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DILEMMA: DO I EAT THE EYE?

Food is the curious traveler's drug of choice. What do people eat and why? Is the big meal at 1 PM, 6 PM, or 10 PM? How are you supposed to eat *that*?

Most people in the United States and Europe consider insects a disgusting thing to eat whereas many other people around the world make them a regular part of their diets. Some consider frozen chicken breasts a more sanitary way to buy chicken while others think the one just butchered is a healthier choice. Some cultures like their meat cooked, others like it raw, and still others like it slightly spoiled.

Hmm ... I wonder why that is.

I can't think of a better way to put your curiosity to work when traveling than through food. Food is a central part of what anthropologists study when seeking to understand any culture. What we eat says a lot about who we are and where we're from.

What's Your Comfort Food?

I recently asked my social media network to share their favorite comfort foods. The diversity of responses was mind-boggling. Chicken noodle soup, laksa, feijoada, spaghetti pie, ramen, grilled cheese, tikki, congee, dodo, empanadas, and the list kept going. Many people from the same places listed different foods. Food is both cultural and personal.

Former *New York Times* reporter Jennifer 8. Lee says her go-to comfort food is a plate of kimchi with white rice and fried Spam. In her wildly popular TED Talk, she says that what we eat is an accumulation of our life experiences, including where you grew up, people you've dated, and places you've visited. We often pick up favorite foods from various places we've lived or encountered along the way, but we continue to come back to foods that mean something to us.¹ For most of us, our comfort foods stem from our upbringing. But the curious traveler expands and diversifies the menu of options that bring comfort.

Soon after we arrived in Singapore the first time, my wife wasn't feeling well. She asked me to pick up some saltine crackers and ginger ale. It's what her mom gave her when she got sick, though neither of us really stopped to think about that at the moment. When our Singaporean neighbor learned what Linda was eating to heal her ailing stomach, she was appalled. "Crackers and soda aren't going to do anything for you. I'm going to make you a pot of congee," a rice porridge commonly eaten across Asia for breakfast and especially when you're sick. She insisted there were healing qualities that come from eating porridge. A bowl of soggy rice didn't sound appealing, but Linda agreed to give it a try and actually enjoyed it. What we find comforting is often rooted in what we ate as a child. Ironically, congee is now part of our family's menu of options when someone gets sick.

My comfort foods are both a product of my upbringing and my experiences. The first thing that comes to mind when I think about comfort food is an authentic sweet and spicy Thai curry or a tasty bowl of ramen, likely stemming from the number of years I've spent in Asia. But there's also something very comforting about going home and having my mom's gooey cheese loaf or one of her pasta casseroles. Those foods bring back many comforting memories of my carefree days as a kid. Even kids who didn't grow up in a happy home usually pine for the foods they ate as a child.

I was recently in line at the breakfast buffet at an Asian hotel and a British guy walked up behind me. When he saw the options—noodles, soup, fried rice—he scoffed. "They call this breakfast? I'll eat my dinner tonight, thank you very much, but where's the breakfast food?" I couldn't resist sniping back. "For most of the world, this is breakfast food, but if you can't handle

it, there's cereal over there." While many travelers I encounter aren't as rude as this guy, I've often observed a reticence to changing up one's breakfast routine more than other meals. There seems to be a greater willingness to curiously explore different foods at lunch or dinner while sticking to what's familiar for breakfast. I get it. For a long time, the idea of noodles or soup for breakfast just didn't sit well with me. Maybe there's something about having what's familiar first thing in the morning that helps us reset for a new day.

Food Judging

Food is more than just sustenance. We judge people based on what they eat, and those opinions are socialized in us from our cultures.

A group of university students were asked to rate people based on what they eat. The students were shown pictures of individuals whose physical appearance and descriptions were nearly identical. The difference was in their diets.

Students were shown a picture of a student with the following description: "Jennifer is a 21-year-old student. She describes herself as active and physically fit and says she regularly enjoys tennis and running. She is 5'4" tall and weighs 125 pounds. The foods she eats most regularly are fruit, salad, homemade whole wheat bread, chicken, and potatoes."

This was the "good food" profile. Students were then shown a nearly identical profile including a description of someone also fit and active, but the last line was switched to "*She regularly eats steak, hamburgers, french fries, doughnuts, and double-fudge ice cream sundaes.*"

Without fail, students rated the student in the first category as thinner, active, and more fit than the one who ate the "bad" food. It didn't matter that the facts stated that the students had identical physical characteristics and exercise habits. What they ate caused them to be perceived differently.

Further, the student who ate fruit and salad instead of french fries and ice cream was rated as more feminine and attractive. The student who ate the bad foods was equated with being more masculine and less attractive.² "Good" and "bad" are how we often talk about food: "I've been bad today"

or “That dessert looks sinful.” Other times we say “I’m trying to be good” when foregoing another chocolate chip cookie.

There’s little question that a diet of french fries and ice cream sundaes is less healthy than fruit and salad. But the salient finding from the study among students was that we associate good and bad characteristics with people based on what they eat, even if it’s an occasional splurge. The foods we eat send a message. You may be perceived as more likeable, attractive, and responsible if the food you eat is perceived as “good.”

The status associated with foods is a big thing in China. Taking a guest to a seafood buffet or serving abalone, shark’s fin, or bird’s nest soup is a way to respect a VIP. In recent years, Western companies like Starbucks and Godiva chocolates are thought to send a powerful message of respect and privilege. Drinking Voss water shows how globally sophisticated you are.

McDonald’s has benefited from being viewed globally as a young, hip brand. How else do you explain the fact that 30,000 people waited for hours when the first McDonald’s opened in Russia? And McDonald’s has been a huge success in Paris of all places but primarily among youth who view it as a cool place to hang out with friends. It’s less about the food and more about the status associated with the food.

We eat what those we admire eat. We order food and drinks that we initially find unpleasant but do it just to be part of the crowd. And before we know it, we’ve acquired a taste for it. Culture and food are directly linked.

Acquired Tastes

Speaking of acquired tastes, is there any accuracy to the urban legend that you need to try something ten to fifteen times before you’ll like it? Not if you’re a dog. Gerald Zhang-Schmidt, an Austrian researcher, tells the story of his dog who routinely begs for extra-hot chili peppers. As soon as his dog bites into the pepper, he jerks away and spits it out. But a few minutes later he comes back asking for another bite, not liking it any more the next time. Repeated exposure to the undesirable food doesn’t seem to help dogs acquire a taste for it.

In contrast, our taste as humans evolves. Most people aren’t initially any

more enthused about the burning sensation of a chili pepper than a dog is, yet many of us gradually grow to like it. Most people who keep trying spicy food eventually get used to the sensation and come to the point of craving something spicy.

Acquired tastes stem in part from the status and social nature attributed to eating. You eat things other people around you eat. Give a baby a sip of coffee or yerba mate or feed them a bite of Brussels sprouts or bitter melon and they instinctively spit it out. Much like a dog, they're initially repulsed by the taste. Go out with friends for sushi, and the novice might start with a roll that doesn't have any raw fish. But before you know it, you become more adventurous and even start to enjoy it. As parents continue to give their kids a taste of foods they initially dislike or disguise the bitterness with sugar, milk, or something else, most kids gradually acquire a taste for whatever they're continually fed. When everyone around you drinks coffee and alcohol, chances are you'll learn to do so too, even when the taste is not the most pleasurable at first.

There is also an evolutionary aspect to our tastes. Bitter plants, herbs, and spices offer health benefits that our mouths initially reject but our bodies need. Alcohol, coffee, tea, and yerba mate offer a buzz and an energizing effect on our psyches to the point of making us addicted to them. Zhang-Schmidt says many of these foods that may not initially taste good give us the nutrients we need, and therefore, in the course of our evolutionary history, we've come to like them, and at some point, they taste good to us. Our species would not have survived and procreated if we had not eaten enough calories to power our bodies.

But why do we eat things like chili peppers that result in a burning sensation? It's not that any of us are insensitive to the burning. Psychologist Paul Rozin contends that they give us a pleasurable sensation similar to the feeling we get from other behaviors that are risky but safe. The chili sends a warning signal to our sensory system, but it is harmless. Similar to riding a roller coaster or jumping from a sauna into a cold bath, biting into a chili provides a constrained risk.³ The more curious you are, the more likely you might go after the thrill of biting into something that makes your mouth feel like it's on fire, all the while knowing you really aren't in danger.

In China, people eat food as much for the texture as the taste. Jellyfish or sliced pig ear don't have much taste but have a texture many Chinese enjoy. The tapioca pearls in bubble tea don't have much flavor, but the boba is fun to chew. Texture too is an acquired taste. Many travelers tell me that "slimy" things are the hardest for them to get down.

The curious traveler experiments with new foods and seeks to understand the origins of what, why, and how people eat. Sometimes it's obvious. You find more seafood in places along the coast, but other times the foods and spices are a rich tapestry of climate, region, agriculture, and centuries of tradition.

Food Habits

The customs associated with eating are just as diverse as the foods you encounter as you travel. The etiquette surrounding what, how, and when to eat is one of the most challenging things to pick up when you enter a new culture. I've been the guest of honor at elaborate meals in Southeast Asia where I had no idea what I was eating or the assumptions about who should eat first, whether I should serve myself or wait to be served, or whether I should eat with my hands or go for seconds. In the moment, I just go for it and hope for the best.

You don't have to go far away from home to experience the wonder of different eating customs. In his best-selling memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance from rural Ohio talks about the culture shock he experienced when prospective law firms were wining and dining him and his fellow students at Yale. Soon after he entered a private dining room for a dinner hosted by a law firm, a server asked J. D. if he'd like some wine. He said, "I'll take white," assuming he had dodged his first bullet of breaking into a class that wasn't really his own. But when the server went on to ask, "Would you like sauvignon blanc or chardonnay?" he went with chardonnay because it was easier to pronounce.⁴

After sitting down, the server asked J. D. if he'd like tap or sparkling water. J. D. writes,

I rolled my eyes at that one: As impressed as I was with the restaurant, calling the water “sparkling” was just too pretentious—like “sparkling” crystal or a “sparkling” diamond. But I ordered the sparkling water anyway ... I took one sip and literally spit it out. It was the grossest thing I’d ever tasted. I remember once getting a Diet Coke at a Subway without realizing that the fountain machine didn’t have enough Diet Coke syrup. That’s exactly what this fancy place’s “sparkling” water tasted like.

“Something’s wrong with the water” J.D. protested. The waitress apologized and offered to bring him another Pellegrino. Suddenly he realized that this fancy water was supposed to be carbonated and taste that way.⁵

Eating customs are usually unspoken and taken for granted, yet deviating from them is one of the first things to trigger you being judged as rude or boorish. One time our family attempted a Madrid pub crawl. This involves moving from pub to pub throughout an evening and ordering different tapas and drinks at each place. We had a blast but were often lost about what to order; how to order; and the protocols about when to pay, how much to tip, and how long to stay at each pub. At each pub, my daughter Emily kept asking for bread and cheese and kept being told no. Finally, she tried again at the last pub of the evening, and the wait staff scoffed, “Of course we have bread and cheese” as if it was the dumbest question they had ever heard. Throughout the evening, it felt like we were being scolded by the pub staff and laughed at by the locals. I had a similar experience the first time I sat down to eat at a British pub and didn’t realize I was supposed to order my food at the bar. I finally clued in when I saw everyone else doing it.

Figuring these things out as you travel is part of the adventure. But there are a few things to consider as you explore eating customs from one place to another.

When to Eat?

Cultures have unspoken rules about the appropriate times to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I once attended a conference in Europe that was orga-

nized by an American group. Dinner was scheduled for 6 PM with a general session to follow at 8:00. The Europeans were amused and slightly horrified about the thought of walking into a restaurant at 6 PM to eat dinner. A couple of the British guys in our group said, “It’s time for a late afternoon tea or a drink but surely not dinner,” to which a Spanish woman replied, “Why don’t we just eat after the 8 PM session is over? We usually eat around 10 PM.”

Eat whenever you like. Just remember that “normal” eating times vary and you may not even find a restaurant open at 6 PM in Buenos Aires or at 10 PM in Chicago. If you eat when the locals do, you’re far more likely to get an up-close look at the culture and social life.

The amount of time devoted to a meal is another variation to be aware of. I’ve run programs in Scandinavia where 15-20 minutes is allotted for lunch and in Portugal where it takes over two hours, complete with multiple courses and wine. Many Western-oriented cultures take a functional view of eating. You eat because you have to, particularly during the day, whereas for many other cultures around the world, eating is a chance to savor the food and conversation.

Why Eat?

A traditional French breakfast is bread, butter, jam, and maybe something hot to drink. Food in France is primarily about pleasure. In Italy, food is about love first and nutrition second. An Italian child’s first bite may easily be ice cream. Traditions surrounding eating and meals are in transition all over the world. But even among young generations who may be changing this up, there’s still a shared, unspoken cultural narrative about the meaning and purpose of food.

Eating is a communal event in most cultures around the world. During the Islamic season of Ramadan, many Arab families and friends have a daily meal called the iftar that breaks the day of fasting together. They eat from the same dishes with their hands, the meal often lasting a couple hours or more. Extended families often eat iftar together every day, but mosques, schools, markets, and other community organizations also offer large iftar

meals open to the public daily. Hospitality is a longtime tradition among Arabs. When an Arab hosts a guest, they are expected to put out a wide variety of food and insist their guests eat some of everything.

In contrast, a Qatari friend told me that he and his wife were visiting the United States and a business associate invited them over for lunch. Soon after arriving, they sat down and had a lovely cheese and broccoli soup with bread. They sat there for the longest time as the Qatari couple wondered when the main course would be served. After about an hour or more of conversation, the American couple brought out a plate of cookies. The Qatari couple was shocked when they realized the soup was the whole meal. They weren't offended; they were just struck by how different this was from how most Arabs would approach hospitality.

My daughter Grace becomes unnerved when we go to an Asian restaurant in the United States and she observes people each ordering their own dish. "What are they doing? Who wants to only eat pad thai for dinner? Why don't they all share the dishes they order?" She has experienced the delights of communal eating with shared dishes. Across the world, eating is social, even in cultures where people order their own unique meals. Having a taste of each other's food, sharing your favorite meals on social media, and even waiting in line to get in a trendy restaurant are all part of the social aspect of eating. Anthropologist Richard Wilk suggests that the origins of eating for all of us are social. Enjoying a shared dish of hummus or a fresh pot of tom yum soup or waiting two hours in line to go to a trendy restaurant is all part of the social context of eating.

Hands, Chopsticks, or Silverware?

Italians often say that the quickest way to spot a foreigner is when someone twirls their pasta on a spoon. Italian children learn to put their fork into a few strands of spaghetti, rest the tines against the curve of the plate, and twirl the fork around until they have a serving that can be lifted to their mouth. Unless you're eating soup, spoons are for amateurs and people with bad manners. Worse yet is cutting your pasta with a knife and fork. Long noodles are meant to stay long. It's said that the character of a person can be determined by how they eat pasta.

If you want to blend in with the local culture, using the utensils used by locals is key. Most European diners hold the fork in the left hand with the tines down while continuously holding the fork and knife while eating. But the North American style is to switch the fork back and forth to the right hand, and forks are typically used with the tines up. When you aren't using your left hand, you're taught to place it in your lap rather than leaning on the table. American hand switching is said to stem from a lack of forks among the pioneers, which resulted in the use of spoons in their place. With most people being right-handed, thus holding the spoon steadier with that hand, the practice of changing hands after cutting became socially acceptable table behavior.

Meanwhile, chopsticks are the norm in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Confucius believed that knives and forks represented aggression and violence and should never be found at the table where you sit with friends and family. And so it's said that chopsticks were designed to not only move food from your table to your mouth but to also reflect gentleness and benevolence. See what your curiosity can teach you from something as simple as eating utensils?

There are some interesting superstitions and customs associated with chopsticks, including these:

- If you find an uneven pair at your table in many Confucian cultures, it means you're going to miss a boat, plane, or train.
- Dropping chopsticks is believed to bring bad luck.
- Diners will sometimes cross their chopsticks at a dim sum restaurant to show the waiter that they're finished and ready to pay the bill. Or sometimes the waiter will cross them to show that the bill has been settled.
- Leaving chopsticks so that they stick out of your food is a major faux pas, as it's done only at funerals when rice is put on the altar. And passing food from your chopsticks to someone else's is also frowned on.
- Usually, the oldest or highest-ranked person picks up the chopsticks first, and the rest follow. If you are the highest-ranking person, they will invite you to begin eating.

Across Africa, South Asia, and much of the Middle East, eating with your hands is normal. Just avoid using the left hand as it's traditionally considered inappropriate. One Indian friend told me, "Eating food with a fork and spoon is like making love through an interpreter!"

It's up to you whether you adapt to the eating preferences of the culture you visit. But you can learn a lot about a culture through the use of their eating utensils or the lack thereof. Use the customs associated with eating as a fun, experiential way to learn about a place.

Paying the Bill

What about the sometimes awkward, unspoken rules about who pays the bill? In the UK, each person at the bar buys everyone a round. In the US, the person who invites the other person out to eat is expected to cover the bill unless explicitly stating otherwise. But there's still an expectation that both parties should offer to pay lest you seem presumptuous. If the person who invited you pays, it's quid pro quo next time. The assumption is you return the favor.

In many Asian and Arab cultures, paying equals prestige. If your host invites you out to dinner, the best way to show respect is to say thank you and not put up a fight for the check. This is true in many Latin European cultures as well. Many of these hosts will discretely make arrangements to pay the bill privately.

In the United States and Canada, once you've been offered dessert and coffee, the server will bring you the bill. But in most cultures around the world, you have to ask for it. It's believed that only a rude waiter brings the check without being asked because you may well intend to linger at the table for another hour or two talking and ordering more to eat or drink.

Many travelers have been confounded by figuring out the proper tipping etiquette in whatever place they visit. The norm in places like Australia and Spain is to simply round up the bill slightly unless it's exceptional service. Whereas in places like the US, 15 to 20 percent is pretty much a standard expectation with many restaurants doing the math for you at the bottom of the receipt. When you go to Japan, however, tipping can be seen as insulting. It's impossible to keep all this straight, so even today, if I can't

recall the tipping protocols for a place I'm visiting, I simply do an Internet search when I arrive to guide what I do. And I often verify the information I find online with one or two locals.

Respectfully Declining

What do you do if you really can't stomach something your host serves you? Or what if you have legitimate dietary restrictions due to religious or health reasons? You have every right to forego eating or drinking something. But be mindful that for many cultures, food is a significant part of their identity. If I offer you a peanut butter sandwich and you tell me you aren't a fan of peanut butter or you have a nut allergy, I'd prefer you be upfront with me and not suffer through eating it. But I can't assume that's the same approach others want.

For many cultures, food is a direct expression of who they are. Some people in India use spices that come from plants that have been in their homestead for multiple generations. The best Indian meals take days to prepare. To pass on eating dishes prepared for you in that context could be far more insulting than a visitor at your dinner table passing on a dish they just don't care for. It can be seen as an all-out rejection of your host.

Try not to refuse food or drinks too strongly. If you cannot eat or drink something, tell the host ahead of time so they can plan accordingly and not lose face.

What about the excessive drinking that often happens among business associates in Japan, Korea, or China? Unlike most Western business dinners, business itself is usually the least talked about topic during a business dinner in these contexts. If anything, it's saved for a sliver of time at the end of dinner. But don't think this means the dinner is a waste of time. The purpose of the dinner is to solidify relationships. It's a big part of determining whether you're trustworthy. Expect personal questions, and don't be afraid to talk about your personal life. And if you keep drinking, it will be seen as a symbol of friendship.

But beware. Chinese wine is generally about 40 to 60 percent alcohol and is poured into small cups, which resemble miniature wine glasses. Basically,

each cup is like taking a shot of hard liquor. The more you drink, the more pleased your cohorts will be, because it shows you're willing to get drunk with them, just like you would with your friends. To drink with a new business associate is to be brought into their inner circle. It's believed that drinking together deepens and strengthens friendships because it loosens people up and helps relieve misunderstanding, no matter how tense the situation might be. Granted, there are times when excessive drinking is used to wear you down. But the primary orientation behind this practice is social yet directly tied to business objectives.

If you decide to drink very little or not at all, just realize that you're going to have to work extra hard to develop the kind of bonding and relationship building that would otherwise come from the drinking rituals. And if the reason you're not drinking is health related, just state that upfront. But work extra hard to enjoy the food you're served. If you turn down the alcohol, eat the snake that's served.

Food Fuels Curiosity

Sit with a group of travelers, and one of the best topics of conversation is comparing notes on food experiences while traveling. Food is one of my absolute favorite parts of traveling. Eating is one of the few things we all do, and it's one of the best ways to build relationships. Yet social contexts are where our cultural differences often become the most pronounced.

Sometimes when I travel, my host assumes I want to eat at a burger joint. I appreciate the sentiment, but I'd much prefer to eat local. Trying the local foods of a place is fun and educational. And food is one of the few forms of entertainment shared across nearly every culture. It's an adventure. I've been served fried maggots, dog, snake, monkey brain, and endless servings of fish head curry. I've eaten the eye of many fish with my dining companions watching my every move. And there are days when I've been traveling for a long stretch and the familiarity of a bagel and Americano at Starbucks is just what I need for breakfast.

Use the exposure to different foods as a way to curiously explore the history and values of a new place. You just might discover some new comfort foods along the way.

Curiosity Challenges | Food

CQ and curiosity allow you to gain more from the culinary adventures that come with travel. Withhold judgment—plan, check, adjust. And use CQ to communicate your eating preferences.

Low CQ and Closed	High CQ and Curious
That's disgusting!	How do you eat it?

- Try something new wherever you go. It will whet your curious appetite, give you a taste of something local, and provide you with a new food to add to your regular diet.
- Look for the meanings behind the foods you eat. Find out whether certain foods are associated with certain holidays or events.
- Identify the ingredients most commonly used in local foods. Why? Can you find this ingredient at home?
- Observe the eating customs (e.g., utensils, time of day, who pays) and see if you can make sense of why those are the customs. Try following the customs for a day or even your whole trip.
- Come up with a way to communicate “no, thank you” if served something that you cannot or would prefer not to eat. Practice it with someone.