**Food Taboos: It's All a Matter Of Taste**

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Fancy a dish of poisonous fugu fish? How about rams' testicle pâté? Sheeps' heads and rotting shark are a particular treat. Or if it's an aphrodisiac one seeks—why not try a carefully prepared bull penis? All of these foods are delicacies on menus around the world.

Food taboos and delicacies often arise from cultural and religious beliefs; one person's meat is another's poison. The humble hamburger, a mainstay of U.S. cuisine, is a forbidden food for Hindus. Pork is off the menu for many Jews and Muslims. More than 1,400 species of protein-packed insects are part of African, Asian, Australian, and Latin American cuisine, but one would be hard pressed to find these creepy crawlies at a U.S. restaurant (at least intentionally).

"Food is often the subject of taboo or disgust because it is internalized. Any revulsion we have for the food is magnified by the thought it will become part of us," said Carole Counihan, an ethnographer at Millersville University in Pennsylvania. Counihan studies the relationship between food, culture, and gender and is author of *Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family, and Gender in Twentieth Century Florence.*

In New York rats are considered filthy creatures that consume human garbage, carry disease, and live in the sewers with human waste—eating one would be unthinkable. But in the West African nation of Togo, rats live a more wholesome existence in the forests and are sold in the village markets. "[West African] rats are more like squirrels or something. They're not in an environment that's sort of filled with human filth," said Paul Rozin, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

**Sheep's Head and Rotting Shark**

Food symbolizes many aspects of everyday culture and is a vehicle for social relations.

In February the people of Iceland celebrate an old tradition called Thorrablot—a festival of feasts. The feast is comprised of some unusual delicacies: rams' testicles, sheep's heads, and rotting shark. Although these dishes strike most outsiders as vile, for Icelanders the feasts are potent ways to preserve their Viking heritage.

"The purpose of continuing to eat these foods makes the rituals real and distinguishes the festival culture from everyday life—it reinforces history," said Nan Rothschild, an archaeologist at Barnard College in New York. It also provides a bonding experience for Icelanders. "By eating these foods—which can be hard to eat—you prove your tie to the community," Rothschild said.

**Medicinal Foods**

Many foods are considered delicacies, not for their taste, but for their medicinal effects. In East Asian markets not only can just about every creature be found—domestic, wild, and endangered—but almost every body part also makes it to the supermarket shelf.

According to numerous legends, organs have special properties that can be transferred if eaten. Supposedly, the penises of many animals endow the consumers with healthy sex lives, rooster testicles help women stay young, and monkey brains cure neurological ailments.

In China the penis of a bull is considered a potent aphrodisiac—the natural version of Viagra. "There is a symbolic link between the sexual potency of something like a bull penis and eating it," Counihan said. "It makes sense that people thought that if they eat some part of the animal, they will gain the attributes of that organ." For foreigners these overlapping functions are a source of disgust. "Food is food and sex is sex—for many it is unthinkable to consume body parts used for sex," Counihan said.

Many older people, from both industrialized and developing nations, remember eating the testicles, cheeks, lungs, kidneys, hearts, and livers of animals. The broad repertoire of edible animal parts emerged from a subsistence culture in which nothing was wasted. This still applies to many countries around the world where people struggle to get enough to eat.

Americans have become distant from the source of their food. Animals are rarely served whole, and innards are not considered worth marketing and have faded from the inventory of edible foods.

**Adults, Babies, and Fetuses**

Not all delicacies have deep cultural roots. Some have emerged relatively recently as cultures have merged and hybridized.

In India the children of European and Indian unions were rejected by both parent cultures and formed their own Anglo-Indian community with unique customs and distinctive culinary traditions. One dish that reflects this departure from both parent cultures is *kutti pi*—an animal fetus. Kutti pi, reviled by most Indians and Europeans, is considered a delicacy both because it is rare—it is only available if a pregnant animal happens to be killed that day—and because of its medicinal properties. Many Anglo-Indians believe it is healthful for pregnant women and also beneficial for people with tuberculosis or back pain.

Eating a fetus, however, triggers a note of discord for many people. "It's taboo, it violates our sense of order and propriety. Most people eat animals that have been born. Veal horrifies many people because it is eating a baby animal—eating a fetus goes beyond," Counihan said.

The concept of delicacy is very often related to how hard it is to get certain foods and how much they cost. To find truffles requires the cooperation of trained pigs. A nest of the swiftlet bird is an essential ingredient in "bird-nest soup"—getting to these nesting sites is quite an ordeal.

Food is a window into culture, and in many ways our comments on what other people eat says more about us than them, Counihan said.