

FOOD HABITS AND BELIEFS

Although **specific** food habits and food systems may not be confined to a particular place or cultural **domain**, place and space do play an important role in regional geographies of food production, food marketing, and food preparation. Because of their comparative advantages of climate and soil, coupled with historical traditions based upon particular skills or trade patterns, certain regions of the world are **assured** of having market dominance for their products. In studying the geography of food, we find that certain foods, habits, and customs, including specific food taboos, are associated with particular places and/or cultures

VARIOUS TYPES OF FOOD-PLACE ASSOCIATIONS

The association of food with a particular place has many variations. We have divided them into four categories for the purposes of this discussion. The first type of food-place category includes food items that come from highly specialized production regions. For example, cranberries are specially cultivated in the United States in Wisconsin, as are grapevines in the Barossa Valley in Australia. Some of these regional specialties are of relatively recent origin; they are a result of intensive capital **investment** and/or a government **subsidy**. For this category of foods, the association between food and place is weak or nonexistent in the mind of the consumer.

The second kind of food-place category includes foods that may have originated with a traditional recipe in a particular place, but which over time have become generic food products. New England clam chowder, Black Forest cake, and Yorkshire pudding are examples of such foods. They were once associated with a region, but now are universally known and manufactured without **explicit** production links to their places of origin other than in their names.

In the third food-place category, we might include foods that have maintained strong links with particular regions in terms of production, quality control, and identity. One thinks here of Parma ham, Florida orange juice, and many types of Continental cheeses. Some of the strongest links are maintained by the legal **framework** of Appellations Contrôlées in France, which over decades has protected and **licensed** individual varieties of wine.

Our fourth food-place category is the regional cuisine that depends upon its distinctive ingredients, the style and skill of the resulting dishes. These foods include various kinds of haute cuisine and other lesser regional traditions recognized around the world. When cooks **immigrate** to a new country, they bring their cooking traditions with them. The haute cuisine of places like Mexico, France, and southern China has migrated far from its origin as **immigrant** restaurant cooks **assemble** regional dishes into a representative selection from their countries. Sometimes these regional cuisines have come to symbolize, or **denote**, an entire nation's cuisine even though they, in fact, only represent dishes from a specific area. This seems to be the case with much of the world-renowned "Italian" dishes of pasta and pizza, which are heavily reliant upon the cuisines of

southern Italy, **specifically** Napoli.

THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY OF FOOD

There has been a tradition of seeing human behaviors (e.g., food habits) as within the **domain** of regional cultures. An example of this is the traditional dishes of the Alsace-Lorraine region. It seems that certain foods characterize the French- and German-speaking peoples to the west and east respectively of the linguistic frontier. In the French-speaking region, red cabbage is used in salad, soup is consumed in the evening, and a regional cheese (cancoillotte) is typical; in German Alsace, red cabbage is cooked as a vegetable, soup is a midday item, and typical foods are naveline (turnips fermented like sauerkraut) and onion tart. The **implication** is that culinary preferences reflect more than individual taste—they reflect a wider culture as well.

Some food habits and foodways are culturally **specific**. Food is the focus of many cultural festivals, both regularly occurring events such as those **denoting** yearly religious and cultural celebrations, and occasional events such as weddings and funerals. A festival may only be an annual event, such as the American celebration of Thanksgiving with its roast turkey, dressing, and pumpkin pies, but it is culturally important, and even people who find themselves halfway around the world have a strong **inclination** to continue observing these social traditions.

Most cultures and places have time-honored food habits and meal patterns, but some of these are starting to **collapse** under the pressure of modern life. Time has become such a **constraint** for busy people that the leisured cooking of complex recipes is now less of an option than it was only a few decades ago, and meals of a predictable composition served at set times have also declined. Moreover, there have been powerful shifts in family structure, with the growth in single-person households undermining traditional collective meals. As a result, it seems that both the family and the family meal have been **subordinated** to other interests, with one survey finding that two-thirds of evening meals in Britain are now consumed in front of the television.

FOOD AVOIDANCES AND TABOOS: THE “YUK” FACTOR

Neophobia is a dislike of the new, and in the case of food, this newness or **oddness** may be manifested in its taste, odor, or appearance. Young children are especially prone to the rejection of food for this reason, but adults may also show a **reluctance** to try novel foods or dishes that seem to lie beyond the limits of their socially **constructed** taste. But it is not only new foods that are avoided.

in its raw state, much of the food that we eat is highly perishable and potentially dangerous if it is allowed to become contaminated or to decay. Even the most delicious food is only a few hours or days away from becoming rotten, unhealthy matter. As a result, disgust is never too far away from the enjoyment of food and eating. Scholars suggest that such revulsion may be classified into “core disgust” (from very bitter tastes or toward certain animals and insects) and “animal nature disgust” (from poor hygiene or

contact with death). But they also find that there are remarkable degrees of cultural variation in disgust responses. This is because our behaviors are affected by our conception of the polluting power of “unclean” foods, which may originate from a religious taboo or from a disgust generated by custom. Many Britons may abhor the notion of eating horse flesh, snails, or dog meat, but some of the traditional foods, such as black pudding (dried blood), tripe (cow’s stomach), and mature cheese veined with blue mold, are equally nauseating for other peoples.

Simoons (1994) wrote a classic scholarly text on food avoidance. He reconstructed the spatial extent of taboos on the consumption of foods like pork, beef, chicken, horse flesh, camel, dog, and fish. He was also able to specify how long-standing economic or cultural practices can influence human genetics. When Simoons studied the correlation between dairying and lactose tolerance, he found that nonmilking areas of the Old World coincide with higher percentages of lactose intolerance (the inability to absorb milk sugar, or lactose). (See Figure 17.1.) The implication of this study is that people in milking regions gradually adapted genetically to the nutritional dairy products that their female livestock supplied.

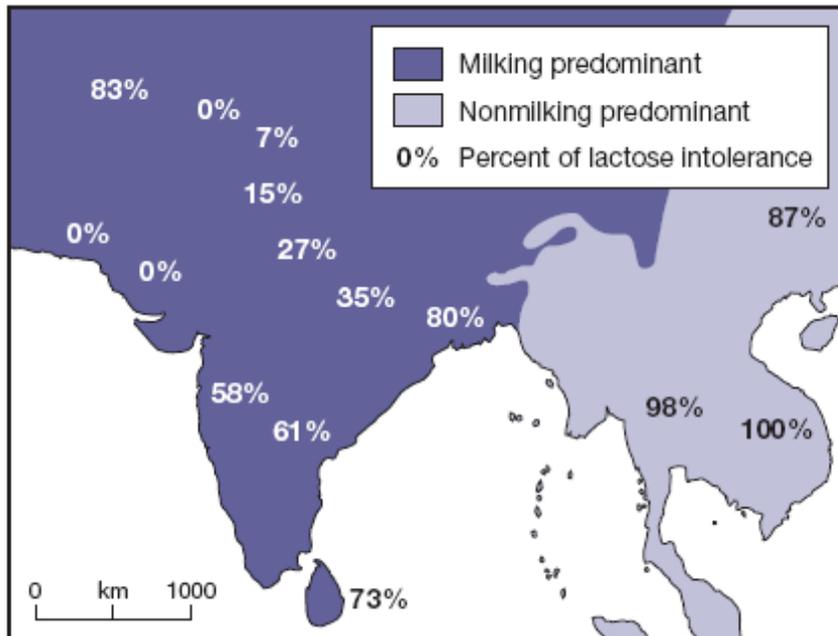


Figure 17.1 Lactose intolerance and the milking and nonmilking regions of Asia

Anthropologists and sociologists have taught us a great deal about regional food habits and beliefs. The origins and evolution of taste are complex and have a big impact on cultures and regions. Food behavior research appears to confirm the **validity** of the following **quote** from George Orwell: “It could plausibly be argued that changes of diet are more important than changes of dynasty or religion.”

Adapted from Atkins, P. and Bowler, I. (2001). *Food in Society*. London, UK: Arnold Press, pp. 274–280, 297–298, 301–304.