

Social foods

Social foods are those consumed in the presence of other people, and which have a *symbolic* as well as nutritional value for all those concerned. A snack eaten in private is not a social food, but the contents of a family meal or religious feast usually are. In every human society food is a way of creating, and expressing, the *relationships* between people. These relationships may be between individuals, between the members of social, religious or ethnic groups, or between any of these and the supernatural world. Food used in this way has many of the properties of the ritual symbols described later in this book (Chapter 9). In particular, when food is consumed in the formalized atmosphere of a communal meal, it carries with it many associations, telling the participants much about their relationships with one another and with the outside world. Most meals have a ritual aspect, in addition to their purely practical role in providing nutrition for a number of people at the same time. Like all ritual occasions, they are tightly controlled by the norms of particular culture or group. These norms, or rules, determine who prepares and serves the food, who eats together, and who clears up afterwards. They also determine the times and setting of meals, the order of dishes within the meal, the cutlery or crockery used, and the precise way in which the food may be consumed – or 'table manners'. The food itself is subject to cultural patterning, which determines its appropriate size, shape, consistency, colour, smell and taste. Both the formal occasion of a meal and the types of food served within it can therefore be viewed as a complicated *language*, which can be decoded to reveal much about the relationships and values of those sharing in the food. Each meal is a restatement, and re-creation, of these values and relationships.

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Different types of meal convey different messages to those taking part in them. Farb and Armelagos¹³ point out that in North America cocktails without a meal are for acquaintances or people of lower social status; meals preceded by alcoholic drinks are for close friends and honoured guests; a cold lunch is 'at the threshold of intimacy', but not quite there; social intimacy is symbolized by invitation to a complete meal, with a sequence of courses contrasted by hot and cold; the buffet, the 'cookout' and the barbecue extend friendship to a greater extent than an invitation to morning coffee, but less so than an invitation to a complete sit-down meal.

Meals can also be used to symbolize social status, often by serving rare and expensive dishes – what Jelliffe³ calls 'prestige foods'. According to him they are usually protein (and often animal), are difficult to obtain or prepare (as they are rare, expensive or imported), and are often linked historically with a dominant social group (such as venison, which was the preserve of the upper classes in Europe during the Middle Ages). Among the prestige foods that can be identified are venison and game birds in Northern Europe, the T-bone steak in America, the camel hump among Bedouin Arabs, and the pig in New Guinea. Status can also be acquired by giving enormous feasts, where large amounts of food are conspicuously eaten or wasted. A well known example of this, from the anthropological literature, is the *potlach* feast, used by the Indians of the North-Western United States and Canada. Different families competed with one another to throw huge, lavish feasts, each one greater than the next, and at which large amounts of food were wasted. The aim was to humiliate rival families by throwing a feast that could not be matched by them.