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[to cite]:

Elizabeth C. Hirschman, Nicole Carscadden, Lindsay Fleischauer, and Martin Hasak, Melissa Mitchell (2004) ,"Exploring the Architecture of Contemporary American Foodways", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 31, eds. Barbara E. Kahn and Mary Frances Luce, Valdosta, GA : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 548-553.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/8962/volumes/v31/NA-31>

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INTRODUCTION

“Food, at the base of civilization, contains deep, multi-layered meanings. Since it is such a strong component and shaper of identity whether on the level of family, community, ethnicity, class, religion, region, or other entity, food is deeply enmeshed in a collective as well as an individual sense of identity. Whether unprocessed or minimally processed foods (wheat, cooking oil), industrially manufactured items (Coca-Cola or Gerber baby food), or hand-made creations (tamales, holiday cookies), people imbue particular foods with meaning and emotion, regardless of whether they are involved in its production or merely its consumption. How and why these foods accrue special meaning—what makes them unique to particular groups of people—can vary widely: method of preparation, long-held tradition, particular ‘flavour principles,’ perception of purity, religious or political significance, signification of wealth or status, or any combination of factors.”

Bentley (2001)

Food has been studied as an anthropological classifier, signifier and identifier from the 1960’s onward (Balfet 1975; Douglas 1970, 1982, 1984; Levi-Strauss 1970, 1973, 1978). And even prior to that, food consumption and food preparation served as objects of study for economists and historians (Lucia 1963; Potter 1954; Simoons 1961). From this body of inquiry it has become clear that food and foodways play an important role in signifying various forms of social order (Bourdieu 1979). For example, seating arrangements, table manners, the utensils used to prepare, serve and consume food, as well as the actual foods eaten, can serve as rhetorical indicators of familial membership, age and gender statuses, socio-economic position and ethnic affiliation (see e.g., Burnett 1968; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Lewis 1989; Merrell 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

Foodstuffs further serve as hierarchical continua of social prestige and power; with access to certain foods (e.g., meat) or drinks (e.g., wine) being reserved for those occupying certain levels of power and privilege (e.g., Barthes 1970; Bourdieu 1979; Korsmeyer 1999; Mintz 1986; Warde 1997). Finally, food and foodways have also been scientized—recast as nutrients, calories, lipids, carbohydrates, proteins and vitamins—a modernist effort to legitimate their study and quantify their utility to society (e.g., Barnes and Shapin 1979; Caplan 1997; Kamminga and Cunningham 1995; Macintosh 1996; McCollum and Simmons 1929; Simmons 1929).

PURPOSE

Our present purpose is to explore these bases of food meaning in an exploratory and modest way among contemporary Americans. In particular, we are interested in the naturalized categories and hierarchies that are currently present in American society. Thus, we do not focus on food consumption micro-cultures (e.g., Thompson and Troester 2002) or on specific food consumption events (e.g., Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Rather we are looking for culturally resonant categories and labeling devices that are used by consumers to ‘make sense’ of food.

METHOD

For this exploratory phase of our research, depth interviews were conducted with five men and four women ranging in age from 17 to 45. Participants were from the Working, Lower Middle and Upper Middle social classes. Ethnicities included Italian, Latino and Irish, although all were from second, third or beyond generations. These informants, therefore, would not be able to reflect variations in food classifications among, say, African-Americans, Muslim-Americans, Korean-Americans or persons who had recently immigrated to the United States. Interviews were conducted at the participant’s home, under conditions of informed consent and anonymity, and were audiotaped. Interview length ranged from 45 minutes to two hours and topics ranged across a variety of food practices/norms. Interview format differed slightly from traditional depth/phenomenological techniques (see Thompson and Troester 2002) in that we did not have participants recount specific food consumption events as a means of eliciting their individualized narratives. Rather, because our focus was upon macro-cultural categorization schema, we would introduce an organizing concept suggested by prior research on food (e.g., male/female foods) and have the participants comment on it by expressing their personal experiences with and exemplars of the category. As will be discussed in the Analysis section, this approach proved to be fruitful.

INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

Following standard interpretive procedure for depth interviews, each transcript was read several times; as the readings progressed, categorical commonalities regarding foodways were detected and noted in marginal commentary. Ultimately, individual passages were identified and matched to an overarching structure of categorization “nodes.” We viewed this overarching structure as a preliminary version of the architecture of American foodways; that is, as a culturally grounded model that represents the interrelated meanings that foodways have for American consumers. This preliminary model is shown in Figure 1; and the discussion below addresses each major aspect of it.

Non-hierarchical Cultural Distinctions

Although parts of our architectural rendering are hierarchical continua (e.g., social class), others are not, and we will address these uni-level dichotomies first.

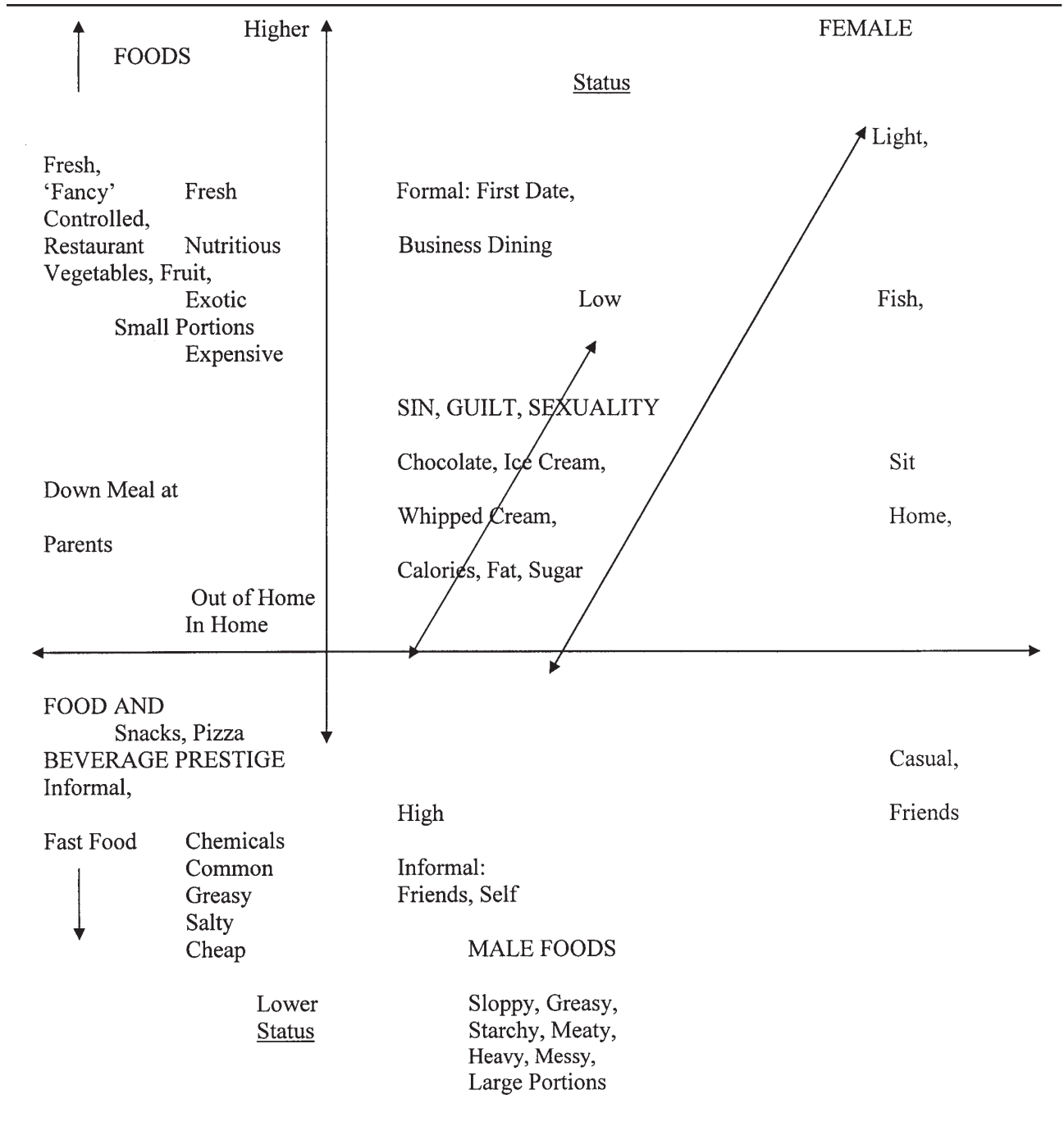
In-Home/Out-of-Home

One important uni-level distinction consumers made was between eating food *in their homes* versus eating food *outside of their homes*; outside areas could include special events, e.g., weddings, picnics, restaurant meals, or common events such as snacks eaten ‘on the run.’ Cross-cutting this basic In/Out dichotomy were modifiers/contextualizers such as Formal or Informal, Necessity or Pleasure, Snack or Full Meal, and Cheap or Expensive.

For example, for some informants, *every* meal eaten out of the home was special, because it happened so rarely:

FIGURE 1

The Architecture of American Foodways: An Exploratory Model



“I can probably count the times I’ve gone out to eat. More so now; I’ve gone out to eat at restaurants now; but when I was growing up [it was] always a home cooked meal.... We never went to restaurants” (Angela).

“When I go out to eat, I think of food as enjoyment, yeah. For the most part at home it’s pretty much a necessity.... Almost every time I eat out it’s for enjoyment, unless it’s like work-related” (Nick).

Messy, Sloppy vs. Controlled

Our participants dichotomized sharply between food consumed outside the home with friends versus food consumed outside with co-workers, dates or bosses. With friends with whom they felt comfortable and at ease, eating ‘outside’ was frequently an opportunity for feasting, rowdiness, sloppy table manners and release from norms of self-control. Diets, concerns about the nutritional quality of the food and etiquette about food portions, messiness or ‘becoming dirty’ were abandoned.

“We eat whatever we want. When me and Gina go out we usually order an appetizer and split it; something like nachos; it doesn’t matter. It could be messy, gross food” (Joellen).

“This is really bad, but... something fried and disgusting like mozzarella sticks; maybe chicken caesar salads we eat a lot, or bagels....” (Lena).

Frank, below, cites several norms governing ‘eating out’ with male friends at a sports event:

F: Yeah, it depends... like tailgating a game you gotta have subs [submarine sandwiches].

I: What kind of subs?

F: Whatever you want, whatever your preference is. You gotta have beer usually.

I: What kind of beer?

F: Cheap, American, domestic beer.

I: Really.

F: In cans. (Laughs.)

I: Not imported?

F: Not imported.

I: And not bottles?

F: Not bottles, it’s not for a tailgate. I guess you could have bottles.

I: Bottles are okay?

F: Yeah, bottles are okay, but if it was me I would get cans.

I: It’s got to be cheap?

F: It’s got to be cheap, especially at a football game.... Like Monday night football, or the Super Bowl, you get chicken wings.

I: What about for a regular season game.

F: The same thing. Not baseball though.

I: Basketball?

F: No.

I: Hockey?

F: Nope, maybe like pizza is universal for all sports [and] chicken wings.

I: I thought chicken wings was only football.

F: No, it’s primarily football, but like I guess you eat the same things as long as you’re going to the game, what kind of game—it doesn’t really matter.

I: You eat the same things as when you’re at the game? Tonight’s football game? You’re at the stadium.

F: Tonight’s football game? I’d get a sub. We’d hang outside for a little while, have a sub, drink a couple of beers.

I: And when you’re in a stadium, do you get any food?

F: No, no I don’t get any food.

I: Why not?

F: For one it’s the price. I refuse to pay the price in the stadium.

I: What’s the price in the stadium?

F: Last time I think it was a hot dog was \$5.25, something like that. I’m not paying that.

I: Would you drink a beer in the stadium?

F: I refuse to pay those prices too. But sometimes you need a beer, and you make a compromise with yourself, but [I’m] definitely not going there and buying beers if I can avoid it.

I: And you mentioned pizza, that goes for all sports?

F: Yeah, definitely, that’s more universal than chicken wings.

Conversely, “eating out” with first dates, co-workers and superiors was described as restrictive. Etiquette was strictly observed, small portions of “clean,” easy to eat food were consumed, and food was not touched or handled. Sauces or gravies that might

splatter or create a “mess” were avoided; as was alcohol, lest one lose self-control.

“If you’re with your boss, you’ll probably tend to watch what you say and try to eat a certain way and look professional” (Lena).

“If I was with someone I just started dating, it would be different than with a [long-term] boyfriend... it wouldn’t be anything messy.... If it was someone I hardly knew, girl or guy, I would be more cautious. I wouldn’t order spaghetti or even a salad; salads are kind of messy. I would be more likely to have coffee after dinner instead of chocolate cake.... I would try to order something more tasteful or classy. I probably wouldn’t eat it all.... I would try to eat slower, not talk with my mouth full, not make a mess of my plate....” (Joellen).

I would not get anything I had to touch with my fingers or hands. I would probably get chicken or seafood. I wouldn’t eat pasta or anything messy... [I’d get] something that would be very easy for me to eat” (Nick).

Food at Home

Food prepared at home was usually described by our participants as “thrown together,” “easy,” “just to eat something,” “simple” and frequently “sloppy.” Those who often ate at home by themselves tended to eat ‘snack’ foods, which they described as ready-made (microwave meals), sandwiches or even cereal (for dinner). Television often served as a companion for these meals. As one informant put it: “When the tv is on, I’m *not* eating alone.” Another described the tv accompaniment to his at-home meals as being “like a beverage.”

A secondary classificatory device for at-home dining was “sitting down” to a “full meal.” This was used to reference a multi-course meal, served to multiple family members and served at the “appropriate” mealtime. Underlying this was the iconic image of a large family, gathered around a dining table, eating and talking together over an extended period of time. Usually the mother of the family would prepare the meal, often using ‘favorite’ or ‘traditional’ recipes. Among our participants, such sitdown-full-meals were the exception, rather than the norm; but they were idealized as a ‘good’ way to eat or the ‘right’ way to eat (see also Wallendorf and Arnould 1991).

“I miss sitting down at meals, like on Sunday which was always a big meal.... We don’t even do that anymore because we are so spread out all over the place. I miss those big meals, just talking with everybody. Eating on the run sucks.... Every night [at] 6 o’clock we used to sit down. We all knew that was dinnertime; for an hour [from] 6 to 7. Now everybody eats 3, 4, 5, 8, 10, whenever they get in from doing something” (Angelina).

FOOD QUALITY/NUTRITION HIERARCHIES

As depicted in Figure One, there was consonance between the hierarchical continua of food quality, as associated with socioeconomic status, and cultural notions of sound nutrition, especially when nutrition was cast as embodying scientized food notions such as the proportion of carbohydrates, lipids and proteins in one’s diet, food freshness, and the presence/absence of preservatives, sodium, and sugars in foodstuffs (see also Thompson and Troester 2002). In general, our participants saw social class positively correlated with nutrition, such that “affluent” or “upper class” persons ate more nutritious or ‘healthier’ foods. However, this correlation was not

perfect or comprehensive. Upper class persons were also seen as eating more exotic or unusual foods, such as caviar, which were not viewed as being nutritious/healthy. However, the correlation at the lower end of the continua did seem to approach both 100% and complete comprehension, in that poorer/lower class persons were consistently seen as eating poor quality, non-nutritious foods.

More specifically, as will be documented through excerpts below, our informants associated higher levels of protein, red meat, seafood, and fresh vegetable consumption with higher levels of affluence. Conversely poorer consumers were characterized as eating foods that were salty, greasy, filling, starchy, carbohydrate-laden, processed with chemicals and preservatives, high in calories, low in nutrition, and available as “fast food” or as “snacks.”

“Upper class food is food that’s not greasy; food that’s like fresh, and probably expensive. Lower class food is like fast food or just thrown together... just not healthy” (Sean).

“What are some high status foods?”

“Caviar. It shows that you have money. It’s probably gross and doesn’t even taste good, but it’s expensive. Low-budget foods are stuff like Ramen noodles that cost like 10 cents per package. Usually low-status foods are ones that are really bad for you.... They are filled with salt, and MSG and crap. Macaroni and cheese in a box where it’s filled with chemicals. Filet mignon would be a higher-status food. Some restaurants have duck or other weird stuff on the menu; that would be a more expensive restaurant” (Joellen).

“Honey Dijon [mustard]. Grey Poupon [mustard]. If you go to a fancy restaurant, they will use a fancy name for chicken.... It goes hand-in-hand with price. Steak and prime rib would be higher class, and lower class would be hamburgers” (Erwin).

“Well, I think rich people generally have fresher food, food that would be harder to get or cost more money to get absolutely fresh, especially a lot of fresh produce like salad. All the extras would be included in the salad too, stuff like fancy olives and mushrooms. I could see a lot of fresh fruit too and not just oranges and the typical stuff you see but the more exotic stuff like kiwis and, umm, pineapples.... Probably more seafood also which is, well some of it is healthy, some of it is having a lot cholesterol, but anyway I think you would see more of that.... At a poor person’s house, I could see there being a lot of the “fillers” like pasta and bread and more fattening types of food. Something where they (the poor people) could feed a lot of them for the money, pasta goes a long way, rice goes a long way...” (Joni).

As Orlove (1994) notes, in many cultures higher status is associated with the consumption of protein-rich foods, especially ‘red’ meats, whereas bread, grains and other carbohydrate-rich foods are equated with lower status (and see also Barthes 1970).

GENDER AND SEXUALITY/FERTILITY

Scholliers (2001) describes his family’s concern that he rejected eating red meat as a child in Belgium, noting that his father likely viewed it as a rejection of masculinity. And analogously, our informants easily classified foods into masculine and feminine categories. Associated with males and maleness were foods such as meat, especially beef muscle, starches such as potatoes, fats and fried foods, sandwiches (especially large, cumbersome ones), and alcohol, particularly beer and distilled liquors. Men were also

viewed as eating larger portions of food, usually in a sloppy, messy and out-of-control manner. They were deemed to be more frequent patrons of “fast food” restaurants and “junk food” snacks. The eating habits of adult males were often equated with those of children or even animals: dirty, sloppy, hand-to-mouth, out of control.

Conversely, our participants described women’s typical foods as “white/light” meat (e.g., chicken, especially breast filets, fish), leafy vegetables, often eaten uncooked as in a salad, and fresh fruits. Women and girls were characterized as using proper utensils to eat their food, avoiding making a mess or getting “dirty” from spattered food, and maintaining better control over the size of bites and overall portions of the foods they consumed. Clearly, these food stereotypes echo widespread gender categorization schemas (see e.g., Counihan and Kaplan 1998).

Erwin, when asked about what foods a man and woman might like to eat, responded:

“Steak and beer is always for men. I’m not sure for women.... [Maybe] chicken. It’s not messy and it’s not heavy.... A girl doesn’t want to get messy on a first date.”

Frank gave a similar response:

“I think a prime example of a guy food is steak. Meat and potatoes.... [For women] something vegetarian.”

I.: “What about a woman eating a steak?”

F.: “I think that’s cool, it’s very cool. I’m proud of a girl that can eat [steak].... That’s the kind of girl you’ve got to marry.”

As did Sean:

“Guys drink beer; girls drink wine. Guys [eat] steak, girls [eat] seafood.”

The women to whom we spoke presented the same gender characterizations:

“Well guys definitely tend to drink beer more than girls do and maybe they tend to eat more hamburgers and like steak. I think that guys tend to eat more than girls” (Lena).

“Probably guys would go for the red meats and stuff like that. Girls are more chicken eaters.... Pasta eaters.... I always envision guys eating sandwiches. Like big, huge sandwiches.... and girls are more like vegetables and fruits.... My dad would always have a steak. At least twice a week my mom would make steaks for him. And my sister and me... would eat chicken, vegetables... where my father and brother would eat steaks and bread” (Joellen)

These metaphoric equivalences of course echo the gender norms that pervade most of American culture. Women are deemed lighter, more genteel, more fragile than men, therefore requiring less aggressive fare. Men, viewed as warriors and laborers, are believed to require the strength and body mass provided by muscle meats and starches (see e.g., Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Lakoff 1987; Orlove 1997).

Fertility/Sexuality

Related to these gendered food categories are beliefs about fertility and sexuality that are also linked to particular foods. Given Americans’ conflicted feelings about their sexuality, most of our informants mixed notions of sexuality with not only concepts of

gender, but also with feelings of sin, guilt and indulgence/pleasure. Like food, sexuality tempts us to consume “the forbidden,” to abandon self-control. In particular, chocolate was seen as an aphrodisiac for women. Fruits – sweet, juicy and fed from hand to mouth – were also characterized as sexual stimulants. And whipped cream, requiring licking and filled with fat and sugar, was viewed as a sexual metaphor.

“Chocolate covered strawberries you can actually feed to somebody and that’s always fun.... Champagne and wine....” (Sean).

“Strawberries, champagne, wine, whipped cream, ice cream.... They’re sweet, they taste good and, of course, with champagne you get a little tipsy” (Lena).

“Ice cream, hot fudge, chocolate covered strawberries.... Stuff that melts” (Angela).

“Grapes could be sexual.... I’ve seen scenes where people are laying naked eating grapes, or the woman is feeding the man grapes....” (Joni).

“I think most of fruit... juicy fruits or just very ripe fruits like strawberries or peaches... soft type foods... chocolate... and things that are very sweet” (Nick).

From prior discussion, we can see that most of these associations are with “feminine” foods that either represent the female body (e.g., peaches) or represent reproduction/fertility (grapes). Americans’ notions of sinfulness and sexuality are seen in “bad but delicious” foods such as chocolate, ice cream and whipped cream.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present exploratory study has outlined some of the architecture underlying American food beliefs and practices. Clearly, this effort is quite preliminary and much more detailed excavation of American foodways is required. Shown in our tentative model but left unaddressed in this brief report are such category schema as food *seasonality*, both in content and preparation. For example, summer is not only associated with the availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, but also with outdoor meal preparation and consumption (picnics, hiking, grilling). Conversely, winter may be culturally associated with heavier foods, such as stews, casseroles, pastries, potatoes that create a sense of warmth, fullness and security. Notably, several feast-days, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Years occur in the winter time and may have ancient roots in human concerns about maintaining sufficient food supplies to survive the barrenness of winter.

Also unexplored at present are consumers’ perceptions of food *ethnicity*, for example which foods are associated with particular racial and religious subcultures? How does this association influence how they are prepared, when they are consumed and who eats them?

With regard to ethnicity, foods can have positive and negative cultural associations that group members must deal with. For example, consuming watermelon and fried chicken is incorporated into negative stereotypes about African-Americans. Conversely, some groups have seen ethnically-identified foods ‘slip-away’ from being associated with a given ethnicity and become circulated in the wider culture; examples would include bagels, pita bread, sushi and salsa.

We also were not able to attend to issues of food taboos and segregation. Why are some foods, e.g., wine, coffee, not served to

American children when they are permitted in other cultures? Why are foods typically eaten in a given order, e.g., salad, meat and starch, sweet dessert? Are there social taboos that operate to prevent specific genders from eating given foods (e.g., females and raw beef)? Food marketers have had to deal with some of these restrictions when attempting to broaden the usage of particular items. For example, efforts (largely unsuccessful) were made to re-position orange juice as an all-day (not just breakfast) beverage. Iced tea has been more successfully re-positioned as a men’s beverage, by emphasizing its ‘briskness’ (=potency). Males still seem hesitant to accept salads as ‘meals’ however, and are likely more stigmatized if vegetarian, than are women.

And finally, we did not address iconic American foods, such as Coca Cola, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, potato chips, hot dogs and corn-on-the-cob, which may represent nonculinary cultural constructs such as democracy, materialism, leisure and modernity. Identifying the deeper aspects of American culture embodied in our foodstuffs (as seen both by Americans and non-Americans) would be a useful avenue to comprehending our national image. Why are we the Fast Food Nation? And, what does this signify? Why has the term ‘McDonaldization’ come into play in cultural discourse? What are the positive and negative meanings of Coca Cola as an icon of America? Obviously, there is an enormous terrain of food meaning available for exploration by consumer researchers, which we have not touched upon in the present effort.

Despite these omissions, however, we believe that the initial mapping shown in Figure One may be of benefit to consumer researchers, especially in the area of gender studies. For example, our model suggests that “fancy restaurants” and sit down dinners at home may both be seen as somewhat more feminine, due to elements of self control and formality. Conversely, snacking and fast food dining seem to both evoke maleness, because they are seen as inherently dirty, messy, uncontrolled and somewhat ‘bad for you.’ Read in this way, sexual foods may also evoke aspects of maleness because they represent a loss of control, eating with hands, high caloric content and messiness.

We hope this initial effort is helpful and may stimulate additional inquiry into this under-studied area.

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