

## Understanding Culture: Food as a Means of Communication

### Abstract

Food is an essential part of people's lives, and as such is much more than just a means of survival. It is also the main factor in how we view ourselves and others. It plays a big role in all social and political issues, and is a bastion of popular media. Over the past few decades, we have witnessed a rise in food-focused media and culture. A "food explosion" surrounds us everywhere we look, from TV shows such as 24 Kitchen, Kitchen Confidential, Floyd On, and Jamie Oliver to organic products, healthy diet magazines and food festivals. There is an increased awareness of food's significance within contemporary society and culture, and therefore there is a need to explore it.

**Keywords:** communication, culture, Japanese food, Serbian cuisine.

*With our gastronomical growth will come,  
inevitably, knowledge and perception of a hundred  
other things, but mainly ourselves.*

M.F.K. Fisher

The role of food in everyday life was until recently more that of a necessity rather than the subject of observation and academic interest. It was not until the twentieth century that food industry arose. The new-found interest and enchantment with food has created an entirely new meaning to food culture. The myriad of published cookbooks and food magazines, culinary festivals, TV shows, celebrity chefs, blogs has completely changed the meaning of food.

The Meaning of Food is an exploration of culture through food. What we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it, who's at the table, and who eats first is a form of communication that is rich with meaning. Beyond merely nourishing the body, what we eat and with whom we eat can inspire and strengthen the bonds between individuals, communities, and even countries. There is no closer relationship than the one with the family, and food plays a large part in defining family roles, rules, and traditions. It helps us to discover attitudes, practices, and rituals surrounding food, it sheds light on our most basic beliefs about ourselves and others.

The aim of this paper is to try to give answers to the questions of what food communication is, and how we understand food communication. Firstly, some examples of communication and the relationship between communication and culture will be given. Secondly, the different relationships between communication and food, and how these relationships negotiate our identities, cultures and environments will

be described. Finally, Japanese food culture and its effect on Serbian cuisine will be mentioned.

The subject of food has been widely studied within the fields of anthropology, sociology and cultural studies. It has not, however, been much addressed in communication studies. When someone thinks of, or mentions food, the first thing that usually comes to mind is: where does it come from and how does it taste, and what is the story behind it? Giving the answers to these questions, people usually refer to the cultural context.

The term 'culture' refers to the set of values, knowledge, language, rituals, habits, lifestyles, attitudes, beliefs, folklore, rules and customs that identify a particular group of people at a specific point in time.

Some authors define culture as "the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviors in the same or in similar ways".<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between communication and culture is a complex and intimate one. Culture is created, shaped, transmitted and learned through communication, and communication practices are largely created, shaped and transmitted by culture.

As we already know, there are different definitions of communication. For some, communication is a process that attempts to create and achieve shared meaning – a process that is influenced by countless factors such as social and cultural context, participants, motivations, purposes and goals. Others consider communication as a process by which a culture or society comes into being. In other words, communication has constitutive power, and is not just a process of creating something external.

There are different levels and types of communication in communication studies. These distinctions are somewhat artificial, since types of communication more realistically fit on a continuum rather than in separate categories. Nevertheless, to understand the various types of communication, it is helpful to consider various factors. These distinctions are somewhat artificial, since types of communication more realistically fit on a continuum rather than in separate categories. Nevertheless, to understand the various types of communication, it is helpful to consider various factors. The distinguishing characteristics include the following:

- The number of communicators (one through many). The physical proximity of the communicators in relation to each other (close or distant). The immediacy of the exchange, whether it is taking place either (1) live or in apparently real time or on a delayed basis. The number of sensory channels (including visual, auditory, tactile and so on).
- The context of the communication (whether face-to-face or mediated).

Each level of communication may be formal or informal, personal or impersonal. Also that the purposes of communication may vary and overlap, giving a communicator a potentially wide list of choices for communication channels.

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Banks, C.A. McGee, *Multicultural Education*, Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1989.

Broadly speaking, the levels of communication can be categorized in a four-fold pattern as intrapersonal, direct interpersonal, mediated interpersonal, and mass communication.

Communication is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing or behavior. It is the meaningful exchange of information between two or more persons.

One definition of communication is “any act by which one person gives to or receives from another person information about that person’s needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states”. Communication may be intentional or unintentional, may involve conventional or unconventional signals, may take linguistic or non-linguistic forms, and may occur through spoken or other modes.

Communication requires a sender, a message, and a recipient, although the receiver does not have to be present or aware of the sender’s intent to communicate at the time of communication; thus communication can occur across vast distances in time and space. The communication process is complete once the receiver has understood the message of the sender.

Broadly defined, communication is the process by which we understand the world and our attempts to convey that understanding to others through both verbal and nonverbal language. We can consider food as a form of communication because it is a nonverbal means of sharing meanings with others. Scholars like Roland Barthes, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Eivind Jacobsen provided us with theoretical tools to understand and analyze how food is communicated, how food communicates and how we communicate about food.

Barthes uses semiotics to put the role and function of food into context. He claims that food functions as a sign, a sign communicating something in addition to itself, perhaps something other than itself.<sup>2</sup> With food, we are not just buying or consuming a product but a whole system or chain of meanings. An apple is not just the red sweet object that you ingest for nutrition; it is the whole system that contributed to growing the apple: the sun, water, animals, human farmers. Also potentially in the apple is pesticide, transportation issues, Snow White, Macintosh and much more. You are not eating an apple, you are experiencing a system or grammar of food. Advertising is a tool, identified by Barthes, with which we can trace and analyze the signification of food.

In ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’, Roland Barthes discusses how food should not be seen as insignificant. He says that psychosociology focuses indirectly on eating habits, and should be paid more attention.<sup>3</sup> In fact, food and culture are very closely related. For example, sugar in America. It has become common to have sugar in almost all American food and is so popular there are even songs about it. Yet in other cultures such as that of France, sugar does not

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<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’, in Carole Counihan & Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture*, New York: Routledge, 2008, pp. 22–24.

play a large part. Barthes describes how culture influences tastes and so does class, and talks of how food is a 'situation'. Coffee, for example, became associated more with the idea of taking a break than with its effect on the nervous system, which ties in with his claim about food and advertising. Advertising has become a huge part of culture, and Barthes states that because of this advertising, people have become loyal to the brand more than the food. He claims food makes its own statement, and discusses how it affects culture and culture affects food.

Scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas have asserted that we can view food as adhering to the same practices as language because food is a *code*<sup>4</sup> that can express patterns about social relationships.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Jacobsen's piece on 'The Rhetoric of Food' advances a basic, fundamental but no less important claim. Just like in anything, the definition one uses sets forth a whole range of meaning, histories, actions and questions that a different definition might foreclose. More than a defining role, how we frame or deploy food in language also matters. And it is these definitions or ways of thinking (or really, not-thinking) about food that should be unsettled, so that we can be mindful of our relationships to food.

Metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche are all tropes that shape how we hear, understand and (re)act to our food relationships. Jacobsen provides a couple that are fruitful for demonstrating the point, "fuel for the body" and "grazing" come to mind. Even the use of "fruitful" to describe an example or analysis calls forth a chain of meanings and emotions that affect us. Tropes are also used to describe three dominant frames of food; food as nature, food as commodity and food as culture. Jacobsen does a fairly good job of detailing the different actors, senses of time, spaces, concepts, etc. that are highlighted when each trope is used.<sup>6</sup> For example, food as nature can be seen in environmental NGOs, in relevant spaces such as the Farm, Kitchen, or the Earth, where nature is its own subject. Food as commodity is related to industry and consumption, whereas, food as culture is related to tradition and nostalgia, with the rhetorical repertoire of aesthetics, identity, uniqueness.

The similarity between the definition of food as a sign and food as a trope is that both Barthes and Jacobsen have provided ways to see food as more than just a means of survival. Both of them have provided ways to look at food as multidimensional, as something that shapes us, our identities, our cultures and in the end, our society. Just as different clothes signify different things (the white coat a doctor, the blue uniform a police officer), food also can transmit meaning. Naturally, that meaning varies from culture to culture. Furthermore, food could not be viewed as a trope if it did not signify a meaning of something to begin with, for example: tomato, basil and mozzarella

<sup>4</sup> The term 'code' represents a set of symbols and the rules for their manipulation, by which the symbols can be made to carry information.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques Volume One*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Eivind Jacobsen, 'The Rhetoric of Food', in Marianne E. Lien & Brigitte Nerlich, *The Politics of Food*, Oxford: Berg, 2004, pp. 59–62.

cheese on a *pizza Napolitana* signify a taste of Italy, while frozen pizza in a supermarket signifies a fast and cheap home meal. In addition, various food tropes are used in everyday life: ‘Don’t sugar coat it’, ‘Teaching your grandmother to suck eggs’, ‘Cherry picking’, ‘Being in a pickle’, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade’, ‘Good as bread’ (the later often used in Serbia). Many scholars have analyzed the relationships between food, identity and communication. One of the most common ways we use food is in the construction of our personal identities. But can food operate as a sole factor in the identification of a group or an entire nation? Does food have its place within a broader set of values linked to age, religion, social status, of which some are closely linked to diet, while others have no link to food? Is the position of food flexible, or is it central (or trivial) in the formation of one’s identity?

“Identities are constructed through differences with others with the aim of achieving collective self-esteem and group solidarity”.<sup>7</sup> The social theorists Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell argue that identity is crucial to all people, because it allows one to situate oneself and the other, to give a sense to existence, and to order the world. Identity contributes to how individuals and groups perceive and construct society, how they give meaning, how they (re)act, think, buy, work, socialize, eat, judge, relax. They do so by referring to economic, social, cultural and political conditions, events and expectations, and by doing so, they affect the economic, the social, the cultural and the political.<sup>8</sup> Greene and Parasecoli argue that identity is best understood as performative. The performance of identity happens in the everyday; each action, decision, speech act, act of signification and whatever it is that we do, with intent or not, communicates or says something about who we are, or at least, who we think ourselves to be, want ourselves to be, or think we want ourselves to be etc. And of course, our identity’s performance is constituted not just of what we do but also importantly what we do not do, say, signify, communicate, etc. And it is here where food becomes such a critical piece of our performance.

The beauty of the performative is that our identities are not static, given, nor determined ahead of time for us, but are constantly in the act of being performed. And maybe this is where the onion figure of speech disintegrates. “Yes, we are constituted by layers, even very complicated layers”. Altman and Taylor compared people to a multilayered onion. They believe each opinion, belief, prejudice, and obsession is layered around and within the individual. As people get to know each other, the layers ‘shed away’ to reveal the core of the person. These layers have both breadth and depth. Breadth is the array or variety of topics that have been incorporated into individuals’ lives. Depth is the amount of information available on each topic. On the outermost shell are highly visible levels of information such dress and speech. Inside are increasingly private details about the lives, feelings, and thoughts of the participants. As the relationship develops, the partners share more aspects of

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<sup>7</sup> Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, CA: Sage Publications, 1996, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Scholliers, *Food, Drink and Identity: Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe since the Middle Ages*, Oxford: Berg, 2001.

the self, providing breadth as well as depth, through an exchange of information, feelings and activities. According to Altman and Taylor, relationships are sustained when they are relatively rewarding and discontinued when they are relatively costly.

But this lack of an essence or core to our identity should not scare or haunt us; on the contrary it should activate and invigorate us. It means that identities can be changed, altered, transformed or performed differently. Taste, like any of the characteristics of our identity, is not natural. Taste does not come from our genes or biology. Taste is taught, learned and performed. Tastes change, and like our tastes, our identities can be transformed.

Identity cannot be performed alone or in isolation. We must think and understand identity through our relationships, our communicative practices and interactions with others. Greene and Parasecoli present good explanations of this relationship between the individually performed identity and others. For Greene, our identities are constituted through a murky combination of our own self-styling and our incorporation of outside ideologies, characteristics, values, traits, etc. This negotiation constitutes our individual identities.<sup>9</sup> Parasecoli advances a similar understanding, but warns that it is necessary to keep the distinction between our cultural representations or ideologies and our everyday individual realities. Just because we watch American blockbuster movies does not necessarily mean that we will identify with and perform hegemonic masculinities.<sup>10</sup> In countless movies, young and adult men share the family table, destroy it, make it into the battlefield, or impose their rule over it. With regard to Japan and Japanese food culture, the popularity of Japanese food in the West has increased considerably over the past two decades, contributing not only to changes in eating habits, but also in the way one sees the food on the plate.

Japanese cuisine has developed over the past 2000 years under strong influences from China and Korea, but it is only in the last 300 to 400 years that all the influences have come together to form what nowadays can be described as Japanese cuisine. Religion played a major part in the development of Japan's culinary culture. During the 6th century, Buddhism became the official religion of the country, and the eating of meat and fish were prohibited. The taboo against the consumption of meat developed further when the Japanese indigenous religion, Shinto, also adopted a philosophy similar to that of the Buddhists. This did not mean, however, that meat eating was totally banned in Japan. However, the lack of animal breeding kept meat consumption very low. In the absence of meat, fish was a significant substitute; as an island nation this source of food was abundant and has influenced many of today's most famous dishes. However, before the introduction of modern delivery systems, the difficulty of preserving and transporting fresh marine fish minimized consumption in inland areas, where freshwater fish were eaten instead. Preserving fish became popular, which is how *sushi* originated as a means of preserving fish by fermenting

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<sup>9</sup> Carlinita P. Greene, *Shopping for What Never Was: The Rhetoric of Food, Social Style, and Nostalgia*, Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Fabio Parasecoli, *Cultural History of Food*, Oxford: Berg, 2012.

it in boiled rice. *Sushi* without fermentation appeared during the Edo period, and at the end of the 18th century, *sushi* was united with *sashimi*, when the hand-rolled variant, *nigiri-sushi* was invented. In the sixteenth century the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, introduced European foods and ingredients that were adopted by the Japanese, and later became cultural symbols. One of the examples is fried food, called *tempura*<sup>11</sup>, which was originally introduced by the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries.

Nowadays, Japanese cuisine is still influenced by the four seasons and geography. To most Europeans, Japanese food may seem bland, but the freshness, presentation and balance of flavors and textures is of paramount importance. In that way, the cuisine of Japan is in many ways different from those of other countries, with its different kinds of food, different ways of cooking and serving, and also different ways of thinking about food, eating, meals.<sup>12</sup> Most cuisines emphasize large portions, and healthy helpings; only in Japan and in Japanese-inspired styles such as *nouvelle cuisine*<sup>13</sup>, is the small considered satisfying. The reason is great concern for the presentation and appearance of the food. To be sure, food everywhere must be presentable, and there the matter usually ends; but this is not enough in Japan. For the Japanese, fish should look like fish, but the dish should also look like something more. It ought to reflect within its composition another concern, one the West considers aesthetic. The effect should be as pleasing to the eye as the taste is to the tongue. At the same time, there is a canon of presentation, a system of culinary aesthetics to be satisfied. The food is to be looked at, as well as eaten. There are various rules involving modes and methods of presentation indicating the importance of eye appeal.

Moreover, certainly nothing enters the Japanese world without becoming Japanese. Most Western food is eaten by most Japanese every day as a matter of fact, but it is changed to the satisfaction of the native palate.

Finally, Japanese cuisine is unique in its attitude toward food. This ritual, presentational cuisine, which so insists upon freshness and naturalness, rests upon a set of assumptions concerning food and its place in life. Eventually, the cuisine itself depends upon the Japanese attitude toward the environment, toward nature itself. Authenticity is detected in presentation and in flavor. Let us take the example of sushi. Just because sushi is available in one form or another from exclusive

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<sup>11</sup> The word '*tempura*' or the technique of dipping fish and vegetables into a batter and frying them, comes from the word '*tempora*', a Latin word meaning 'time period', used by Spanish and Portuguese missionaries to refer to the Lenten period of Ember Day (*ad tempora quadragesimae*), Fridays, and other Christian holy days. Ember days or *quattuor tempora* refers to holy days when Catholics avoid red meat and instead eat fish and vegetables.

<sup>12</sup> Donald Richie, *A Taste of Japan*, Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1993, pp. 7–11.

<sup>13</sup> *Nouvelle cuisine* (French, 'new cuisine') is an approach to cooking and food presentation. In contrast to *cuisine classique*, an older form of *haute cuisine*, *nouvelle cuisine* is characterized by lighter, more delicate dishes and an increased emphasis on presentation. It was popularized in the 1960s by the food critics Henri Gault, who invented the phrase, and his colleagues André Gayotand & Christian Millau in a new restaurant guide, the Gault-Millau, or *Le Nouveau Guide*.

restaurants in London, New York or Moscow to supermarkets in Amsterdam does not mean that sushi has lost its status as an authentically Japanese cultural property. Globalization has not necessarily homogenized all cultural differences nor erased the salience of cultural labels. Quite the contrary; it grows the franchise. In the global economy of consumption, the brand equity of sushi as Japanese cultural property adds to the prestige of both the country and the cuisine. Certainly, the presentation and ingredients or forms of sushi vary from country to country, but it is still seen as something very distinctive.

Japanese food has become very popular in Europe in the past ten years,<sup>14</sup> but what about Japanese food in Serbia? The first Japanese restaurant was opened in 2002, and has been the only one in the country for a long time. At present, there are four Japanese restaurants. 'Japanisation' did not take place in Serbia as quickly as in other countries due to economic and cultural reasons. Serbia has been under economic and political sanctions over 10 years. Such isolation was the main reason for slow development in every social and cultural aspect. Furthermore, due to the low monthly incomes, people in Serbia did not have the opportunity to travel and experience different cultures and cuisines. Although many people are interested in Japanese culture, especially popular culture, interest in Japanese food has remained at a very modest level. In Serbia, Japanese food is still reserved for the 'educated and wealthy'. The reason for this is fear of the unknown, of a culture too far away and too different, but nevertheless regarded with respect. Serbia might be one of the last countries that will continue to open to new foreign culinary experiences in search for its own culinary identity. As witnessed by many, Serbia has good quality food, although there is not much of an overarching intellectual concept behind it. In order to create a visual identity, Serbia needs to follow a good example, and this is where the role of Japanese food culture could have a place.

In the last two years, the Serbian culinary world has seen an increased interest in Japanese food and the Japanese presentation of food. One of the reasons is the awareness of how food looks on the plate, and the will to upgrade the existing food presentation. There are some things chefs need to consider when arranging food the Japanese way, such as uniformity vs. contrast, asymmetry, the five colors, the importance of empty space, and seasonality. There is also a whole bunch of 'don't' rules, including never arranging four elements on a plate, as the Japanese word for four is a homonym for death.<sup>15</sup>

Serbian chefs are trying to communicate something of Serbian tradition through the form of sushi, thus creating something new called 'Serbian sushi'. Serbian sushi represents the Japanese form of sushi, but with different local ingredients; for example, freshwater fish is used instead of salmon or tuna. Also, local vegetables such as vine

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<sup>14</sup> Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, London: Reaktion, 2006, pp. 1–4.

<sup>15</sup> <http://keiskitchen.com.au/News-Views-Archives/japanese-food-presentation.html> (accessed 24.09.2013).

leaves, green lettuce, sour cabbage and spinach are used to make maki rolls. One kind of the most popular Serbian sushi bites is made with Serbian prosciutto, or beef steak.

As food culture in Japan has undergone transformations and developments, so has it also caused changes in some Western cuisines. Through the implementation of some Japanese elements, yet without discarding its own customs and traditions, Serbian food culture could gain a new visual identity, and help us to better understand our own culture and those of others.

The multicultural character of contemporary Japanese cuisine is the result of the specific circumstances in which Japan found itself, and yet its authenticity and cultural preservation should serve as a good example for Serbia to follow.

It does not seem easy to define food as a means of communication, before we try to answer some of the following questions: What is it about food that makes it an especially intriguing and insightful lens of analysis? What questions about food ways still need to be addressed? How have food regimes changed through time? How does the universal need for food bind individuals and groups together? What sort of changes at the personal, community, national or international levels could contribute to a more equitable food system?

The main reason we should view food as a form of communication is because it is directly linked to both ritual and culture, where ritual is defined as “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life”. Nowhere can this serious life be viewed more closely than in rituals involving food.<sup>16</sup> It is at the center of every important event in our lives, such as birthdays, weddings, holidays and funerals. Within ritual contexts, food often ‘stands in’ for expressions of life, love, happiness or grief.

In Western society, food and eating are no longer connected only with pure survival, but have a multi-faceted dimension involving the anthropological, sociological and psychological aspects linked to them. They all clearly emerge in food communication and representation, both in written and iconic texts, such as TV, movies, literature and mass media in general. We are witnessing the explosion of Food Channels and Shows, such as 24h Kitchen, the Travel Channel, and TV shows such as those presented by Jamie Oliver, *Gastronomad* (a very popular TV show about food and cooking in Serbia), *Kitchen Confidential*, *Floyd On...* and much more.

Because food is strongly related to territory and national identity, talking, writing and representing food necessarily raises important cultural issues when traveling across borders.

Gastronomic tradition is dependent upon culture, and it is an unavoidable and promising tool for learning about cultural differences. This is even more the case in a globalized world, where not only food and ingredients are produced, processed and exported to different countries, but also advertised and promoted via mass media to the rest of the world.

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<sup>16</sup> Eric W. Rothenbuhler, *Ritual Communication: From Everyday Conversation to Mediated Ceremony*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1998, p. 28.

An important aspect of food communication is its everydayness, its ubiquity in ordinary life. Our taking food and our relationships to it for granted may have contributed to the ignorance of food as an object of study or informing communication research. Interestingly, while food may have been a blind spot for communication studies, this and other papers demonstrate that communication theories can be used to help understand and research our relationships with food. From the perspective of communication studies, food has and continues to be an important symbol in our creation of meaning. Food is a site not just for sharing meaning but also as a place where we struggle over meaning.

In conclusion, understanding a culture through food is an interesting process because once a person starts asking these questions, such as how something is made, what ingredients are in it, or why it is called a certain way, the answers obtained go beyond culinary learning. In these answers, food tells us something about a culture's approach to life.

In the end, we can say that food functions symbolically as a communicative practice by which we create, manage and share meanings with others. Understanding culture, habits, rituals and tradition can be explored through food and the way others perceive it.