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# Grandma's meatballs and Syrian sweets: Food is home

Anke Klitzing

**Abstract:** Food plays a strong part in the formation and maintenance of our identity, and is intimately linked with memory and a sense of home. Meals are an important site of socialisation and the tastes and smells of our childhood often recall the nurture and affirmation of identity received at that time. Individual foodways are anchored in the family, which in turn is embedded in regional foodways and cuisine. These change over time, through trade, migration and conquest - sometimes rapidly as in the case of the Columbian Exchange. A conversation with Syrian refugees in Berlin in 2016 explored the questions of home and identity as expressed through their foodways and added a contemporary focus to an age-old question.

**Keywords:** *food studies, foodways, cooking, identity, Columbian Exchange, migration*

When Marcel Proust raised a madeleine cake dipped in lime flower tea to his lips, he was instantly transported back to his childhood. The experience inspired the writing of *The Search for Lost Time*, his seven-volume *opus maximus*. Smells have the capacity to transport us rapidly into the realm of our memories. Our olfactory memory kicks in even before we have cognitively identified the smell. You don't have to be Proust to know this feeling – the yearning for a lost time, perhaps our childhood, for persons who are dear to us but far away or for a world that seems safe and sound. We yearn for security, belonging and affirmation – we yearn for home.

In the 19th century, the Brothers Grimm linked the idea of *heimat*, or home, to a really existing place – the place where you are born or permanently reside. Today, social scientists agree that the perception of "home" is more abstract than this, and can also change or expand. Home is where you feel safe, secure and understood – where you belong. The feeling of home is strongly linked to our sense of identity, with the validation of our actions and of our person. This can be in the place where you were born as much as in a new place, a home of our choice.

Our food habits play a multifaceted role in the development of our identity. Meals are an important site of socialisation, the introduction and absorption of the individual into the community. During meals, we strengthen the feeling of belonging – children learn the social habits of the family and community through the everyday practices and festive rituals around food. What we get to know at home is intensely familiar and intimately connected with the people who have nurtured us and affirmed our identity. The tastes and smells that accompanied these primary experiences are deeply rooted within us. They are also more likely to be connected to a person than to a place or regional cuisine: home is grandma's meatballs, grandpa's apple juice, daddy's roast potatoes, mommy's chocolate cake.

Food habits, or foodways, are also necessary to learn how to feed oneself safely and well, which is fundamental in the complex world of human food. Taste and eating habits are not genetically programmed into humans – we are omnivores. This brings challenges as well as advantages, what social scientist Claude Fischler called the “omnivore's paradox”. On the one hand, humans can and do live and eat in the most diverse climatic zones. On the other hand, it is crucial that we eat a variety of foods, as no single foodstuff can cover all of our nutritional demands – and the need for variety always also opens us up to the possibility of eating the wrong thing. Since we lack a genetic compass, we need to learn from each other what is good and nutritious. Taste, therefore, is fundamentally

social. Generally, the basic culinary training for children happens within the family, which in turn is anchored in a cultural context that may be more or less traditional, more or less modern.

Cuisines, meals and recipes are sophisticated systems of communication comprising practical nutritional knowledge. Modern science has caught up by now and is able to explain to us in detail why we salt our water when cooking vegetables, eat carrots with butter or let pancake batter rest before baking. That we should indeed do all these things has long been taught to us by our grandmothers, by chefs and cookbooks. Traditional cuisines and nutritional rules shape the physical and mental health of the individual as well as the community, through hygiene rules, food taboos and table etiquette. They also tell us how to celebrate and feast to mark social milestones such as weddings, christenings, birthdays and funerals. This still applies in modern societies, although the transmission of knowledge and rules around food and eating tends to be more explicit nowadays, through books, media or public debates.

The cuisine of a region is traditionally rooted in the local fauna and flora, which have developed out of the climatic and geographic context. Also the cultural context shapes cuisines, as processes of production and cooking developed around the foodstuffs of a certain region. Since diversity is so important for us omnivores, new products and techniques were always adopted as they arrived through trade, conquest or cultural exchange. Grain was first cultivated in Mesopotamia, but slowly spread as far as Western Europe and East Asia. Winegrowing comes from the Caucasus in the Near East and was propagated by the Romans into all corners of their empire. Cattle, rice, beets and other foods could eventually be found in many regions of the moderate climate zones of the Eurasian landmass. The cuisines of these regions grew richer with new ingredients but also recipes and cultivation methods. The latter is not to be underestimated, because when new products appear without the adequate agricultural and culinary knowledge, it may cause all sorts of problems.

The Columbian Exchange of the 15th and 16th century, for example, was a great shock to the system. For thousands of years, the American continent had been separated from Eurasia, and on each landmass, a multitude of diverse plant and animal species had evolved. On both sides of the Atlantic, highly developed cultures practiced sophisticated agriculture and animal breeding. When Europeans eventually conquered the Americas, they brought back not only gold and silver, but also biocultural wealth – animals and plants – and in turn introduced European and Asian farm animals and crops to the so-called New World.

Potatoes, tomatoes, pumpkins, beans, peppers and maize were often first planted in aristocratic gardens or botanical institutes in Europe, and arrived on fields only gradually. Different, however, to new produce that was spread through migration and trade – also the Romans brought food plants and animals first and foremost for their own provision as they settled in the far ends of their empire – the Columbian Exchange did not include the relevant culinary knowledge. Fatal incidents occurred for example when European farmers mistakenly ate the highly toxic green leaves of the potato. As the socialisation from the ground up was lacking, it had to be replaced by policy from above. German emperor Frederick the Great issued the so-called Potato Decrees, to make this new food that thrived in poor and wet soils, needed neither mill nor ovens and was highly nutritious, palatable to his people. Today, the potato is central to a number of European cuisines, from Germany and Eastern Europe to Ireland.

Trade and migration continue to influence cuisines in all parts of the world. Thanks to the large population of Turkish descent in Berlin, doner kebab is as typical for the local food scene as currywurst, which appeared in the German capital a mere twenty years before the meat-filled flatbread. In the 1950s, Italian and Greek guest workers opened tavernas, pizzerias and ice cream parlors in West Germany. Travel-happy Germans brought back ideas and tastes from their holidays

and began to seek out buffalo mozzarella and rice noodles back home. First, specialty shops catered to this market of curious locals and new arrivals, but more and more, supermarkets have been adapting to the changing tastes of their clientele.

Maram from Damascus and Amna from Aleppo arrived in Berlin in late 2015. I spoke with them when they had lived there for almost a year, at the time in temporary housing in the Berlin suburb of Köpenick. Their families were in Berlin, too, Maram with her husband and small children. Amna's little sister Yamama attended the eighth grade of the local school and spoke enough German to translate for us. The families were able to cook in the hostel, each family for themselves, but food was often shared with neighbours, especially homemade sweets and baked goods. They could find everything they needed for their usual dishes in Berlin, and even shared a few tips with me: there were a number of Arab shops in this or that Neukölln street. Turkish butchers offered halal meat, just like at home, and even a few of the discount supermarkets had begun to sell it. They made their own cream cheese from yoghurt. Only the vegetables were not quite as good as back in sun-kissed Syria: "But German potatoes are excellent!" It was not only the shopping facilities that made life bearable for Amna and Maram. Being able to cook for themselves and eat together as a family meant they could speak about the foods of home in a relaxed manner, without a strong sense of loss or yearning.

Choukrai had come to Berlin from Mogadishu, but she did not want to talk about that, nor about food: "I am here now, thank God! Africa is over." Her hands energetically drew a line. A social worker later told me that Choukrai was the last surviving member of her family. All others were murdered in Somalia. The young woman had escaped on the difficult route via Libya and Italy. Her home had betrayed her: Africa was neither safe nor secure for her.

A 2005 Swiss study reports that our food habits can alter rapidly when the sense of security changes. As long as their status in Switzerland was unclear, a migrant family from Macedonia held on tightly to their foodways. When their residence was finally permanently secured, both parents found themselves curious and eager to try the foods of their new home.

Curiosity and the quest for variety constantly weigh against our sense of security, also in our eating habits. But what may seem strange to us at first turns into an enrichment of our bill of fare, of our cuisine, for the individual and the community. As Cicero said: Home is where we are well.