-won material evidence. Through daily food activities people not only stay alive;

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

they remake themselves mentally, psychologically, and physically. In these practices the actions and material remnants connect to unlock the past, as we increasingly link the small bits of data together into a picture of seasonal cuisines and cultural preferences such as that presented about the Neolithic world by Atalay and Hastorf (2006).

Many aspects of past food activities are not visible. The actions themselves are gone: the stirring of the pot, people's conversations, the sounds and smells of cooking, savoring the taste as the cook checks the sauce, the anxious hunger of the onlookers, the sated feeling after eating, or the sequence of courses consumed. Our work here requires an acknowledgment of these invisible practices. Nevertheless, food archaeology begins with specific contexts of food remains, the meals, the kitchens, the technologies harnessed, and the rubbish left over. Studying the procedures linked to this evidence enables us to learn more about how people acted out their social and cultural dynamics through their food habits and styles.

Five Themes in This Book

This book builds on a series of tenets. In addition to the fundamental premise of the agency of food in creating our identities, done so through memory, I build on five related concepts that thread throughout my presentations. The first premise is materially driven, another one is social, the third is sensory, the fourth economic, and the fifth cultural. All are framed by the belief that meals are not just cultural events, they are also agents; they are techniques of the body and exist through meaningful practices that get carried along through bodily repetition and memory. Based on these notions, the study of food allows us to investigate many issues of interest to archaeologists.

Materiality

The first theme derives from the disciplines of materiality and identity and how artifacts reflexively and actively influence social worlds (DeMarrais et al. 2004; Dietler and Herbich 1998; Gosden 2005; Miller 1998a, 2005). The material culture of food creates as well as reflects social relations. In the following chapters I examine how food actively renews society and engages the participants through the *things* that are involved in food creation. Food – the material and the idea – is an ethnic marker, a group identifier, and a medium for exclusion and inclusion. In Barthes's (1979) study of French and U.S. eating habits, for example, we learn how the way

© in this web service Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

of eating fish, meat, and salad communicates the identity of the individual as well as their social class. The French, Barthes noted, eat by class and gender; men eat meat in large bites, women nibble at salads. There is little snacking. In the United States, on the other hand, snacks are common and iconic foods are traditionally shared between genders. Barbequed meat is the core meal on the Fourth of July in the United States; unleavened bread must be served at a Jewish Passover *Seder* feast; and a baked cake, preferably layered and white, is essential at a wedding. Ingredients and their preparation signal and define activities and events. This premise of the material links to societal formation can help focus our application of plant taxa, ceramic wares, and animal bone frequencies to gatherings, ceremonies, differential power at social events, and social relations within communities. These interrelationships help us sense the material agency of things in the manner that Alfred Gell (1998) proposed.

Social Agency

The second tenet engages with and reflects the social world and therefore entails social agency – how a meal can be a political, social agent, reaffirming, transforming, or realigning relations among the participants (Appadurai 1981; Fajans 1988:145; Gell 1998). Eating partners exist in many societies, forming special bonds of trust and support in a fictive kinship that operates beyond dinner. The social world never operates far from food that people share. Acquaintances reach a different relationship if they eat together. People clearly manipulate food presentation to channel social outcomes (Appadurai 1981; Klarich 2010a:2; Weismantel 1988). Reflect on an important family meal at which someone wants to make an impression. The agency of the dishes, their presentation and flavors, are there to enchant the guests. All participants consume the meal, but each person is entrapped in a different social position; those that helped prepare the meal have a different social outcome than those that are invited. Food can be shared evenly or selectively, eaten quickly or slowly, left on the dish to signal satiation or fed to the dog under the table. The end result realigns the participants. Each of these acts is a construction of the social relationships that are played out around the table.

Identity is created through these acts of social eating. The restaurant is a benign example in which people are generally allowed to choose what they want to consume, communicating their personality and mood to others at the table. Power relations can be enacted behind the scenes. We hear of the power of chefs over their subordinates in professional kitchens, with

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

scenes of melodramatic power displays during food preparation. There are evocative ethnographic examples of power relations seen in feasting and presentation too, with aggressive serving to neighboring communities on the Goodenough Islands presented by Young (1971) or the elegant wedding feasts of India, famously described as gastropolitics by Appadurai (1981).

A good meal and its setting enliven conversation and create consensus and social cohesion. Meals do this by resonating with past meals and the people who prepared and ate them, by evoking food memories through the sensory tastes and displays. Satiation – the sense of physical well-being, transformation, and communion – becomes the collective memory of a meal that can be called up in the future. This transformative experience resonates long after the meal is over, in the corporeal sensation of the meal and the affirmation of social relations, tucked away in memories. Like material heirlooms, past food experiences can evoke strong emotions and even sustain people when there is little else (Sutton 2001). Thinking about eating leads to thinking about people in their social world. *In Memory's Kitchen* records recipes remembered by women who were in the Terezín concentration camp during World War II, written down as these women tried to retain their sense of identity and community through remembered recipes and meals (De Silva 1996). Food heirlooms such as written-down recipes illustrate the active power of social memory and enchantment. By talking about and remembering past foods and recipes people connect to their past social worlds and to themselves. This is a common activity for those away from home.

The Senses

The third, related premise of this book concerns sensory and physical engagement with food. Eating is a sensual act, since each meal physically transforms mood and energy levels. Anticipation occurs throughout the production, collection, storing, and processing of the ingredients as the remembrance of smells, tastes, and feelings resonates with the meals to come. Disgust as well as desire can be aroused by these sensations (Jones 2000). Food transforms each person's body through their eating and drinking; we can get ill from poor diet, or regain health through a good one. Corporeal transformations ensue with fermented beverages, poisons, or excessive calories; change can also come from hunger. All the senses are engaged in meal preparation and consumption; taste, smell, touch, hearing, and sight (Lalonde 1992). The pot bubbles as the cook tastes the stew with a wooden spoon. The senses are activated, physically transforming

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-15336-3 — The Social Archaeology of Food
Christine A. Hastorf
Excerpt
More Information

mood and bombarding the body with an increase in serotonin and insulin. Socially acquired tastes such as spicy or bitter foods are constructed, as seen in the cult-like engagement with chile peppers (*Capsicum*) that "chile heads" have, now around the world (www.chileheads.com/; Nabhan 2005; Weismantel 2004). Given that food preparation and the produced meals are physical, interactive events, we can track how corporeal transformations locate the participants in their social world through such sensory actions. This perspective leads us into the realms of identity, since archaeologists are increasingly realizing that certain foods, their production, preparation, and accompanying sensations create individuals and communities over thousands of years (Fuller and Rowlands 2009). This is what Elizabeth Rozin (1973) called core flavors.

Economics

The fourth premise to be discussed is how food engages with cultural economics – the economics of value, access, desire, and control. This standpoint asserts that caloric efficiency and "energetic practicalities" do not guide everyone's actions with regard to food choice, but that people do include some economic constraints, costs, inputs, and outputs and production styles in their decision making. A strong component of cultural tradition – affective feelings, familiarity, and the understanding of what food is acceptable – enters into food consumption decisions. Further, the notion of power and control of production and access can never be removed from food. Who has the right or agency to harvest a crop or hunt an animal, procure a rare mushroom or bake a specific recipe? Part of this economic equation of food acquisition is the history and memory of tactics and practices. Some food ingredients are passed over while others are sought out. These actions are not based solely on cost and availability, although such criteria play a role in crafting cuisines. Organic matter becomes edible when it embodies desirability within an historical food tradition – what constitutes good food or proper eating situations is defined within a network of economic and historical influences (Logan 2012; Logan and Cruz 2014; Wilk 2006).

Taste

Taste, the fifth theme, is an important cultural force that weaves through every example in this book, being both enabling and constraining (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1939; Falk 1991; Giddens 1979; Warde 1997). Taste

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org