CHAPTER 1

What Is Food, and Why Do Archaeologists Study It?

What do you want to know about the past? Do you wonder about family lives, or about international relations? Are you curious about ancient warfare, or about human sacrifice? Perhaps you're interested in the origins of private property? In prehistoric gender roles? Possibly you're fascinated by how ethnic identities develop, or by how members of a faith vary in religious observance? You will find all of those topics in this book, because you can investigate all of them via food.

As omnivores we human beings face a world full of potential edibles. Our intellectual and physical abilities expand our options still further, allowing us to alter nature's menus by growing, cooking, and combining foods. We thus have choices about what to eat, how to get it, how to prepare it, how to consume it, and how to discard it. The world is dauntingly full of options. Our responses are constrained by the ecologies in which we live, the technologies to which we have access, and the communities in which we live, but choices remain (e.g., Brumberg, 1988:164–188; Bynum, 1987). We make those choices not just in accordance with our economies but also with our politics and our faiths, our heritages and our ambitions. In doing so, we reinforce or challenge existing traditions – and we propel our cultures and civilizations onwards through time. Our foodways reflect our lives.

Our foodways also leave traces in the archaeological record. Plant and animal remains are still scattered throughout ancient neighborhoods and campgrounds. Human remains lie in graves and in dumps, their physical and chemical characteristics shaped by ancient diets and activity patterns. ("We are what we eat," after all.) Ovens, bars, and storage bins stand inside homes, palaces, and bars. Microscopic fat deposits remain in the walls of prehistoric cooking pots, and starches, proteins, and pollen linger in centuries-old dental plaque that no dentist scraped from someone's teeth.

We archaeologists have innumerable data sets with which to reconstruct past foodways – and thus to investigate past social as well as biological lives.

Much of the excitement we feel when studying ancient foodways lies in food's omnipresence, and thus its ability to testify to many different aspects of life. The chapters in this book delve into how archaeologists use food to explore economics, politics, faith, gender, ethnicity, and more. In each of these spheres, food plays an important role: who eats what, who avoids what, where does the food come from and where is it eaten, how does it get to the table, and in which dishes does it sit. Before we get to those explorations, however, I want to emphasize that food isn't just any substance that happens to get tangled up in various aspects of our lives. Food is arguably unique in its power to attract us and to move us, because we experience food physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

Food and the Senses

Gardening, grinding, cooking, dining, and virtually all other food-related activities stimulate multiple senses; eating involves all five simultaneously. Our interactions with food are not remote or coolly intellectual: when we eat our noses are filled with scent, our mouths with flavor, our hands with the warmth or chill of food or utensils, our ears with the sounds of chewing, our eyes with the sight of our meal and our dining companions. Harvesters sniff and feel the fruit to see if it is ripe, trying all the while not to prick themselves on its thorns or snag their clothes on its twigs. Cooks surround themselves and others with a wide variety of sounds, scents – and stinks. They crimp crusts and dye eggs to please the eye, before arranging their dishes on plain or on colorful platters. Eaters savor sweetness and pucker at tartness. Their mouths crunch into the cool crispness of a fresh apple, sip at the velvet smoothness of a cream-filled soup, and gnaw at the stringy chewiness of beef jerky. Heat from cooking fires warms bodies and homes; smoke from the same fires perfumes the air or sends people choking away, blinking to clear their eyes of its sting.

Food's constant stimulation of all five senses makes it deeply powerful. We record our food-related experiences not just in our rational brains, but in our feelings; our memories fill with pleasant and unpleasant sensations and the emotions that accompany them. These memories color our perceptions of current realities and our anticipations of future ones; the present "seems to 'hum' with memories of past words and past times" (Sutton, 2011:472). The taste of commercial macaroni and cheese resonates with laughter at Dad's kitchen table or with loneliness in the dorm room.

The smell of tomatoes in the sunshine summons happy picnic-dates or days of sweaty labor weeding the garden.

Foods thus 'hum' with social experiences and emotional associations. These associations are initially intensified and later called to mind by varied sensations. This is another reason that archaeologists and anthropologists (notably Hamilakis, 2008; Sutton, 2001, 2010) argue that food makes a particularly potent social tool or symbol. When cooks and hosts work to enhance meals' flavors, sounds, and settings, they please their guests – and they heighten the social and emotional impacts of their gatherings (Hamilakis, 2014; Hayden, 2014:12–14).

Time

> *When you ate buckwheat cakes in winter you thought of that hot July Fourth when it had been sown, "wet or dry." You smelled the bee-sweet odor of small white orchid-like flowers upheld on their stout, wine-colored stems and heard the hum of a million wings . . . Like God, you looked back upon your work and called it good.*
>
> *Della Lutes, 1936: 175*

"[E]ating does not mark time, it creates it" (Hamilakis, 2008:15). "Dinner time" is not a set time of day that we recognize by eating a meal: it is whenever we choose to eat. The same goes for breakfast, lunch, and snack times. The social and cultural experiences that we associate with meal times, from setting the table with one's child through chatting with one's friends to washing the dishes with one's lover, occur when we decide we're going to eat.

When we make that decision, we do not simply punctuate our day and its schedule. Rather, we bring into the day both the past and the future, the memories 'humming' in the food on the table and the framework it provides for meals to come. We note that finishing the jam now leaves none for tomorrow morning; we eat yet another winter potato and dream of the asparagus and spring peas to come.

When we eat, therefore, we reach back into our pasts and project ourselves into our futures. In the present, our meals set the rhythms of our days. Specific foods are in our lives at specific times: oatmeal at breakfast, stew at dinner; water the vegetables at dawn, harvest the herbs after the sun has dried the dew. These foods cycle throughout the course of the year and shift through the generations. Each culture's food patterns maintain and repeat across the days, weeks, months, and years that make up people's experiences (Sutton, 2001).

Unusual eating events such as feasts or ritual meals disrupt our food rhythms, marking our mental calendars with occasions we may long remember and discuss (Hamilakis, 2008:16; Hastorf, 2015). The disruptions make people more aware of the routines from which they're diverging as well as of the highlighted nature of the special occasions.

Those occasions, meanwhile, reflect days and even months or years of planning and preparation (Dietler, 2001; Hastorf, 2016:196). Lavish meals are never isolated events; think of how much planning, shopping, cooking, and cleaning happen ahead of a family Thanksgiving, and how many years later people still remember what happened at that meal. (Roughly thirty-five years ago my grandmother accidentally baked the sink drain in the Thanksgiving turkey. I will still be talking about it thirty-five years from now.) That's one meal, attended by perhaps six to twenty people; imagine the time and saved-up resources required to stage a feast attended by hundreds or even thousands (e.g., O'Connor, 2015:58; Perodie, 2001; Sutton and Hammond, 1984).

More prosaically, food is enormously time-dependent (Halstead, 2014; Logan and Cruz, 2014; Parker Pearson, 2003; Stallibrass and Thomas, 2008b). Wild foods come into and go out of season; domesticated crops and herds require work at specific times of year and, in some cases, at specific ages. All foods take time to grow, and all perish if left uneaten for too long. Hunter-gatherers as well as farmers therefore store food. In prolonging their food's utility, they create deposits that memorialize past activities and assets and also promise future survival and perhaps success (Hendon, 2000:47). Regular withdrawals from these stores keep them, and their symbolic messages, ever-present in people's lives and thoughts (Hastorf, 2016:109).

Establishing the Topics at Hand

Let me now establish what this book is about. Words such as "food" and "feasting" have varying definitions. Obviously, you must know how I'm using them if you are to grasp the intended scope of this book as well as the implications of many of my statements. Please be aware that other authors do not necessarily embrace my preferred definitions.

Food

> *. . . the local boys started to poke me and tease me about my obvious reluctance to eat a live bug.*
>
> *James Skibo (1999:95)*

He was a bold man that first ate an oyster.

Jonathan Swift

Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are.

Brillat-Savarin

What is food? For those of us interested in its cultural more than its biological importance, "nutrients" does not suffice. When we think and talk about our dinners, we talk about salad, not fiber and vitamins; sashimi, not proteins and lipids; spaghetti, not carbohydrates topped with antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, and monounsaturated fat. We punctuate our lives with meals and snacks, not with episodes of calorie and protein ingestion. We reject nutrients that our cultures deem unacceptable – no insects, dog meat, or human flesh for us – and we seek out items with no recognizable nutritional value (diet soda being the classic example).

This book focuses on what modern Westerners typically consider food: solid edibles. This is not a definition that all archaeologists use, and for valid reasons (Twiss, 2015). One problem is that the boundaries between "food" and "drink" are fuzzy at best. The same materials are often found in both food or beverages: any bin of wheat can become beer or bread, porridge or whiskey, depending only on how people prepare it (Dietler, 2006, 2007; McGovern, 2017). (Sometimes people bake bread specifically to use as an ingredient for beer. Thirty-eight hundred years ago, Sumerians hymned the beer goddess Ninkasi with "It is you who bake the beerbread in the oven. . ." [Black et al., 1998-].) Ethnographically documented farmers often turn 15 to 20 percent of the grain they raise into alcohol (Dietler, 2001:81). Alcoholic drinks are nutritionally important in some cultures, and many groups consider alcohol to be a form of food (Dietler, 2006). Even within a culture, individuals may disagree about the boundaries of "food": how do you classify a smoothie?

Likewise, in segregating the categories of "food" and "medicine" this book implies a distinction that rarely if ever exists. Across the world and through time people have eaten in order to achieve health aims: slimming down or fattening up, of course, but also clearing skin, easing digestion and excretion, healing pains and aches, and more. Moreover, substances that in one context are easily recognized as "food," in other circumstances are equally easily recognized as "medicines." For example, people sometimes use mustard to add zing to meals, and sometimes they mix it into poultices and plasters to smear on ill people's chests (McGuire, 2016).

This book nonetheless focuses on solid edibles for two reasons. First, there is an extensive and fascinating archaeological literature on drink that

only partially overlaps with the archaeological literature on food (see Dietler, 2006; McGovern, 2009, 2017; Smith, 2008 for overviews). Second, a key feature of alcohol is that it can significantly alter the consciousness of its consumers. Because of this, alcohol – by *far* the most prominent subject in the archaeology of drink – is often used and valued differently from other consumables. People think about mind-altering substances in ways that they generally don't think about foods that can fill the belly and excite the tongue but not induce euphoria or suppress inhibitions. This is why other psychoactive drugs (e.g., mushrooms, betel, coca, San Pedro cactus, haoma; see Fitzpatrick, 2018; Guerra-Doce, 2015; O'Connor, 2015:67) are also beyond the scope of this book.

Even if the term is limited to solids, "food" is a culturally specific label. Dogs, horses, cats, and bugs have been or are cheerfully consumed in cultures across the globe, but most Brits and North Americans quail at the idea of even tasting any of these meats (MacClancy, 1993; Skibo, 1999). The same Brits and Americans eat beef, but that appalls Indian Hindus. Such Hindus enjoy tubers and root vegetables, though, which their Jain neighbors reject (MacClancy, 1993). Cultures also often see specific foods or food preparations as appropriate only for certain subsets of the population. Few healthy young American adults would even think of pureed chicken and green beans as a dinner option: such a meal is "baby food," and not for those whose teeth have fully emerged from their gums. Among the Hua, substances' edibility varies not only by age, gender, reproductive status, and ritual status, but also by the relationship between the eater and the person who produced and/or cooked the potential food item (Meigs, 1984). An unmarried youth may not eat white pandanus, for example, but a married man may – as long as it wasn't peeled, cut, tasted, or stepped over by his firstborn child (Meigs, 1984:151, 177).

Furthermore, within a culture the meaning of "food" changes through time. Today the American antipathy to eating horse meat is such that in 1998 Californians voted 59 percent to 41 percent to criminalize its sale for human consumption. (California Proposition 6 made a first offense a misdemeanor, and subsequent sales felonies. Selling horse meat for *dog* food remained entirely legal.) A mere half-century earlier, however, horse meat was accepted enough that the July 9, 1951 issue of the influential news magazine *Time* advised cooks preparing equine pot roasts to "remember that the meat tends to be sweet. More onions should be used and fewer carrots … In broiling horse fillets, spread some butter over the meat because it is lacking in fat." Such changes highlight the need to be cautious about identifying "food" in the archaeological record. Researchers cannot

safely assume that the boundaries that they set around "food" are those that past people would also have set. They cannot presume that ancient people saw all non-toxic, digestible, potential nutrient sources as edible. They must remember that nutrient sources that they themselves don't eat – insects, amaranths, extinct herbs, and modern fodder crops – may have been seen as important foods (e.g., Fritz, 2007; Koerper and Kolls, 1999; Nymann, 2015; Sutton, 1995; Valamoti, 2017).

Feasting

A startlingly large proportion of the archaeological literature on food and foodways centers around feasting. Of the 630 food archaeology articles and books in this book's bibliography, 72 (11.4 percent) have "feast" or "feasting" in their titles; many, many more discuss it in-text. Given the obvious archaeological importance of feasting, one might expect that we would all know what feasting is: we'd share a working definition and ideally also a set of criteria for identifying feasting in the archaeological record.

One would be wrong. Not only do we not all agree on how to identify feasting archaeologically, we don't agree on what feasting actually *is*. Consider the work of the two archaeologists who are probably most widely associated with the topic, Professor Michael Dietler of the University of Chicago, and Professor Emeritus Brian Hayden of Simon Fraser University. Together they co-edited *Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives* (2001), which is cited and beloved by archaeologists across the globe, and individually they have authored many, many other works that you will find in the bibliography of this book. Dietler and Hayden have been the two most prominent voices in the archaeology of feasting, and they have profoundly different perspectives on what feasts are and why they matter.

Dietler defines feasting as "a form of ritual activity centered on the communal consumption of food and drink" (Dietler, 2001:67, 2011: 180). Hayden defines feasting as "any sharing between two or more people of a meal featuring some special foods or unusual quantities of foods (i.e., foods or quantities not generally served at daily meals) hosted for a special purpose or occasion" (Hayden, 2014:8). Hayden[1] says that Dietler's

[1] I should note in the interests of full disclosure that Hayden clearly disagrees with my conception of feasting, having referred to "definitions proposed by some other authors" as "counterproductive," while citing only me and an unpublished conference paper. Specifically, Hayden (2014:8) argues that I (Twiss, 2012:8, 23) question the validity of distinguishing

definition has "problems of vagueness" and dislikes Dietler's requirement of ritual activity, arguing that he can't tell whether or not Dietler considers two-person meals feasts and that "for many people, tying consumption to rituals implies that feasting only occurs in religious contexts" (Hayden, 2014:8). Dietler, meanwhile, gently notes Hayden's "eccentric understanding of the nature of ritual" (Dietler, 2011: 180), explaining that rituals are simply activities that in some way are symbolically differentiated from normal, everyday life. (It is the norm in archaeology and anthropology to distinguish between ritual activity and religious belief [Hicks, 2010; Madgwick and Livarda, 2018; Swenson, 2015; see also Chapter 7].)

I wrote (Twiss, 2012:23) that "It is difficult to argue that a term ["feasting"] that covers all of these variants is of significant analytical utility (*contra* Dietler and Hayden 2001:3–4)." My point was – and is – that these ethnographically based definitions of "feasting" incorporate such a wide range of activities that the term itself isn't helping us understand what people were doing, why they were doing it, or how what they did impacted their lives. What is the analytical value of a word that refers to both a romantic anniversary dinner for two and a political fundraising dinner for two thousand? They have different purposes, different social implications, and different material signatures. All that the term "feast" is telling us is that the meal is "special" in some way (Twiss, 2015).

An additional complication is that "feast" is a word in widespread use, and it has clear meanings and associations for all English-speakers that do not match the definitions that we archaeologists keep trying to give it. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (www.OED.com, accessed May 25, 2018) says that a feast is: "a sumptuous meal or entertainment, given to a number of guests; a banquet, *esp*. of a more or less public nature.[. . . or] an unusually abundant and delicious meal . . ." A lot of food, and multiple guests: scale and luxury are what characterize feasts in lay English.

Scale and luxury are also what commonly characterize the feasts that appear in the archaeological literature (e.g., Hastorf, 2016:195; Mills, 2004; Peres, 2017; Pluckhahn et al., 2006; Potter and Ortman, 2004; Twiss, 2015). We most often identify feasting on the basis of big cooking or serving equipment or large collections of food remains, foods inferred to be

feasts from daily meals. As what I wrote (Twiss, 2012:8) is that "feasts are closely related to everyday meals in form as well as in meaning but are also consciously distinguished from those meals . . . the relationship is a complex one, and highly challenging to archaeologists who wish to avoid slighting either the links between domestic consumption and feasts, or the special, set-aside nature of those feasts," I politely reject his overall criticism.

delicacies, prestige goods, and valuable materials (e.g., Ben-Shlomo et al., 2009; Junker and Niziolek, 2010; Peres, 2017: table 2; Turkon, 2004:234). This is because we have to focus on practices that leave perceptible traces in the archaeological record, and large and elaborate events are far more visible (meaning archaeologically distinguishable from quotidian meals) than small, simple ones. On the limited number of occasions when small-scale feasts have been recognized, archaeologists have again cited the presence of ample, valued food remains and/or special vessels (e.g., Pluckhahn et al., 2006; Reinhart, 2015).

We are, I think, fighting an uphill battle when we attempt to redefine "feast" away from its common usage. Anthropologically justifiable as the alternative definitions may be, they match neither the familiar meaning of the word nor what we archaeologists primarily discuss. Using them requires students and laypeople to set aside what they know the word "feast" to mean in order to grasp our work. Using them also distances archaeologists from each other, since we don't agree on a single alternative definition. As multiple alternative definitions are currently in use, however, readers of the archaeological feasting literature must remain alert to each author's concept of his or her subject.

One more important point about "feasting" is that a culture's feasts – whatever they may be – are culinarily, stylistically, and symbolically related to other meals in that culture (Fletcher and Campbell, 2015; Hastorf, 2016; Hastorf and Weismantel, 2007; Joyce and Henderson, 2007; Potter and Ortman, 2004; Twiss, 2007, 2015; Van Keuren, 2004). People do not create wholly separate cuisines, manners, and social norms for feasts. Feast dishes, decorations, and drudgery (dishwashing duty!) may not be the same as those seen at everyday meals, but the two are in conversation with each other. Cultures where the genders habitually dine together don't segregate the men from the women, for example, and bread-centric cultures don't replace their baked goods with manioc or rice. . . *unless the feast is making a point of that change*. Everyday patterns may be scaled up or elaborated (more courses, more guests, fancier dishes, live music, special settings, special prayers), but they are not fundamentally changed without people recognizing the shifts and focusing on their differences from everyday practice. Whether a feast recapitulates day-in, day-out eating habits or whether it violates them, it is always referring to them.

Everyday meals refer constantly to feasts as well, as conversations are not one-sided. This resonance between different kinds of meals intensifies and extends the social messages each sends (Douglas, 1975). A group of women do the cooking for a religious feast, linking gendered behavior with faith; in

cooking her husband his Tuesday lunch one of those women demonstrates her acceptance of the divine order of the world.

At present many archaeologists believe that it's time to increase research into daily food habits, which have received far less archaeological attention than has feasting (e.g., Peres, 2017; Pollock, 2015). These researchers point out, entirely accurately, that feasts represent only a small proportion of the meals people consume. If we archaeologists let unusual events dominate our discussions of ancient foodways, we miss much of the culinary "story," and we do so in a way that biases our understandings of the past. Feasts may make or ruin reputations, showily violate norms or transform local politics (see Chapter 5); many feasts bring people together who wouldn't normally socialize. Ordinary meals seldom do any of these things, and if they change rather than reproduce the status quo they do so gradually, not convulsively. Paying attention to daily meals also helps focus attention on domestic labor (which should loom large in our thinking about past economies) and on gender (Pollock, 2015). Women are consistently prominent in discussions of domestic foodways, but are often relegated to behind-the-scenes cooking or total invisibility in feasting reconstructions. Increasing numbers of archaeologists are answering this call with an explicit focus on daily cuisine.

Should we in fact discard "feasting" as a focus of archaeological research? There are certainly problems inherent in using a dichotomy of Feasts and Not Feasts to discuss past meals, as most of us do. Many societies stop at multiple points along the continuum from simple family meals to over-the-top celebrations attended by hundreds. If rural Greek weekday dinners aren't feasts, and Easter and wedding dinners are, what is the proper classification of Sunday dinners, where a handful of friends and relatives may join a family as they dine on pie or chicken as well as standard fare (e.g., Halstead, 2015)? Are these meals feasts, or not? Researchers (and diners) can reasonably disagree, and subjectivity is unavoidable in the decision-making.

Most archaeologists nonetheless prefer to keep discussing "feasts" and "daily meals" as opposed to variously large and elaborate episodes of food-sharing. Our argument is that feasts are qualitatively, not just quantitatively, distinguished from everyday meals. Symbolically differentiated from normal practices, their contents and social meanings resonate with but are not limited to those of the quotidian table. We may struggle to determine which of the past meals we've identified were feasts, and which were not, but as long as we are open about the criteria and the models that we're using to decide, we are acting justifiably. Interpretive challenges are not reasons to discard ideas.