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Writing a menu: the politics of food choice

Abstract:

This paper explores the cultural frameworks for the choices we make about what we eat, drawing on a range of contemporary theories including Pierre Bourdieu's work on distinction, Claude Lévi-Strauss' on the constitutive nature of food choices, and Michel Foucault's notion that food and its selection is a matter of the care of the self, and hence carries an ethical imperative. Reading writers on food and our relationship to food—from Socrates to Princess Diana—I discuss the processes of selection involved in the production of a menu that, albeit unconsciously, operates as a system of distinction and individuation.

Biographical note:

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The rules of the menu are not in themselves more trivial than the rules of verse to which a poet submits (Mary Douglas 2002: 250)

1. Food

Say the word out loud; listen to the rich round sound of that double-o; feel the slippery fricative F, and then, as you take the word into your mouth, notice how your lips form an O—ooh—as the utterance takes form. It's the second shape our lips make in our lives: first the open-mouth cry of shock at being born; then the curved O as we seek sustenance, comfort, something to suck, something to hold in our mouths. Food. Ooh.

But after that first reaching out to the world for sustenance—an animal gesture, an instinct or reflex—our relationship with food becomes cultural. The 'ooh' becomes 'Hmmm ... the beef or the lamb? Thai or French? Raw or cooked?'

2. Distinction

The raw, and the cooked: that binary observed, analysed and recounted by the recently deceased anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The implication in his famous book of that title is that this is what it comes down to, for food; that we are what we eat—or what we say we eat, what we publicly eat. That what and how we eat is that the core of our identity as individuals and as cultures. Food is not mere fuel, not simply sensual pleasure. It is a marker of identity, as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out: 'Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (1984: 6). It is a marker of difference, again to quote Bourdieu, who writes about the ways in which society and its fields are structured in terms of the struggle 'to impose principles of vision and division of the social world' (2000: 113). Food is not neutral, not ordinary, not obvious. It is—or, it can be—a site for struggle, a site for the working out of relations of power. It tells us who we are, it divides us, it sorts the men from the boys, the natural from the cultural, the savage from the socialised.

Am I overstating the case?

3. Choices

When I was a child we ate according to this pattern:

- Monday nights: simple food—meat and 3 veg
- Tuesdays: something with rice: a curry, or something bland and boiled
- Wednesdays: something with more oomph, usually incorporating potatoes and carrots and peas
- Thursday night: we'd go out to dinner at some restaurant
- Friday night: soup, or stew, or eggs, or salads
- Saturday: whatever you could snatch up en route to somewhere

- Sunday lunchtime: roast meal, with gravy and 5/6/7 different vegetables

Never, or almost never cakes or desserts. Always, and in abundance, fruit.

Liquor-glasses of wine for the kids on special occasions. Water. Lemon squash. Cocoa. Pepsi. Percolated coffee. More water.

This is, surely, simple food; non-political food; food prepared with an eye to a combination of nutritional value, gustatory pleasure and economy of effort. This is food that has nothing to do with distinction, with struggles for power, with the constitution of identity. Surely?

Well, yes; and no. I am confident that my mother did not, in her consideration of the food she would present her family, think explicitly—*if we eat X it will mean we are X sort of people*. But not once did my mother prepare the sorts of food that were eaten by the majority of people in the nation that was my home. We never ate *pap en wors*;¹ we never ate *putu*.² She would prepare *maas*,³ the comfort drink of her rural childhood, but we never touched it and she never insisted we do. We never ever ate goat, or *ting*.⁴ Nor did we eat chicken feet, pork belly, sheeps' eyes, fish cheeks, haggis, grits, black pudding or white, or take-away food. So while on the one hand my childhood menu was one of simple, fairly nutritious food, mostly fairly edible, it was not neutral, natural, or necessarily what it was. Our menus were drawn from a limited lexicon (as was yours, I'd be prepared to bet); and operated according to a strict though unarticulated set of rules of inclusion and exclusion (as do yours, I'd bet). Ours was a menu that divided my family from the millions of Africans and Afrikaners who lived with us in the country of my birth. It divided us from the billions in China and East Asia, from many in the Americas, and even from many in the British Isles, our ostensible point of origin centuries earlier. It was not a menu based on availability or convenience, but on selection—a process of selection that, albeit unconsciously, operated as a system of distinction and individuation.

I would not risk asking my mother about the basis of her menu choices; and besides, it's decades later now—too late to clarify her thought process—and it was in another country, and another thought/practice economy. And would she be able to provide me any useful answers? I shouldn't think so. Distinction—the process of marking oneself out from the others on the basis of taste and taste-related practices—is not necessarily a conscious act. It happens, as often as not, below the surface. It would not be a common event for someone in their everyday life, preparing an ordinary meal for their family, to reflect on the basis for their choices. Rather, we prepare food on the basis of how we do it; and that is the result of our incorporation as particular kinds of individuals—the sort who eat raw food rather than cooked; the sort who prefer fried food to grilled, salads to yams with marshmallows, sausages to pigs' trotters. Some food is unthinkable, let alone inedible—not because of what it is, but because of what and who we are, and how we have been constituted as subjects in the world. Food is not just fuel; food is not just sensory delight or disgust. Food is something at once alien and familiar, both desired and despised; it is not (*pace* Lévi-Strauss) binary but multi-faceted; it is not natural but is, above all, social.

4. Food and morality

The social life of food, its social properties, are very evident in the domain of religion. Food, in many organised religions, is not treated as something natural or everyday. Rather, it is categorised, its use carefully regulated, and its choices associated with moral integrity and divine approbation or opprobrium. The interdictions against the eating of meat in general (Buddhism, or Catholicism on particular dates) or beef (Hinduism) and pork (Judaism and Islam) in particular; timing of meals; the rituals associated with meals; the correct combinations of food stuffs; the balance of feast and fast: all these are manifestly and explicitly set out in religious law, where nothing to do with the body can be allowed to escape oversight and judgment. Those of us who live a secular life can, most of the time, ignore the social and political life of food, though new systems of proscription have arisen in the wake of religion to associate food choices with moral imperatives. You are what you buy; and to be ‘one of us’ you need to pay attention to moral issues in food. How many kilometres did that pumpkin travel before it arrived on the greengrocer’s shelf? Was it grown through the application of artificial fertilizers? And about those eggs: were the hens allowed out to scratch and peck, or were they trapped in darkened barns? Does the food contain too much fat or sodium? Were those lentils imported from Israel?

We are lucky we can struggle over our choices, lucky we have the luxury to pay attention to our food, lucky we have the capacity to reject some foods on moral grounds. Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil note that this focus on food, like the attitude that food is a banal topic, or eating ‘a mundane activity’ (1997: 2), is possible only at those times and in those places when the food supply is secure. In times of starvation or deprivation the gentlest of people have been observed to salivate over the prospect of eating a rat, or to sift weevils out of flour and then cheerfully—gratefully—prepare a coarse biscuit from the results. It requires the security of supply before we have the luxury of struggling with, relating to, such a banal activity as the eating of food. It is, that is to say, natural (if we don’t eat we die), and overwhelmingly political, and relational.

5. Relating to food

I’m going to quote someone I have never quoted before, but who was the poster child for how we relate to food—at least in the West, where we have the luxury of relating to food as an agent, a friend or enemy; where food is a matter of our identity rather than a matter of bare survival. That someone is the late Princess Diana, famous as much for her bulimia as for her dress sense. In a 1993 speech on eating disorders, she said:

From the beginning of time the human race has had a deep and powerful relationship with food—if you eat you live, if you don’t you die. Eating food has always been about survival, but also about caring for and nurturing the ones we love. However, with the added stresses of modern life, it has now become an expression of how we feel about ourselves and how we want others to feel about us.

This is a trifle banal. But I have read my Foucault, and he suggests that there is something significant about banality. What we need to do, when confronted with banal statements and banal facts, he wrote, ‘is to discover—or try to discover—which specific and perhaps original problem is connected with them’ (in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 210). Princess Diana’s speech does, I think, contain valid points and concepts within the banality of its overall line of thought. Certainly I take issue with the first line, because it seems to me that ‘if you eat you live, if you don’t you die’ is not a matter of our relationship with food, but a practical reality. But there is a specific problem connected with her position: that we do not simply eat food, but have a relationship with food; that that relationship is not simple or merely mechanical, but affectual; that food is intimately associated with ‘caring for and nurturing the ones we love’.

She is not alone in this attitude; Pels, Hetherington and Vandenberghe note that in hospitals and hospices, ‘food can become the medium of care: that of nurses for their patients or relatives for their dying loved ones. ... Food’s texture, smell and its taste provide a source of pleasure as much as nourishment’ (2002: 16). What we feed others—the menu we write for them—expresses our relationship. *What’s for dinner, mother?* Delicate salads and perfectly cooked mushrooms when I’m feeling loving; a bit of toast and Vegemite when I’m too tired or too annoyed.

In a culture—our culture—where there is no shortage of food, what and how we eat is not a matter of survival except for the ill or the deluded, but rather a matter of care. Care for others, care of the self. When care fails, the law steps in. I am reminded here of the Breatharians, that cult whose main premise was that it is possible to live on air or light alone (though its members have been seen to eat—only for pleasure, they insist, not for need) and who came to public attention when a Queensland-based adherent unsurprisingly died, an event that resulted in prosecutions and jail terms for the cult leaders.

6. A cultural thing

The late Princess did not speak only of the relationship between food and care of others, but also of food as ‘an expression of how we feel about ourselves and how we want others to feel about us’. I am reminded here of attitudes to people—often adolescent girls and young women—who suffer from eating disorders (the term itself demands far more attention than I can provide in this short essay), and who can be incarcerated in hospitals, their rights suspended and their bodies invaded, until they begin to relate to food in a way considered appropriate, and healthy. They do not care about themselves in a way that our society approves. And they do not project themselves to others in a way that can be considered sound. They refuse to express themselves through their food choices, but only through their rejection of food (anorexics and bulimics) or in their unqualified consumption of anything at all (overeaters). They do not seem to acknowledge that, in our culture, food, our relationship with food and our choices with respect to food express ‘how we want others to feel about us’. This frequently leaves people—their family and friends, their medical practitioners—very uncomfortable. But it is, I suggest, merely a wildly

extreme version of what we all do anyway. Who is truly consistent with respect to their food choices, or to their relationship to food? When there's no one to observe me except me myself, how do I relate: do I feed myself plain boiled rice, or a finely cooked soufflé? Depends on what I think I deserve. Depends on how much I care about myself that day. And when I am out in the world, when I am visible, then it is far more likely that I will approach food as a marker of identity. I might be one of those people who wouldn't be seen dead in a Starbucks, but happy to look sophisticated in a Carlton café. Maybe in my secret life I creep into Starbucks and buy their so-called coffee, but not if I think you'll see me there. No, if I'm in public, I will want you to think of me as a Carlton café kind of person, not a chain store fast food commodity-captured person. It's not snobbery, though it has elements of that; it's more about identity; it's more about habitus; it's more about confidence in the world. It's not just about caring for myself and others; it's about presenting myself to others. It's a cultural thing.

7. Care of the self

The care of the self is what Michel Foucault came to consider and write about in the last years of his life, when the art of living became prominent in his expressed thought. Is life a terminal disease, which we can only deal with by not neglecting truth, wisdom or indeed poultry (Socrates' very last words are a reminder to Crito not to forget to sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius, the god of medicine). Why a rooster? But why not; after all, isn't chicken soup the panacea for all ills?

For some philosophers, this suggests that Socrates saw life itself as a disease cured only by death. Nietzsche, for example, insists that the philosopher's dying words prove that, for Socrates, life 'is no good' (Nietzsche 2006: 458). For others (Foucault, for instance), it may be that life is rendered more liveable by the care of the self. Which does not necessarily mean chicken soup is the answer—and certainly not for Socrates, who apparently said that 'those who pursue philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead' (Plato 1966: 641). This is hardly a ringing endorsement for the avoidance of death, or for the efficacy of chicken soup in making life more worth living. And yet, as Foucault notes, food and diet were terribly important to the ancients, even more important than sex: 'In the Roman epoch, at all events, the regimen of sexual pleasures holds a relatively limited place next to the great alimentary regimen' (1986: 141). Right living—which means right eating—is central to the care of the self, caring for the self, expressing to each of us ourselves how we feel about ourselves—how we care.

So, let's turn the spotlight on you, and on your cultural being, your own relationship with food. How do you feel about yourself, and how do you manifest in your choices of menu: are you a vegetarian, or a meat eater? Do you eat your food boiled or roasted? Are you a sophisticate, making your choices from an elegant list in an upmarket restaurant, or a lover of 'simple home cooking', throwing together a nutritious meal from what you find in the fridge?

Are you raw, or are you cooked?

Or maybe that's a nonsense question. After all, raw and cooked may look as though they fit comfortably in a binary order, but they don't, not when it comes to food. Food won't stay put on one side or the other. We all, however quote unquote sophisticated we may be, however comfortably off, eat raw as well as cooked food. Roquefort, steak tartare, sushi, salad ... The difference, of course, is that by the very act of naming something 'food', and preparing it even in the most perfunctory way, and presenting it to ourselves, our families or our guests, transform it from nature into culture. We are not Bear Grylls, reduced to munching live scorpions. If we serve live scorpions we do it by choice, and with art: we place it just so on the serving dish; we drizzle it with melted butter and a little cracked pepper; we transform it, by the magic of presentation and hence representation, into the cooked.

We are not just staying alive. We are writing a poem, we are crafting a work of art, we are making a life. As such, we follow particular rules of order, structure, flow; we apply recognised techniques; we obey the conventions of the craft—or, perhaps, the genre. Linguist Mike Halliday points out that, grammatically speaking, the menu is the top category in the whole business of eating. The daily menu is the structure that shapes the way we eat (1961: 62), a mouthful of food is a morpheme (1961: 64), and the content, combinations, and timing of our meals are analogies for sentences and conversations. In the crafting of a menu we follow a grammar, a syntax—the right combination of elements, in the right order. The menus we write in our imaginations or in our restaurants, the menus we write before the guests come over for dinner, or before Christmas day—they are not so much about nourishment of the body as about the satisfaction of the soul; they are about showing off, showing love, showing wealth; they are about showing that we know what we are about. We are not savages, or the desperate, whether our food is raw or cooked. We are people capable of choice.

8. Choice and desire

This is what we tell ourselves. We stand in the supermarket and weigh up the relative value, the relative desirability, of 53 different kinds of cheese. We make our choices: free choices, democratic choices. And yet ... what sort of choice is it, really? Limited; to some extent predetermined by the choices made earlier by the supermarket's buyer; whose choices are themselves predetermined by cost, availability and belief in consumers' preferences. Limited; to some extent predetermined by the identity of individual shoppers, whose 'free choice' of food stuff is actually set in advance by 'the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations' (Bourdieu 1977: 78) which is the habitus, itself formed by individuals' personal history and contexts, and then the process of formation forgotten so that the (almost) forced choice seems to have been freely made. We think we choose freely; but we choose in a limited way, from the basis of the objective structures that constitute us and generate our subjective practices; we think we choose freely, but this is only because we forget our own history. By and large, we treat our personal tastes as natural, inevitable—which goes some way to explain the difficulty experienced when we have to cater for a vegan, or someone with coeliac disease; suddenly the 'natural' and 'inevitable' choices are explicitly problematic, no longer just 'the thing to do'.

There are no natural choices. The menus we write—formally an account of what is available for a meal, informally the list of possibilities in our heads, on our shelves—are artefacts, products of human activity and so are bound by their makers and how they themselves were made: their habitus, their cultural frame. For instance: why refuse the meat of the slaughtered whale, but cheerfully barbeque a slaughtered cow? For instance: how often do you eat koala, or cat; and if not, why not? Our choices are as broad as the supermarket, as the world; our choices are as narrow as our habitus, our personal history. Despite this, we consume. We consume because we must; because we have been interpellated as consumers. We consume particular objects in particular orders because the grammar of food, of eating, is part of how we find our being in the world.

In our world, the western world, the grammar of food is like the English lexicon: vast and varied. It is predicated on excess. What is a menu but evidence of excess? There is always more made available than I actually need, listed in a range of choices on a card. That wide range of possibilities will be limited to the few items I choose, but (knowing myself as I do) I can confidently confess that my choices, however restricted, are surfeit. I will certainly order more than I can eat. And the restaurant will almost certainly have more prepared than will be purchased. This is the problem of food and choice: for some of us there is just too little, maybe too contaminated, maybe just mind/palate numbingly dull. For the rest of us, the 20%, there is always too much, and instead of dying of hunger, we are dying of cancer of the bowel, heart attacks, diabetes; we are dying because our bodies respond despairingly to the contaminants of type and quantity that we have been shovelling in. Our menus, like our hips are too broad. Which is a curious thing because the word *menu* in the French is an adjective that translates as:

- slim
- small
- thin
- slender

It seems that there is something Nietzschean going on: if we consume (according to) our desire, it will consume us in turn.

9. Rewriting the menu

So is this a morality tale: control your urges, or they will control you? Certainly that is what the ancients thought, as time rolled closer to the Christian epoch, and self-control became a more valued mark of identity than did joyous consumption (of food, of others' bodies). That is not precisely what we are up to yet in the west. Our governments and medical professionals urge us all to eat a little less, eat more healthily, and get a little more exercise. Yet, like Jacques Brel's bourgeoisie, the older we get, the fatter we get. It's just too difficult to eat 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day, especially if you're already full of Coke and cake and coffee. And it is just too

difficult to resist the effects of a whole-of-culture culture in which we have been interpellated as consuming subjects.

But perhaps it need not be. After all, a menu is first about discourse, and only second or third about food. We have long ‘known’ that food is as much about communicating with others, and with oneself, as it is about fuelling the body; that menus are not so much lists of meals as ‘sets of principles’ (Beardsworth and Keil 1997: 67) which combine recommendations and rules about food and food choices. A menu is thus a sort of a story; it provides place, plot, person. A menu is a poem—it provides stanzas, movement, image. A menu is not just about juxtapositioning of food items, but about health, or pleasure, or the exotic, or comfort, or asceticism, or responsibility, or irresponsibility; about being good (just fruit for me, thanks); about being bad (bring on the dessert tray). A menu can be, oh, just about anything.

Jeffner Allen writes: ‘A tale, once heard differently, can be retold’ (1989: 45). Perhaps the only way to consider, and rewrite our menus, to consider the choices they reflect, is to tell them differently: tell them in a way that renders food both healthy and joyous; tell them in a way that lays out a different world, a different sense of self, a different hint of who we might become.

Endnotes

¹ *Pap*: a maize meal porridge; *wors*: a spiced sausage; served with spicy tomato sauce, and eaten principally by people of Afrikaans origin

² *Putu*: another kind of maize meal porridge, this one served very stiff, picked up with the fingers, shaped into balls and dipped in spicy sauce; mostly eaten by Zulu and Xhosa, adapted by the Afrikaners

³ *Maas* for the Afrikaans tongue, *amasi* for the Zulu and the Xhosa; a fermented milk closely related to yoghurt

⁴ *Ting*: fermented pap, mostly eaten by people of Sotho-Tswana origin

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