

# THE GEOGRAPHY OF FOOD

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What a combination: geography and food. Does food have a geography? Of course it does. Everything has a geography. Food is inherently geographic. Food comes from somewhere. Different foods are associated with different groups of people. And such cultural identities are usually *place based*: steak and kidney pie and the English, for example. Food is exotic, or it is bland, but it is always noteworthy. The great English beer drinker has become the lager lout made famous by so many international soccer tournaments and brought to our television screens on slow news nights. The same dipsomaniacs are also featured as the shirtless, and lobster pink, individuals that have made Spanish resorts what they are today: places inundated with British style pubs and cafeterias selling “traditional” British fried breakfasts, and offering fish and chips in the evening. Where did all of the tapas go? Over a Thanksgiving meal (which for me, being English, held no sense of family tradition, but served only as a dress rehearsal for my imminent Christmas Day meal of Turkey) I was loudly informed from across the table, by a German guest, that the English eat horsemeat. This was no statement of simple fact meant to educate the non-European hosts. This was good old European cultural animosity. The horsemeat insult has made its rounds as far back as I can remember. As a child I always believed that it was the French that ate horsemeat, and I was also indoctrinated with that base and foul, racist lie that south Asian restaurants in Britain used cat, and dog, meat in their curries. This reminds me of the 2002 World Cup soccer tournament held in both Japan and South Korea. The South Koreans wanted to hand out free hot dogs to spectators at some of the soccer matches. The only problem was that the South Koreans actually do eat dog meat. Were the hot dogs really dogs? The European media certainly exercised itself over this revelation. The sense of outrage was palpable. Simply put, food is deeply associated with people and places. Food feeds our cultural stereotypes. It is inherently geographic. It is a social and cultural marker and is never devoid of meaning and significance. Food and food practices denote cultural, class and moral

superiority or inferiority. I can still remember the humiliation I felt in a restaurant in Wales while on a geography field trip in my early undergraduate days. Soup was served and I stared dumbly down at the bewildering array of silverware, and at the objects floating in my soup ahead of me. “They’re croutons you moron,” announced a fellow student at a volume indicating her future ambition to spend time behind the lectern.

Shortly after I had put out a call for papers, broadly concerned with geography and food, on several email group lists, in scholarly journals and in a variety of newsletters, I received an email message from a friend of mine from my graduate school days. I had not been in contact with this friend for some time so I was happy to do some catching up with him, albeit in cyberspace. The email, however, derided the very idea of studying food and geography. Doubtless, the email was an attempt at humor, but there was also a real sense that he believed that there was no value, scholarly or otherwise, in studying food issues. This was a surprising message for me to receive from a fellow cultural geographer. I remember well his dejected manner at a past annual geographers’ conference, that year in Toronto, because of the negative reception his early research findings, on the geography of sport in England, had received. One well established

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*Journal for the Study of Food and Society*,  
Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 2002, Pp. 7-9

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professor had even told my friend that it was tantamount to a crime to waste time studying sport. Criticism from disciplinary peers is difficult to accept, especially when that criticism is so damning. However, as geographers, we were, even then, growing used to regularly defending the discipline of geography from researchers in “proper” academic pursuits, like mathematics or history, that questioned the intellectual need for geography. We also had to constantly defend our choices of research topics within the discipline. The geography of sport was not well thought of. So, given our experience in attempting to promote the widest range of research topics, why should he be so dismissive of the idea that food, like sport, does indeed have a geography?

In part, I suspect, the answer lies in a column from the *Financial Times* (December 4<sup>th</sup>, 1999) that I have kept in plain view on my desk since reading it. The article was a review of the food conference held at the Hagley Museum in Wilmington, Delaware in November of 1999. It seems that Food Studies, much like Geography, is something of a pariah in academic circles. The newspaper article, discernibly patronizing in tone, saw Food Studies as the latest “fad” on college campuses. Food Studies was “sadly benign”, apparently having little political division amongst its practitioners, and no “thin skinned minority” to fuel intellectual debate. Of course I disagree on both of these points. The column also touched on the theme of disciplinary integrity. Those studying food related issues, it was noted, come from many disciplines but are generally from the liberal arts; a point underscored by the author’s comment that “nutritionists, biologists and physiologists” have excluded themselves from Food Studies. Food Studies is populated by a diverse crew of individuals willing to look beyond disciplinary boundaries. Like Geography, so too is Food Studies seen as an academically unsure undertaking outside of the confines of “proper” disciplines like Biology and Physiology. But, I would argue, unlike these reductive sciences, Geography and Food Studies can be synthesizing subjects – able, perhaps, to make sense out of food issues by putting food and food practices into the context of broader rhythms of life. It appears to me, then, that this interdisciplinary undertaking—Food Studies—has the same advantage as Geography does in that both seek to represent the complexity of everyday life rather than to try and reduce food to the atoms of nourishment alone. This, I believe, is an intellectual strength.

Food issues are complex and often take on national and international cultural significance as the South Korean example shows. Recently an advertising campaign by the British Tourist Authority (BTA), attempting to attract more US visitors to Britain, made the claim that curry was now the traditional dish of the British supplanting our assumed ancient reliance on roast beef and Yorkshire pudding for dinner, and even threatening the cultural status of the (always healthy) “black pudding” and kidneys for breakfast. The rancor that this statement generated from the tabloid and conservative media alike, and from “traditional” British restaurant owners, put the lie to the claim that food studies is benign. The BTA, apparently, had done nothing less than attack British cultural identity and, for some injured parties, an island history of a thousand years or more. If, as the *Financial Times* claimed, there are no thin skinned minorities in Food Studies, it is certain that there is at least one thin skinned majority.

The papers presented here, as geographical insights into food issues, are as eclectic as the discipline of geography itself. However, all have common geographical themes. They all address the issue of food—be it consumption, production or regulation—across space, and at different scales of human interaction. They address the nature of food in the constitution of urban areas as well as the role food plays in constituting place based identities. Haverluk provides an excellent case study of the creation of such a place based identity in the US south west. Here the chili pepper is a key ingredient in the constitution of the cultural identity of Pueblo, Colorado. Block’s essay on the milk industry highlights the ways in which regulation of milk production has had uneven geographical consequences over time. Here the connection between different geographical scales of human interaction is a key organizing theme. Local communities must interact with regional and national imperatives in order to try and ensure a safe food product. Bell’s paper draws on a deeply geographical idea that places can be understood, and used, more effectively by individuals and groups if they have a map. Thus the idea of the London A–Z map—long a staple for anyone wishing to use, and enjoy, that great metropolis with any success—has been transformed into the idea that the *food-scape* can also be mapped in this way. Clearly shown in his paper is the fact that food is a major focus for cultural and class issues. Human identities are often place based and food is an important resource that helps constitute those

identities. Bellows and Hamm develop the argument that food security is an issue that is geographical in nature. It is at the scale of local communities that people are increasingly able to address food security issues. Food rights can only be obtained if local communities can effectively connect with national and international institutions. Finally, McLarnon's review of Jakle's and Sculle's book analyzing a quintessential US food-scape—road side diners—testifies to the fascination we have with food and food related geographies. Each of these papers then, elucidates different geographical concepts—place, scale, human interaction—and in so doing illuminate fundamental features of the food-scape.

While writing this introduction I visited the Lancaster annual town fair and was surprised to find a food stall selling Emu meat. I tried an Emu hot dog, and, well, it tasted like a hot dog. Should I have been as surprised as I was that such exotic food would be readily available in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, amid the usual American bistro style restaurants and the slew of diner style “family” restaurants offering delicacies like scrapple? Perhaps not, but I think this reflects, in a very real way, the connection between food, people and places that pervades the understanding we have of where we live. Food Studies *is* a politicized entity, and is far from the benign “intellectual parlor game”, the Financial Times would have us believe it to be. The significance of food exceeds far beyond the human need for nourishment and far into the realms of politics, culture, class and race. And a geographical perspective on food is one way that can help us to understand the deeply rooted nature of food in the very constitution of our communities.