Food: Culture, Etiquette and Wild and Wonderful Dishes from Around the World

In the simplest terms, food is a necessary commodity and basic human need that we quite literally wouldn't be able to live without. However, our biological need for sustenance aside, food provides us with so much more than a basic need. As well as its physical benefits, it provides us with emotional regulation, social interaction, self-control, self-identity and communication. It brings us together with friends and family and on a wider scale it brings together whole communities and nations as we feel a connection to our culture and ethnicity through what we eat. On the other hand food can cause division and much controversy as it affects the environment, influences politics and even rallies activists who hold strong beliefs around what we consume.

Food and Cultural Influences

We connect to our culture and ethnic group through the foods that we eat and for some of us, what we consume is a way of retaining our cultural identity when living somewhere else. As well as where we live and our cultural history playing a big part in our food preferences, ingredients, methods of preparation, means of preservation and food conventions around different times of the day can also heavily influence our food choices, likes and dislikes.

While regional food habits do exist, they continue to change over time as people emigrate and take their practices and preferences with them while continuing to share their culinary experiences as they travel. It is extremely important to remember that both food and people are mobile and any attempt to characterize one country or culture by a particular food can lead to inaccurate stereotypes.

Despite cultural differences, preferred ingredients and the diverse flavours that exist around the world, it is the experience of food that unites us in community and pleasure. Food is meant to be enjoyed, and for most cultures it is meant to be enjoyed with friends and family. Whether we are celebrating family gatherings, community events or religious holidays, food and our enjoyment of it is the thing that ties us together.

Etiquette

As well as culture impacting the choices that we make with food, culture also influences our food-related etiquette. Widely referred to as 'table manners' in Western societies, the cultural expectation of many is to be eating food or meals at a table.

Utensils and Using Hands

Utensils around the world vary from knives, forks, to spoons and chopsticks, and using our hands. Some cultures are also concerned with which hands are to be used, how many fingers should be used to eat with on that hand and whether both hands is actually accepted.

Licking Your Fingers

In some countries, licking your fingers after eating is considered to be polite, while in others it is seen as extremely impolite and perhaps only done in secret!

Wonderful Food From Around the World

The world is bursting with a huge variety of wonderful foods to delve into and tickle our taste buds. For any serious food enthusiasts, a trip around the globe sampling the world's culinary delights is sure to be a life-long dream. Food is one of the primary reasons for world travel; food tourism sees travellers seeking to experience true authenticity from the places they visit.

These foods are considered as some of the world's most delicious national dishes:

Goulash, Hungary

Named a national dish in the 1800s, goulash is made up of stewed beef, vegetables including red onions, and spices. The dish is warm and comforting and perfect to consume on a cold day.

Ackee and Saltfish, Jamaica

Ackee is a nutritious buttery-nut flavoured fruit that resembles scrambled egg when it is boiled. Usually it is served sauteed with salt-cured-cod (saltfish), onions and tomatoes.

Wiener Schnitzel, Austria

Usually served alongside potato salad, wiener schnitzel is made from pounded veal cutlets breaded and lightly fried. It is typically garnished with parsley and lemon slices.

Bulgogi, Korea

Beef bulgogi, meaning 'fire meat', consists of thinly sliced, prime cuts of meat that has been marinated in a mixture of sesame oil, garlic, onions, ginger, soy sauce, sugar and wine and then grilled. Usually eaten wrapped in lettuce or spinach leaves it is often accompanied by fermented vegetable pickle (kimchi).

Pot-au-Feu, France

This dish, meaning pot-in-the-fire, is a rustic yet fragrant broth made up of stewing steak, root vegetables and spices. The broth is usually sieved from the pot and served separately from the meat.

Leftovers

The amount of food we leave on our plate also differs from culture to culture. In some cultures a little bit of food left on a plate indicates fullness, whilst in others the cook might be offended by leftover food indicating that you did not enjoy it. On the other hand, confusingly, a clean plate can also indicate a desire for more food in other cultures.

Conversation

In many cultures, families treat mealtimes as a great opportunity to talk and connect with each other. But some believe that topics of conversation should be at least limited while others believe that conversation should be omitted altogether.

Irish Stew, Ireland

Irish stew, traditionally a thick broth of onions, potatoes, parsley and slow-boiled mutton, is a staple of Ireland often served in Irish pubs worldwide as well as on the tables at the home of Irish residents. Nowadays it includes other vegetables and some people will prepare the mutton differently.

Chicken Tikka Masala, England

Hailed as a symbol of multicultural Britain, chicken tikka masala is widely considered to be the country's national dish. Consisting of roasted marinated chicken chunks in spiced curry sauce, the curry itself is creamy and orange coloured.

And Now for the Wild...

The food combinations that some parts of the world consider as edible delights, or even delicacies, may cause people from elsewhere to cover their mouths in disgust or shake their heads in disbelief.

For example, while here in the UK most of us drink tea with milk like it's going out of fashion, we are actually in the minority of countries that add milk to their tea. The fact that it is cows' milk seems even stranger. Similarly, other countries (and even some regions of Britain) find the habit of covering chips in gravy here in the UK an extremely odd combination, and that's before they discover that some people will overload them with cheese!

Must try combinations - according to the Internet...

While some will most certainly read this list with horror, the Internet swears by these combinations. What do you think?

Strawberries and balsamic vinegar
Chocolate and avocado
Banana and bacon
Peanut butter and pickles
Blueberries and steak
French fries and honey
Watermelon and feta cheese
Olive oil and ice cream
Ice cream and french fries
Chicken fried in Coke

Clearly what one culture deems suitable for consumption, another might have a strong emotional reaction to and see as completely inedible. Read on to discover five unusual foods from around the world...

1. Chicken Feet – East Asia, Caribbean, South America and South Africa

Eaten in many countries worldwide, chicken feet are described as being very gelatinous in texture as the edible part is mostly skin and tendons without muscle. Served in soups, broths, stews or as a side dish, the preparation, seasoning and cooking varies greatly from one culture to the next.

2. Haggis – Scotland

This dish consists of sheep's heart, liver and lungs minced and mixed with onions, oatmeal and suet. It is traditionally seasoned with salt and spices before being cooked inside the animal's stomach (although these days often in a synthetic casing instead) - it is described as giving off a subtle savoury aroma.

3. Century Egg / 100 Year Old Egg / 1000 Year Old Egg – China

Traditionally preserved in a mixture of clay, ash and quicklime for a few months, the egg yolk turns a dark green or black and becomes slimy while the white of the egg becomes a dark brown translucent jelly. The process causes a strong smell of sulphur and ammonia, yet it apparently tastes like a hard-boiled egg but creamier and more succulent.

4. Fried Spider – Cambodia

A regional delicacy in the Cambodian town of Skuon, a typical fried spider recipe involves tossing them in salt and sugar before frying them in a fragrant garlic oil. While the legs become stiff and crispy, the contents of the abdomen remain soft and gooey with a delicate white meat. However, not everyone is a fan of eating the abdomen as it contains a brown paste consisting of eggs, organs and excrement.

5. Black Pudding - Europe, America, Africa, Asia

Essentially a blood sausage, the widely available black pudding is made of congealed blood (mainly from pigs) mixed with fat and oatmeal and seasoning that varies from producer to producer before being stuffed into sausage casing. It can be served fried, grilled, cut into rounds or crumbled and used in a variety of ways to add flavour to recipes.

Crazy Eating Challenges

Over the last five or so years, food challenges have grown in popularity worldwide with prizes ranging from a free meal andw your picture on a restaurant's wall of fame, to huge cash prizes. Willing contestants are invited to truly push their bodies to the limit by eating overwhelming amounts of food (and calories) in a set time in order to claim victory.

Here are three examples of crazy challenges from around the world.

Kitchen Sink Challenge, San Francisco, US

This gigantic sink-like dish consists of three bananas, eight scoops of ice cream, eight toppings, whipped cream, nuts and a cherry on top. It must be eaten within 30 minutes. The current record sits at 16 minutes and 40 seconds.

Ghost Wing Challenge, Minnesota, US

This challenge requires the contestant to consume 10 hot wings in just 15 minutes. It might seem easy at first glance, until you find out that ghost peppers are the hottest chilli peppers - 400 times hotter than Tabasco sauce in fact!

Kidz Breakfast Eating Challenge, Great Yarmouth, UK

This challenge gets its name from the fact that it weighs the same as an average baby. The contest asks participants to eat 6000 calories and 9lbs of food within one hour. Health experts are so concerned by the harm this dish could cause that they are trying to get it removed. The current record stands at 26 minutes.