



## The cultural dimension of food



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# Executive Summary

From earliest times, man—like every other species on the planet—has interacted with nature according to one overriding imperative: survival. For a very long time, this imperative was based not only on the need to protect himself from what, at times, were highly adverse environmental conditions, but above all, on his ability to win the challenge of eating or being eaten.

Continuously exposed to the threat of becoming food themselves, our ancestors developed an increasingly sophisticated approach to nature, long before the advent of agriculture approximately 15,000 years ago. The major phases in this process are well known. In the Paleolithic Age, man had already discovered and begun to use fire. During the same period, he began to invent numerous tools—first in stone and later in metal—for hunting, fishing, defense and building shelter.

Whether gathering fruit from a tree or killing his prey, man's relationship with the environment around him has always been based on transforming it.

As mentioned, the discovery of **fire** marked a major step in man's ability to **manipulate nature**. Used alternately for heat, light, protection from wild beasts, send messages and dry clothing, fire made possible progressive cultural developments that were enormously important, especially in terms of diet. For Levi Strauss, **cooking food using fire is "the invention which made human beings human"**. Before learning about cooking, food (and especially meat) was eaten raw, spoiled or rotten. The use of fire brought about a decisive change.

Cooking symbolically marks a transition from nature to culture, and also from nature to society, given that while *raw* is natural in origin, *cooked* implies a step that is both cultural and social.

From that point on, food as such becomes the basis for extraordinary developments in the social and cultural nature of human beings. As Rozin states, national cuisines incarnate the dietary wisdom of populations and their respective cultures.

We can therefore say that the history of man's relationship with food has been an extraordinary social and cultural epic, a probing search for significance. What was once perhaps the most difficult aspect of human existence (the search for food to nourish himself) changed from *critical factor to opportunity*.

Focusing on this fundamental consideration, this document reviews the most important steps in the concrete transformation and reflections that have accompanied the development of the man-food relationship.

Among the many topics that could conveniently have been explored, the choice was made to concentrate on a view that highlights, above all, the **cultural importance of food in the religious dimension, in that of conviviality and in identification within the great culinary traditions** (Mediterranean, Oriental, Anglo-Saxon), emphasizing, in more recent times, the **gradual loss of content of the food-culture relationship**.

At a certain point in history, food ceases to be heedless pleasure: other considerations start to creep in, such as the increasing demand of **functionality**, health worries become the modern problems that Pollan has brilliantly defined "**the omnivore's dilemma**" - referring to the typical difficulty of human beings, as omnivorous creatures, to define the composition of their diet.

This brings us to the present when the increasing demand for authenticity arises and is linked to the rediscovery of sustainability in all its forms (environment, health, social relations) that calls the food industry to account, demanding that it accept new responsibilities.

This is the turning point. What we have today, in the field of food styles, is the opportunity to **rethink**, according to new viewpoints, our entire **relationship with food**. According to Bauman's analysis, the emerging traits of this new approach could be situated between the pleasure of the sensory experience and the demand for situational convenience that allows for full enjoyment of the food consumed. **Speed**, that has become one of the characterizing elements of our time, will certainly affect our relationship with food, in very different ways from those we already know (and that are the expression of a tragic loss of cultural content).

And this introduces two other significant dimensions: from the need of more simplified food preparation (making it possible to gain time lacking today and compensate for the loss of food culture that makes it impossible to operate independently in this area); to that of portability - anywhere and everywhere - viewed as ease in enjoying the desired eating style, even in an increasingly hectic world.

Ritual is also an aspect impacting on our relationship with food. Regaining ritual aspects will provide the dimension of sense and reassurance that contributes to making the eating experience more intense.

In the light of these considerations relative to the cultural implications of food, we believe in the long run that to address the future of food anew means:

- valorizing the rich and varied aspect of **conviviality**;
- protecting **local territorial variety**, with a view to expansion;
- transferring **knowledge and know-how** as extraordinary funds of cultural wealth;
- returning to a healthy relationship with the territory and the context of raw materials, aiming toward the **excellence of the ingredients**;
- rediscovering the value of food as a means to achieving a **fertile relationship across the generations**, in the simplicity and clarity of its benefits;
- recovering **ancient flavors**, which can be renewed in our modern taste;
- spreading the culture of taste and the art of good living through authentic food.



# 1. The cultural dimension of food

## 1.1 Food–marriage of nature and culture

From earliest times, man–like every other species on the planet–has interacted with nature according to one overriding imperative: survival. For a very long time, this imperative was based not only on the need to protect himself from what, at times, were highly adverse environmental conditions, but above all, on his ability to win the challenge of **eating or being eaten**. The modern-day film industry has often allowed us to experience the anxiety of these primordial times. Wandering in search of food since the dawn of time, man has placed his survival in two practical principles: the gathering of anything edible and hunting. According to a leading human ethologist, “man has lived as a hunter-gatherer for 99 percent of his history, and this may also have shaped him biologically”<sup>1</sup>. Whether gathering fruit from a tree or killing his prey, man’s relationship with the environment around him has always been based on transforming it.

Continuously exposed to the threat of becoming food themselves, our ancestors developed an increasingly sophisticated approach to nature, way before the advent of agriculture approximately 15,000 years ago. The major phases in this process are well known. In the Paleolithic Age, man had already discovered and begun to use fire. During the same period, he created a growing number of tools–first in stone and later in metal–for hunting, fishing, defense and building shelter. Physically ill-equipped compared with other animals, the hunter-gatherer did have significant mental resources and tremendous curiosity.

In some hunter-gatherer populations, the diet was significantly based on game and, as a result, on meat consumption. This is true even in modern-day hunter-gatherer populations in the arctic and sub-arctic regions where there is very little else to eat. But the majority of contemporary experts believe that most hunter-gatherers of the past lived predominantly on foods derived from plants or–in areas near the sea and rivers–fish and shellfish. Some population were almost exclusively vegetarian<sup>2</sup>.

During the Paleolithic era, *Homo erectus* was replaced by *Homo sapiens*, and the size of the brain expanded from approx. 400 cubic centimeters to the current 1400 cubic

centimeters. A large brain requires an extraordinary amount of nutrients. However, Anderson challenges the theory that this is an explanation for the drive to hunt and eat meat, given the inadequate presence of teeth and claws on man and the questionable efficiency of primitive hunting instruments. He has another explanation for the **interconnection between the brain and diet**:

*“In my view, the only credible theory of the evolution of the human diet is that the first hominids continued to improve as omnivores. They improved in finding meat, looking for carrion and hunting, but also in finding roots, seeds, sprouts, eggs and anything else edible. [...] The only way in which an animal with a large and demanding brain could survive is by using that brain for thinking about how to utilize a vast range of good foods to obtain maximum nutrition with least effort”* (Anderson, 2005).

As a result, man’s first “cultural” efforts largely involved the issue of how to find food and open the way for his extraordinary **omnivorous drive**. Pollan, in his well-known work, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, is in full agreement with this. Other animals, notes Pollan, follow the opposite strategy, that of a highly-selective diet and, in line with this, have very small brains. The koala is an extreme case. If this animal has a notoriously small brain, it is because “a large quantity of cerebral circuitry is not needed to imagine what’s for dinner when the only thing someone eats are eucalyptus leaves”<sup>3</sup>. The koala is thus free of the anxiety of omnivores in searching out alternative foods (its only problem is, if the eucalyptus forest disappears, it will die). The situation with man is radically different since, as Pollan observes, he must dedicate an enormous amount of mental energy to hone the cognitive and sensory tools needed to distinguish which foods, among the many available, are safe to eat. This effort is, in fact, an essential part of the cultural process and will be discussed later on.

As mentioned, the discovery of fire marked a major step in man’s ability to manipulate nature. Used alternately for heat, light, protection from wild beasts, send messages and dry clothing, fire made possible progressive cultural developments that were enormously important, especially in terms of diet. For Levi Strauss, cooking food using fire is “*the invention which made human beings human*”. Before learning about *cooking*, food (and especially meat) was eaten *raw*, spoiled or rotten. The use of fire brought about a decisive change. In Levi Strauss’

1 Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1993

2 Anderson, 2005; Milton, 2000

3 Pollan, 2006

structuralist approach, cooking symbolically marks a transition from nature to culture, and also from nature to society, given that while *raw* is natural in origin, *cooked* implies a step that is both cultural and social<sup>4</sup>.

These concepts are further elaborated using the “culinary triangle” analysis which divides cooked into three different categories: **roasted**, **boiled** and **smoked**. In all societies, roasting was the first form of cooking, the one closest to the natural order. The most ancient use of fire was based on directly exposing food to flame—food put on sticks was simply “burned”. Smoking and boiling are two different forms of cultural development that differentiate themselves from roasting in the creative use of two separate elements for cooking: air and smoke for the first, and water and some kind of container or pan in the second. The use of utensils for cooking, a requirement for boiling, is certainly proof of cultural evolution, but so is the ability to smoke in order to extend the food’s ability to resist spoilage for an incomparably longer amount of time than in any other method of cooking. The relationship between nature and culture can be described on the basis of comparison of the various methods:

*“Smoking and boiling are different in terms of the nature of the intermediary element between fire and food, which is air or water. Smoking and roasting are differentiated by the greater or lesser role given air; and roasting and boiling are differentiated by the presence or absence of water. The boundary between nature and culture, that can be imagined as being parallel to the air axis or water axis, places roasting and smoking on the side of nature, boiling on the side of culture in terms of the means used; or smoking on the side of culture and roasting and boiling on the side of nature in terms of the results”* (Levi Strauss, 1966).

In his original structural study, Levi Strauss attempted to analyze food and the categories that comprise it as if it were a language or grammatical structure. This interpretation and its most extreme manifestations were not without criticism. Today, many writers agree with subsequent works of Levi Strauss in which food is compared (more than to a language) to music or painting: there are rules, but actual practice and improvisation also count and introduce a sense of unpredictability that renders comparison with formal linguistics not all that convincing. However, this does not lessen the importance of the basic insights of this French anthropologist on the role and ways of using fire in defining the major transition from nature to culture.

### 1.2 Food as a stimulus to primordial communication

Whether structured as a language or not, food had a very important role in the development of the earliest forms of human communication. When, simultaneously with the growth in the human brain, social groups tended to grow in size—from around 20 members in groups during the *Homo*

*erectus* era to around 50-150 members in groups during that of *Homo sapiens*—the amount of territory controlled by the group also grew. Over a larger territory, the discovery of a food source had to be communicated in more detail to explain where it was and how many members of the group could be fed. This is, unquestionably, one of the ways in which language developed<sup>5</sup>. Eibl-Eibesfeldt also underscores that at the root of language was the need for territorial control tied to food, together with the desire to maintain social ties, given that man is the only primate which, in order to hunt, leaves his own group for long periods of time<sup>6</sup>.

Language may also have been developed to reduce tension connected with the division of food. As recently noted by Jones, at the origin of what we today call conviviality was the primitive practice of sharing food around the fire by groups of human beings who sat face-to-face, smiling, laughing—and, with time, conversing. These practices were not found among other species, not only because of their fear of fire, but because within the animal kingdom, direct eye contact, opening the mouth and showing teeth are typically hostile gestures. *“If this is added to the fact of placing food right in the middle of a group of individuals, other than a parent and child, there is a clear recipe for conflict and violence.”* The ability to be able to communicate must have had a major role and it, in turn, was stimulated in those rites of sharing with which our ancestors were able to overturn the signs of danger and transform them into the very essence of conviviality that defines the human condition<sup>7</sup>. The contemporary table and the practice of mixing food and talk under all sorts of convivial circumstances thus derives from a very ancient experience in which the human race overcame natural instincts of tension and moved a number of rungs up the ladder of cultural and social development.

### 1.3 What is food and what isn’t: cultural classification of what is edible

Increased mastery of language and the developed intellectual capacity of *Homo sapiens* does not mean that deciding what to eat has ever been an easy choice. In fact, unlike animals with a more selective diet, omnivores continuously find themselves in the situation of having to decide if a given edible substance is good or bad for you. For man, the problem was born of the situation which, as Pollan notes, *“there is probably no nutritional source on the Earth that has not been eaten by someone somewhere—insects, worms, dirt, fungi, lichens, algae, rotten fish; roots, sprouts, stems, bark, blossoms, flowers, seeds, fruit of trees; every part imaginable of every animal imaginable.”* This ability for **dietary adaptation** greatly aided the evolution of the species, but it has also created on-going problems for man in recognizing those foods that are recommended to eat. As Pollan notes:

<sup>5</sup> Anderson, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1993

<sup>7</sup> Jones, 2008

<sup>4</sup> Levi Strauss, 1964

*“The omnivore’s dilemma comes into play each time we decide whether or not to eat a wild mushroom, but it is also involved in our less-primordial encounters with what is supposed to be edible: when we muse over the nutritional claims of a box in the cereal aisle; when we choose a diet to lose weight (low fat or low carb?); when we decide to try the new chicken nugget recipe at McDonalds; when we weigh the costs and benefits of buying organic strawberries compared with normal ones; when we choose to follow (or disobey) Kosher or Halal dietary rules; or when we decide if it is ethically defensible or not to eat meat” (Pollan, 2006).*

The concept of the **omnivore’s dilemma** dates back to the writings of Rousseau and Brillat-Savarin, but it was officially singled out and identified as such by Paul Rozin, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania.

In 1976, Rozin wrote an article entitled *“The selection of Foods by Rats, Humans, and Other Animals”* in which he compared the existential condition of omnivores, such as rats and man, with that of animals with selective eating habits. Animals have no doubt about what to eat since their preferences are genetically-determined. These animals waste no thought or emotion on understanding what to eat or not. For these animals, the natural and instinctive mechanisms function perfectly because their digestive systems are able to extract everything the body needs from a small range of foods.

Omnivores (such as man), on the other hand, must dedicate time and thought to try to understand which of the innumerable foods offered by nature can be eaten without risk. When an omnivore runs into something new or potentially edible, it/he is faced with two contrasting sentiments: *neophobia*, the fear of eating an unknown substance, and *neophilia*, the desire to try new tastes. These “feelings” are totally unknown in animals with a specific diet.

As an omnivore, man is equipped with extraordinary abilities of recognition and memory that allow him to avoid poisons and to search out more nutritious foods. In this process, man is aided by the sense of taste that spontaneously leads him towards what is sweet—a sign of energy-rich carbohydrates—and away from what is bitter, characteristic of many poisonous alkaloids synthesized by plants, just as a sense of disgust marks substances that are potentially harmful, such as over-ripe or rotten foods.

For man, the fact of being omnivorous and, therefore, generalist, is both an advantage and a challenge. The flexibility offered by the absence of dietary specialization has allowed human beings to colonize all the habitats of the globe and adapt to all the different types of food offered. On the other hand, omnivores must spend time and energy understanding what to eat on the basis of what is, ultimately, a Manichean approach to food: on one side, what is good, and on the other what is bad.

In addition to having to count on their own senses and memory in selecting food, individuals base themselves on culture and traditions which preserve the accumulated knowledge and experience of innumerable “tasters” who have gone before them. Culture codifies the rules of a prudent diet with a complex series of taboos, rituals, recipes, rules and traditions. Everything that permits human beings to not have to face, each time, the omnivore’s dilemma.

Although man as a species is ready to swallow anything, it should be said that various human societies tend to limit considerably the concept of what constitutes a food. It is well-known that grasshoppers and termites are considered a delicacy in many African countries, while in the West, they are normally looked on with disgust. There seems to be a very fine line between delicacy and disgusting, and this line is almost always culturally dictated. As Rozin notes, disgust (a word with a more general meaning, but whose etymology derives from the alimentary concept of *gusto*, or taste) is the fear of introducing substances that would be harmful to the body. However, few things have the power to disgust individuals from all human societies: bodily fluids and secretions, corpses, rotten meat. From this standpoint, disgust is a question of adaptation that is very useful because it prevents ingestion of toxic and infected substances<sup>8</sup>. But specific societies express forms of disgust that are much more idiosyncratic that often have no other reason than cultural development of norms and habits. Even in Western societies, depending on the region and social group, foods such as snails, frogs and offal can be considered delectable or repellent.

The choices involving what can be considered edible in many countries become means of classifying the world. The anthropological standpoint involving this is clearly illustrated by Douglas who states that, for man, *“the body social determines the way in which the physical body is perceived”*. At the same time, *“the physical experience of the body, which is always conditioned by the social categories through which it is manifest, provides support for a particular view of society: there is a continuous exchange of meanings between the two types of corporal experience, and each reinforces the categories of the other”*<sup>9</sup>. For this reason, what we ingest—or refuse to ingest—says more than a simple food preference. Every culture tends to divide the world in terms of what can be eaten from what cannot, and entering into this subdivision are many elements of symbolic nature which, starting from the physical body, orient towards a certain perception of the body social, and vice versa. As shall be seen later, the crucial significance for these processes of classification involve, above all, the concept of purity.

<sup>8</sup> Rozin, 1997

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, 1979

#### 1.4 Food, culture and social power

The alimentary order has its own precise relationship to power. Its order of rank establishes the rules for access to food, and this is also true for many other animal species. Despite the fact that they are the leading figures in hunting, lionesses do not touch the prey before the male lion has finished eating. Among many, control over food has historically been one of the major resources of power. In the Middle Ages, banquets of noble families contrasted with the endemic hunger among the peasant masses, and in various parts of Europe, those caught poaching on the land of the king or local lord would be put to death. Countless battles have been fought between livestock breeders and farmers in many parts of the world, the prize at stake always being that of the predominance of a specific way of producing food. On the African continent, these conflicts continue to this day.

Food can also be a mark of power in terms of social prestige. But it is interesting to observe that the cultural perception of these types of prestige are quite complex and sometimes even contradictory. The categories of Levi Strauss' culinary triangle also make it possible to clarify this aspect. According to his analysis, boiled food is a more evolved form and communicates a more refined sense than roasted food. But this relationship in terms of prestige and power can also be reversed because boiled food often tends to be associated with a more intimate, family-oriented way of cooking (braised or stewed dishes), food predominantly cooked by women. Roasted food, on the other hand, can be served during public festivities, often out of doors and in full view, which tends to be associated with a male world<sup>10</sup>. In our contemporary society, a very significant

example of this latter form is the barbecue, especially as a part of American social habits.

These issues have been updated and broadened in social-anthropological studies that examine the **relationship between food and gender**. There is no question but that alimentary practices give rise to a range of hierarchical forms and that in many societies this tends traditionally to place women in a subordinate position. In fact, while some scholars maintain that from her position of designated food preparer in the home women can draw the pleasure of an activity no less intelligent and imaginative than others normally considered to be superior, such as music<sup>11</sup>, others stress the fact that women remain in a much less advantageous hierarchical position. For example, Allison notes that Japanese mothers, in the meticulous and dutiful preparation of the *obentō*, the lunch-box for pre-school children, tend to reproduce an ideology of their own role that is quite limited and strongly influenced by state institutions<sup>12</sup>. DeVault, on the other hand, shows how feminine activities in providing food for the family, although they can be gratifying for those involved in them, are part of subtle yet pervasive inequitable inter-relationships of subordination that reinforce the "natural" sense of deferring to the needs of men and undermine progress towards forms of food culture based on reciprocity<sup>13</sup>.

It can be seen from these various profiles that the relationship between nature and culture is a fundamental basis in studying the role of food in human society. This perspective will underpin the entire analysis that follows.

<sup>11</sup> De Certeau and Giard, 2008

<sup>12</sup> Allison, 2008

<sup>13</sup> DeVault, 2008

<sup>10</sup> Levi Strauss, 1966



## 2. The food-culture relationship in the practice, spiritual and social life

### 2.1 Food in the world's great religions

As Anderson notes, referring to Durkheim, a number of rituals, ceremonies and religious rites inevitably include a relationship with food. As a basic, universal aspect of human existence, food *"is central to religion—as a symbol, subject of prayer, sign of sharing and non-sharing, as an element of communion"*<sup>14</sup>. It is hard to overestimate the symbolic value of food in the world's major religions. In Judaism, a large number of the 613 mitzvot (commandments) that guide the life of a practicing Jew involve food and are based on major tracts in the Old Testament. The majority of these rules regulate meat consumption, also because, as Di Segni explains, the prevalent interpretation of some passages in the Bible indicates that humanity was first vegetarian and only became carnivorous at a later date, with divine authorization. *"According to biblical thought, eating meat is not a natural fact or some right to be taken for granted, but rather an act that involves violation of an order and is permitted only under certain conditions."* Jewish tradition is oriented towards seeing in the act of nourishment a meaning that teaches choice and continuous verification, defines the relationship of man with nature and is deeply concerned with sacredness. According to this view, *"eating becomes a rite, a holy way of being and acting, an instrument for perfection; no longer just a way to survive and a biological necessity, but also system of cultural affirmation"*<sup>15</sup>.

There is no analogous dietary code in Christianity. In particular, there is no general distinction between permitted and prohibited foods. However, man's relationship with food is still part of the context of knowing God. The symbolic role of wine and bread in the sacrament of Communion based on the words of Jesus during the Last Supper, is, for Christians, the means for communion between souls and permanent reminder of Christ's Passion. Despite the fact that, in Christianity, the relationship with food is relatively free, some precepts call for limiting meat consumption and fasting, especially during Lent. The third monotheist religion, Islam, rejects both the strict commandments of Judaism as well as the dietary freedom of Christianity, tending to preach a moderate approach to food consumption. Halal, followed by 70% of Muslims in the world, also has a number of rules about what can and cannot be eaten. The main limitations (less stringent than the Jewish ones), once again involve meat. In addition, unlike Judaism and Christianity,

Islam, as is well known, does not allow consumption of alcoholic beverages. The importance of dietary practices from a religious standpoint is underscored by fasting during Ramadan which is meant to teach Muslims patience, modesty and spirituality.

From the standpoint of diet, other religions are characterized above all by the virtually absolute prohibition of eating meat, at least for the most devote. *"Meat,"* says Anderson, *"is seen as something that involves killing animals, something that is violent and anti-spiritual. The religions based in India—Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism—share a commitment to what in Sanskrit is called 'ahimsa' (non-violence)"*<sup>16</sup>. Assuming that every living thing, including microscopic beings, have a soul, and that the soul is potentially divine, Jainism in particular refuses the consumption of meat as well as all pointless violence, such as that practiced in modern livestock raising. This leads the followers of this religion to refuse even foods from live animals (eggs and dairy products) and to adopt a diet very similar to Veganism.

#### 2.1.1 Food, knowledge and sin

Food symbolism has many ramifications. One of the most relevant in many religious traditions is that concerning the relationship between food, knowledge and sin. The Jewish Bible narrates that in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve committed the first sin by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, thus becoming aware of good and evil (as well as their own nudity), a crime so great that they were expelled from Eden. Above all, it was the original sin, at the basis of any potential sin for thousands of successive generations.

But it is the Christian tradition, in particular, that over the centuries has developed most of the arguments and symbolism against the temptations represented by eating—presumably because all cognitive and intellectual knowledge made possible through food tends to pass through quite pleasurable sensory experiences. One of the seven deadly sins, gluttony, is associated with excessive and intemperate eating. That Dante placed gluttons in Hell and destined them to be immersed in mud, whipped by pelting rain and tormented by Cerbero, the three-headed dog, is only indirect proof of the extreme strictness (often bordering on paroxysm) with which theologians of the Church in the Middle Ages condemned, among the pleasures of the flesh, those offered by a particular love of eating. In his analysis of diet during the Middle Ages,

<sup>14</sup> Anderson

<sup>15</sup> Di Segni, 1986

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, 2005

Montanari clarifies well how the frugal monastic diet can be explained, to a large extent, by the symbolic value of “meat/flesh”, an ambiguous term referring both to gluttony and lust. In fact, indulging in the pleasures of eating was seen by many Christian preachers of the day as the first step towards completely giving in to the temptations of the senses<sup>17</sup>.

The redemptory value of fasting is the mirror reflection to these impulses, that which emerges very clearly when taken to the extreme, as in the case of a number of female saints or “miraculous young girls” of the middle ages. Illuminating in this regard is the reconstruction of the events involving Lidwina of Schiedam given by Walker Bynum, who provides an extraordinary narration of how, in the story of Lidwina, fasting, sickness and suffering have been fused together. Following a fall that left her partially paralyzed, Lidwina becomes seriously ill and, little-by-little, gives up eating. At first she lives only on water and wine, then only on consecrated communion wafers, but then stops eating altogether. “*Like the bodies of many other women saints,*” Walker Bynum says, “*the body of Lidwina was closed to normal ingestion and secretions, but produced extraordinary effluvia,*” the special nature of which was that they could nourish and heal others. Lidwina died in 1433 and was proclaimed a saint. Over the centuries, the tendency to fast, even for long periods of time (or for life) was seen as a symbolically crucial practice for Christian spirituality<sup>18</sup>.

### 2.1.2 Food sharing and congregation of the faithful

In most religions, food is also an important **factor of social aggregation** which has, among other things, the function of establishing who is part of the congregation and who is not. Anderson explains this point very effectively:

*“Typically, aggregation and differentiation are stronger and more emotionally intense in religion than in other human activities (even if political ideologies and ethnicity have sometimes taken on greater importance in this sense over the last century). Food is almost always an element of demarcation. Those who share a faith eat together at ritual meals. They sometimes go beyond this and define their congregation on the basis of shared rules. Everyone must eat certain foods, often in certain ways; everyone must avoid certain other foods. The group that prays together, stays together—especially if its members share religious feasts. Holy Communion in Christianity is a form of this sharing. Sikh temples insist that the faithful share a sweet food made of substances acceptable to all Indian religions. [...] More conspicuous feasts that put people together around religious themes include Thanksgiving and Christmas in the American Christian tradition, Pesach and Hanukkah in Judaism; the feasts in Buddhist temples throughout eastern and southeastern Asia; and an infinite number of sacrificial feasts or those tied to hunting in indigenous populations.”*

Thus, food sharing not only has ritual importance, but

also a very precise role in keeping the community together. Its anthropological significance is that of contributing to designating the boundaries of the body social of the faithful through ingestion of common, shared foods into the bodies of individuals. By extension, this principle is also valid outside a strictly religious environment, in the dietary preferences of each community which, according to Pollan, are one of the strongest social bonds we have. “*Historically, national cuisines have been very stable and resistant to change, and this is the reason why the refrigerator of an immigrant is decidedly the last place in which to look to see signs of assimilation*”<sup>19</sup>. Modern-day Western metropolises are, in fact, full of “ethnic” food stores which, out of religious vocation or community spirit, allow members of a given faith to keep to precise rituals and, together with the flavors of traditional foods, maintain the knowledge of being part of a social universe with its own identity.

### 2.1.3 Dietary prohibition: food and purity

As mentioned previously, many **prohibitions regarding food** are part of religious precepts. Naturally, certain foods tend to be thought of as inedible, including for primarily cultural reasons that have no precise basis in religion. For example, in the West, eating dogs is generally not considered acceptable, while this animal is eaten without any particular problem in Korea, Vietnam and China. Religious dictates, however, tend to have broader and stricter prohibitions.

As has been said, while Eastern religions tend to prohibit consumption of meat in general, without doubt it is Judaism that provides the most precise and detailed instructions about which foods must absolutely be avoided. Jewish dietary rules, explains Di Segni, are part of a program involving *qedushàh*, i.e., health and hygiene. Because the root *qdsh* from which the term derives originally signified “separate”, it can be seen why the Torah insists so strongly on the need to distinguish between permitted and prohibited foods<sup>20</sup>. The latter primarily involve certain types of animals. In particular, the Bible absolutely prohibits all carnivorous animals, predators and those that feed on carrion. Also prohibited are herbivores without a cloven hoof and which are also ruminants (for this reason, horses, camels, pigs, hares and rabbits are forbidden, but not the giraffe or antelope). All birds of prey, reptiles and insects, as well as seafood without fins and scales and shellfish are also prohibited.

These prohibitions, and with them the rules about permitted foods, have been interpreted on the basis of various levels of explanation, from disgust regarding certain species, sanitary reasons, symbolic motivations (for example, prohibition against birds of prey because of the innate violence of these animals) and educational reasons (to teach man that all good must not be enjoyed directly without reflecting on it). It would be highly interesting to discuss the explanations provided by Di Segni,

<sup>17</sup> Montanari, 2008

<sup>18</sup> Walker Bynum, 2008

<sup>19</sup> Pollan, 2006

<sup>20</sup> Di Segni, 1986

but it would take us outside the ambit of this study. But even just briefly outlining them makes it possible to see that dietary prohibitions related to religion can be the result of a range of motivations and contribute in a number of ways to cohesion and unity of a culture.

From an anthropological standpoint, Douglas traces many rites aimed at defining the relationship between an individual's body and that of the body social to a general concept of *purity*. This analysis broadly includes the area of food, a symbolic element of special import in that it involves an actual piece that is literally "embodied". In his view, the concept of contamination and fears that derive from it, are strongly present both in the primitive world and that of modern society. Some rituals, then, through practices of separation, demarcation and punishment, are aimed at approaching an ideal of purity. The clearest example is that of the Hindu caste system in which the lower castes, by definition impure or with a level of purity lower than that of the higher castes, are regularly involved in the production of food in various roles, for example as farmers. For this reason, in upper castes, food must be cooked by the family or by someone of the same caste level. *"Before being allowed into the body, a clear symbolic break is required to manifest the separation of the food from that contact which is necessary, but impure. The cooking process entrusted to pure hands provides this ritual break"*<sup>21</sup>. That modern-day concerns about food purity have recently become accentuated is not surprising if the deep-seated anxiety that has surrounded this issue has involved entire peoples from ancient times.

## 2.2 The world's great culinary traditions

As was noted earlier, food is also key in underscoring the differences between groups, cultures and social classes, and is used to reinforce group identity, to separate and differentiate "us" from the "others"<sup>22</sup>.

Food has an important role in ethnic questions. For example, in the past, some "foreign" and distant cultures were stigmatized with the definition of being "cannibals". For the civilized peoples of the West, the others—peoples on the other side of the ocean and exotic peoples—were considered definitely cannibals, or in any case, people who ate disgusting things. The accusation or suspicion of cannibalism which caused profound repugnance in Europeans, was leveled at a number of African, Asian, American, Aboriginal and Australian populations. Although the actual existence of cannibalism has yet to be proven and, in any case, requires a more in-depth discussion, this practice symbolized the "evil" and uncouthness of these uncivilized peoples. This distinction between the "right" foods and the food of others—seen negatively in which cannibalism marks the extreme manifestation—is the boundary that distinguishes and often still differentiates "us" from the "others"<sup>23</sup>.

These distinctions, between good and evil, and civilized and uncouth, also tend to highlight diversity and a sense of superiority in some ethnic groups in the face of others. Distrust of what is different, fear of contamination, closed-mindedness and intolerance.

Even today, diet is considered one of the most important elements in defining ideological, ethnic, political and social barriers or, on the contrary, one of the most-utilized means for getting to know other cultures, mix civilizations and attempt to create an intercultural approach. Food, in fact, represents a mechanism for detecting ethnic, cultural and social identity<sup>24</sup>. Food is perhaps the initial means of coming into contact with different cultures, given that eating the food of others seems easier—at least apparently—than decodifying their language.<sup>25</sup>

When speaking about dietary traditions, it seems only natural to consider identity as belonging to a territory: the products and recipes of a given place. *"Geographic eating"*<sup>26</sup> that is aimed at representing both the physical and cultural characteristics in the relations between a given food and its area of provenance. But this explanation does not take into consideration that identity is also—and above all—defined as difference in relation to others. Specifically, in terms of cuisine, it is clear that the "local" identity is born as a result of an exchange, the moment in which a product or recipe comes up against different cultures and diets.<sup>27</sup> *"Comparison with the other not only makes it possible to measure, but also create one's own diversity."*<sup>28</sup>

Although well-preserved (but anything but static), food and gastronomic traditions are extremely sensitive to external influences, change and imitation. *"In fact, every tradition is the fruit—albeit temporary—of a series of innovations and adjustments that these have brought about in the culture that has opened itself to them."*<sup>29</sup>

From this standpoint, this study must necessarily begin to examine the theme of the world's great cuisines from that of the Mediterranean basin and the formidable cultural melting pot it represents. The Mediterranean area could be considered the product of a process of exchange in which, over a fairly long length of time, the diverse cultures found there have melded to form a new reality.

### 2.2.1 Mediterranean cuisine

The Mediterranean is *"a large basin surrounded by mountains with narrow coastline plains comprised largely of not very heavy or fertile soil; an area more favorable to migrant pasturing than permanent crop cultivation. Three large peninsulas and a group of islands divide its waters into compartments and facilitate*

<sup>21</sup> Douglas, 1975

<sup>22</sup> Bourdieu, 1983

<sup>23</sup> Guidoni A., Menicocci M., *"Il cibo come linguaggio e cultura"*

<sup>24</sup> Scholliers 2001

<sup>25</sup> Montanari M., *"Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi"*, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> Montanari M., Capatti A., Montanari M., *"La cucina italiana"*, 1999

<sup>27</sup> Capatti A., Montanari M., *"La cucina italiana"*, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Montanari M., *"Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi"*, 2002

<sup>29</sup> Montanari M., *"Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi"*, 2002

*navigation, fishing and trade*<sup>30</sup>, “each group, with its own specific culture, has contributed to its common enrichment.”<sup>31</sup>

Since Neolithic times, *mare nostrum* has been the destination of numerous migrations that have taken place between pre-existing communities in search of better living conditions: more fertile land for those coming from the Asian or African deserts, a less-harsh climate for those from the foreign lands of Scandinavia or Germany. During the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, contact between Muslim and Christian communities in the Iberian peninsula resulted in intense commercial exchange in which large amounts of food products were introduced into the respective gastronomic cultures, modifying their very structure.<sup>32</sup>

Earlier, during the early Middle Ages, the old Roman tradition which—on the Greek model—saw in bread, wine and oil the products which symbolized the tradition of a farming and agricultural civilization, as well as the elect symbols of the new religion, came head-to-head with the culture of Germanic peoples. The latter, living in close symbiosis with the forest, took from the latter, together with hunting, shepherding and harvesting, most of their food resources.

In the meantime, the new food civilization born of the marriage of the fusion between the dietary models of the Roman-Christian and Germanic cultures, came into contact with the Arab world which had developed on the southern shores of the Mediterranean a different food culture.

It was the Muslims who gave a fresh impulse to farming activity—in which irrigated land played a fundamental role—in Andalusia and Sicily, thus influencing and “contaminating” their dietary model.

New Muslim-style agriculture included the introduction of plant species that were previously unknown or used only by the wealthier classes due to their high cost. Among the products introduced into the Mediterranean cuisine by the Muslims were, in particular, sugar cane, rice, citrus fruits, eggplant, spinach and spices. Other significant ingredients found, in particular, in southern cuisine were rosewater, oranges, lemons, almonds and pomegranates.

Islamic culture, therefore, was involved in changing and transforming the cultural unity of the Mediterranean which Rome had built through force, while at the same time making a decisive contribution to the new gastronomic model that was in the process of being formed. A significant number of foods passed from the Islamic to the Latin culture, bringing along with them also techniques of preparation and recipes.

Another event of tremendous historic impact was, as we all know, the discovery/conquest of the Americas by Europe. This discovery was also reflected in a busy exchange of food products: the potato, tomato, corn, peppers and chili pepper, as well as various types of beans.

The tomato, an “exotic curio”, ornamental fruit only later considered edible,<sup>33</sup> the first red vegetable to enrich our vegetable basket, has become symbolic of Mediterranean and, especially, Italian cuisine.

While the key role of vegetables has been one of the most original characteristics of the Mediterranean tradition, the role of grains as the basis of the poor man’s cuisine and means of everyday survival should also be noted, given their “ability to fill” and reduce the hunger pangs of less well-off classes.

The type of grains consumed, as well as their preparation, take on different aspects depending on geographical considerations and traditions that characterize the populations of the countries that face onto the Mediterranean basin. Bread polenta, couscous, soups, paella and pasta are all different ways of consuming grains.

This vast geo-culinary movement, which also drew on food contributions originally from the Far East and Africa, “underscores the fact that the Mediterranean acts as a melting pot for civilizations, beliefs and ways of life. Cross-breeding is one of the causes of its diversity, as well as its cultural distinctiveness”<sup>34</sup>

In Mediterranean gastronomic tradition, there is a unique feature intrinsically tied to its millennia-long history.

In June 2008, the Senate of the Republic of Italy, underscoring that “diet represents a terrain for encounter, dialogue, exchange and development that is critical for the cultural and economic importance of each region of the world in the historical course of world diet,” approved the motion requesting recognition from UNESCO for the dietary model typical of the Mediterranean tradition as an intangible aspect of world heritage.

As has been outlined, the Mediterranean dietary model, as part of the historical and cultural identity of the Mediterranean area, is not only a means of nourishment, but also the expression of an entire cultural system that is not only based on wholesomeness, quality of ingredients and their distinct geographical provenance, but also a millennia-long tradition passed down from generation to generation. Despite the changes in dietary habits and lifestyles that have occurred starting in the second half of the last century, the Mediterranean diet continues to be a point-of-reference not only in the Mediterranean, but also in other regions of the world, given its special nutritional characteristics.

30 Braudel F., “La Méditerranée. L’espace et l’histoire”, Paris 1985.

31 Montanari M., (ed.), “Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi”, 2002.

32 Reira-Melis A., 2002.

33 Montanari M., “Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi”, 2002

34 Montanari M., (ed.), “Il mondo in cucina: storia, identità, scambi”, 2002

The Mediterranean diet also represents a “*very important resource for sustainable development for all countries facing onto the Mediterranean basin given the economic and cultural importance of food in the entire region and its ability to inspire a sense of continuity and identity for local populations.*”<sup>35</sup>

### 2.2.2 Oriental cuisine

Oriental cuisine—whether Chinese, Japanese, Thai or Vietnamese—is truly unique, rich in flavors for Mediterranean-based populations and is the fruit of a historical and cultural tradition comparable in importance to that developed in the Mediterranean basin.

Because it is paradigmatic of a broader-based approach, we will focus here on the great Chinese tradition, in particular, and the distinctive traits of a cuisine which is known across the planet.

Rooted in a vast rural world, Chinese cuisine boasts an extraordinary variety of ingredients and excellent dietary qualities.

For millennia, in China, healthiness has been at the center of food habits. In fact, in Chinese daily life, its cuisine is the way in which the dietary rules developed as the foundation of traditional medicine are respected.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, in order to gain an understanding of the Chinese culinary tradition, it must be seen within the wider context of a body of knowledge that governs the relationships between diet and health.

This attention to diet, the nutritional aspects of food and the foods that were closely studied by doctors and Taoists, is emblematic of the concept of diet which has been part of Chinese tradition for thousands of years. In fact, the Chinese see in a correct and balanced diet one of the primary ways to improve health in a search for longevity and immortality.

In this context, another relevant factor in the Chinese tradition should be mentioned: the central role of food in their holidays and the symbolic value of some dishes. For birthdays and at the new year, for example, thin noodles are eaten because their long, thin shape symbolizes longevity (this is also the reason why it is considered bad luck to break up long pasta before cooking it).

In Taoist philosophy,<sup>37</sup> the world is in constant motion, the propulsive force of which is derived from the opposition of yin and yang (feminine/masculine, dark/light, cold/heat) which,

far from being theoretical principles, are concrete categories of life that also permeate dietary practice. As a result, foods were divided into four categories on the basis of their yin and yang nature: cold and fresh are yin, hot and temperate are yang.<sup>38</sup>

The richer elements of yin are the fresh foods and do not undergo any special procedures, either during their cultivation or preservation; these include fresh vegetables, fruit, whole grains, eggs and fresh meat from game or fish. On the other hand, because of the processing they undergo, hung meat and refined products (sugar, flour, etc.) lose their energetic yin properties and become yang, “*foods required to generate heat and satisfy the masculine side of an individual.*”<sup>39</sup>

As a result, the cuisine must take care to respect the balance and harmony of these categories of ingredients.

Chinese cuisine also offers a unique technical approach mirrored in cooking<sup>40</sup> and cutting methods. The cooking method follows the harmony of flavors and the purpose of cooking is “*to bring out the best in the ingredient through heat.*”<sup>41</sup> Thinly slicing foods before they are cooked, another characteristic of this cuisine, is also the aspect that most notably differentiates it from the others. This practice, easily going back thousands of years, is fully understandable given the use of the *kuàizi* (bacchette) in this cuisine.

The historical continuity of this millennia-long cuisine would seem to have had specific repercussions on the Chinese who believe themselves to be superior in terms of culinary questions. “*Countries that do not know how to eat or enjoy life the way the Chinese do seem to us to be uncouth and barbarous.*”<sup>42</sup>

Compared with the Mediterranean tradition more used to wine consumption, in China, tea is the characteristic traditional element and it is so important that it is included among the seven indispensable products for life, the others being fuel, oil, rice, salt, soy sauce and vinegar. The Chinese were the first to cultivate tea and its production and consumption have been widespread throughout the country since the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD).

Once again in China, diet is an extremely important social factor. In fact, in the Chinese gastronomic culture, and more generally in Asia as a whole, there are shared aspects with the conviviality common to the Mediterranean basin. There is an enjoyment of food which is transformed into enjoyment of eating together with others, a way to both enjoy and be together.

35 Senate of the Republic of Italy, Session no. 21, June 17, 2008

36 Boudan C., “*Le Cucine del Mondo: la geopolitica dei gusti e delle grandi culture culinarie.*” 2005

37 Since the first half of the first millennium AD, traditional schools of thought such as Confucianism and Taoism, with the aid of guidelines of comportment proposed by teachers, offered “*recipes for living.*” These schools became rooted in an anthropology guided by the notions of tao, in and yang. Boudan 2005; Granet M., “*La pensée chinoise.*” 1934

38 Boudan, 2005

39 Minelli E., “*La dietetica nella medicina tradizionale cinese.*” 1998

40 Cooking in the wok or by steam are typical of this tradition, just as is the use of heat and intense flame

41 Sabban F., “*Le système des cuissons dans la tradition culinaire chinoise.* Annales ESC, April 1983, 2, p. 357

42 Lin Yutang, “*La Chine et les Chinois.*” Paris, 1937, p. 353

### 2.2.3 Anglo-Saxon cuisine

Anglo-Saxon cuisine, especially North American, is born of a logic, approaches and social contexts which are very different (and in some ways in contradistinction) to those described above.

The lack of a millennia-long history that allows widespread culture values and practices to settle over time; marked tendency towards mobility that prevents putting down roots in an area; the objective absence of local products that characterize a culinary style; lifestyles and consumption based on individualism, pragmatism and speed<sup>43</sup>— all these factors seem to have prevented the development of an original, significant and high quality gastronomic culture in North America.

The influence North American culture has had on the United Kingdom over the past century, together with the natural tendency of the English to be little-concerned about food-related activity, makes it possible to group these two countries together in this profile. Many writers refer to the entire Anglo-Saxon world when they refer to Western diet.

When cooking was still a common practice in Continental Europe, in England and the United States it was more a question of duty rather than pleasure in an atmosphere that downgraded culinary duties into mere drudgery.<sup>44</sup> The cursory and hasty preparation of meals, predominance of desserts and sugar and focus on, or more precisely, reduction of the gamma of recipes to two emblematic dishes, grilled meat and ubiquitously-present gravy,<sup>45</sup> seem to be the key features of Anglo-Saxon culinary practice.

In describing Anglo-Saxon cuisine, it must be noted that as early as the Sixties in America and, later, also in England and Europe, the fact of women working involved all social classes.<sup>46</sup> As a result, women became managers and professionals who rejected the previously-established role of women (primarily concerned with home and children). Eating, therefore, became an opportunity to socialize and part of the recreational sphere.

The resulting social changes with lesser amount of time available to dedicate to the kitchen, together with a rapid and intense industrialization process in agro-food production and spread of prepared foods, explain why the number of meals consumed out (most of which being in fast food restaurants) grew exponentially.

However, it should be noted that this alienation pre-dated the industrialization of the food sector which is not totally responsible because it was one of the last to be affected by

mechanization. According to some experts,<sup>47</sup> the interruption in transmission of popular culture caused by rural emigration and impoverishment, contributed to the growth in lack of culinary interest, making room in 19th century cities for *"incredible ignorance in food and cuisine"*.<sup>48</sup>

To summarize, it can be seen that the economic orientation and lack of a previously-strong culinary tradition contributed to orienting Americans and Anglo-Saxons towards speedy consumption and choices, with a resulting lack of attention to the nutritional aspects of the food.

*"In many English kitchens, cooking was unsuccessful because of the rapid methods utilized and for the excess heat produced by enormous charcoal fires kept burning constantly in all seasons, and without which inexpert waitresses imagined it would be impossible to cook any meal well."*<sup>49</sup>

*"The bounty and beauty of products we have in America abundantly contrasts with the style of cooking most common in our country. How often we sit down at tables brimming with products of the best type, but which in their preparation have been ruined to the point of not having anything edible!"*<sup>50</sup>

It represents, perhaps, the most clear-cut case in how the lack of a heritage of knowledge and shared choices (food culture) ends up "dumping" on single individuals, without basic informational and cultural tools, the responsibility for making food choices—with very negative results.

As early as 1872, Catharine Beecher in her book, *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, exhorted Americans to change their diet and eating habits. Catharine Beecher felt that *"the unhealthiest foods are those resulting from poor cooking, such as heavy, sour bread, sweets, pastry and other dishes based on cooked mixtures of flour and fats. The fewer the mixtures in the kitchen, the healthier the food."*<sup>51</sup>

According to this author, this situation must be taken on at the root, with the teaching of complex cooking techniques.

Another very interesting aspect, in the case of the United States, is the phenomenon of migration. Despite the fact that the US is, by definition, the home of people and civilizations from all over the world, as Bevilacqua notes, this has produced, at best, only a marginal process of creative contamination capable of generating new, original approaches. On the contrary, there has been a general leveling towards a shared mediocrity.

43 Lang, Heasman

44 Boudan C., 2005

45 Sabban F., "Le système des cuissons dans la tradition culinaire chinoise, Annales ESC, April 1983, 2, p. 357

46 In 1970, 39.5% of American women worked

47 Stephen Mannell

48 Mannell S., "Français et Anglais à table", p. 294

49 Acton E., "Modern Cookery for private family", London, 1845; Boudan C., 2005

50 Beecher C., Beecher Stowe H., "The American Woman's Home, or Principles of Domestic Science, J. B., Ford, New York, 1872

51 Beecher C., "The American Woman's Home, or Principles of Domestic Science", p. 133; Boudan C., 2005

Various attempts have been made to explain this. And it must be noted how, in the past, the hope of being part of the American dream has often led the newest arrivals to undergo a rapid process of assimilation.

#### 2.2.4 Dietary crossovers

*"Diet could be considered one of the elements of individual life most sensitive to variations in the surrounding environment, but strongly tied to entrenched habits and traditions which, [...] in turn, have been gradually transformed."*<sup>52</sup>

In the past, changes in food culture were due primarily to migratory flows. Today, globalization, enhanced mobility between countries, the desire to discover the characteristic traits of other civilizations in a process of **getting to know "others"**, as well as expansion in production of some multinationals, have modified the culinary landscape.

Therefore, over the last ten years, the distinction between the ways of cooking of the world's major traditions and food preferences—as well as the approach to food itself—has become increasingly confused. The "McDonaldization" of food habits<sup>53</sup> on a global level is a fact, as is the significant development in the West of ethnic restaurants.

In China, for example, the approach to fast food (known as *kuican*, fast meal) and major chains such as McDonald's or KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) has occurred through television and the movies that have spread awareness about them and, above all, "desire" for them. The phenomenon later "exploded" in urban centers because the model of eating and consumption proposed represented "an experience", the discovery of the American lifestyle they saw only in the movies. In fact, the general view of the Chinese is that the hamburgers and French fries typically served in these chains are considered *chi bu bao*,<sup>54</sup> a snack not particularly very good or tasty, with low nutritional value and also extremely different from traditional dietary habits.

In addition, this model was, and is, considered particularly enticing because, for a fleeting moment, it allows established rules of conduct to be broken: at fast food restaurants, people eat with their hands and less attention is paid to traditional table etiquette.

Generally, introduction of American eating models, as well as ethnic cuisine, has occurred predominantly through commercial eating establishments (despite the fact that many complain that the cuisine is different from that of the home country and has been adapted to the tastes of the host country).

In Italy, for example, where this process arrived later than in other countries (because of the deeper-rooted pre-existing

culinary tradition), the introduction to ethnic cuisine first occurred through Chinese restaurants, which have now been joined by others: Indian, Tex-Mex and Spanish which, in just a few years, have become those preferred most, especially by young people.

More recently, perhaps also in line with a more healthy view of food, Japanese food has enjoyed tremendous success. Today there is a multiplicity of foreign restaurants: Thai, South American, African, multi-ethnic and fusion.

Through restaurants, Italians—like those in other countries—have begun to discover new flavors that they often also wish to replicate in their own homes, thus opening the way to commercial distribution of ethnic products.

Looking through the discussions on Internet blogs, there are even those who propose to celebrate Christmas not with the traditional panettone, but with couscous, steamed dumplings, spicy chicken and sushi. Although Italians have not yet arrived at the point of eating ants (an ethnic store in Milan sold ants for immigrants from Central Africa, homesick for the food of their homeland, just as happens for many Italians with pasta when they go to live abroad), the consumption of ethnic products continues to grow.<sup>55</sup>

*"Discovery of a new delicacy does much more for the happiness of the human race than the discovery of a star."*<sup>56</sup>

### 2.3 Diet and social rituals

In an era in which food seems to have become a rational problem about which to make careful choices, the extent of its cultural, emotional and sensorial value could constitute an aspect on which to reflect in defining a new perspective of the future of eating.

Food and how it is shared have special significance for the individual, group and society. The **food includes a symbolic and relational meaning**<sup>57</sup> that goes beyond its nutritional value and the physical need to feed oneself. Dinner, for example, is a prevalently relational moment during which a process of building and sharing intimacy and closeness is set in motion, and there exists an emotional involvement. What and how to eat are seen as a collection of products and conventions with their own precise meaning and identity.

#### 2.3.1 Food as a shared pleasure

One could be led to believe that taste is a subjective thing which, to a large extent, cannot be communicated. In reality, **the taste of food is a collective aspect** that can be communicated

<sup>52</sup> Filippa M., 2003

<sup>53</sup> Guigoni A., Menicocci M., "Antropologia dell'Alimentazione", art. 2001

<sup>54</sup> Counihan C., Van Esterik P., "Food and Culture: a reader" II Edition, 2008

<sup>55</sup> Piccinini E., 2007

<sup>56</sup> Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *Afortisma IX*

<sup>57</sup> Douglas M., Isherwood B., "The world of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption", 1979; Barthes R., "Mythologies", 1957; Muller K., "Piccola etnologia del mangiare e del bere", 2005

and shared. Taste is, thus, a social product.<sup>58</sup>

Sharing food can mark entry into a community, making people an integral part of the same culture and putting them in communication with each other. For example, a gift of food creates a bridge between people, and in all societies it has always had major importance in social relations.

As a result of this, **sharing the same food** is the basis of rituals. As a social force, food requires shared customs that allow for orderly interaction between people.

It is the repetitiveness of gestures over time which creates the basis for behaviors to settle into forms of ritual. Rituals which can take on different forms, just as a family dinner is different from a business lunch.

At the base of this possibility is the objective fact of the pleasure of sitting down at the same table. In fact, there is a direct and indissoluble link between the taste of food and pleasure in sharing it.

### 2.3.2 Table rituals

The attention given to preparing the table, for oneself and for others, how foods and dishes are arranged, as well as the care taken in cooking favorite dishes, are all daily rituals and, in some cases, related to special occasions (birthdays, anniversaries, etc.). In general, these are precious moments specific to each family, its habits and daily life.

A ritual could be defined as a collection of actions and customs which, when repeated, over time form the cultural models of a given society. At the same time, they have the role of transmitting values and standards, institutionalization of roles, recognizing identities and social cohesion.

There are many aspects of ritual tied to the consumption of food that are very different depending on the cultural context.

A highly significant example of table ritual can be found in wine and the actions that accompany its consumption. In the Western world, opening of a bottle of wine involves a series of codified movements. Movements and gestures we find within a family context, as well as at a restaurant. Similarly, when it comes time to taste it, when one of the diners has taken on the responsibility of tasting and evaluating the quality of the beverage for others, a certain ritual is involved. In fact, irrespective of the level of tasting knowledge or experience, the first thing the person tasting will do is observe the wine in the glass in an attempt to discern its color. Following this, he/she will attempt to get a sense of its bouquet and scent. Finally, together with the gestures that precede the actual moment of drinking, there is a final ritual in which the wine is sipped to appreciate its taste, before it is offered to other diners.

From the standpoint of ritual, wine is very different from water, beer or sakè. With water, for example, there are no gestures or customs that precede it being drunk. There is only a certain ritual practice in its sharing with other members of the meal.

Rituals are, therefore, the concrete manifestation of a culture. It is not merely the mechanical repetition of actions, but rather an evocation of values and lifestyles.

### 2.3.3 The competence and cuisine knowledge to strenght social identity

Brillat-Savarin's 1826 comment: "*Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are*"<sup>59</sup> is probably emblematic of food as the expression of an individual's personality and character.

According to Barthes,<sup>60</sup> overabundance has weakened the nutritional value of food, while other meanings that identify an individual or groups of individuals have been emphasized.

The so-called **adjunct values of food**, i.e., all those meanings found in food that are not mere nourishment, are actually capable of bringing out the identity of a person or group. Thus, the what and how of eating can constitute the object that makes it possible to identify and be identified.

These additional elements can be seen in a variety of aspects.

**Participation** or lack of it in a meal is the first sign of group membership. Monastic communities, for example, get together in the refectory, while hermits refuse to share as a symbol of their separation from society<sup>61</sup>.

Similarly, the table is a way to define **roles and relationships** between those present. For example, the difference between roles of men and women in some societies in the past (with the former seated and the latter on their feet, serving), or the monarch who eats alone, while its modern-day incarnation can be seen in formal situations (diplomatic or political banquets). Even the shape of the table itself (rectangular or round) is an element of social hierarchy or democracy. In addition, the place where one sits has a precise meaning depending on the historic, social or political context. Similarly, sharing of food, or who gets which piece as opposed to another, is not casual, but rather the translation of relationships of power and prestige within the group<sup>62</sup>.

Similarly, the quality and quantity of food is an expression of culture, culinary tradition and, at the same time, social status. How and how much someone eats derives from and reveals the social standing of that individual. However, this changes

<sup>59</sup> Brillat-Savarin A., "Physiologie du Gout", 1826

<sup>60</sup> Barthes R., "Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine", 1961

<sup>61</sup> Montanari M., "Il cibo come cultura", 2008

<sup>62</sup> Montanari M., "Il cibo come cultura", 2008

<sup>58</sup> Flandrin J.L., "Il gusto e la necessità", 1994; Harris M., "Buono da mangiare. Enigmi del gusto e consuetudini", 1990

over time and depending on historical context. So, while in the Middle Ages, for example, nobles ate meat and the image of the peasant was associated with the fruits of the earth, in a later period, the distinction was based on the difference between good and bad. Today, traditionally poor and rustic products (such as grains, millet, rye or barley) are considered to have special cultural value, although in the past they were linked to the image of a peasant.

In this interpretation, the individual products and customs can be seen as the verbal expression of one's own identity. As in language, the lexicon of food varies from individual to individual: its breadth can vary depending on availability and access to products, personal tastes and cultural and religious options of the individual. The language of food can join or differentiate people and groups. In the Middle Ages, for example, spices differentiated the rich from the poor<sup>63</sup>.

To conclude, **food is a way to present oneself and a means for cultural exchange**<sup>64</sup>. In fact, through codes of communication, it transmits a set of symbolic values and various types of meanings (economic, social, political, religious, ethnic, aesthetic, etc.). The food system **contains and transports the culture, traditions and identity of a group** and constitutes the initial means to enter into contact with different cultures. One prime example of this was the cross-contamination between different cultures during the Middle Ages in Europe. During that period, the combination of Roman culture with barbarian culture united consumption of bread, wine and oil with meat and animal fats. Bread and pork became the marks of European food identity. Basically, there was a shift of symbolic values from the Near and Middle East to the North Mediterranean. Following this was the wave of influence from the new plants and agricultural techniques from Africa and the Far East.

Another example is that of what is known as the **cuisine of migrants** which is continuously occupied with the problem of **preserving** its identity while measuring it against that of others. Food definitely acts as a true means for re-appropriating identity when the latter is lost; it is the bridge to what is dear to us and our homeland.<sup>65</sup>

Food keeps alive the tie with our culture of origin in a tangible way because it is direct, immediate and physical.

Food "evokes, and in a certain way represents an anthropological place made up of words, memories, stories, people and relationships. Through eating, nostalgia for our homeland unwinds, is consumed, reconciled and sometimes reinforced. The type of tie we continue to have with it is measured.<sup>66</sup>

## 2.4 Recent history of man's relationship with food

As mentioned in the introduction, the history of man's relationship with food coincides with the history of humanity itself. From the first day of life on Earth, the problem of how to have an efficient and effective relationship with the daily need to nourish themselves has involved man and animals. In the case of man, this problematic aspect was transformed from a *critical factor* to an *opportunity*, to the point of creating the possibility for an extraordinary social and cultural epic.

Although presenting different aspects, all of human history offers extraordinary material for analysis. The decision to concentrate our analysis on a single period of time, the one closest to our own day, is justified by the fact that it is one of critical importance. In an era in which food seems to have become a rational problem about which to make reasoned choices, the extent of its cultural, emotional and sensorial value is capable of reorienting the future of diet.

There is, in fact, a common thread of experience that links the issues of culture, quality, health and diet.

### 2.4.1 From the post-war period to the 1970s: birth of the modern food industry

The period following the Second World War marked the **birth of the modern food industry**. That period saw an incredible cycle of technological innovations which opened the way for rapid economic and social progress, especially in Europe. Transport improved both within and outside cities, as did logistics and there was a dizzying development in the automobile and roadways. From a purely food-related standpoint, there was progress in the way foods were preserved and prepared, development in scientific knowledge in animal husbandry and farming and the spread of home appliances.

The widespread diffusion of the mass media gave rise to new **models of consumption**. Entire sectors of the population had access to the first types of modern-day food manufacturing.

In Italy, the 1950s and 1960s were years of tremendous social mobility, with the birth of a new entrepreneurial class and broader access to university education. A middle class was formed and its hegemony would be one of the key social characteristics of Italy up through 1990s.

But they were also years of high migration from the south to the north of the country, as well as a shift from the countryside to the cities (urbanization). Alongside the rise of the middle class was also the birth of a large-scale urban working class.

In tandem with the consolidation of democratic political regimes and the re-flourishing in renewed form of industry following the hardships of war, a generalized state of economic well-being was created that constituted one of the essential factors in the birth of the modern-day consumer society.

63 Nerisi F, Rettore V, "Cibo, cultura, identità", 2008

64 Montanari M., "Il cibo come cultura", 2004

65 Pravettoni P.

66 Teti V, 1999, p. 84

In retrospect, one of the elements which seems to have had the greatest influence on the social development of European countries (as had occurred more than ten years earlier in the United States) was the birth of **television**.

In addition to the strictly sociological aspects connected to the dynamics of **creating consensus or unifying language and consumption** from a strictly economic standpoint, the business of television constitutes the transmission belt for a new approach to the communication of goods and products. With television, **modern-day advertising was born** which has been so crucial in the fortunes of goods for mass-consumption, including food products.

Television, printed publications and, in this specific case, advertising, are ideal vehicles for consumer pedagogy, spreading up-to-the-minute news and the new manufactured goods to be transformed into status symbols.

Emblematic of this phenomenon was the Italian television program Carosello which, first aired in 1957, soon became a formidable advertising tool and, as a result, a channel for new models of behavior.

But, given its fairly invasive nature, television is not only a driver for communications, it also has a direct effect on the **way food products are consumed**. 1953 would seem to be the year in which Swanson & Sons, a medium-sized frozen foods manufacturer, introduced an innovative product, the "TV dinner": pre-roasted turkey ready to be eaten in front of the TV that greatly reduced preparation time. The story has it that this product innovation was born of the need to get rid of a surplus of turkeys for which there was low market demand. As often occurs, from a secondary-level problem, the concept for a tremendously-successful product was born.

What seems relevant in terms of early attempts to focus in on innovative types of products and forms of communication, is the fact that the food industry—first in the United States and later in Europe through the importation of operational modes and approaches—seems to have created a successful formula fairly rapidly and, although it has continued to be updated over time, its basic elements have remained unaltered.

Aggressive advertising campaigns, maniacal attention to packaging, and competition centered on price and convenience (also reflected in the offering of ever-richer and higher-calorie portions) capable of identifying modes of consumption coherent with an **increasingly fast and frenetic average lifestyle**.

The result was the introduction of an aspect which remains central to this day in any evolution in the approach to the role of food in the future: speed. More than any other, this aspect has marked a substantial difference in the structure of people's lives over the last fifty years. It has impacted on every sphere of personal life, including the amount of time employed and how food is consumed.

Over this period, the speed up in lifestyle has not created a sense of difficulty. The type of food product described here corresponds to what the new consumer is looking for, a consumer that is optimistic, heady with fast economic development and the prospects for progress offered by science and technology. Someone who does not know the connection between diet and health, something which he/she seems not very concerned about.

While, on one side, the 1950s and 1960s were the years of the great food "blow-out"—following the shortages (especially in Europe) caused by the two world wars—with generally limited concern about quality and the nutritional aspects of products, it should not be forgotten that, at the same time, it was an era in which the food industry positively promoted its **unique advantages: food safety, process control, broad-ranging consumer choice and access to food**.

Parallel with the birth of advertising was the revolution in **distribution** with the hegemony—throughout the Western world—of large-scale chain stores.

Interwoven within its refined humor, the short story "Marcovaldo al supermarket" ["Marcovaldo at the Supermarket"] (Italo Calvino, 1963) provides a glimpse of the almost destabilizing effect these new "stores" had on European cities.

*"In short, if your basket is empty and the others are full, you can stand this up to a point: then an over-powering envy begins to eat at you, and you can't resist. So Marcovaldo, after having instructed his wife and children not to touch anything, made a sharp turn down a side aisle, out of the sight of his family, where he grabbed a package of dates off a shelf and dropped it into the basket. All he wanted was the pleasure of being able to walk around with it for ten minutes so that he, too, could show off his purchases the way the others did, and then return the package to where he had taken it. This package, together with a red bottle of hot sauce, plus a bag of coffee and a blue pack of spaghetti. Marcovaldo was convinced that, if prudent, he could enjoy for at least fifteen minutes the happiness of someone who can choose a product without having to pay even a cent. But heaven forbid that the children should see him! They would immediately begin to imitate him and God only knows the confusion that would ensue!"*

The first pioneering steps in the concept of fast food took place in the 1950s. It was in 1955 that Raymond Kroc founded the company that is now no. 1 in this sector, McDonald's, famous worldwide, but at its inception it offered a new, completely original way of eating and consuming food that was different from the past.

In terms of the relationship with food, the 1970s marked the definitive establishment in structured form of the trends seen in previous decades. Within a context of deep-seated youthful rebellion and a calling into question of the family and its rituals, the characteristic features of the new consumption styles

became the norm with its habitual approach to food: extreme industrialization—including the technologies utilized, growing mass-production, establishment of supermarkets and chain stores, shifting of tastes increasingly towards **less cooking and more pre-prepared foods** (including frozen) and advertising with ever-greater impact on consumption trends.

Food conceived increasingly less as a form of pleasure, collective and convivial rite, or, at most, an appetizing curiosity. A social context in which gastronomic choices were increasingly reduced to knee-jerk responses to advertising and the frenetic pace of daily life, as if a conditioned reflex to the pressures that were structurally changing people's lives, without them having had the time to develop ways of responding and adapting.

#### 2.4.2 '80s-'90s: globalization, fast hedonism and slow philosophy

Taken overall, the 1980s are remembered for the Liberal politics of the period (Ronald Reagan in the United States and Margaret Thatcher in Great Britain), accelerated economic development and re-launching of Western countries, **the predominance of a hedonistic lifestyle**, the definitive defeat of terrorism in some European countries and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

It was in the late 1980s, within this strongly-evolving context, that the **slow food** movement was born in direct contrast to the spread of fast food and frenetic modern lifestyle. The slow food movement studies, defends and spreads agricultural and gastronomic traditions from all over the world in support of the right to enjoy food.

Above all—and this constitutes the most innovative aspect of the movement—with slow food was born the idea that consumption is a political act which implies awareness of the social-economic consequences of food choices. Consequences for oneself and for others.

While the first reactions to the **banalization of the relationship with food** that occurred in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were emerging, the early 1990s saw the phenomenon of **globalization** burst onto the international scene. And with globalization, the rise of renewed curiosity about the food habits and lifestyles of other peoples. Discussion of food became popular once again, involving growing sectors of the population as was seen in the presence—a must in the early 1990s—of numerous special-interest programs on all European television channels.

The spread of **mass-based tourism and the growth of migratory flows** accompanied the experience of discovery about the food traditions of other countries.

However, this was also the phase in which a split occurred that was difficult to heal between the Anglo-Saxon approach still strongly anchored in a production-oriented food model, and a "European" one which, although still influenced by the

consumer trends of the previous decades, began to make a critical return, especially in the Mediterranean countries of Europe, to the concept of daily life in which food is a cultural factor necessitating opportunities for it to be enjoyed.

The European model being one in which the amount consumed seems to begin to count less than its quality and where the variety of foods and their preparation are not constantly sacrificed to the overwhelming consumption of a single food (meat). **It is a model which attempts—perhaps with difficulty—to recover the social dimension of food.**

#### 2.4.3 Today: the shopping trolley full of...wealth or threats

It has only been in the last fifteen years that there has been a decisive shift within food trends in wealthy Western countries to bring diet to the increasingly-concerned attention of policy makers.

Over the second half of the last century, the first clinical studies highlighting the connection between human behavior and disease began to emerge. This provided scientific proof of the extremely close connection between individual choice and consequences for health, and study was begun on the nature of the underlying social, environmental and cultural factors. The area of eating habits emerged, in particular, as one of the ones most connected to the quality of life and personal health and, as a result, one of the promising ones in terms of results which could be obtained through prevention.

This led to a crisis in the **production-oriented model**<sup>67</sup> that had ruled the food sector for nearly two hundred years. Based on the industrialization of agricultural and food production, single crops and use of pesticides and fertilizers, this model faced a crisis in terms of issues regarding the health of individuals.

While the European Union is now preparing to release binding norms for functional foods (those foods that have been scientifically proven to have a beneficial role in humans), the question of health joins that of recovering the **cultural, political and social values of the relationship with food**, presaging new tendencies and a new era in creative study.

#### 2.5 The impoverishment of the food-culture relationship

*"If a food is more than the sum of the nutrients that compose it, and a diet is more than the sum of the foods that compose it, we can also say that a culinary culture is more than the sum of the menus attributable to it: it also includes the entire set of eating habits and the unwritten rules that - together - govern a person's relationship with food and the act of eating".*

Michael Pollan, in a recent work<sup>68</sup>, expresses and emphasizes

<sup>67</sup> *Food Wars*, Tim Lang, Michael Heasman, 2005

<sup>68</sup> Pollan M., "In Defense of Food. An Eater's Manifesto", 2008

with these words the sociological dimension of food and eating.

As we have already had occasion to mention, the Slow Food movement, like Pollan, has tried to illustrate and restore the central position of food in its cultural and social dimension. A similar perspective, far from being merely theoretical, has important concrete implications and - as highlighted by some disparaging critics of this approach - undoubtedly a number of commercial ones which, however, should not be viewed as mere promotional strategy, having the undeniable advantage of effectively imposing a reflection on the most recent developments between man and food<sup>69</sup>. It is a relationship that, not surprisingly, is mediated by sociological categories and is unquestionably linked to contemporary social developments.

If *contemporary* art is by this time, almost by definition "disturbing" (purposely or not) and disquieting and the categories of philosophy and sociology unable to illustrate and explain the reasons that motivate it or to find intelligible reasons and intentions, *contemporary eating* appears to share the same problem. The product of contemporary society is represented as well by a work of contemporary art as by a Big Mac, probably without distinction.

Overlooking brands, symbols and cultural-culinary policies, it appears interesting to examine the lexical binomial *slow-food*, turning it, at a closer look, from an unconscious de facto description of the daily reality of a world long gone - with its dilation of time, tradition and familiarity - into a new daily *oxymoron* for most of the employed and socially active people in the world, at least its "western" part, understood in the broadest sense.

An oxymoron that is certainly rich in subtlety - that in some readings, as in Pollan, can degenerate at times into a stereotyped contrast between national culinary habits (American vs. French, for example) - but that appears to have unquestionable general validity.

The *slow-food* binomial, apparently composed of two simple terms, is effectively the point of juncture of two "culinary categories" that are completely different, though related, that of HOW to eat and that of WHAT to eat.

Our reasoning about contemporary developments in "eating" cannot fail to take account of both, that is, the act of "eating" and the object of that act, "food".

If we think about it, attributing the term slow ideally to the category of "eating" is in itself already a choice: one of the criticisms that are most often made by commentators on a certain widespread type of "culinary habit", identified simply as

the so-called *western diet* of Anglo-Saxon derivation, resides exactly in its being, effectively, a form of "nutrition" and not of "eating".

In reading Pollan on the subject of contemporary life, in particular, the current generations do not eat, they feed themselves: The "food" that is commonly consumed is not really food but simply a jumble of many processes, often chemical and industrial. From the problem of what to eat in terms of foods we seem to have shifted to what substances to assimilate: the diet, in this interpretation, has become a medical/health problem also considering the enormous interest of nutritionists, the food industry and journalists in having their say on the subject of what and how to eat.

### 2.5.1. Cooking, the table and food: the how, where and what of eating

Taking a step back and returning to the categories of how and what to eat, three elements among the many appear able to lead us through a reasoning that defines points of contact and distance between some of the habits and elements most specifically linked to the current relationship of man with food, and the habits and elements that, more than others, marked the lifestyle and daily life of the past generations, from our grandfathers to our fathers: cooking, the table, food. The how, where and what of humanity's oldest social activity: eating.

In the first place, cooking. Increasingly, food is purchased ready to eat, or at the most heat and eat, so that the cooking dimension is entirely lost in the fullest sense of the creation of a thing starting from its basic ingredients.

The decision not to cook means forgoing any knowledge about what one is eating, but above all means forgoing the experience of sharing something that is the product our own labors. The microwave oven takes man back to when he had not yet discovered fire and its ability to change the natural state of what he hunted or gathered in nature to make something else out of it, more edible or simply nicer.

Technology and the frantic pace of contemporary life are turning us back into cavemen who, when they come into possession - through bits of metal called "coins" and pieces of metal called "shopping carts" - of something edible and feed it into their digestive tract so as to acquire the optimum quantity of calories (or what they consider optimum: the concept of what is optimum is often connected in mathematics with the concept of maximum and man - accustomed to asking himself what is the maximum output obtainable from a given set of productive factors, and prompted by decades of economic theory to believe that any different solution to the problem is inefficient - by now is more and more convinced that eating the maximum number of calories possible in a given number of "meals" during the day is the least that can be expected of him).

<sup>69</sup> For a fuller examination see, in particular, Leitch A., "Slow Food and the Politics of Pork Fat: Italian Food and European Identity", in "Food and Culture: a reader", 2008

After cooking, the table. Far from being a simple piece of furniture, this essential element in every home (if not in that critical precursor to certain deviations of modernity represented, in Italy, by the movie "The Country Boy") is one of the keys to understanding the change that has occurred in the last twenty years in eating styles. Increasingly, food is consumed in places other than at the table, individually, without any type of preparation and in the least possible time.

The table has thus become a metaphor of a series of elements - we might call them values - that many contemporary commentators feel have been lost, making food and the experience of its consumption shed those ritual and social characteristics that had long distinguished it in history.

Consuming our meals at the table, sharing the culinary experience with the whole family has apparently gone out of use in some cultures. Certainly, the Italian culture seems to have been less affected by certain Anglo-Saxon habits that a number of observers (Pollan in the front line) have scrutinized and severely criticized. However, many of these trends are finding their way, albeit slowly, into the European Mediterranean, the unquestioned home of a relationship with food that differs from the precise sociological and culinary categories used for the Anglo-Saxon world, which have acquired the position, by now, of negative examples in much "culinary literature".

Eating meals at the table means spending a lot of time on it, on the choice of what to have and on its preparation, parent's dietary education of their children, the sharing of flavors and new tastes. The table, or its ideal absence, becomes the metaphor of the relationship between man and food. The car, the sofa, the desk - more and more often the sites of the daily action of "eating" - are culinary non-places that summarize, perhaps more than any other definition, the changes and problems that have developed in the relationship between man and food.

Completing this little sociological anthology is "*food*". As we have already seen, in our time, quality is replaced by quantity. We, or at least some societies, seem to have lost the vision of food as pleasure, as a sensory experience, a cultural expression. Of food as "beautiful" and of food as "good".

The food that is eaten has, increasingly, the form of "nourishment", lacking any other characteristics of its own that we could define "food of quality" and that for decades has been, in the culinary tradition of past generation, simply "THE" food we eat every day.

### 2.5.2. Food as experience

Consuming food of quality does not merely mean eating something that is "better" than other possible nutritional elements capable of generating a sense of fullness in the individual, it means performing a set of experiences, that are not otherwise repeatable.

In the first place, a sensory experience: the flavor. Much of contemporary cooking and the current view of the daily business of eating tends to sacrifice the sensory experience potentially intrinsic to the culinary experience, impoverishing it and relegating food to the role of mere necessity. In addition to what is "good" we have often also lost the "variety" of the culinary experience: the diet tends to revolve around a "universal" model that unifies all the culinary traditions, effectively losing sight of their distinctive, unique features.

In the second place, a cultural experience: traditions. Food has a cultural value that goes well beyond its role as a mere instrument for the acquisition of the micro and macro nutrients necessary for the correct operation of the human organism. Food - strictly linked to historical, social, demographic and economic factors - is at one and the same time, the mirror and the memory of the different cultures that influenced, originated and spread it.

What we are seeing today is nothing less than a cultural loss, linked to the fact that the current generations no longer eat what their parents and ancestors ate, adopting conformist eating styles leading - in perspective - to the complete abandonment of culinary traditions, rituals and customs that have their roots in the history of the peoples and give them their distinctive cultural and social traits.

It is easy to understand that taste and tradition - in combination - are elements that highlight significantly the importance of the subject of memory, especially now: memory both of the culinary experience (also in terms of social experience), and of the culture behind it.

If there is a word that can summarize the main critical aspects of the current relationship between man and food, the elements of his break with the past and the reasons for worrying about future developments, it may be none other than this word: "memory". At one and the same time a measure of the present and hope for the future.

# 3. The influence of social cultural trend on contemporary nutrition

## 3.1 The omnivore's dilemma in today's world

Rozin's early works on the behavior of omnivores faced with a dietary choice, started from the premise that the **omnivore's problem should have revealed many things to us, not just in terms of what and how man eats**, but also about him as a species. Subsequent scientific research, both anthropological and psychological, confirmed the validity of this intuition. This hypothesis represents an analytical tool not only for understanding the mechanisms of food choice by animals, but also the complex "biocultural" adaptations in primates, as well as a vast range of apparently incomprehensible cultural practices in man according to which a food must not only be "good to eat", but also "good to think"<sup>70</sup> (Lévi-Strauss 1962).

Man's omnivorous nature and its characteristics are genetically imprinted in the human species and the individual organisms which natural selection has equipped with the objective of allowing for an extremely varied diet.

The omnivore and, specifically, man, has teeth capable of grinding seeds, plants and herbs, as well as tearing meat; he also has very unusual jaws that can move like those of a carnivore, herbivore or rodent. Human metabolism requires specific substances that are found only in plants (such as vitamin C), but also requires substances found only in animals (such as vitamin B<sub>12</sub>). For man, variety is not only a source of pleasure, but also a true biological necessity.

This dietary flexibility assumes a highly complex nervous and metabolic system. In fact, in omnivores, a good part of the nervous system must be reserved to sensorial and cognitive elements capable of sustaining dietary choices and deciding what to eat without running risks. The need to be equipped with a very advanced sensorial and cognitive system is due to the fact that if every possible choice would have to be included in the omnivore's genetic code, the total information would be too great to be contained in the code itself. A number of the cognitive and sensorial devices that man, as an omnivore, has developed are also contained in other mammals, some represent tremendous evolutionary success in primates, while still others are part of natural evolution/selection and cultural invention.

The first means available to man in choosing food is the

sense of taste which selects on the basis of the nutritional value of foods. As can be seen in the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century writings of Brillat-Savarin,<sup>71</sup> taste "*invites us to choose from among the various substances Nature offers us, those most suitable for nourishing us.*" In human beings, taste has become an increasingly complex issue, but it is based on a pair of innate preferences, one positive and one negative. The first is a preference for sweet taste that indicates a high concentration of sugars, which is equivalent to a high concentration of energy. The desire for something sweet persists even when we are no longer hungry, and this could also explain why sweet things are normally served at the end of a meal.

The desire for substances and foods with a high sugar content has represented an excellent form of evolutionary adaptation. The human encephalon, which in terms of the body is much larger than that of any other animal, requires a high level of glucose, the only source of energy that can be utilized by the brain. On average, the human brain—which represents 2% of body mass—consumes approx. 18% of total energy which it gets exclusively from consumption of carbohydrates.

Disgust is another useful means available to omnivores during the process of food selection. This instinctive emotion is highly useful and prevents omnivores from eating potentially harmful substances, as Steven Pinker argues effectively.<sup>72</sup>

Although useful, the sense of taste is not infallible and does not represent a perfect guide. For example, some plant species that contain curative and highly nutritional substances have a bitter taste. The sap of the opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*) and the bark of the willow contain very bitter substances with high curative powers. When the omnivore discovered the pain-killing power of opiates and the curative power of salicylics, cultural aspects gained the upper hand that pushed him to ingest substances of that type, despite the instinctive repugnance for bitter things. Thanks to his ability to deduce, remember and communicate, man was able to conquer the defense mechanisms of plants.

Another very important tool developed by man to overcome the snares of the plant world was that of cooking food. For example, native peoples in the Americas discovered that ground acorns left to soak in water and then roasted could be eaten

<sup>71</sup> Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du Gout, ou Meditations de Gastronomie Trascendante*, Sautet, Paris, 1826

<sup>72</sup> Pinker S., *How the Mind Works*, Norton, New York, 1997

<sup>70</sup> Lévi-Strauss C., *Le Totémisme aujourd'hui*, Puf, Paris, 1962

more easily because their bitter taste was lost. The same was true for cassava roots which, as protection against predators, synthesize cyanide which could be neutralized through the cooking process. Cooking brought two great advantages for man, the omnivore. First of all, it made numerous previously-inaccessible sources of energy (carbohydrates) accessible. In addition, this access occurred to him alone since other species and other potential consumers (insects) are still not able to successfully utilize these plants.

Cooking—which opened up new horizons to human omnivores—is perhaps the most powerful tool he has available. By significantly increasing the availability of food to man and rendering it more digestible, this process has also been identified in a number of theories as the main factor in the average increase in the size of the human brain which occurred approximately 1.9 million years ago. Since then, the teeth, jaws and intestine of man’s ancestors began to get smaller because it became increasingly less-necessary to digest raw food.

Cooking—together with the production of tools—is often cited as the proof that man the omnivore has entered into a new ecological niche known as “cognitive”. Humanity’s process of adaptation and evolution is “biocultural” and depends both on the process of natural evolution and cultural processes that are exclusive to man.

Taste, observation, memory and the spread of dietary knowledge have made it possible, and continue to make it possible, for man to create ties with his fellow man, not only in small groups, but within the community. In addition, the dietary preferences of a population represent one of the strongest factors of social cohesion and rooting and maintenance of their traditions. National cuisines have always been strongly resistant to change and, in fact, the refrigerator of an immigrant is probably the last place in which to look for signs of integration.

### 3.1.1 Past dietary traditions: good to eat and good to think

As mentioned previously, man’s senses are useful for initial differentiation between good foods and harmful foods, but he also relies strongly on those means that **involve evolution, cultural discovery and tradition**. There are a number of wide-ranging rules for wise diet that have been codified by man from a series of taboos, rituals, formalities and traditions that touch each individual aspect and involve:

- amounts of food;
- order in which they must be eaten;
- types of animals prohibited and allowed and in which periods of the year.

Many anthropological studies have examined the biological sense of this series of rules and the conclusion has been that they help to reinforce a given identity and resolve the omnivore’s dilemma. Culinary traditions codify a series of rules in the preparation of food and specify the permitted

combinations of substances and flavors.

For example, the dangers innate in eating *sushi* are balanced out in Japanese tradition by the use of *wasabi* which is a very strong anti-bacterial substance. The hot spices used in many tropical countries where, due to the high ambient temperature, foods deteriorate rapidly, have a similar function.

As Rozin states, national cuisines incarnate the dietary wisdom of populations and their respective cultures. If foods are imported from another culture without also importing the rules for their preparation, i.e., the cuisine as a whole, the result is deleterious. From this standpoint, for example, the United States represents a typical example of importing food from all over the world, without importing the corresponding cuisine. For example, pasta and pizza are topped with unusual foods, such as french fries. Quantities are almost never observed and, often, a plate of pasta is literally “drowned” in the sauce which, in turn, is comprised of a wide range of ingredients, such as bacon together with peppers and/or cheese.

Despite the fact man’s millennia-old dietary history has introduced a fairly detailed codification of best food practices within the various dietary traditions, today, in some parts of the world, this reservoir of food knowledge and information seems to be disappearing.

For example, the North American dietary situation and lifestyle which many countries are tending towards and which could be interpreted as a return to the omnivore’s dilemma, is worrying. The combination of excessive quantity and types of food in supermarkets, together with the lack of a suitable key to understanding and interpretation due to a gradual loss of alimentary identity, disorients people and transports them back in time, to the period of choice-making.

At the supermarket, just as in restaurants, man finds himself assailed by “omnivorous doubts”, some of which are ancestral connected to his basic nature, while others are new and tied to current-day situations: should I buy normal or organic fruit, local-grown or imported, farmed or wild fish, vegetable oil, butter or margarine, what if I were to become vegetarian? We draw on our senses and memory to understand (taking from the past) if it is worthwhile to buy one food rather than another. We examine the products, weigh the packages and read the labels to understand what is in them and often we find ourselves unsure of the meaning of what we read.

The most natural of human activities—feeding oneself and choosing what to eat—has become and is increasingly becoming a challenge requiring assistance from nutritionists, food scientists, doctors, etc. The new high-protein, low-carbohydrate content diets found support in new epidemiological studies, new diet books and new scientific articles. Americans were inundated with news, TV programs and ads which said that, in order to lose weight, they should eat meat and put aside bread and pasta.

Such a radical change in the eating habits of a population is a clear sign of a widespread food disorder. Something like this could never happen in a society with solid traditions regarding food and how it should be consumed.

As Pollan writes: "*when it is possible to eat almost everything nature has to offer, to decide what is good to eat, it inevitably generates a certain apprehension, especially if certain foods could be harmful to health or even lethal.*"

This is the modern face of the omnivore's dilemma. What, historically, referred to a *natural* condition of man, has become—almost as if in retaliation—the exact opposite: emblematic of a situation of uncertainty generated by prevalence of conditions which are *unnatural*. Dazed by the excess of information and products offered, incapable of having in-depth knowledge of manufacturing processes, the composition of food and the consequences of what he eats on his health, man finds it difficult to make choices.

As a result, one of the most satisfying experiences for a person, including from a relational standpoint, becomes a source of apprehension, anxiety and growing concern.

### 3.2 Rediscovery naturality

#### 3.2.1 Orientation to authenticity

The spread and gradual popularization of the trends described in this study have led to a general rediscovery of the concept of what is natural. In parallel with the growth of the concrete risk of a drift also in Europe towards a junk food-oriented dietary model, there is also growing demand for wholesomeness within an ever-larger sector of the population in Western countries.<sup>73</sup> Unfortunately, the concept of natural foods is ambiguous and, therefore, controversial.

For some, at the far extreme, it means the produce from **natural farming** promoted by Masanobu Fukuoka.<sup>74</sup> His theory promotes a form of farming that calls for human intervention only during planting and harvest, while letting nature take care of the growing process.

For others, more realistically, the concept of natural means the decision to produce **organic food**. Organic farming is an approach which attempts to see the entire agricultural ecosystem from a holistic approach to take advantage of the natural fertility of the soil and boost it through activity on a limited scale.<sup>75</sup> This approach promotes the environmental biodiversity in which it operates and excludes the use of synthetic products (except those specifically allowed by

Community regulations<sup>76</sup>, in Europe) and genetically modified organisms.

Central to the organic approach are the agronomic aspects: soil fertility is maintained through the use of organic fertilizers, crop rotation and scrupulous maintenance (or, if possible, improvement) of soil composition and percentage of organic substances. Pest treatment is allowed only using vegetable, mineral and animal compounds with no chemical component (except for some products considered to be "traditional"), in order to favor biocontrol.

Organic farming makes it possible to reduce the use of pesticides. However, critics<sup>77</sup> of this approach contest its ability to guarantee high enough yields to meet world food requirements,<sup>78</sup> as well as some of its specific measures. For example, the use of manure as a fertilizer would seem to connect this farming approach to a broader-ranging production method characterized by a significant presence of livestock, with fairly high environmental impact. In addition, in organic farming, product choice and the molecules that can be utilized are decided on the basis of their origin, which must be natural. This distinction between natural and synthetic products is questionable, however, from a scientific standpoint and leads to the erroneous conclusion that the former are always less-toxic than the latter.<sup>79</sup>

Contrary to supporters of organic farming, there are those who hold that, seen in perspective, production of agricultural products utilizing a massive input of biotechnology is the **only way to obtain natural products**,<sup>80</sup> thus rendering superfluous most of the chemical compounds utilized today in conventional farming.

An additional element key to the concept of natural is **proximity**. A reflection of this is the locavore<sup>81</sup> movement which encourages people to consume food produced within a radius of just a few hundred kilometers and, where possible, from small farms. The concept of sustainability is central to the viewpoint of these activists.

Implicit in the notion of proximity is that of **seasonality**. What is questioned here is the advisability of consuming fresh farm products in non-traditional periods of the year, thanks to innovative production techniques or transport.

73 Counihan C., Van Esterik P., "Food and Culture: a reader" II Edition, 2008; Pollan M., "In Defense of Food. An Eater's Manifesto", 2008

74 Fukuoka M., "The one-straw revolution: an introduction to natural farming", 1978

75 ICEA - Istituto per la Certificazione Etica e Ambientale

76 Reg. (EEC) no. 2092/91 on organic production of agricultural products and indication of this method on agricultural products and foodstuffs. It was only in 1999 with \*Reg. (EC) no. 1804/99 that livestock raising was also regulated.

77 Umberto Veronesi, Speech on Advisory Board Barilla Center for Food&Nutrition 78 Average yields are 20-45% lower. Nutrient Exclusivity in Organic Farming, Does It Offer Advantages? H. Kirchmann and M.H. Ryan, 2005

79 Ames Bruce N., Swirsky Gold Lois, "Paracelsus to Parascience - The Environmental Cancer Distraction", September 7, 1999

80 Umberto Veronesi, Speech on Advisory Board Barilla Center for Food&Nutrition

81 Time, "Local-food movement: the lure of the 100-mile diet", 11 June 2006



In terms of **livestock**, the concept of what is natural involves the physical conditions under which they are raised (available space, raising techniques, use of feed, chemical additives, etc.).

And, finally, if we extend our gaze from the agricultural supply chain to the wider context of food processing technologies, this issue encompasses the entire range of industrial processing food is subjected to, as well as packaging and transport. Especially critical is the area of processing additives.

Common to all these different cultural viewpoints is the belief that the requisite of being natural is violated by the **excessively invasive use of technology** within the food sector.

Finding one's way within this articulated system of positions is difficult. Being forced to provide a perspective, what seems crucial to us is how some of these attempts grow out of a reaction to what is often an unscrupulous and opportunistic use of food technology. Conversely, it must be remembered that what has made it possible for man to survive over the centuries has been his ability—from prehistoric times—to introduce technological innovations that improve the characteristics of food as it is found in nature.

We feel that three **guidelines** can be indicated. First of all, we feel it necessary to free the field of the erroneous conviction that **technological innovation** in the food sector necessarily constitutes the origin of problems, rather than their solution. In fact, technology has often had a positive role in introducing a process of gradual improvement in food products.

Secondly, we believe that the food industry must be able to take advantage of the **emerging demand for natural products** to define practices and approaches that can raise the median quality of foods consumed while making sure they are widely accessible to all.

Finally, we believe that the process of selecting production methods must utilize a **rigorously scientific approach** that puts the emphasis on issues tied to personal health and environmental impact, rather than merely questions of profit or ideological orientation.

### 3.2.2 The vegetarian approach

In addition to this search for enhanced naturalness, another of the interesting emerging phenomena is certainly that represented by vegetarianism. This type of diet excludes consumption of some or all foods of animal origin, usually on the basis of ethical,<sup>82</sup> environmental, health or religious considerations.

There are a number of different philosophies of vegetarian living which generally exclude the eating of meat of all species (mammals, fish, insects and others) and other products derivative of animal husbandry. In some cases, this exclusion

also includes fish. Vegan diets, on the other hand, exclude any food of animal origin.

From a cultural standpoint, the decision to not eat meat depends on a series of **extremely strong reasons**: the absolute refusal to kill animals on the basis of a commitment to non-violence extended to all of creation; awareness of the environmental impact of livestock raising on a global scale; and the conviction that a meat-free diet can guarantee improved health.

In terms of the environmental impact on eating habits and, therefore, the legitimacy of preoccupations in this regard, it is sufficient to consider the consumption of water resources associated with various dietary choices. On average, an individual utilizes 2 to 4 liters of water per day for drinking, while virtual daily water consumption<sup>83</sup> to feed oneself varies from approx. 1,500-2,600 liters for a vegetarian diet, to approx. 4,000-5,400 liters in a meat-rich diet.<sup>84</sup>

Practically, the decision to be vegetarian is based on two very clear conceptual aspects: an aversion to **eating meat** in the belief that it is philosophically wrong as well as harmful to health; and the idea that eating **fruit and vegetables** constitutes the basis of a health, balanced diet.

One may not agree with this extreme view of the problem. However, it is undeniable that awareness continues to grow that moderate consumption of meat, accompanied by a diet rich in fruit and vegetables constitutes the basis for a healthy eating style with limited environmental impact.

Foods of vegetal origin provide protection against free radicals, i.e., those molecules that can alter the structure of cells and their genes. This could lead to the belief that those who have a vegetable-rich diet have less risk of becoming ill and living longer. There is also a second factor. We are surrounded by pollutants that are life-threatening. They are harmful if we breathe them, but even more so if we ingest them. Eating meat, we put ourselves in this situation because from the atmosphere, these substances fall back onto the earth and therefore onto the grass which, eaten by livestock (or through feed), introduces harmful substances into their fatty tissue and, ultimately, onto our plates when we eat meat. The accumulation of toxic substances makes us vulnerable to many of the diseases connected with "good living" (type-2 diabetes, atherosclerosis, obesity). Cancer risk is also connected to the quantity of meat we consume.

Fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, are low in fats and rich in fiber: by fostering the transit of food ingested, these latter reduce the amount of time potentially cancerogenous agents found in foods remain in contact with the walls of the intestine. In addition, not only do vegetables contaminate

<sup>82</sup> See, for example, the studies by Helmut Friedrich Kaplan

<sup>83</sup> Water Footprint Network

<sup>84</sup> World Water Council, 2008.

us much less than other foods, but they are also a precious store of substances such as vitamins, anti-oxidants and cancer inhibitors (such as flavonoids and isoflavones), which neutralize cancerogenous agents, dilute their formation and reduce the proliferation of diseased cells.

This brings us, by analogy, to the content of the Mediterranean diet which was spoken about in the previous section. Because of the proportion of the intake of fruits and vegetables on one hand, and meat on the other, the approach of the Mediterranean diet is one that is highly effective and of extreme contemporary relevance.

Although initial signs of a re-thinking of the future of food from a non-productionist<sup>85</sup> standpoint can be seen, it should be noted that this is taking place within a context (first and foremost that in Italy) which has largely lost its ties to its more-wholesome food traditions.

Despite the results of numerous studies indicate that the dietary approach to be followed for healthy living is the Mediterranean diet, starting from the 1950s to the present day, i.e., from the first study by Keys<sup>86</sup>, throughout the Mediterranean area, including Italy, there has been a gradual abandonment of this diet in favor of less-healthy eating habits.

In fact, in terms of Italy, results of the studies conducted by Fidanza<sup>87</sup> have shown how the Mediterranean adequacy index in the two cities symbolic of this dietary approach has fallen drastically: in Nicotera it was 7.2 in 1960, falling to 2.2 in 1991, while in Montegiorgio it was 5.6 in 1965, dropping to 3.9 in 1991. The Mediterranean diet has also declined sharply in popularity in major Italian cities.

In a recent study conducted on the situation in Spain and Italy, Baldini<sup>88</sup> found that younger generations seem to be gradually, but constantly abandoning the Mediterranean diet in favor of new eating trends characterized by high-fat foods (baked goods). Overweight and obesity in Italy and Spain seem connected not only to reduced physical activity, but also the rejection of the Mediterranean diet.

In conclusion, a study presented in July 2009 by the Associazione Italiana Dietetica e Nutrizione Clinica of the Osservatorio Nutrizionale Grana Padano, confirmed the trend in the decline of the Mediterranean diet. In Italy, in fact, the Mediterranean adequacy index is around 1.44, a far cry from the 7.2 of Nicotera in 1960 and 5.6 of Montegiorgio in 1965.

85 Lang T, Heasman M, "Food Wars", 2005

86 Keys A., "Seven Countries. A multivariate analysis of death and coronary heart disease", Harvard University, 1980

87 Fidanza A., Fidanza F., "Mediterranean Adequacy Index of Italian diets", Public Health Nutrition, 2004

88 Baldini M., "Is the Mediterranean lifestyle still a reality? Evaluation of food consumption and energy expenditure in Italian and Spanish university students", Public Health Nutrition, 2008

### 3.2.3 Food, environment and sustainability

Sustainability is one of the major subjects of debate of our day.

The roots of today's exchanges were already to be found in the writings of Malthus and Condorcet between the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>89</sup> The former, an economist and demographer, expressed **skepticism** about the ability of natural resources to sustain the population growth rates which began to be seen in that era. The latter, a mathematician, economist and philosopher, professed a doctrine based on the complete trust in man's ability to overcome the limits imposed by his environment through **progress**.

Making a forceful reappearance in the Seventies with the first pessimistic forecasts about the depletion of oil,<sup>90</sup> in recent years the concept of sustainability has taken on a wider environmental, economic and social connotation.

As is well-known, the convergence today of a number of significant factors of discontinuity—population growth, rapid developed of a number of large countries (China, India and Brazil), increased environmental tensions—offer the same dilemmas once again and call for effective solutions.

We are particularly interested in noting the connection between **eating habits** and **environmental sustainability**.

Agricultural activity is responsible for producing 33% of the total annual greenhouse gas emissions in the world.<sup>91</sup>

In addition, the use of pesticides and fertilizers which did so much to contribute to the extraordinary results of the green revolution over the last 30 years, has resulted in land degradation.

**Livestock raising** causes even further problems. In reality, global agricultural output would be sufficient to feed the planet's six billion inhabitants if it were equitably divided and, above all, if it were not used largely to feed the three billion heads of livestock.

The massive **urbanization** occurring throughout the world constitutes a further critical aspect from the standpoint of sustainability,<sup>92</sup> especially food.

In addition, the role of diet is increasingly key in terms of individual health and, as a result, of **social sustainability**. Dietary choices have a decisive role in preventing a number of diseases, such as those chronic ones which in recent decades have seen a significant increase within the world's population.

89 Belasco W., "Meals to come, a history of the future of food", 2006

90 Club of Rome

91 World Resources Institute, Database.

92 Manzini E., Jégou F., "Scenari di vita urbana", 2003

Major studies have shown that 80% of the cases tied to these diseases could have been prevented by eliminating a number of risk factors such as smoking, poor diet, physical inactivity and excessive alcohol consumption. On the contrary, without adequate preventive measures, their impact on world health could increase by 17% over the next 10 years.

Focusing analysis on the factor of diet, it can be seen that there is an exponential growth in obesity in virtually every country in the world. This trend is so significant that the *European Association for the Study Of Diabetes* (EASD) has called prevention and treatment of obesity “*the most important public health problem in the entire world*”. Over 65% of all Americans are obese or overweight and there has been a tripling in the number of overweight youth from 1970 to the present.<sup>93</sup>

### 3.2.4 New responsibilities for industry

The *raison d'être* of a company is to **generate and distribute wealth** within a context of socially responsible behavior.

Companies are the most efficient entities that have been designed over the course of history to lift humanity out of wide-scale poverty. Despite all the contradictions which have accompanied industrialization, the existence of companies has coincided over time with an increase in well-being of increasingly wider segments of the population.

Therefore, companies, and those with whom companies are involved in creating and supporting over time (entrepreneurs), cannot be asked to give up their goal of **maximizing the wealth generated**—for themselves and for others—without calling into question their very reason for being and the underlying dynamics of corporate functioning. What society must demand, and, in fact, increasingly demands, from companies is that they operate responsibly in terms of the environment and all stakeholders.

Corporate social responsibility<sup>94</sup> (CSR for short) has been one of the most important cultural developments in recent years. Although this issue began to arise starting in the 1960s, opening the way to debate marked by significant differences of opinion (Milton Friedman's position on the question is well-known<sup>95</sup>), it was only in the 1980s that corporate social responsibility took on an organized structure with specific operational tools.

93 For a more detailed discussion, please refer to the “*Alimentazione e Salute*” study by the Barilla Center for Food and Nutrition

94 The European Commission defines corporate social responsibility as: “A concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis.”

95 “That is why, in my book *Capitalism and Freedom*, I have called it a ‘fundamentally subversive doctrine’ in a free society, and have said that in such a society, ‘there is one and only one social responsibility of business—to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud.’” (“*The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits*”, *The New York Times Magazine*, September 13, 1970

The most advanced thinking today recognizes the role of CSR as a factor capable of **contributing to corporate competitiveness**.<sup>96</sup>

Clearly, this aspect of responsibility (which is relevant for every company) is of particular importance for companies operating in the field of food production. The very nature of the goods produced calls for transparent and irreproachable behavior.

The issue of responsibility towards consumers, the environment and all stakeholders does not affect only those companies involved in this sector. The concept is a wider one which involves all actors of whom it is demanded, including indirectly, to assume responsibility for global management of food: governments, legislators, international institutions, regulating bodies, etc. In addition, a significant part of supply chain actors, although companies in all respects, are hard to classify as manufacturers.

Despite this, it is the companies themselves—and in particular medium-to-large food producers—who, within this context, can make an extremely significant contribution to a correct approach to food issues, taking the responsibility on themselves to manage some of the main food emergencies. But, more than individual companies, it must be the system of companies that comprises the food industry.

There are many aspects to the **responsibilities held by the food industry**. First of all, there is the fundamental aspect of guaranteeing food safety.

Today, faced by new emergencies, such as the consequences of climate change<sup>97</sup> and the need re-orient dietary habits towards a more natural approach in much of the Western world, the food industry finds itself faced with the need to update and improve its food safety measures.

This implies not only constant improvement in production processes, but also evaluation of new technological frontiers, above all, the thorny question of the introduction of biotechnologies in the production of food products.

There is also a second, just as relevant aspect connected to the specific way the agro-food sector is organized on a world scale. Farming, by definition, is local, while the food industry, especially larger components of it, tend to be global. In addition, farming is often performed as the primary source of sustenance by the most destitute sectors of the population in some of the world's poorest countries. This creates an imbalance that requires not only political action, but also

96 The European Commission has recognized the role of CSR as a fundamental factor in the Lisbon Strategy for economic growth. CSR “can help to shape the kind of competitiveness model that Europe wants”

97 Barilla Center for Food & Nutrition, “*Cambiamento climatico, agricoltura e alimentazione*”, 2009

enormous attention from all actors in the agro-food sector to guard against making discriminatory choices or introducing mechanisms of exploitation.

It has been established that one point of growth in agricultural production contributes to the well-being of the population in emerging countries more than growth in any other single sector of the economy does.<sup>98</sup>

However, despite the fact that they are complex, filled with unknowns and subject to continuous acceleration (which require significant innovation), these are the traditional challenges the sector faces. And the sector has always faced them. If anything, it should be noted how even those issues most closely tied to the sector's traditional activities have been made extremely difficult with the arrival of new factors, such as technological development (a case in point, GMOs).

But there is more. As we have seen in this chapter, **new areas have opened up**. These involve primarily consumer health, types of advertising and a growing request to safeguard the cultural heritage tied to food, through a demand to recover a sense of natural authenticity.

In terms of the first point, the debate is still open over whether industry must take responsibility for consumer health (for example, through development of recipes more attentive to potential consumer risk, such as reducing salt content in products), or if production processes should be primarily oriented towards consumer demand. Clearly, these various issues are interconnected because advertising questions also come into play.

Here, we believe a position must be taken. Although we believe a process of cultural growth involving consumers of food products is essential in order to "impose" choices which are more in-tune with dietary considerations, we also think that part of the concept of food industry responsibility involves identification of all the possible ways of increasing available knowledge and improving the "wellness" aspects of food offered within the various categories of products.

Advertising also plays a fundamental role. Above and beyond the legislated requirements more specifically connected with functional foods,<sup>99</sup> there exists a need to introduce forms of advertising offering enhanced information for the consumer.

Finally, the food industry will be called upon to become increasingly aware of the sustainability profile that must become part of their way of operating: social sustainability, which means the ability to guarantee suitable quantities of products for healthy eating habits; and environmental sustainability to reduce the impact of their operations.

Finally, there is the theme of defending food traditions, one not to be taken for granted. As has been highlighted throughout this paper, food is the expression of the culture which generates it. Where this connection has been severed, there have been immediate, dramatic consequences.

For this reason, re-establishment of a true food culture is the most powerful tool available to the food industry in order to serve man, his health, aspirations and social life.

### 3.2.5 Food advertising: myth-making, brands and manipulation

Food advertising has always attempted to create myths that promote consumer identification.

Today, however, we have reached a point in which this arsenal of devices and approaches, honed on experiences of the past, are no longer adequate to correctly portraying the current reality of styles of living and consumption.

As noted, **the request for authenticity in the eating experience, environmental sustainability and social ethics, as well as inclusion of diversity**, will be the areas on which to build a new vision food for the future.

Two paradigms have emerged: one of scientific integration, on one side, and ecological integration on the other.

The technological paradigm introduces a medically-oriented view of human and environmental health based on biotechnological manipulation and functional concept of food that is enhanced through engineering. The natural paradigm promotes a holistic approach to human and environmental health based on ecological diversity and agro-ecology, with a more culturally-oriented concept of food through the development of organic factors.

In many ways, these two approaches are contradictory, but, at the same time, both are generated from the same nucleus of factors of change described in this chapter.

It is around these two major themes that the food industry, individual companies and their brands must take a position. And from this will most likely emerge a new food industry.

Perhaps even more than in the past, brands will continue to be a major generator of new meanings, sense to give to daily life: they must offer, first of all, a world with values, identification and a mirroring of deep-seated human aspirations and connection with others through similitude. In a world of "non-places", the brand must make one feel "at home".

People will purchase brands that offer an experience with new meanings, which meet a multiplicity of identities, provide a real sense of belonging, create new concepts of community and which engage in a real process of interaction.

<sup>98</sup> World Bank

<sup>99</sup> US Food and Drug Administration



However, for this to occur, for the food industry to be capable of entering into this new world with sufficient efficacy, there must be a leap in quality with acceptance of a new series of responsibilities that will govern how they do business.

### 3.2.6 For a new vision: going back to the central dimension of food, redefining the pleasure and spread knowledge of food

To this point we have listed a number of factors that will influence the future of food over the decades to come, the most important of these being the request for more natural products and the need to bring eating habits back into balance for a healthier, sustainable dietary approach.

But the greatest challenge of our era is probably that of reacquiring a more profound, richer and more motivating relationship with the process of eating, in which the relationship with food is returned to an aesthetic one based on taste and pleasure. As has been mentioned on several occasions, time is decisive in this regard. Time which extends to allow new space for the eating experience.

Just as important is regaining the aspect of conviviality which, in many ways, creates the possibility for a gratifying experience.

While the need exists to recover those traits typical of traditional ritual, the current-day situation requires that new behavior paradigms be applied to food consumption. Our post-modern society is one of disenchantment, the loss of the magic of symbolic exchange and distortion of space and time in our lifestyles. Globalization creates an incumbent presence of what is "diverse", denying people of the human aspects of tangibility, resemblance, durability, connection and profundity.

The risk is that a desperate need to interact with others and the progressive fear and inability to do so, will tend to make communities fragile and ephemeral, and emotions fleeting and fragmented.

To summarize, the society of tomorrow will be a society that is **multifarious** and **uncertain**: an older society, feminized, economically more polarized, multi-ethnic, much more urbanized, based on total mobility and lifestyles that are fragmented and under pressure, with serious environmental emergencies. Speed of living and loss of the traditional spatial dimension will be aspects that determine lifestyles.

As a result, lifestyles will be "fluid", influenced by changing situations and moods; age, gender and cultural identities will be multiple and in continuous flux.

What will the role of food be in this newly-emerging world? Image will increasingly tend to form the basis of consumption. It will not be products themselves that determine a choice, but their codified meaning. To convince people to consume, and continue to do so over time, products must be integrated into

functional and emotional aspects through symbolic elements that meet the need for roots, localization, duration and respite from anxiety, with a reassuring physical and mental boundary.

From the standpoint of eating habits, this opens the possibility for a new type of relationship with food. According to the analysis of Bauman, the emerging traits of this new approach could be situated between the pleasure of the sensory experience and the request for situational convenience that allows for full enjoyment of the food consumed. Speed has become a characteristic trait of our era, and, on the basis of aspects different from those we are familiar with, it will significantly influence our relationship to food.

And this introduces two other important dimensions: on one side, simplified preparation (making it possible to gain time lacking today and compensate for the loss of food culture that makes it impossible to operate independently in this area); on the other, portability everywhere, seen as ease in applying the eating style desired, including within an increasingly-frenetic society.

Ritual is also an aspect impacting on the relationship with food. Regaining of ritual aspects will provide a dimension of sense and reassurance that contributes to making the eating experience more intense.

To summarize, the future offers us the possibility of constructively re-interpreting our relationship with food in the attempt to reconcile modern-day social trends with a healthy, positive approach to food and eating.

## 4. Conclusion

**W**e would like to conclude this excursion into the cultural implications of food by highlighting what seem to us to be the most significant results of the work done. First of all, we should indicate two essential elements that will help to explain the sense of the conclusions we have reached:

- the consumption of food is, by nature, **a cultural experience specific to mankind**. We can see that the bond between food practices and culture is emerging as a structural aspect of all of human history. The gradual loss of this important aspect of the overall cultural dimension seems to be the result of a process of alienation that, as we have shown, generates anxiety and uncertainty. Our era is thus the best possible time to requalify the cultural value of the man-food relationship in positive terms. The social relevance and urgency of a vast operation of rethinking that relationship make it one that cannot be postponed any longer; we must respond at the root to the needs and desires of our fellow men;
- the food culture is the **most effective way of redefining the man-food relationship in concrete terms**. The only way we can successfully deal with the great food emergencies of our century, linked to access to food, the prevention of a wide range of diseases and respect of the environment, is by developing a food culture that is more attentive to the values of naturalness and sustainability in all its aspects. Culture has always been a multiplier of results, with its ability to activate and focalize the energies of large numbers of people. If we limit ourselves to finding technical solutions to the emerging problems, but do not address the spread of a cultural dimension and knowledge, we will only obtain short-term results and will fail to address the deeper causes of the current difficulties.

In the light of this need, we think that addressing the future of food anew means:

- valorizing the rich and varied aspect of **conviviality**; ours is an epoch that suffers from a poverty of relationships. Though we have many more opportunities for contact, also via new technologies, human relations are often highly superficial. Food has always been the vehicle of occasions for aggregation and social relations; this natural inclination must be recovered and an adequate social dimension restored to our consumption of food;
- protecting **local territorial variety**, with a view to expansion; as an expression of a community's identity and that of a territory, food maintains a uniqueness that allows it to reveal its own cultural roots and at the same time relate to

other traditions. For this to happen, however, it is essential to preserve the full richness of its identity, though without rejecting a taste for contaminations, thereby strengthening the emotional capital linked to the roots, the typical flavors of territorial localization, but also exploring the humanly universal aspects;

- transferring **knowledge and know-how** as extraordinary funds of cultural wealth; The preparation of food is by nature a labor of craftsmanship, to a large extent; the consumer often has to contribute by participating in forms of *co-production* with the supplier of the foods. This action requires important skills, however, that must be preserved and handed down from generation to generation;
- returning to a healthy relationship with the territory and the context of raw materials, aiming toward the **excellence of the ingredients**; in the case of food products, the relationship between the material quality of the food and the quality of the cultural experience is particularly strong. Poor quality food does not produce culture. It is essential, for this reason, to insist on the fundamental importance of excellent ingredients, establishing a direct, respectful bond with the context in which the raw material is produced;
- rediscovering the value of food as a means to achieving a **fertile relationship across the generations**, in the simplicity and clarity of its benefits. The breakfast and dinner table seem to be, for many families, among the few times and places for the transmission of education and a more meaningful sharing of affection in which the whole family participates. This is another element that should be fostered and used as an element of construction (and reconstruction) of the social fabric that modern life is weakening;
- Resurrecting the **ancient flavors capable of experiencing new life** in the contemporary taste through a critical selection that enables us to maintain the finest elements of the culinary traditions and reinterpret them in creative ways. This, in all fields, is the fundamental mechanism for the transmission of cultural aspects;
- Lastly, **spreading the culture of enjoyment of the eating experience and the taste for good living** through authentic food, because restoring the magic and wonder of food and its rituals and the delight of its carefree enjoyment - as existential and cultural fuel - are ways of rediscovering the central importance of people and their emotions. In the future, luxury and good health will both reside in great measure in the art of living and conceiving of food in a cultural key.

*" [...] What I want are the cream puffs they sell at the supermarket [...]. A perfect cream puff, covered with sugar grains, requires the same attention necessary for any good puff pastry. Not too soft, not too stiff. The cream puff must not be chewy, soggy, flaky or excessively dry. Perfection is a cream puff that is soft but not soggy, consistent but not dry. The pastry chefs who have to fill them with cream have a very delicate task: they have to prevent the softness of the cream from contaminating the puff [...]. Pages and pages have been written about the first bite, the second and the third [...]. But I can never transmit the exquisite thrill of that sensation to you, I can only tell you about it [...]. Like the synapses that intersect in the depths of*



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