

## Food as a link with ourselves

Marie Walser, Tristan Fournier and Nicolas Bricas

*Food, beyond its biological and health functions, connects us with ourselves. It is a source of sensory experience and pleasure, provides the building blocks for our individual and collective identities, and is a vehicle for self-optimization. What we eat today shapes the fate of our bodies and minds and, thus, our futures.*

Food is not just any consumer commodity. Despite its commonplace nature, eaters face a fundamental paradox every day: eating is vitally essential, yet it involves taking risks (Fischler, 1990). Apart from drugs, food is one of the very few things that, once ingested, is processed to facilitate its assimilation. It thus transits from the outer world to the individual's interior – from the outside to the inside – transcending personal barriers. The mouth could therefore be likened to a chamber with a safety valve that allows food to be swallowed or not. The subsequent journey of food within the body reshapes the most intimate aspects of the individual on biological, emotional, identity and moral levels. Hence, food intake is not only objective but also symbolic: it influences the eater's well-being as well as their overall sense of self and self-affirmation. This chapter explores this connection to the self through food.

### A health component

The first thought that springs to mind when contemplating the role of food is often: 'it's essential for life!' Definitively ceasing to eat would rapidly result in death. Apart from extreme situations of total deprivation or intoxication, eating 'well' is widely regarded as key to good health.

Awareness of the nexus between food and health is certainly not new. This connection has been recognized in dietetic principles since ancient times. According to Hippocrates, as well as traditional Chinese medicine and Indian Ayurvedic medicine practitioners, some foods may serve as medicine to maintain a healthy individual's state or to restore the sick to health. Foodstuffs such as garlic and ginger in China or asparagus and barley in Europe are thus often used together in daily cooking and for therapeutic purposes, sometimes in combination with pharmaceutical remedies (Ausécache, 2006; Marie, 2015). Dietary advice on food was long underpinned by empirical evidence due to a lack of knowledge of the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying the relationship between food and health. Ancient European medicine, for instance, maintained that diet improved health when the four fundamental elements that make up the body – water, earth, air and fire – were in balance. Some of these dietary tenets were nevertheless effective. For instance, since ancient times, endemic goitre (an increase in the volume of the thyroid gland due to iodine deficiency) had been treated by prescribing marine-derived remedies, even though no one was aware of the existence of iodine or of the thyroid gland (Jaffiol, 2011). Since the seventeenth century, in Western societies, dietetics has gradually given rise to the nutritional sciences, with research shedding light on the microconstituents of food (macro- and micronutrients, bacteria etc.) and their cellular and molecular mechanisms of action on the human body (Chapter 9).

The food diet is certainly only one of several components of health – alongside physical activity, lifestyle, sleep and genetics, for example – yet its effects on bodily functions are so profound that it perpetually redefines human beings on a biological level. Food quality affects parameters as diverse as a person's height, life expectancy, and physical and intellectual abilities. Malnutrition, when it affects young children or their parents prior to conception, can have lifelong ramifications for individuals. A child's 'first 1,000 days of life' (from conception to two years of age) are thus seen as a critical window of opportunity during which dietary practices (in utero, breastfeeding, diet diversification etc.) may influence the risk of developing diseases in adulthood. Even before birth, there is evidence of fetal programming of obesity and metabolic diseases (Barker, 1998).

Beyond malnutrition, micronutrient deficiencies (vitamins, minerals) can impair certain physiological functions such as eyesight and immunity, while overeating may lead to overweight, obesity and certain non-communicable diseases (cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer). Moreover, a person's health can be affected by substandard food quality, with adverse effects ranging from vomiting to death in the most acute cases. In

industrialized societies, the medium-term health effects of certain chemical compounds contained in food, such as microplastics, pesticides and additives, are also starting to be identified (Tandel, 2011; Bouwmeester et al., 2015; Kim et al., 2017).

Recent advances in nutrition, which have highlighted the critical roles of intestinal microbiota and epigenetics, have provided a more detailed understanding of the link between diet and health. Food, far from being merely one of many determinants of health, exerts a lasting effect on our bodies.

### A sensory and emotional experience

Foods all have in common that they trigger a taste sensation when placed in the mouth. The sense of taste, like those of sight, touch and smell, transmits information to the nervous system, thereby enabling the eater to determine the nature and quality of the food. Yet it also has the particularity of causing an ‘affective resonance of information’ (Chiva, 1983): the taste of food triggers a clear and immediate emotional response associated with a hedonic dimension (Chiva, 1979; Le Magnen, 1984). These emotions are primarily innate – newborns subjected to taste stimulations systematically show a mimicry response that differs depending on the sapid quality of the stimulus (Steiner, 1974). This reaction is unintentional in the first months of life (Chiva, 1983); it is an affective reflex rather than the result of cognitive processing of sensory information. Cognitive processes subsequently take precedence in shaping food choices. Yet the pleasure – or displeasure – induced by the taste sensation remains a fundamental driver of food intake (Le Magnen, 1951) and a powerful regulator of eating behaviour through its ability to change based on a person’s physiological state (Cabanac, 2010; Dupuy, 2013).

Throughout life (and as early as pregnancy, when the child’s eating patterns begin to develop), biological and socio-cultural processes are interwoven to shape the unique tastes of each individual. The food neophobia phase, which usually occurs during childhood between the ages of three and seven, is an anthropological landmark in which children experiment and build their own food choices (Fischler, 1990; Rochedy and Poulain, 2015). At first, the child often refuses foods that are unfamiliar or prepared in new ways (Rigal, 2006). Their taste palette will subsequently broaden to a varying extent, depending on the child’s socio-cultural and emotional background. The taste of food, along with its associated representations and the circumstances in which it is consumed, shapes

the complex configuration of food pleasure through which a person asserts their status as a plural eater (Corbeau, 1997; Dupuy, 2013). On a more general level, psychologically, food plays a role in structuring the individual's relationship with pleasure. The oral phase, which is characterized by the pleasure induced by sucking when the infant nurses and the satisfaction of the biological tension caused by hunger, is a key stage in the development of their personality (Freud, 1905).

The act of eating is sometimes driven solely by the quest for pleasure. Moreover, even prior to eating, simply thinking about a food may trigger a specific emotion linked to individual appetites and histories, creating a desire to concretely relive this emotion through the experience of eating. From the food-preparation stage, one may derive sensory pleasure from the smells, the combination of tastes and textures, and the presentation of food on the plate. The prospect of pleasure is itself a source of satisfaction, which can also contribute to promoting a healthier diet when it involves reducing the amount of food consumed (Chandon and Jouvent, 2017). Like Proust's madeleine, food is thus a vector of well-being and even of fulfilment and comfort. We should note that the affective dimension of food is also involved in the broad range of eating disorders (EDs) that can develop as a way to control negative emotions (Bourdier, 2017). Food hedonism – through both its organoleptic and contextual dimensions – therefore contributes to eaters' emotional balance.

### A medium of individual identity

Eating means accepting to be transformed by food through the ingestion of all or part of its properties. Humans feed on nutrients, yet they are also nourished by meaning. Food intake occurs on a biological level but also on an imaginary one, where the symbolic, moral and intellectual qualities of foods, particularly those of the animals consumed, are transferred to the eater (Fischler, 1990) (Chapter 3). Depending on the socio-cultural context, some foods are specifically prized for their real and imagined benefits. Meat is regarded as a food that conveys strength (Chapter 13). The people of northeast India whom Lucien Lévy-Bruhl interviewed more than a century ago claimed that they liked eating owls to improve their night vision (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926). In the Bulu community of southern Cameroon, some foods are considered remedies for both physiological and so-called supernatural diseases (Otye Elom, 2018).

Conversely, eating a food deemed to have bad symbolic qualities poses a threat to the eater's identity. For example, warriors in some communities studied

by James George Frazer in 1890 avoided eating hare or hedgehog ‘for fear of losing their courage or shrinking away from danger’ (Frazer, 1894). Moreover, the symbolic impurity of a food implies a risk of contamination (Douglas, 1969), which may lead to cognitive revulsion and inhibit consumption. This is the case of foods that are labelled as forbidden in certain religions or cultures. Hence even food that may be considered ‘good to eat’ (*bon à manger*), as it is safe for the body, is not always ‘good to think about’ (*bon à penser*) (Lévi-Strauss, 2021). Since we become what we eat, each mouthful represents an opportunity or a risk (Fischler, 1990).

‘Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you who you are.’ Two centuries ago, in his book *The Physiology of Taste* (first published in French in 1825), Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1971) described food as a kind of ‘mirror of the self’. By reflecting our identities as eaters, forged from our personal histories, socio-cultural roots and shared values and beliefs, it is revealing of our person and our interactions with the collective. In this regard, the concept of incorporation provides a framework for exploring the relationship between the individual and the collective, for to eat is to embed oneself in a community and incorporate its rules (Fischler, 1990) (Chapter 2). From a constructivist perspective, identity is a dynamic and reflexive process that is continually reshaped by the individual’s various structuring experiences of socialization across different spheres of activity (Dubar, 1991). By eating, individuals adopt the values and codes of the group to which they belong. At the same time, they assert their individuality, sometimes through adaptation or opposition and often by influencing the group in return. Meals thus appear to constitute a key site of socialization from the earliest age (Larson et al., 2006; Dupuy, 2013; Comoretto, 2015). A child, through contact with their close circle, gradually adopts the family’s range of preferred foods (Watiez, 1994) while asserting their position as an individual within the collective identity (Chapter 2). In many other situations, eaters use food to assert their position in a specific social context, engaging in processes of compliance, identification, distinction, provocation or transgression. The consumption of alcohol among adolescents and young adults clearly exemplifies this identity-assertion process (Palierne et al., 2015).

The way in which each eater relates to their food is therefore shaped by their own experiences. Food practices – particularly cooking and the possibilities it offers for creativity and self-distinction – reflect the eater’s individual history. This may involve a recipe inherited from one’s grandmother and adapted to suit the person’s current mood, an exotic food discovered during a trip and bought from a gourmet shop, a striking dish recreated after a dinner at a restaurant,

a food supplement consumed as part of a medical treatment and so on. Food choices reveal a symbolic and social construction of the 'self', conveying a person's mindset, constraints and preferences.

### A form of self-optimization

Food can also be a vehicle for presenting oneself to the world. In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) approaches the social world as a theatre: actors (us) have roles that are prepared backstage (where rehearsals take place) and performed in plays (social interactions) before an audience (the others). The restaurant is a typical example of a venue where people stage themselves in a relatively explicit and codified way and where food may serve as a social foil. The dishes selected and openly savoured, as well as those prepared privately in the kitchen for a spouse, family or friends or to bring to work, reveal a whole part of a person. This process is far from trivial: it reflects our tastes, values, living standards, commitments and degree of receptiveness to nutritional recommendations or ethical debates. This self-staging mechanism has become all the more pronounced with the current growth of the self-help market and the widespread use of social media and mobile apps, which allow the public sharing of pictures of one's dishes and meals. One's diet can thus become a narcissistic and selfish endeavour, an ordinary everyday self-narration tool (Hassoun, 2010) geared towards publicly flaunting oneself in the best light. Food consumption is therefore constantly articulating the individual and the collective, while also being the outcome of the convergence of 'centrifugal' and 'centripetal' forces (Corbeau, 1992).

But what do we actually stage when we invite friends to a barbecue evening or share a picture online of the cake we made for our child's birthday? This process of promoting part of oneself may relate to the idea of (dietary) performance: we perform what others expect of us, or rather what we think they expect of us, or what we would like them to think of us. This performance is closely dependent on the moral injunctions that permeate our society, the degree of appropriation of which varies based on the prevailing social-attachment criteria such as class, age and gender (Parsons, 2015). If one belongs to the upper-middle class, it might be a matter – in the case of a barbecue with friends – of showing that one has assimilated the nutritional norm but is also able to deviate from it on social and festive occasions. If one is a man, it may – in the case of the birthday cake – involve showing one's commitment to the egalitarian gender norm by presenting

oneself as a so-called modern man who knows how to cook and care for his children.

These moral injunctions – that is, healthy eating (Adamiec, 2016) and sharing domestic chores (Fidolini and Fournier, 2022) – trigger reactions ranging from enthusiastic support to outright rejection, with more implicit or negotiated positions in between. The question of interest here is, above all, how individuals appropriate these injunctions to optimize their diet. What do they make of them in practice? The everyday act of eating could be likened to the bed of a river that always flows in the same direction but meanders according to the roughness of the landscape. The moral injunctions mentioned above, as well as the biographical events and the interaction settings in which food is consumed, constitute these rough features. They challenge eaters and foster their reflexivity; that is, they drive them to gain perspective on themselves and the ability to (self-)critique. This also sometimes enables eaters to do things differently, which can lead them to consume new categories of food products (food supplements, organic food etc.) or to adopt new practices (veganism, ‘free-from’ diets etc.).

This reflexivity may therefore be enacted on a daily basis through cooking and eating. Moreover, it may be conducive to wandering (deliberately strolling through a market or allowing oneself to ‘waste time’ making a dish from scratch) and even lead to individual experimentation (monotrophic diets, intermittent fasting etc.). All of this improvisation, which may be both discreet and instructive, has a transformative potential that ranges from seeking a more relaxed relationship with oneself to individual and collective forms of politicization of food (Lepiller and Yount-André, 2020). In this sense, food can be grasped as a form of self-optimization (Dalgarrondo and Fournier, 2019), that is, as a social space, a technique or yet a practice that provides a means of seeking and sometimes achieving a satisfactory compromise between norms and possibilities, between moral injunctions and individual preferences.

## Conclusion

To eat is to satisfy hunger, treat oneself and reveal oneself to others in the moment. A nourished body will almost instantly emit messages of satisfaction, more or less pleasant emotions and regulatory signals, particularly satiety. Yet eating is also a long-term self-construction process. Food shapes our bodies and minds through its biological, hedonic, social and identity dimensions. We become what we eat, consciously or subconsciously, voluntarily or not.

Becoming aware of this relationship with ourselves, woven through food consumption, enables us to gain some perspective on this essential component of our lives, while contemplating the question – beyond who we are – of who we want to be. Eaters, through their food and the ways they improvise it, find ways to ‘optimize’ their lives so as to fulfil their own expectations or those of others, while also navigating the constraints placed upon them. However, the configuration of certain forms of food consumption is now changing the situation. In light of the range of products available on the market, people can tailor their own special diet and optimize it according to their genetic profile, preferences and lifestyle. These new options broaden the scope of opportunities while also raising questions about the reshaping of the relationship between eaters and their tablemates, food retailers and, more generally, their food culture. Food is clearly a vehicle for connecting with others.

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