

Food Builds Community

Who's around your dinner table?



Today's food system is making it harder than ever to create connections and prioritize health, seasonality, and intention, but food can still be a community builder. From shopping at farmers' markets to planting in community gardens to sharing meals with loved ones, people can still engage with what they eat at every level. These are not radical choices; they simply acknowledge the human tradition of honoring what keeps people alive and the joy they can gain from sharing it.

The Power of Shared Meals

For thousands of years, humans have built societies, relationships, and rituals around their food. One study found that hungry babies as young as 19 months will give high-nutrition food away to a begging stranger—a uniquely human sign of altruism and empathy. Meals affect our brains, too: Researchers have shown that sharing the same food increases trust between people. By sitting down and bonding over a meal, humans make the act of sustaining themselves into a communal event where food becomes a vehicle for connection. During this act, people

are often compelled to relate as they eat, forming pivotal memories and lasting relationships in the process.

The Unseen Labor

Even if you're preparing a meal to eat on your own, you never truly dine alone. Each bite has a story that connects you to other humans—from the people who grew and tended to the ingredients to the people who packaged, transported, and sold them. The work of many is helping to

keep you alive. But in today's food environment, that story is often invisible. Your local grocery store likely sells fruits harvested halfway across the world and milk from cows raised and processed on massive industrial farms. Before you can even reach for fresh foods, shelves upon shelves of factory-produced items call out to you with shrewdly designed packaging and dubious health claims. In this world of segmentation, it's hard to feel connected. Allowing food to be a bonding agent can be incredibly powerful and restorative.

The Promise of Farmers' Markets

One grocery outlet has remained relatively safe from that industrial influence: your local farmers' market. The produce here will be fresher than your grocery alternatives; you'll likely meet the people behind your local food options and, if you get to talking, you'll learn more about their approach to whatever they grow or raise. You can



Michael visits City Slicker Farms in Oakland, California

ask questions to not only educate yourself about how food works, but also to discern whether their business practices align with your values. If they grow produce, for example, you could ask about whether they prioritize regenerating their soils. These markets aren't without their detractors, but supporting local farmers can help connect you to your own region's environment—by purchasing from them, you'll shop with the seasons and feed your local economy. If you're looking to make an impact for yourself, your community, and your society, farmers' markets can be a great place to start.

The Beauty of Community Gardens

Take that intimacy with food even further by getting down and dirty at your local community garden or farm. These shared spaces—often nestled within parks, converted vacant lots, and public spaces leased from the city—allow folks to plant, tend, and harvest fresh food. It can be hard work, but it pays off: Research shows that people active in community gardens eat more fruits and vegetables and report lower stress levels than those who don't. They bring community members together, too. One study found that working in a shared garden strengthened participants' feelings of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement in their neighborhood. Even if you live in a concrete jungle, there's likely a garden closer than you think: America's largest cities offer more than 29,000 community gardens and counting. Do you know where to find your local gardening spot? The answer is a Google search away.

ASSIGNMENT

WHAT ARE YOU EATING?

A low-stakes food audit

For this assignment, make a list of everything you can remember about your most recent full day of eating: breakfast, lunch, dinner, and snacks.

This exercise is more about self-reflection than accuracy, so don't sweat it if you forget a few items. Once you've made your list, look it over and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What was your balance of fruits and vegetables? Of the fruits and vegetables you ate, how many were fresh and how many came from packages?
2. Do you focus on mostly one food group, or are your day's meals diversely spread?
3. Did you prepare anything yourself, or were most of your meals made by someone else? If you ate out, do you know where the restaurant sources its foods?
4. If you ate a packaged product, check out the label: Do you recognize all the ingredients, or are some of them unfamiliar?
5. Do you notice any patterns? Any surprises?

As you work through these questions, don't judge any of your choices. Consider this a practice in building awareness of what you put into your body every day. There are no wrong answers. This will serve as a baseline you can revisit as you apply new learnings.





The Story of an American Meal

A critical look at a typical breakfast

Want to start your day with a meal that embodies your values? If you shop like most Americans, chances are the food you eat has been processed and has traveled quite far to make it onto your plate. Consider a familiar American breakfast—the kind you might see shared by a family on TV—and the daunting journey these staples typically undergo.

ORANGE JUICE

Due to the mass production of oranges (and some skillful marketing to reframe that increase in numbers), orange juice became a breakfast fixture in the early 1900s. If you research a major producer of branded juice, you may find that the largest source of oranges is Florida. Across more than 500 groves, more than 2,000 workers pick 48 million oranges daily to get juiced about eight hours later. The processing plant for this producer operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week; hundreds of workers operate machines that squeeze the oranges, **pasteurize** the juice (when liquid is quickly brought to a high temperature, killing harmful microbes without impacting taste or nutrition), and seal the results in cartons to either store or distribute. Eventually, the product could be shipped to dozens of countries on every continent.

EGGS

Eggs have been a breakfast standard for eons—even the ancient Romans preferred an eggy breakfast if one was available. Today, 99 percent of farm animals in the U.S. live on factory farms. If you buy a standard egg at an American supermarket, it probably came from a chicken living in an

industrial hatchery in Iowa, Ohio, or Indiana. There, the chicken most likely lived in a small cage, inside a barn shared with as many as 250,000 hens, selectively bred to produce eggs at unnaturally high rates. The egg was then run on a conveyor belt, sorted, packaged, and shipped in a refrigerated truck to a distribution center in your home state.

TOAST

Feeling toasty? Bread is one of humanity's oldest baked foods, but sliced bread is a relatively recent American invention: It was created in Missouri in 1928. If you're buying a typical loaf of white bread anywhere in the United States, the wheat was likely grown in Kansas. The harvested wheat is likely transported to your closest division of one of the nation's billion-dollar packaged bread producers; this facility might make around 2 million pounds of bread per week, mixing wheat in massive vats with water, sugar, and preservatives. Later, the bread is sorted, sliced, bagged by machines, and shipped to a store near you.

BACON

Bacon is one of the world's oldest cuts of meat: More than 1,000 years ago, the Chinese began preserving pork in salt. In order for little piggies to go to your market now, they have to be raised, slaughtered, and processed, and 129 million pigs meet this fate every year in the U.S. Large bacon producers can run dozens of factory farms across the country, where pigs are kept in cages. Some **sows** (female pigs) are kept isolated in small individual gestation cages where they're fed and inseminated; after they've given birth several

times, they're slaughtered at age three or four. The largest facilities can slaughter up to 32,000 pigs per day. Once slaughtered, the pig bellies—the part bacon is often made from—are separated, processed (cured with sugar and preservatives), sealed in plastic, and shipped to your grocer.

HASH BROWNS

Did you know potatoes are the most common U.S. vegetable crop, grown commercially in 30 states? If you're heating up frozen hash browns, they likely were processed in a massive Idaho factory: thousands of potatoes on a conveyor belt cleaned and peeled under high-pressure steam, then run through a mechanical cutter and sliced into strips. Those strips are blanched in hot water, cooked with **dextrose** (a sugar) and a salt preservative, and flash frozen. They're packaged by machines and stored in a freezer room, then loaded onto trucks and shipped across the country every day.

LABEL CHECK

● Many breads and other bread products in the United States are baked with bromated flour. Potassium bromate, which helps create that perfect loaf, is a known carcinogen outlawed in the European Union but still legal in the United States.

Where Did All the Corn Go?

A seed catalog from the early 1900s could have hundreds of varieties of sweet corn. Today, you'll find only about a dozen

Corn is the second most common cultivated crop on the planet, and the United States is the largest corn producer, growing 15.1 billion bushels per year. But these gains in quantity have made for huge losses in variety.

A CORNY HISTORY

Domesticated corn, or maize, is as old as human agriculture. Around 9,000 years ago, tribes in Central America replanted the wild grass teosinte, choosing seeds based on the texture, taste, and size of the kernels. Over millennia, maize seeds spread across the Americas, evolving into myriad shades of sweetness, starchiness, colors, and sizes. Maize, in its many forms, soon became an American staple crop. But with the rise of industrial agriculture in the past 100 years, only a few types of corn have taken a starring role. And it isn't just corn that has suffered: Colonialism, genetic plant breeding, and the rise of factory farms have erased 90 percent of plant crops from farmers' fields. Now, about 75 percent of the world's food comes from just 12 plant species.

HARD TO STOMACH

Most corn grown in the United States isn't meant for human consumption. According to 2014 stats from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA),

46 percent of corn is fed to animals; 30 percent is converted to ethanol (so, fed to cars); and much of the rest is turned into sweeteners (like maltodextrin and high fructose corn syrup), starches, and a range of alcohol products. Only 1.5 percent of corn grown in the United States is used to make human food. The nation's heartland is covered in 90 million acres of corn, much of which is **field corn**, a hard and tasteless crop that's all but inedible to the farmers who grow it. And as genetically modified, pesticide-resistant varieties come to dominate the market, many of those maize types are a rarity in commercial grow operations.

A GOLDEN FUTURE

But maize variations haven't completely disappeared. Many of the near-extinct maizes have been preserved as seeds in universities, federally kept seed banks, and other seed keeper collections. Native American activists play a key role: Since 2014, the NAFSA "Seedkeepers Network" has worked to preserve biodiversity, expanding the roster of seed varieties making it into the soil. With this "seed sovereignty" work, these communities are reclaiming thousands of years of agricultural tradition, celebrating the diversity of a food that started it all.

FOOD FOR
THOUGHT

It's All Corn

When was the last time you had corn? If you're thinking of a side dish or a popcorn snack, you're probably wrong. The modern food system puts corn in almost everything—in fact, a large fraction of carbon molecules in American bodies come from corn. The cheapness and efficiency of producing corn have made it food producers' go-to tool to sweeten or thicken products. Some are a little more obvious, like corn syrup, high fructose corn syrup, cornstarch, and corn oil. Others aren't so easy to spot: dextrose, fructose, maltose, dextrin, and maltodextrin. Check for these ingredients on labels and you'll see them everywhere: sauces, potato chips, sweets, packaged meat, canned vegetables, infant formulas—even baking powder and wine. If you eat farmed animals (or even fish!), you're probably getting corn indirectly through their feed, too.





ASSIGNMENT

EAT WITH THE SEASONS

For most of human history, people cycled their eating patterns along with trips around the sun. What changed?

You might have heard the old axiom "An apple a day keeps the doctor away," but eating an apple a day shouldn't actually be possible. Depending on the time of year and where you live, the apples in your grocery store might come from 50 miles away or 5,000 miles away. That makes an enormous difference in the amount of energy, labor, and resources it took to get to you. Today's grocery stores flatten humans' natural dietary connection to shifts in the climate. But you can restore it by knowing what your own area has to offer.

1. RESEARCH

Before your next trip to the grocery store, do a little digging to find out what's in season in your hemisphere during your time of year. Online resources like seasonalfoodguide.org will show you what's in season according to your location (for example, the chart on page 26 shows seasonality for the East Coast). Visit a farmers' market and ask about what's in season, too.

2. PICK YOUR STAR

Select a seasonal ingredient to be the centerpiece of your next meal. Throughout the research process, you'll learn so much, from which summer months are best for your favorite berries to the fact that even in the dead of winter you'll likely find chard, mushrooms, or potatoes nearby. Applying this knowledge and eating with the seasons can help you stay connected to the source of your food: the ever-shifting natural world.

3. CREATE

Try building a dish using all seasonal ingredients (like ratatouille in the summertime, or a mushroom risotto or borscht during the fall). What better way to truly eat with the seasons (and be creative in the kitchen) than to make a wholly in-season dish? Be playful and experimental as you shop and cook. Do you notice a difference in the flavor of the seasonal ingredients? Are those berries just a little sweeter?

FALL



WINTER



SPRING



SUMMER



Genetically Modified Organisms: Myths and Facts

It's time to examine the debate on GMOs—and the problems they purport to solve

Genetically Modified Organisms, or **GMOs**, are any species whose DNA has been altered using genetic engineering techniques. Since their introduction in the mid-1990s, GMOs have become common in the food supply—and faced consistent pushback. In 2018, nearly half of Americans surveyed said they avoided GMOs. Dive into the debate to debunk some of the most common GMO myths.

MYTH: GMOs are dangerous to eat.

FACT: Decades of research have failed to find any adverse health effects, and the World Health Organization and the American Medical Association both say that GMOs are safe to eat.

MYTH: GMOs are “saving” impoverished nations.

FACT: It's a relatively typical techno-optimistic argument: GMO crops like “golden rice,” which infuses the staple grain with Vitamin A, will help solve global crises in

malnutrition. But those claims fail to interrogate what caused nutritional deficiencies in many regions and populations. What's more, these arguments push millennia of local nutritional and agricultural wisdom into obscurity.

MYTH: GMOs have nothing to do with biodiversity.

FACT: The planet is facing a crisis in agrobiodiversity (or agricultural biodiversity): With the globalization and consolidation of agriculture, the world is losing seed varieties fast, creating new dependencies on an ever-shrinking supply of seeds. Once a GMO seed is introduced to

an area, it often replaces all other versions of that same crop. This harms surrounding ecosystems that rely on a diversity of species, and it threatens cultural food practices. Many Indigenous seed activists recognize that food sovereignty must include seed sovereignty: the ability to practice your own cultural agriculture, with your own biodiverse selection of seeds to plant and tend.

“The whole history of GMOs, which goes back to 1996, has been a series of promises that would make them more sustainable, more healthy, none of which has come to pass.”

—MICHAEL



ASSIGNMENT

THE “BETTER” FOOD QUESTIONNAIRE

A more meaningful food audit

1. PREPARE

Plan a meal to share this week. What will be in it, where will it come from, and how will you prepare it? Where will you eat it and with whom? Draft a brief paragraph describing the meal and the context in which you'll partake in it.

2. DISCUSS

Then, during the meal, take some time to talk about food values, intentionality, and awareness with the others at the table. Are there any values you and your dining companions share? What can you teach one another?

3. RECONSIDER

Review the values you stated at the beginning of this guide. How did this meal—the ingredients you gathered and prepared, the conversations you had, the food that was consumed (or left over)—reflect those principles? What changes could you make to further align your food experiences with your food values?

