Food as Culture: Eating in Social Context (Credits: 4)
Sociology 297FS Fall 2021; T/R 10:00a-11:15; Location: Machmer E-35
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Student Hours (934 Thompson or via Zoom): to be arranged at class

Overview. During the last century, there have been remarkable changes in what Americans consume that have drastically altered the landscape of how we think about food and eating. These changes have not simply been a matter of quantity. We eat out in restaurants more, and in particular, patronize more fast-food restaurants, and consumers are offered larger portion sizes than past generations. We eat together as families less often than in decades past. Or do we? Is it possible that perhaps what has changed is how we eat with family – as families themselves have changed? It is known that on average, food needs to travel further to reach our homes as Americans have become accustomed to “seasonless” consumption. There are also fewer unadulterated foods on grocery store shelves. Our eating patterns are linked to a range of food decisions that nowadays typically require a significant amount of information awareness. These include choices between multiple sources of high-energy but low-nutrient sugar on the shelves of the supermarket, choices between organic and nonorganic produce, or choices between farm-raised, humanely-treated, or industrially processed, mass-produced meats. All of these foods might travel from the neighboring town or halfway around the globe to reach us.

A central tenet of nutrition research is that our food choices are largely determined by nutritional need. But this isn’t a nutrition class. This is a sociology class, and one of the main ideas here is that there are considerable social forces at work behind how, and what, we eat. Some of these are obvious, some of them less so. For instance: early childhood learning of taste preferences and taste aversion mechanisms, the broad array of choices facing consumers in their local food aisles and restaurants, and changes in prices over time. In short, we adopt our tastes for so many other reasons than nutritional content. Think about availability, cost, religious guidelines, short-term diets for health purposes, and cultural beliefs. Not to mention that our relationships with others influence what we eat, whether in the context of the family dinner table, a friend’s choice of a lunch spot, or the workplace (or college) cafeteria. We’re constantly learning about ways of eating from people around us. We know from numerous studies that the presence of friends and family affects what food – as well as how much of it, and how – we consume. Furthermore, one’s socioeconomic, demographic, and cultural background all contribute to the cultures of food that one is exposed to. Food exposure and access is unequal across the American landscape in a variety of ways – we will probe how these inequalities arose, are perpetuated, and discuss how these inequalities may be narrowed (or exacerbated) in the future.

Goal: You should leave this course with an ability to think critically about how, and what, you eat is shaped by a wide range of social forces. Although genes and biology may be responsible for some part of the foods you prefer to eat, tastes for food are enacted and reinforced in the social context in which you live. Your job as a member of the class is to be relentlessly curious about how this might work. An equally important goal is to continue to develop skills that will transfer beyond this course: a) evaluating the quality of evidence on scientific claims about food and eating, b) interpreting data (in many forms) about food, and c) writing/reflecting about social science research on food and culture.

Grading. This course uses Moodle, and it will reward consistent engagement with the material and with your classmates. Letter grades will be used (A: 93-100, A-: 90-92.9, B+: 87-89.9, B: 83-86.9; B-: 80-82.9; C+: 77-79.9; C: 73-76.9; C-: 70-72.9; D+: 67-69.9, D: 60-66.9, F: 0-59.9). You have multiple ways to excel; the grade consists of: 25% reading memos (13 of them – I’ll drop the lowest one); 25% in-class midterm (multiple-choice & short-answer); 30% final exam; 20% homework (2 assignments).
For all written assignments (response papers/homework), a full letter grade will be deducted for every day it’s turned in late. There is no grading curve.

**Prerequisites.** You are expected to come to class having read the material so we can talk about it. There are no formal prereqs besides an active curiosity for the topics; a willingness to read material across the social sciences (mostly sociology), some psychology, and some public health; and a willingness to engage with data presented in a variety of ways. You’ll encounter a variety of data and diverse kinds of (mostly) qualitative and (some) quantitative methods.

**Brief check-in.** Every student is required to sign up for a 10-minute student hours meeting with me during the first 2 weeks (in person, or via Zoom – we’ll see how the fall unfolds). This is a small class – we’ll all get to know each other. You’ll learn that I take my job seriously. It helps me be a better instructor if I know more about your interests in the course material, and if there are ways that I can help you learn. (Pro tip: it helps you too. It’s easier for professors who their students to write letters of recommendation for them for a job or scholarship opportunity. Think ahead.)

**Readings.** There are 2 required books. The remainder are primary-source (original) scientific journal articles, a couple short films, podcasts, and other media. Most are food-centric; a few will ask you to expand your sociological thinking far beyond the study of food.

I’ve selected this material to be challenging but rewarding – staying on top of the readings and engaging in class will help you get the most out of class. PDFs of readings and links to media are available on Moodle.

Two strong encouragements:

1. **ORDER BOOKS EARLY FROM YOUR PREFERRED BOOKSELLER SO THAT YOU DON’T FALL BEHIND.**

2. Make yourself a course-pack by print out .PDFs so that you can mark up and highlight articles. These annotations tend to be easier to retrieve, to bring to class for discussion, and will likely serve your learning processes better than digitally marking up a .pdf.
What I expect of you:

**Attendance.** During the fall variant of the pandemic, I don’t think it’s right to make attendance mandatory, but know that this is as much a discussion-based small class as it is me lecturing. Get in touch if you have extenuating circumstances that make your attendance difficult, and we’ll work together to find a solution.

**Homework assignments (20%).** There will be two of these, one during the first half of the term (weeks 1-7), one during the second half (weeks 8-15). Details will be provided during class.

**Short reading memos (25%).** Each week, you have a set of readings that touches on a particular theme. Your task is to write a short (250-300-word) response statement that summarizes a key point of a chapter/article(s) and offers some of your original thoughts and reactions to it(them). What struck you as surprising? What challenged your previous thinking on the topic? Do you disagree with the author(s)? Does this connect to ideas you learned elsewhere? You have flexibility here, by design. Memos must be uploaded to Moodle prior to the class about which you’re writing to receive credit. Graded as check-, check, check+.

**Exams.**

a) **In-class midterm (25%).** This 70m in-class exam on Tuesday, 10/19 will be multiple-choice and short-answer questions intended to test your grasp of key ideas from the 1st part of the term.

b) **The comprehensive final exam (30%)** will be weighted towards material from the 2nd half, though some fundamentals from the first half may also be included. Details will be provided during class.

**Class norms:** We all were on zoom a ton last year. Let’s take a break from screens to reconnect. I generally have a “no screens in class” policy. I’ve designed our sessions together as interactive, discussion-based lectures. It sounds old-fashioned, but taking notes, asking questions, and reviewing notes in preparation for exams are the best predictors of deep learning in college coursework. I’m happy to point you towards numerous pieces of research that show this to be the case.

What you can expect from me:

**To help co-create a constructive learning environment.** This means being knowledgeable, prepared, and willing to puzzle through questions prompted by the material. It means helping us to take stock of where we’ve been each week, and where we’re headed the following week. It also means being as responsive to your concerns as I can be.

**To be available to you outside of class.** I’ll take a poll in class as to the best times for student hours and I’ll set that time according to what works best for your schedules. This is because I want this time to be helpful for you. You can zoom or stop by my office. If you email, you can usually expect a response within 24h. I check email about 2x/day during the week. I’m not on Facebook and have a professional Twitter account but generally don’t follow (or accept follows) from active students – you all deserve to have an online life unsurveilled by university faculty!

**To be transparent and clear about how you are being evaluated during the term.** I want you to be apprised at all times about how you’re doing in the class. This syllabus gives you an overview of how your grade is calculated. I will be providing additional grading rubrics for response papers during the semester. You can check your grade at any time on the Moodle website, or email me. I will also post a grade calculator spreadsheet in the “class documents” folder on Moodle so you can forecast what your grade will be if you were to get a [X] grade on assignment [Y].
Week 1 (Thurs, 9/2): Cultures of Eating in America

Q: How do sociologists talk about “culture”?

[Come to our first class having read the following two short pieces!]

Week 2 (9/7 & 9/9): Food cultures & taste

Q: What is a “typical” American diet? Where does our idea of a “meal” come from? How do sociologists think about “taste”, and where do our tastes for food come from?

Tuesday:

Thursday:

Week 3 (9/14 & 16): Food & Social Space

Q: How is what we eat affected by where we come from?

Tuesday:

Thursday:
Film: Food Forward: Urban Agriculture Across America (2014, 25m, Kanopy Streaming)

(NOTE: *** suggests you allow extra time to read this piece.)
**Week 4 (9/21 & 9/23): Food economies & measurement**

*Q: How do material resources and social position shape access to what we consume?*

**Tuesday:**

**Thursday:**

***9/24: Assignment 1 Due***

**Week 5 (9/28 & 9/30): Eating together**

*Q: Why do we eat with other people?*

**Tuesday**

**Thursday**

**Week 6 (10/5 & 10/7): Eating in & eating out: How social networks structure what we consume**

*Q: How do we affect what other people eat, and vice versa?*

**Tuesday**

**Thursday**

Week 7 (10/12 & 10/14): Examining race in the study of food

Tuesday:

Thursday:

Week 8 (10/19 & 10/21): Midterm week / Production of Culture Perspective

Tuesday:
*** In-class midterm ***

Thursday:

Week 9 (10/26 & 10/28): Food and biology
Q: How does our biology play into what we eat?

Tuesday

Thursday
Rozin, P., & Ruby, M. B. (2020). Bugs are blech, butterflies are beautiful, but both are bad to bite: Admired animals are disgusting to eat but are themselves neither disgusting nor contaminating. Emotion, 20(5), 854–865.
Week 10 (11/2 & 11/4): Omnivores, vegetarians, and everything in between

Q: How are our choices in plant and animal-based products shaped by our ethics, morals, taste, and our wallets?

Tuesday:

Thursday:

Week 11 (11/9 & 11/11): Social networks and eating habits

Q: How do people in our social networks (our family, friends, and co-workers) affect what we eat?

Tuesday:

Thursday: HOLIDAY – veteran’s day

Week 12 (11/16 & 11/18): Eating and health

Q: What kinds of social origins do diet inequalities have? What are some of the consequences of our diet decisions?

Tuesday:

Thursday:
Film: Soul Food Junkies (2012, 64m, Kanopy Streaming) or Sugar Coated (2015, 60m, Kanopy Streaming)

***Monday, 11/22: Assignment 2 Due***
The Future of Food & Society

Week 14 (11/30 & 12/2) The pandemic and food

Q: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected our foodways and cultures of eating? What are longer-term implications of these shifts?

Tuesday

Thursday

Week 15 (12/7): How is technology affecting our relationship with food?

Tuesday:
Turkle, Sherry. 2011. “Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other.” New York: Basic Books. *(Short excerpt)*.
I want you to succeed in this course! See below for additional resources.

**Gender Respect at Title IX at UMass**
From: [https://www.umass.edu/titleix/](https://www.umass.edu/titleix/)

The University of Massachusetts Amherst aspires to be a university environment that is free of discrimination, sexual harassment, and sexual violence. We take allegations of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, sexual violence, sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence, stalking, and other sexual misconduct with the utmost seriousness. The cornerstones of our processes are providing supportive measures, conducting fair, impartial and prompt investigations, respect for the privacy of the parties, and a commitment to due process. It is our goal that anyone who reports an experience of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, or other forms of prohibited sex-based harassment or is engaged in a university process knows their rights, is connected to resources and options, is treated fairly, and that our educational and training efforts will support an educational and working environment free from gender and sex-based discrimination.

**UMass Amherst Office of Disability Services**  
[http://www.umass.edu/disability/students](http://www.umass.edu/disability/students)

**Accommodations and Services For Students:** Disability Services provides a wide variety of services to students with disabilities. Our office promotes the empowerment of people with disabilities and their full integration into campus life and the community.

**Accommodations:** An accommodation is a modification or adjustment to a course, program, service, job, activity, or facility that enables a qualified student or employee with a disability to participate equally in a program, service, activity, or employment at the University. A “reasonable” accommodation refers to an accommodation that is appropriate as well as effective and efficient, and is agreed upon by the University and the consumer with a disability. Many accommodations are available at the University to ensure that students with disabilities participate fully in academic and student life. They provide a student with a disability equal access to the educational and co-curricular process, without compromising essential components of the curriculum. Accommodations are determined on an individual basis, based on the student’s documentation. For accommodations to be timely, they must be arranged well in advance. Students are responsible for contacting Disability Services at the beginning of each semester so that reasonable accommodations can be made in a timely manner (first two weeks of classes, or first week of summer or winter session).

Common Accommodations For Students: most frequently provided include, but are not limited to:
- Additional time to complete assignments
- Alternate Formats for Printed Course Materials
- Alternate Types of Exams
- Assistive Technology/Captioning Services
- Classroom Access Assistants
- Document Conversion
- Extended Time on Exams
- Extension of Statute of Limitations
- Exam Proctoring
- Learning Specialists
- Modification of Graduation Requirements
- Note-Taking Services
- Paratransit Services
- Prepared Materials Before Class
- Reduced Course Load
- Sign Language Interpreters and Oral Transliterator
- Tape Recorders
Department of Sociology Statement of Values

The Department of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is committed to creating and maintaining an inclusive and equitable department. We ask that all members of the Sociology community -- faculty, staff, and students -- be mindful of our responsibility to create an environment that is welcoming to all, and where each person feels accepted, included, seen, heard, valued, and safe. We recognize that learning how to be inclusive and respectful is an iterative process and sometimes we all act in imperfect ways. As sociologists, we are aware that we are all inheritors of systems of inequality, whether to our advantage or our disadvantage. We also acknowledge that we each are privileged in various ways. We strive to create safe spaces to encourage productive dialogue with the goal of learning from our mistakes and changing for the better.

We strive for excellence in all we do. True excellence requires each individual to be able to work and learn in an atmosphere of respect, dignity, and acceptance. Our commitment to equity and inclusion requires each of us to continuously ensure that our interactions be respectful. We recognize that marginalized groups of people have unique experiences in the Pioneer Valley and within the larger society. We are committed to making our department a place that counteracts, to the best of our abilities, those processes of marginalization, and that inspires academic freedom and creativity.

Whenever and wherever possible, our department will affirm this commitment to values that oppose racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, transphobia, classism, and hatred based on religious identity publicly and explicitly. As a department dedicated to social justice, we will take very seriously reports, formal or informal, of harassment and discrimination. We will make every effort to ensure that this commitment manifests in our department's policies, programs, and practices.

In the Department of Sociology, we:

- Value equity, inclusion, and dignity for all.
- Insist on a culture of respect and recognize that words and actions matter. The absence of action and words also matter.
- Encourage respectful expression of ideas and perspectives.
- Will not tolerate sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and other overt and covert forms of prejudice and discrimination.
- Share in the responsibility to create a positive culture and to safeguard equity, inclusion, dignity, respect, and safety for all. Each member of our community - faculty, staff, and students - should be a role model for others.
- Will take action when we observe people being treated unfairly or in a demeaning manner.
- Envision and strive to foster an inclusive, welcoming department.
UMass Amherst statement on academic honesty
http://www.umass.edu/dean_students/academic_policy

All members of the University community must participate in the development of a climate conducive to academic honesty. While the faculty, because of their unique role in the educational process, have the responsibility for defining, encouraging, fostering, and upholding the ethic of academic honesty, students have the responsibility of conforming in all respects to that ethic.

Intellectual honesty requires that students demonstrate their own learning during examinations and other academic exercises, and that other sources of information or knowledge be appropriately credited. Scholarship depends upon the reliability of information and reference in the work of others. Student work at the University may be analyzed for originality of content. Such analysis may be done electronically or by other means. Student work may also be included in a database for the purpose of checking for possible plagiarized content in future student submissions. No form of cheating, plagiarism, fabrication, or facilitating of dishonesty will be condoned in the University community.

The Academic Honesty Policy was established to ensure that the learning environment at the university is honest and fair. The policy is designed to provide faculty and students with options for handling incidents. Academic dishonesty includes but is not limited to:

- **Cheating** - intentional use or attempted use of trickery or deception in one's academic work
- **Fabrication** - intentional falsification and/or invention of any information or citation
- **Plagiarism** - knowingly representing the words or ideas of another as one's own work
- **Facilitating dishonesty** - knowingly helping or attempting to help another commit an act of academic dishonesty