

## **Why people eat what they eat: beyond mechanics**

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### **Summary**

This paper looks beyond the physiological concept of the body and suggests explanations for food choices at several levels - the cultural, the social and the individual. While none of these, in itself, represents an adequate response to the question of why people eat what they eat, each offers an alternative way of understanding food choice. Examples illustrating the various types of explanation are presented and their relevance discussed.

### **Introduction**

Why do people eat? The answers are relatively simple: people eat for reasons of hunger, pleasure, comfort, sociability, communion. But answers to the question of why they eat *what* they eat are far more complicated.

The very posing of this question assumes that people are able to choose what they eat. It can hardly apply to a group of castaways stranded on a tropical island with only coconuts for sustenance. When food resources are limited, as in times of drought, famine or war, people eat whatever is available, even foods normally considered inedible, such as wild grasses and seeds, in order to satisfy hunger. In a normal situation, however, choices are possible. The question relates to *how* and *why* those choices are made.

The reason that certain foods might be chosen in preference to other foods may sometimes be associated with their nutritional value (for example, a preference for high-energy fat foods is often exhibited in hunter-gatherer societies where the availability and supply of foods can vary greatly), or with the physiological state of the individual (pica is an extreme example). Usually, however, considerations of food choice require a shift away from a mechanistic view of the body as something needing certain amounts of energy input to balance energy expenditure, together with certain quantities of proteins, fatty acids, vitamins and so on. Many centuries ago Hippocrates promoted the idea of instinctive appetite - that an individual, faced with a selection of foods, will take the ones that most appeal, this choice then being the best one for the individual at that time. While the introduction of scientific nutrition, about two hundred years ago, made this theory obsolete, this does not mean that physics and chemistry can adequately explain food choices. Humans are not soul-less machines, nor are they like pigs or chickens, accepting whatever diet is imposed according to the end-product desired. Food choices are often irrational, in nutritional terms, and one must look to other rationalities to understand them.

In this paper, I will give examples of food choices and preferences and discuss the background to and reasons for these choices as a way of demonstrating the multiplicity of factors that influence food choice.

### *Setting boundaries*

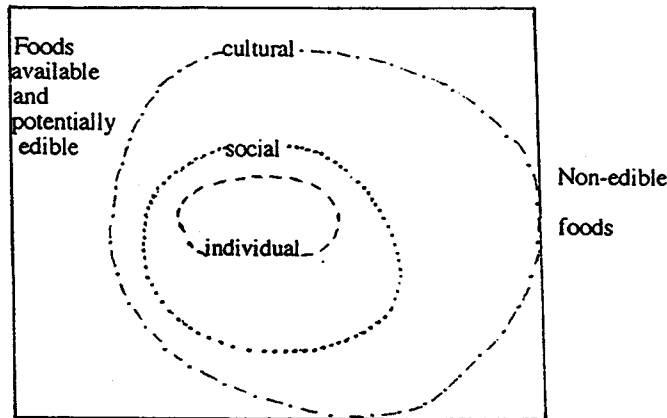
Rather than trying to understand why people eat what they eat it is often easier to look at why they don't eat what they don't eat. All cultures, societies and individuals set boundaries separating what is considered edible from what is considered inedible (even if potentially edible and valuable nutritionally).

One of the reasons for placing such boundaries or filters is to resolve what Claude Fischler has called 'the paradox of the omnivore' (1). Because human beings are omnivores and able,

physiologically and theoretically, to eat such a wide variety of foods, rules are set to guide people in their food choices. Typically these act by restricting the variety of foods considered edible and therefore placing artificial (man-made) constraints on choice.

One way of understanding food choice is first to envisage a series of filters or screens successively applied to the total availability of all plant and animal products, the net effect of which is to reduce the number of foods from which choices are made (Figure 1). Assuming, hypothetically, that all plants and animals are potentially edible, then the first boundary serves to eliminate the poisonous, the dangerous, the inedible, foods which constitute a risk to the population. The next filter operates to screen, from the total supply of edible foods, those which are culturally inappropriate: pork and shellfish in Jewish cultures, beef for Hindus, grasshoppers for non-indigenous Australians, chickens' feet for most English people. The succeeding screen operates at the level of social groups within a culture, or sub-cultures, again filtering out what is inappropriate - meat and animal products for vegetarians, processed foods for whole-food enthusiasts. Finally, there is a filter for each individual which screens out certain foods which, from past experience or metaphoric association, do not fall into the realm of the edible.

Figure 1. Influences on food choice

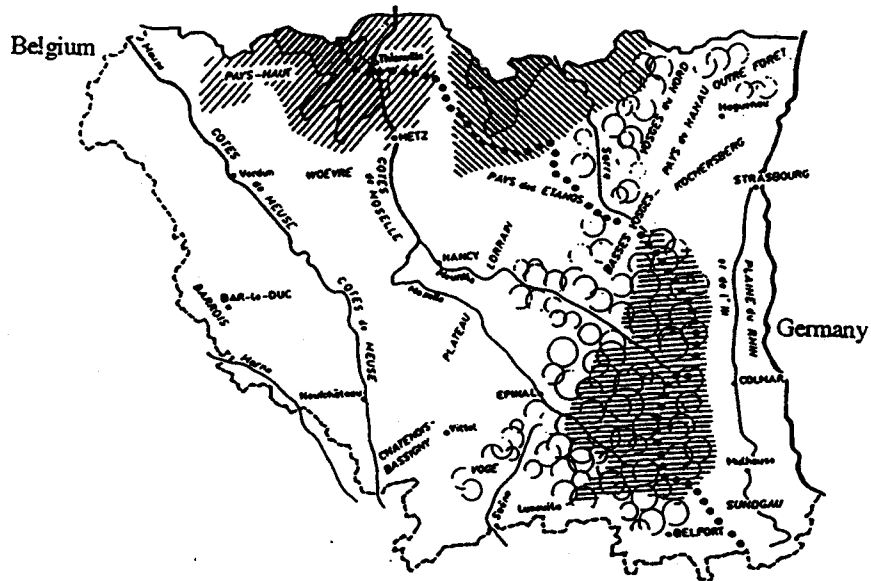


Cultural and social groupings thus condition tastes. In a country as ethnically diverse as Australia, it is important to recognise that there will be cultural groups with particular cultural tastes, and within these social groupings or sub-cultures with another set of tastes, as well as individual preferences expressed within these socio-cultural limits. The answer, then, to the question of why people eat what they eat might be that what they eat reflects what is considered appropriate for their cultural or social group. What an individual eats reflects his or her personal predilections, within what is seen as socially and culturally appropriate.

*An example of a cultural-linguistic boundary*

In north-eastern France, that part of the country so often disputed between neighbouring France and Germany, the population can be divided into predominantly French-speaking and predominantly German-speaking groups. Not surprisingly, the former tend to occupy the western half of the region and the latter the eastern zone. (Figure 2) A survey administered in school classrooms, reaching over 30000 families, solicited information on family eating habits, in particular consumption of regional specialities and traditional dishes (2). One question related to red cabbage, and whether it was eaten in salad (typically French) or cooked (typically German); another to soup, and whether it was eaten in the evening (French custom) or at midday (German custom).

Figure 2



Linguistic border  
(Figures 2-6 adapted from Thouvenot C, Favier A (2))

The results are illustrated in Figures 3 - 6. They show clearly that in the predominantly French-speaking zone families adopted predominantly French eating habits, while in the neighbouring German-speaking zone German eating customs prevailed. People in this region of France eat what they eat because of their cultural background, as represented by language.

Figure 3  
Red cabbage eaten as salad

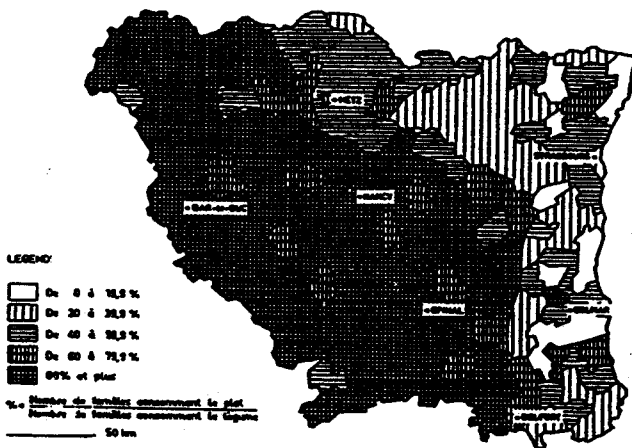
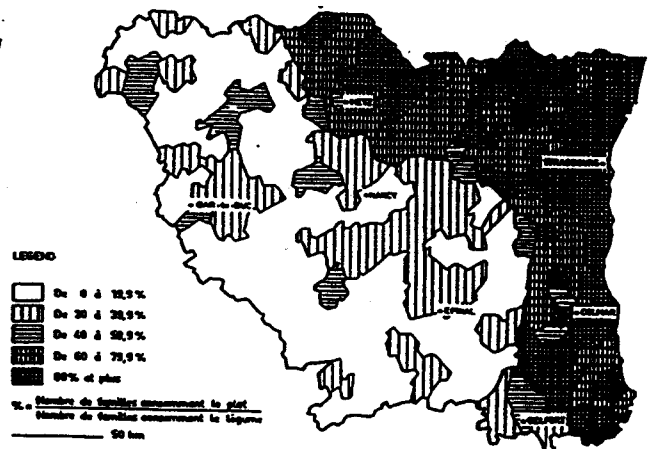


Figure 4  
Red cabbage eaten cooked



(Percentages refer to number of families eating the particular food in the total population of consuming families)

Figure 5  
Soup at midday

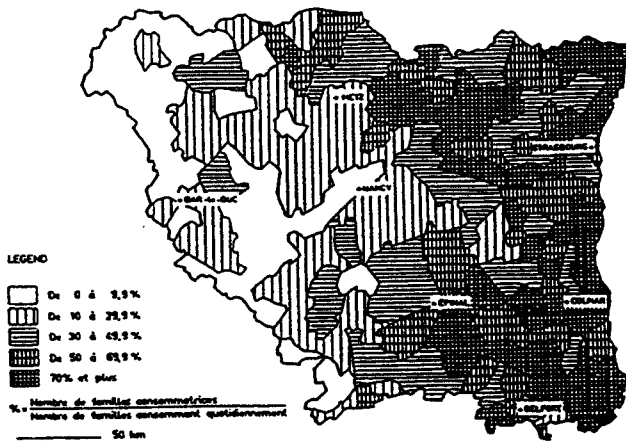
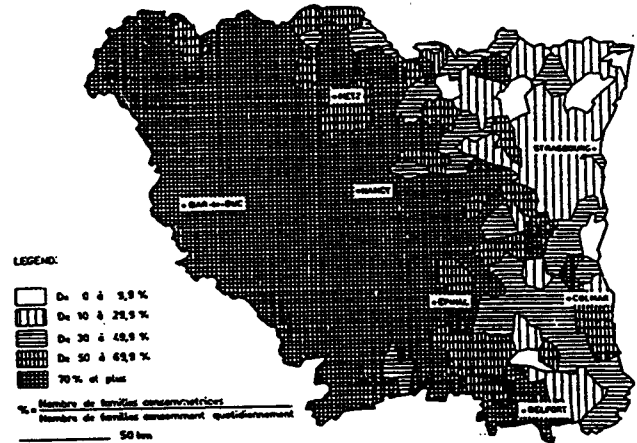


Figure 6  
Soup in the evening



(Percentages refer to number of families eating the particular food in the total population of consuming families)

*Sub-cultural tastes*

The above examples demonstrate how people tend to eat within their culture. This cultural association shapes what they eat and, to a certain extent, explains *why* they eat what they eat. Many similar examples can be offered. It is less commonly recognised that the social group to which people belong can also explain why certain foods - 'junk foods', for example - are eaten.

Anecdotal evidence might suggest that young people are amongst the largest consumers of 'junk food' (eg soft drinks, chocolates, confectionery) and indeed data from the 1983 and 1985 dietary surveys confirm that consumption of 'junk' foods is typically highest amongst people in their mid- and late-teens (Tables 1, 2, 3). In these surveys 'take-away foods' were defined as including chiko rolls, spring rolls, dim sims, fried chicken, hamburgers, meat pies, pasties, pizza, sausage rolls.

Table 1. Consumption of take-away foods (excluding fish), by age and sex, 1983 and 1985

	Males grams	Females grams
10 years	34	26
11 years	38	27
12 years	44	29
13 years	48	30
14 years	47	29
15 years	59	37
25-34 years	53	20
35-44 years	42	12
45-54 year	29	9
55-64 years	20	9

Source: National dietary survey of schoolchildren (aged 10-15 years): 1985; National dietary survey of adults: 1983

Table 2. Consumption of soft drinks, sweetened, by age and sex, 1983 and 1985

	Males grams	Females grams
10 years	60	54
11 years	80	61
12 years	87	79
13 years	95	78
14 years	120	104
15 years	159	108
25-34 years	113	69
35-44 years	61	39
45-54 year	41	24
55-64 years	23	22

Source: National dietary survey of schoolchildren (aged 10-15 years): 1985; National dietary survey of adults: 1983

Table 3. Consumption of sweets and snacks, by age and sex, 1983 and 1985

	Males			Females		
	Confectionery		Snacks grams	Confectionery		Snacks grams
	Chocolate grams	Other grams		Chocolate grams	Other grams	
10 years	7	5	11	6	5	11
11 years	6	4	11	7	7	10
12 years	8	7	12	10	8	13
13 years	11	9	13	10	7	13
14 years	13	6	11	12	7	12
15 years	13	7	12	9	6	11
25-34 years	7	2	3	6	3	1
35-44 years	6	1	1	4	3	2
45-54 years	5	2	1	5	2	1
55-64 years	4	1	0	4	2	0

Source: National dietary survey of schoolchildren (aged 10-15 years): 1985; National dietary survey of adults: 1983

Not only did teenagers have the highest consumption levels, but more of them consumed these foods. Amongst schoolchildren, the proportions consuming take-away foods in each age group gradually increased from 21.8% at 10 years to 27.8% at age 15 years (for boys), and from 17.8% to 22.7% for girls. Amongst adults, the highest proportions consuming such foods were in the youngest age groups, 22.9% for men and 13.9% for women.

But why do young people and teenagers eat relatively large quantities of 'fast foods' (which they themselves might call 'junk foods'), together with soft drinks, chocolates and snack foods such as potato crisps? The answer might lie in the interpretation of 'junk foods' and what they represent.

Nutritionists tend to define them in nutritional terms, as high in fat/salt/sugar, low in fibre/vitamins/minerals, or as 'empty calories', supplying energy and little else. Young people might see them differently. 'Junk foods' can also be defined as foods which are outside normal family customs and usage: because they are eaten at any time they are not part of the standard eating schedule; because they are not usually eaten at table, sitting down, and usually eaten with the fingers rather than with a knife and fork, they are not like a standard meal. Eating 'junk foods' can therefore represent the teenager's desire to express individuality (at the same time conforming to the customs of the social group), a sign of rebellion against parental authority. The reason why teenagers eat 'junk foods' might be to express themselves, as teenagers, with all that is implied in this phase of growing up.

### *Class tastes*

Teenagers constitute a social group with particular food preferences. It is possible that different social classes also have particular food preferences, and that social class itself can offer an explanation as to why people eat what they eat. In other words, social class can circumscribe, if not determine, food choice.

Little research has been done in this area in Australia. In France, however, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has proposed the existence of 'class tastes' which are independent of income level, but more closely correlated with level of education and occupation. According to his theory, the principal opposition (between necessity and luxury, between no choice and freedom of choice), which corresponds roughly to differences in income, 'has masked the secondary opposition ... between the fractions richer in cultural capital and less rich in economic capital, and between those whose assets are structured in the opposite way. ... the theory which makes consumption a simple function of income ... cannot account for cases in which the same income is associated with totally different consumption patterns. Thus, foremen remain attached to 'popular' taste although they earn more than clerical and commercial employees. (3). 'Popular' taste was represented by heavy, fattening foods which are also cheap - pasta, potatoes, beans, bacon, pork. The boundary marking the break with the 'popular' relation to food was positioned between manual workers and clerical and commercial employees.

Bourdieu's diagrammatic representation of tastes in food shows, at one extreme on a horizontal axis, those with high cultural capital but low economic capital, and with little spare time available (a group typified by female teachers), and at the other extreme the professionals (the 'new' rich), typified as having low cultural capital and high economic capital. The tastes of the former (according to 1972 data) tend towards foods classed as *recherché*, exotic, healthy, natural, raw, grilled, while the latter group's preferences were for rich and expensive foods - foie gras, meat, fish and shellfish, wine and *apéritifs*. On the vertical axis a preference for delicate, refined, light and lean foods was opposed to the representation of 'popular' taste, with its salty-fatty-strong-simmered foods, cheap and nourishing.

Despite the qualifications that must be attached to data on household expenditure as estimates of food consumption, which itself is taken to represent food choice and food preferences, Australian data also show that differences in income and total expenditure on food cannot explain all the differences in patterns of food expenditure. The Australian household expenditure surveys do not allow breakdown by occupation or educational level reached, and thus do not permit an analysis analogous to that of Bourdieu. Nevertheless, one can compare average weekly expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages by two household categories of similar size and composition. Table 4 shows that the lower-earning households, in which a higher proportion of weekly household income went towards food, actually spent more per week on fresh fish and on fresh meat (beef, veal, lamb, mutton and pork) than did households with over three times as much average weekly income, despite their spending much less in total on food and non-alcoholic beverages.

Table 4. Average weekly household expenditure by food category, 1980  
 Households A: main source of household income from unemployment/sickness benefit  
 Households B: main source of household income wages and salaries

Food category	Households A \$	Households B \$
Bread	4.48	5.05
Pasta	0.48	0.50
Rice	0.37	0.23
Fresh meat	8.78	8.14
Chicken	2.06	2.59
Fresh fish	1.43	1.16
Frozen fish	0.34	0.29
Cheese	1.38	2.16
Fresh fruit	3.78	5.13
Potatoes	1.26	1.30
Fresh vegetables	4.31	4.90
Baked beans, spaghetti	0.38	0.26
Biscuits	1.31	2.12
Potato crisps	0.79	1.24
Sugar	0.43	0.42
<b>Household characteristics</b>		
Av. weekly income	176.56	585.00
Av. weekly expenditure on food	56.03	82.95
No. persons under 18 years	1.39	1.04
No. persons 18-64 years	1.89	2.09
No. persons over 65 years	0.01	0.05
Total no. in household	3.29	3.18
% married couples with dependent children	46.5%	38.4%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Household Expenditure Survey 1988

Bourdieu insisted that eating habits cannot be studied independently of the whole lifestyle, which must include consideration of the domestic economy and division of labour between the sexes. He also proposed that tastes in food depend on ideas of appropriate body size and shape in the various classes, and their notions of the effects of foods on the body. Taste, he wrote, 'helps to shape the class body', which is therefore 'the most indisputable materialisation of class taste'.

Data on the prevalence of obesity and overweight in Australia in 1989, according to occupation and level of education, show that for both men and women 20-69 years the proportion overweight or obese decreased as the level of education increased, from primary through to tertiary (4). Similarly this proportion was much higher amongst labourers and related workers, both men and women, than among professionals and para-professionals. Data from France also shows incidence of obesity/overweight to be related to level of education attained (5). The usual interpretation of results such as these in Australia is that less educated individuals, who consequently do manual and less skilled work, are less aware of the risks associated with obesity and overweight, less motivated to reduce weight and less informed as to the ways of reducing weight. Following Bourdieu's hypothesis, I would suggest that different classes (as defined by occupation, educational level and income) have different body images and also different tastes in

food. While not proposing that people eat what they eat because of the class to which they belong, I believe that the tastes of that class influence food choices.

The idea of a hierarchy of foods, from the necessary to luxury items, introduces the idea that different foods have different status. In Bourdieu's representation charcuterie was near the bottom of the status ladder, expensive meats such as veal and game close to the top. The concept of differential status introduces the idea that certain foods (assuming that they can be afforded) will be chosen precisely because of their prestige.

#### *An appetite for meat*

Australians in the nineteenth century were amongst the world's largest consumers of meat. Why? One reason was that it was extraordinarily cheap, in Adelaide in 1862 and in Sydney in 1892, a shopper could buy one cabbage or two pounds of beef for about the same price (6). Another reason was the high prestige of meat, according to both popular and scientific scales of values. Traditionally, meat has been valued because it has been more scarce, more difficult to obtain, than plant foods. Superstitions associated with meat, based on the principle of incorporation, attribute to its consumption such qualities as strength, valour, courage and masculinity. Further, eating foods of perceived high status is a way of attributing to the eater the same high status. Finally, medical opinion for much of the century held that only those nutrients which could be transformed into blood - in other words nitrogenous foods, protein foods, of which meat was the prime example - were of value to the individual, since from the blood they were converted to solid, useful muscle. Meat was valued for all of these qualities and, since it was cheap, virtually everyone ate meat in large quantities. In this example, the reason why people ate what they ate (meat) are related to its cost and its prestige.

Prices change, and changes in price, upwards or downwards, will sometimes determine whether people eat or do not eat a particular food, or at least how much of it they will eat, or how often. Similarly, the status of a food changes - as when a product that was rare becomes abundant, or when it is perceived in a new light. Flank steak (or skirt steak) was at one time considered to be of low value; it required a particular cooking technique because of the absence of fat and long muscle fibres. When stir-fry cooking became popular, flank steak was reappraised; it was lean and easily cut into the thin transverse slices which this new technique required, and its status soared. Another example of status change has occurred with pasta; the fashion for Italian cuisine transformed the image of pasta in Australian minds from 'bad' to 'good'.

#### *Conclusion*

The examples presented here show that there is no single, simple answer to the question of why people eat what they eat. Nor are there adequate scientific, nutritional reasons to explain food choice. Amongst the explanations offered here are cultural association; rebellion, the desire to conform and peer pressure, class affinity, cost and prestige. All of these fall outside the field of study when appetite and food intake are considered mechanistically as merely physico-chemical responses to hunger or the desire for food.

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