

Craving Food: A multi-perspective approach

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Róisín Curtin

MSc Applied Psychology

Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

Craving food can be interpreted on several theoretical levels. The basic physiological craving of food may reflect a response to nutritional need. Conversely, people with a monotonous diet might crave the same food as they always eat contradicting the idea that craving arises only from nutritional deficiency. As a gastronome, the food we consume extends beyond the functional need to obtain nutritional value. Desire for food thus may also satisfy a social need, a sense of identity. Nostalgic invoked craving of a traditional food might occur in immigrants living away from home. Food in this sense may symbolically serve a higher order purpose. On a more abstract level, it is argued that consumerism has influenced what we desire. There is a societal belief perhaps arising from the rise of individualism and popular positive psychology that human's ultimate desire is to be happy. The wave of consumerism was targeted as a way of alleviating desires for happiness; through for example the gratification received from consuming food, drink and lifestyle. As we see in Ireland post famine, the erosion of the power of Catholicism and the expansion of globalisation was the onset for a revolutionised way in that food is perceived particularly for the middle and upper classes of society. On the other hand the intense pressures of society to engage and conform to consumerism are ironically linked with the increase of the prevalence rate for depression. The words craving and desire in the context of food are embedded in several different processes and layers in society, some of which will be approached in this paper.

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Fischler's (1988) seminal paper highlights the complexity of human's relationship with food. Specifically he asks how can a desire for cultural specific foods be received in the taste buds, what is the connection between social and biological desires for food? From an evolutionary perspective neural systems in humans have adapted to motivate and reinforce foraging and food consumption (Avena, Rada and Hoebel, 2008). That is, desire for food is beneficial for human survival. Presently, there are instances where craving or desire towards food may extend beyond its primary function where it can even be maladaptive at times.

Craving food is a fascinating complex process manifesting in different facets of human existence. It can be localized to micro biochemical processes in the brain yet can be contextualized in the wider social stratosphere in the form of culture and identity. Accordingly, some are in favour of an integrated bio psychosocial approach to understanding why and how we crave food (Fischler, 1988). The scope of this paper will be to illustrate examples of the manner in which craving and desire for food is encountered across several domains, in attempt to highlight the significance of food in everyday living , providing practical examples of how this knowledge can be applied.

Social desire for food

As it stands today, desire for food may have social significance. For instance social learning of suitable food sources is exhibited by infants. Where children may have innate tendencies to desire sweet and high calorie foods, food selection is also socially learnt through seeking approval from parents in judging what objects might be edible (Schutz Kinzler and DeJesus 2013). In another respect gastronomes' desire for food extends beyond nutritional value. Hegarty and O'Mahony (2001) describe gastronomy as 'the free play of the human intellect at a level which is essentially non-practical.' (p. 8). Nevertheless gaining social enjoyment from food could be considered more practical than is usually acknowledged. Cultural conditioning of food may have partially occurred from the need to separate the edible and poisonous parts of plants. Passing on this advice was useful for survival and social interaction. This disclosure of knowledge later developed into writing cookbooks which may have been a precursor to the social gratification received today from the participation and presentation of food.

Contemporary gastronomers desire for specific food arise from evolutionary adaptations in several other ways. As an omnivorous species, people need to have a varied

diet in order to receive appropriate nutrients compared to animals such as Koala's who only eat Eucalyptus (Rozin, 2007). As we know, taste is received through various sensory modalities such as texture, smell and visual appearance which helps to discriminate food variation. The term 'eating with our eyes' characterizes more than an aesthetic judgment of food, rather an adaption of our omnivorous nature to pick up on colour in order to obtain a variety of nutrients. This has become important in the dining industry in particular how food is presented. Recent exciting literature is uncovering the multisensory perception of food (Spence, Mischel and Smith, 2014). Specifically how sound may influence taste. For example the sound of a plane might affect a person's detection of sweet and savoury taste but not umami. A goal of this research is to design food that is more desirable by enhancing sensory stimulation. This neuro-marketing strategy has been received well by chefs like Heston Blumenthal, where diners are presented with headphones playing sounds of the sea whilst eating seafood.

Current desire for novel food experiences like these are exhibited for example by the Nordic Food Lab; which is team of food gastronomes' and scientists who forage for edible ingredients in the environment such as insects and cuts of meat not traditionally considered to be edible. For instance in an attempt to understand why ancestors in Irish, Scottish and Nordic countries used to bury their butter in the bog, Reade (2013) experiments with making his own bog butter. Reactions to trying bog butter differed. Some reacted in disgust from the flavours that are absorbed from being buried in peat whereas others found it to be a pleasant experience. As such, desire for novel foods may depend on the enjoyment received from the experience. Tasting unknown foods may elicit disgust for some, which is a natural defence mechanism to prevent humans from eating poison. Social desire for novel food experiences is subjective and may override a natural phobia to try new things (Fischler, 1988).

A Hunger for Identity

It could be argued from the aforementioned examples that desire for specific food can serve to reinforce a sense of identity and form part of cultural expression (Fischler, 1988). Where food such as escargot is a delicacy in France, Irish tend not to perceive snails as a food source despite its nutritional value. A recent company 'Gaelic Escargot' are the first snail farmers in Ireland exporting to the French and Italian market which are currently experiencing shortages (Byrne, 2013). The common garden snail is available in Ireland yet it is not a culturally desirable food. It is a reflection which fits to Fischler's description (1998), which is that social norms can impact on taste perception. Similar to what Sutton (2010)

identifies as ‘the culturally cultivated phenomenon of synaesthesia’ (pp 1).

Attraction towards certain foods might be driven by its reinforcement of identity, purpose and belonging to a social group. Maintaining specific diets can provide a sense of control, like vegetarians who make ethical judgment on treatment of animals, even though they crave meat at times. A study by Sparks and Shepherd (1992) found that self identity impacted on the likelihood of being a green consumer. Since the industrialization of food production in the Western society people have become a ‘pure consumer’ rather than hunting their own food. However there is blindness to where food is being sourced. In contemporary society certain people exhibit insecurity about the quality of food. For instance, The Slow Food movement arose in attempt to ameliorate food insecurity and promote desire for a certain particular type food such as ethical, locally produced food through traceability. Annual conferences attract members and food producers ranging from over 40 different countries (Petrini 2003). Taken together the above examples demonstrate that while people might crave food because they are hungry, they are selective on the basis of identity and ethical considerations.

In contrast to hunger where satiation occurs from eating any type of food, ‘a craving may be satisfied only when the sensation from what we eat matches our sensory memory’ (Pelchat et al. 2004, pp 1). Role of memory in food craving can further be exhibited in nostalgic invoked craving of food, which is a common experience for immigrants living away from home. Routledge et al. (2011) explain the benefits of nostalgia to recreate a sense of existential meaning. People living away from home in a new cultural environment may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing threats to meaning in life which can be bolstered by preserving ones one culture through for example eating traditional foods. In an Irish context there is an increasing availability of polski shops selling traditional polish food.

Contextual influences

On another wavelength, creating desire for food can be an influential force in shaping society. From a macro perspective, structural changes across time have influenced what foods people desire. Food appreciation in Ireland has experienced rapid changes from what Kuhling and Keohane (2007) describe as the ‘Irish Cultural Renaissance’ (p. 1). As we see in Ireland post famine, the erosion of the power of Catholicism and the rise of globalisation in the celtic tiger period may have fuelled the onset for an expansion on Irish perception of food particularly for the middle and upper classes of society (Deleuze, 2012). Introduction of foreign food

culture has become successful partially because it has been married with Irish tradition as promoted by Bord Bia (2011) recreating foreign dishes with a celtic twist. Robin Cohen's terms this 'creolisation' where inherited culture is transformed by global influences to create new culture (Robertson, 1997).

There is a desire to participate in the trending food experiences. The power of structural circumstances on preference of food experiences is evident in the change in the pattern of consumer behaviour, resulting from the decline of the celtic tiger economy in Ireland. Specifically I refer to the shift in wanting a fine dining experience to a more frugal minded consumer in reaction to the recession (King, 2014). Current trends include the emergence of pop up restaurants, supper clubs and the recent marriage of fashion and food for example Dolls Boutique & Bibi's Café in Dublin. As suggested this has important implications for how businesses develop in the food industry.

Part of expression of identity involves not only eating food but capturing and sharing the experience through social media. Paul Duffy who is the CEO for Absolut vodka, has suggested that consumers can also be participators in marketing a product through social media, where emphasis is placed on conditioning lifestyle with a product. The use of popular positive psychology ideals in media messaging tends to promote that human's ultimate desire is to be happy which can be achieved through consuming food, drink and lifestyle (Kasser, 2004). However desire for materialism has been associated with higher levels of depression and anxiety (Kasser and Ryan, 1993). Further an increase in availability of food, has become a critical driver of food intake. Whilst craving for food may arise biologically it may also be influenced by what is available which might be considered maladaptive. Global food trends across countries may have negative implications for nutrition, where cheaper, energy dense, imported food products replace local diets (Phillips 2006). That said globalisation may be responsible for the increase in levels of obesity, which has become most problematic for people living in warmer climate areas whose diets ought to consist of less energy dense foods.

'The proportion of men and women with a BMI. 30 kg/m² in Nauru was 77% in 1994 and for Pacific people living in New Zealand in the early 1990s the prevalence rates were about 65–70%' (Swinburn, Caterson, Seidell and James 2004).

Resisting temptation

More energy dense foods are available yet there are pressures to conform to societal

expectations of the ideal body shape, which may reinforce dieting behaviour. That said, people who diet are more likely to experience food craving, facing a psychological conflict between the current desires of craving high calorie food versus the desire to lose or remain a certain weight (Pelchat et al. 2004). Whether or not people resist temptation is dependent on various complex contextual factors such as mood and motivation. Negative mood might be associated with craving of food. That is, people who are depressed have the propensity to crave carbohydrates because they release serotonin associated with feeling happy (Wurtman and Wurtman, 1996). In state of depression, anxiety or boredom people are more likely to act on a food craving thought (Hill, Weaver and Blundell, 1991). The control of food intake is further determined by the reward value and pleasantness associated which are received from multimodal sensory communication. What can be gathered by this is that craving of food may be context specific to culture, food availability and even mood state. Of course there are times where people are not particularly attuned to considering what they are eating other than it is cheap and they are hungry. This has not been mentioned previously and is open for discussion.

Conclusion

Ultimately it can be concluded that the reward value of food is both subjective as well as sensory. Gastronomes' may have a subjective 'heightened' value system for food which influences their desire for things food related, which is culturally conditioned (Avena, Rada and Hoebel, 2008). That is people's appreciation towards specific food may be shaped by the context of the culture they belong to, including consumerism and the varying availability of food supply but there are also internal biological drives which are inherent. Together it signifies the complex nature of human's desire for food in everyday living experiences where biology, psychology and sociology interact. To this end, it's theoretical application might be of benefit to the food industry, particularly an Irish context.

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