

LS 270.25

What's for Dinner: Culture and Agriculture

(Tentative)

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Thursdays, 6:15-8:45 p.m.

In the last fifty years, our food supply has undergone major troubling shifts. This class will address these issues by exploring food as a commodity. Where does our food come from? Who sells it to us, and what is their stake in the growth and manufacturing? Who cooks it for us and with what ends in mind? What cultural processes have shaped the planting, harvesting, cooking, packaging, shipping, advertising, selling, and buying of our food? What do these shifts mean for us humans, for farmers, for farm animals, and for the greater environment?

Most of the food our parents and grandparents ate (along with all the other humans who populated the planet for at least the last 8,000 years) was gathered or produced and cooked within 100 miles of where it was consumed. Seeds were saved from generation to generation to grow crops and the animals consumed came from either the wild, or—once domesticated—were part of a crop based system; that is, they ate what we couldn't or didn't, and their manure provided needed fertilization for the soil. Most households kept "kitchen gardens" and women were almost always responsible for preparing food. Refrigeration, transnational corporations, the necessity of two incomes per family, and global capitalism changed all that. For example: the bread you had for breakfast was most likely made from genetically modified wheat; virtually all grains now are altered to produce sterile fruits, which forces farmers to buy new seed every year to produce more profit for industrial agriculture. These practices have caused the foreclosure of untold small family farms; indeed, as we'll discover, the vast number of suicides of farmers and all over the world can be attributed solely to lack of seed. Climate change, drought, and flooding have not only produced worldwide famine, they've changed the ways we grow food. Where smaller farms used to be the norm, large farms growing only one crop—i.e., "monoculture" now prevails. And these monocultural plant-based crops today rely on chemical fertilizer, as it is more efficient and profitable to farm animals separately. Different chemicals are sprayed on or engineered into the wheat in your bread (and all the plants you eat) to keep the bugs away and the weeds down. More chemicals are added when food is prepared industrially to increase its shelf life. With a couple of exceptions for chemicals like DDT and certain additives, few long-term studies have been done to examine how GMO's, synthetic fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides and many preservatives and stabilizers affect human health.

Nowhere is globalization more apparent than in fish and meat production; the "local" Whole Foods Atlantic salmon fillet you had for lunch may have been farmed in tanks off the coast of North Carolina, but it was most likely frozen and shipped to China (where labor is cheap) to have its bones removed. If the fossil fuel investment in farmed fish (aquaculture) is shocking, the state of waste related to ocean fishing is even more appalling; most scientists agree that the oceans will be empty of edible fish by the year 2050, perhaps even sooner. And if you think the beef, pork, or chicken you ate for dinner

came from the happy farms portrayed in childhood storybooks, think again. Today's livestock is almost entirely raised in "factory farms," torture chambers that treat animals as living flesh machines. These animals don't have enough space to turn around, spread their wings, or even once meet their offspring. Not once in their lives will they smell fresh air or feel the sunshine. They are fed a constant supply of hormones and antibiotics, which cause human health problems from cancer to antibiotic resistant superbugs. And people who live within ten miles of these factory farms suffer even greater health problems than those of us who eat this meat. The waste from these industries has polluted the soil and surrounding environments astronomically.

Global monocultural agribusiness corporations are primarily invested not in the healthy nourishment of our bodies, and certainly not in the sustainability of the land, its farmers, or the wellbeing of nonhuman animals, but solely in profits. "Externalities" (as the industry calls them) such as environmental degradation, human disease, and animal suffering constitute the hidden costs of these profits. It's not easy to look at the global problem of industrialized food; most of us would rather turn our heads, ignore it, and go on with our current practices. But the food industry is counting on our apathy and ignorance. It recognizes that few of us have the time for or the interest in changing the way we eat. Moreover, shifting to a local based food supply is not easy, and we'll talk about the downfalls at length. In many ways, especially when it comes to meat, dairy, and eggs, eating differently is more expensive. What will the impact of such a switch be on low income families? Also, who will shop for the food? Who will prepare it? How can we add these tasks to our already full lives? Will these tasks fall disproportionately on women? This class will examine in depth questions of poverty, "food deserts," and women's labor in relation to food.

Eating is not only an agricultural act, it is also an ethical act. What we buy and consume in this world market affects animals, laborers, soil, and many different cultures and communities around the world. We will explore the ethical impact our decisions have on other cultures, from rural farm communities in the U.S. Midwest to industrial agribusiness in developing countries across the globe. Using feminist insights and methods, the class will come to a critical understanding of the problems associated with a industrialized global food economy.

Evaluation: Work for this class will have three components. First each week, students will be responsible for a "one-meal" journal. 1-3 pages in length, you'll outline the food products contained in one meal. It doesn't have to be your best meal, or even one that you liked. The goal here is to figure out how far the food traveled to get to your plate and what the costs of that food were beyond the money you paid for it. What are the hidden "externalities" of a meal you consumed and how should we think about and describe these realities? Part of this project will be similar to taking a "carbon footprint" of the meal, but in addition to how much fuel was consumed in getting the food to you, I also want you to imagine the work of the farmer that grew it, the laborer that picked it, the animal that lived it, the soil that supported it, and the person who cleaned, chopped, cooked, and seasoned it for you. The intent of this is in no way to police your eating habits, but rather to raise all of our awareness about the hidden costs of the new food

system we inhabit. These are reflection papers that will help all of us think about the food we eat; thus, these assignments will not be graded. You will get full credit for every piece of writing you turn in. These assignments will be worth 30% of your final grade.

You will also write a final paper of 10-12 pages. These papers can take up many different theses from plight of the small family farmer to the life of a factory-farmed pig to new food movements in our state or anywhere in the world. We'll discuss these topics as the semester progresses. External research is necessary for these papers, but internet research is encouraged. The paper will be worth 40% of your final grade.

Finally, good conversation and debate will form the heart of our experience this summer. Thus, attendance is mandatory and unexcused absences will be penalized. Your participation in these conversations is recommended and will constitute 30% of your final grade.

No tests.

1. Introduction: What is food?

2. An Experiment in Reversal

Barbara Kingsolver, Animal, Vegetable Miracle

3. International Implications of Corporate Food

Vandana Shiva, Earth Democracy

4. Is There an American Way to Eat?

Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America

5. What About the Animals and the Vegan Option?

Eric Marcus, Meat Market

6. Four Options for Eating: Fast Food

Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma Section One

7. Four Options for Eating: Whole Foods vs. Local Food

Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma Section Two

McKay Pollan blog exchanges

8. Four Options for Eating: Hunting and Gathering

Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma Section Three

9. Food is More Than Fuel

Jessica Prentice, Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection

10. Shared local meal with farmers

Booklist:

Barbara Kingsolver, Animal, Vegetable Miracle

Vandana Shiva, Earth Democracy

Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America?

Eric Marcus, Meat Market

Michael Pollan, The Omnivore's Dilemma

Jessica Prentice, Full Moon Feast: Food and the Hunger for Connection