Food For Thought: A Study of Food Consumption in Postmodern US Culture

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The objective of this research is to examine the symbolic meanings of contemporary food consumption and provide an in-depth understanding of related practices. Specifically, we view food as a prominent cultural category representative of postmodernism and approach our study using a postmodern perspective. The paper provides an insight into how US consumers relate to food and highlights the symbolic dimension of food in a culture that is often depicted as highly individualistic. Offering a theoretical framework rooted in an ethnographic account of food consumption we uncover its postmodern complexities that take into account social, cultural, and contextual dimensions. Food is discussed in the context of relationships, desire, and a globalized commodity.
In the last twenty years or so, consumer scholars have been looking at consumption in its broader dimensions instead of examining it only from a product acquisition point of view. Thus the meaning of consumption as currently understood includes such aspects as product use (e.g., Folkes, Martin, and Gupta 1993), experiential consumption (e.g., Joy and Sherry 2003), consumption rituals (e.g., Otnes and Lowrey 2003), acts of possession and disposition (e.g., Tian and Belk 2005), and a host of other activities concerning consumer relationships to objects. In addition, consumption has also come to include many symbolic aspects and not just functional activities. For example, recent work on fashion and clothing further attests to this (Thompson and Haytko 1997) by suggesting that one can theorize consumption activities from the point of view of meaning systems in which they are embedded. Appadurai (1986) has coined the term “the social life of things” to represent such a point of view. It is in this cultural context that we examine the consumption of food in this paper.

Going beyond emphasizing the reduced number of calories and the statement “fat-free,” food marketing has become more and more elaborate and offers consumers such labels as “Lifeway foods,” “Galaxy Nutritional foods,” “Slow food,” “True food,” “Supernatural food,” “Green food.” All these examples are a good indication that in contemporary food consumption, a high value is placed not on the physical attributes of meals and the process of eating them but on the symbolic meanings associated with food. Therefore, food can be seen as a cultural category representative of postmodernism, and examining food consumption using a postmodern perspective is the objective of this study.

Postmodernists regard everyday life as a valuable “site for expressions of cultural symbolism” and urge researchers to turn to everyday practices for what they term “guiding themes of life” (Firat and Venkates 1995, p.249). Domain of contemporary everyday life, as an
ever-changing and mutable phenomenon rich in symbolic activity (De Certeau, Giard and Mayol 1998; Pillsbury 1998) has become a challenging area of academic study because it blurs the boundaries between ordinary and exquisite, mundane and extravagant and makes one material product become many symbolic things at once. The presented study attempts at providing an interpretation of food consumption as the most pervasive part of such life.

We examine food consumption as a rich and sophisticated postmodern experience that carries multiple cultural, social, psychological, and symbolic meanings. We pursue two major research questions: 1) What cultural functions are associated with food? 2) More specifically, what are the current symbolic meanings attached to food consumption? In addressing these questions, we explore how US consumers react to food, what factors define the symbolic perception of food consumption, and what implications for consumer culture these pose. By focusing on US consumers, we venture into a culture that is often depicted as highly individualistic. This becomes especially meaningful given that at the heart of postmodern thinking is the idea of the subject/consumer who becomes a producer of self-images and (hyper)realities and is “freed from having to be, have, or seek a center, freed from another commitment imposed by modernist metanarratives” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p.254).

BACKGROUND

Popular literature views food consumption as a complex interplay of cultural, economic, social, political, and technological forces. Its current approach seems to emphasize the dual nature of food as both a commodity and a metaphor. Recent works like “Fast Food Nation” even suggest that a nation’s diet can be more revealing than its art or literature (Shclosser 2001) -
making a claim which is supported in academic studies. For example, the French dietary traditions of moderation, focus on quality, and emphasis on the joys of the moment have been found to help today’s consumers to cope with the accessibility and enormous variety of foods better than the American culinary values of abundance, quantity, and comfort (Rozin 2005).

In consumer behavior, we discern three basic approaches to studying food consumption practices. One is quantitative modeling of grocery shopping and product preferences. Typically these studies focus on how consumers make choices between product or brand alternatives in retail environments (e.g., Manchanda, Ansari and Gupta 1999). Such studies, while important, focus more on food acquisition and do not shed much light on food consumption from a phenomenological or experiential standpoint.

A second approach examines food as a means of studying something else, as “background” data to propose generic conceptual and theoretical frameworks that can be equally applied to other product categories. An example of such an approach is the inclusion of food items in an experimental study with the purpose of investigating the mechanism of interaction of affect and cognition in consumer decision-making (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999).

The third stream of research, which is more relevant to our study, explores food consumption from a social-symbolic perspective (Levy 1981; Rook 1985), especially in ritual settings and on special occasions. The theory of symbolic consumption states that consumers value goods for what they symbolically mean to them. The scholars examining food consumption through the social-symbolic lenses focus on the celebratory nature of food (Wallendorf and Arnould 1991), explore its sacred and secular characters (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), uncover its healing power (Thompson and Troester 2002), reveal its materialistic dimension (Belk 1988), examine its aestheticised dimension through the texts of cookbooks
(Brownlie, Hewer and Horne 2005) and analyze the relationship between the symbolic constructions of time and fast food (Brewis and Jack 2005). It is this academic venue that we join in order to enhance our understanding of food consumption in a contemporary society.

Food as a Carrier of Symbols

The first comprehensive analysis of food in relation to the lives of people and its place among other products was offered in the consumer behavior discipline by Levi (1981, 1999), who used interviews with housewives to demonstrate the application of a structural approach drawing upon Claude Levi-Strauss (1963). Levy started by assuming that human events are highly symbolic, and his interpretation of food became a process of searching for meanings based on the analysis of stories, called “myths,” elicited from interviewees. Reflecting on the nature of symbols, Levy asserted that the social group prescribes roles and their accompanying symbols, and consumers adopt the roles and symbols suited to their identities. This theory led the author to conclude that the basic vocabulary of cooking and eating is used to help express identities. He then identified symbolic distinctions that were being made among specific foods, methods of preparation, and the ideas they represented. Since then, this classification has been extensively used by other researchers. An example is the most current European studies exploring the symbolic (Bugge and Almas 2006) and ritual (Marshall 2005) dimensions of a “proper” dinner.

The academic search for meanings imbedded in food that has been reported in the consumer behavior discipline reveals three levels of symbolic framing of food. Symbols seem to be attached to particular foods, their manufacturing and preparation methods, and eating patterns
of consumers. The first level of symbolizing is the most straightforward on the surface. It occurs when certain foods are strongly associated with well-articulated and collectively shared meanings and images. Thus, a hamburger is symbolically teenager food (Levy 1981), and fondue is a fun meal (Heisley and Levy 1991). In an extensive study of Thanksgiving rituals, Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) find that Jell-O symbolizes tradition and a bonded family, root vegetables send a message about the common agrarian roots of America, and the extensive use of butter rather than margarine conveys a message about the triumph of nature over commerce.

On the second level, attention is directed toward ways of manufacturing food. Not the food items but their technological properties are at the center of this meaning formation. Consequently, units of analysis are represented by such words as homemade, manufactured, natural, organic, packaged, processed, and frozen. This level results in the generation of its own symbols. Examples show that manufactured foods are taken as signs of industrialization, modernization, and progress, and natural foods symbolize a return to nature, a retreat from over-refinement, and authenticity (Kniazeva 2002, 2005; Levy 1981). Homemade food, in turn, "operates as a symbolic bulwark against intrusion of the market into the domestic domain" (Moisio, Arnould and Price 2004, p.380).

On the third level, identified symbols link together food properties, eating patterns, and food values and rationalize consumer behavior. This is the most comprehensive level of symbolizing that incorporates multiple functions of foods, their perceived attributes, and the meanings generated on the first two levels. Thus, eating at home carries the symbol of family unity and conventionality while eating out symbolizes festivity and separation (Bove, Sobal and Rauschenbach 2003; Kemmer, Anderson and Marshall 1998). This level provides the symbols of self-indulgence, femininity, taking control and categorizes food, in consumer terminology,
into "rushed and not rushed" (Heisley and Levy 1991). It allows exploration of how consumers meet the complex demands of the contemporary world and fit into it by negotiating their identities – a process that embraces food as one of the most expressive and pervasive tools. In this light, food can easily be seen as a cultural category representative of postmodernism.

The term postmodernism refers to the cultural conditions that define the present time in human history. According to the scholars conceptualizing the emergence of this new philosophical and cultural movement, postmodern consumption is not a purely rational but a largely symbolic activity (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, 1995; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Oswald 1999). This activity starts with the consumer perception of an object not as a material thing valued for its functional benefits but as a symbol that carries the weight of values that are mentally assigned by the consumer. Thus, the objects are replaced with symbols, and consumers, in turn, become both the producers and consumers of these symbols. Such transformation of objects into symbols is argued to be the crux of postmodern consumption. Consequently, this view regards the subject (a consumer) not "as someone seeking to satisfy an end (needs), but as someone seeking to produce (construct) symbols" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p.260) – an approach reflecting contemporary food consumption. The postmodernist philosophy asserts: "It is image that essentially determines the object... thus image must be studied as symbolic production (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p.261). Adopting this approach we aim at demonstrating that food, eating, and cooking practices as a symbolic domain of everyday consumption can provide important clues about guiding themes of life.

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY
Our study involves 30 in-depth interviews. We chose interviewing as a method for data gathering in order to enhance our analytical overview of existing research by introducing the voices of consumers (McCracken 1988b) through an in-depth ethnographic account of their food consumption practices and discourses. The interviews lasted 1.5 to 2.5 hours each and were tape-recorded. We had prepared 21 open-ended questions that invited our participants to reflect on the place that food occupies in their lives, to describe favorite foods, to recollect childhood food-related memories, and to share self-imposed grocery shopping rules (see appendix 1). All our interviews started with the question, “What comes to your mind when I say ‘food’?”

Insert Appendix 1 about here

The interviewees included 15 females and 15 males ranging from 22 to 71 years of age, all being US residents of the West Coast. Among them were 18 Caucasians, two African Americans, five Latinos, and five Asian Americans. Nine were single, twelve were married, two lived with a boyfriend, and seven were divorced or separated. Six persons had adult children living separately and ten had young children living at home. Educationally, six interviewees had a high school diploma, seventeen held a bachelor’s degree, and seven had earned a master’s degree (see table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

The first six participants of the study came from a pool of the first author’s acquaintances. The other 24 interviewees were chosen by the authors from names suggested as potential subjects by those first participants. The major criterion of choice during the recruiting
process was to provide a moderately diverse sample in order to gather data that would allow variations in responses.

We analyzed the interviews by employing procedures for developing grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998) because we found it especially relevant for the purpose of our ethnographic interpretation (Spiggle 1985). In the analysis of data, we first used the technique of open coding, in which we scanned our interviews line-by-line and sentence-by-sentence, attempting to generate key words, initial concepts, and categories that would define starting points for our conceptual thinking. After completing this first step, we focused our attention on uncovering properties and dimensions of categories that appeared to be crucial for understanding consumer attitudes toward food consumption practices. The next step included axial and selective coding schemes. The final step led to theorizing from our data that uncovered the multifaceted nature of food. As a result, we focused on three major themes for our data analysis: food as a social connector and disconnector, food as an object of desire, and food as a globalized commodity.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF FOOD

Food as a Social Connector and Disconnector

The narratives of our informants demonstrate the fluid nature of food as a concept that routinely undergoes transformation from "filler" food into the "real thing." It is the absence of social context that defines "filler" foods, which are described as meals consumed by one in a hurry, on the go, and out of the need to be fueled. The "real thing" in turn implies the social
aspect of meals. In a similar way, in the study of newly formed households, Kemmer et al (1998) distinguish between “fuel” and a “meal”. Thus, when food consumption occurs in a setting involving more people than oneself, it becomes a key figure in establishing powerful interpersonal relationships. In this role, food is utilized both to connect and disconnect people by creating or dispelling tensions.

Our informants provide numerous examples of the socially positive nature of food. It is not the taste that is the focus here, but the bonding power of meals that possess the ability to add significance to any human gathering. When asked about the best meals they have ever had, our informants engage in detailed descriptions not of the foods, but of the occasions at which they were consumed. Aerica recalls celebrating the 75th birthday of her father several years ago, Patrick had the most memorable meals when he was out with his girlfriend, and 40-year-old Hudson describes having his friend over when both of them were seventeen and Hudson’s mother fixed pork chops in gravy with greens and mashed potatoes.

The analysis of such recollections reveals that the major elements of a good meal include not only tasty dishes, but what seems to be even more crucial: a social setting and social interaction. Pam, who had the rare experience of eating in the best restaurants in the country, “over and over again, several times a year, no expense barred,” claims that it doesn’t matter to her: “It really doesn’t. It’s just food. I think that the people you are with are what matters.”

Sharing food is very characteristic of ritual consumption behavior, and in that function food performs as a symbolic way of sharing group identity and bonding through food (Belk 1988). As a ritual artifact, food and its consumption are included not only in holiday celebrations, but also in such everyday occasions as the coffee break, the dinner, the business lunch, and the courtship ritual. Thus, men traditionally use gifts of chocolate when involved in
romantic relationships because sweets in general and chocolates in particular have long been associated with women, indulgence, luxury, reward, and sensuality.

The social dimension of eating involves a gathering of people that usually has a well-defined purpose, or what our informants call “an excuse.” Sometimes the meaning is very deep, such as in the reference made by Sue who philosophically talks about submarines: “I was thinking of submarines where people are for long periods of time. But part of keeping the human spirit alive and functioning inside this tube where you are going to be under water for two months at a time or whatever the schedule is… is that getting together [for dinner] and having a sense of normality and silverware and plates. I think if you took that away, people would probably go crazy.” We can trace a duality in the nature of food in this comment. On the one hand, the celebratory nature of food adds exclusivity to human gatherings; on the other hand, it possesses the ability to bring a sense of normalcy to out-of-the-ordinary situations. The following recollection by Darlene seems to grasp this duality: “Some of the best times I’ve had is getting together to go out to dinner or being on white water rafting trip for two days and not being near any civilization, no stores. You bring all your food with you on the river and yet… preparing this gourmet meal of chicken marsala with green beans and having an apple pie for dessert that we just freshly baked, and sharing…. There’s no substitute for that.”

Darlene’s romantic picture underlines the primitive roots of the concept of sharing and makes parallels with sitting around the fire and breaking bread. However, her recollection appears to be more sophisticated. On one hand, she sentimentally portrays authentic natural beauty, where “white water” symbolizes peacefulness and content and temporary escape from reality. On the other hand, the escape is not complete, and the glamorized absence of any civilization and fancy supermarkets is only good so long as all the ingredients necessary to
prepare a gourmet meal are available. It is not plain bread that she enjoys eating but chicken marsala and dessert.

The social dimension that includes preparing and then enjoying food with other people while sitting and talking underlines the longing for good, unstructured communication. For instance, Tom does not enjoy having a business meeting combined with a meal. That is not the kind of social interaction he is looking for when he has a meal, he explains. Though also a way to connect with people, this meal does not let one fully enjoy the relaxing power of food. It is when one does not need to control laughter that the soothing power of meals is enjoyed. And it is the value of good conversation accompanying meals that highlights the pleasures derived from food. In that sense, Jane’s account is very revealing. She claims, “I would never eat in a restaurant by myself. Never been by myself in a restaurant. Maybe a fast food, but I have never sat down in a restaurant by myself.” She finds meals to be empty when not accompanied by human interaction: “You know, my daughter used to cry when she would see old people sitting by themselves in a restaurant because she thought it was so sad, to be by themselves. And I would say, go and join them, go talk to them.” (laughs)

Moreover, social gatherings involving food appear to be so special as to make one forget about the guilt created by consuming “very fattening” meals that one “never” makes at home. Good company seems to warrant permission to deviate from the strict daily eating routine by letting one temporarily break the rules and indulge in otherwise prohibited foods.

The narratives of our interviewees also include some painfully detailed pictures of meals used by their parents or relatives to assert power over them. Lou recalls how, as a child, he was made to eat fish head soup and broccoli for punishment: “I was always a bad boy. My cousin at the time when my mother was in the hospital, she would just take fish heads with the eyes and
everything and boil it and make me eat it. Another punishment was broccoli, only it was cooked until it was completely soft. It’s disgusting.”

It is not the memories of the past, but the realities of her family’s present that deeply worry Pam, the mother of two children. Her ex-husband, she says, has been using food to exercise power over their younger son, and has made dinner a very stressful time for the child:

“He would force him to eat and then he would disdain him. Then, he would treat him with contempt, and my little one, when he was six, and even younger, he knew by the set of my husband’s shoulders whether it was going to be a pleasant time or not. It was terrible.”

Reflecting on the negative power of food, Pam uses such descriptors as “dangerous,” “hurting,” and “struggle.” Claiming she has successfully corrected the situation, she talks about “liking,” “enjoyment,” “pleasant thing,” “relaxation,” and “joy.” It is evident from these accounts that food symbolizes the giving or withholding of love when used as a material reward to modify certain behavior (Belk 1985).

As an interpersonal tool, food is often linked to conflict situations and may both result in conflict and resolve it. Eating patterns can become a source of tension at the beginning of marriage as the spouses adjust to each other (Heisley and Levy 1991; Kemmer, Anderson and Marshall 1998). Later, because families may include both stubborn and finicky eaters and those who are easy to feed, food can reflect a lack of harmony based on varying tastes and preferences (Bove, Sobal and Rauschenbach 2003), which makes the family members refuse, resist, and disparage food (Levy 1981). On the other hand, food can be used to please and fix broken relationships (Heisley and Levy 1991; Levy 1981).

Food as an Object of Desire
The everyday account concerning food issues is revealed in self-imposed encounters of the following kind. Initially, food is assigned a secondary role and is used as a tool to augment a desired self. Eventually, though, the power of food may attempt to prevail, revealing a sublimated tension between the self and food as the object of both positive and negative desires.

The rational discourse concerning the desired bodily self is rooted in two major concerns – health and/or weight. Both result in self-imposed taboos or restricted foods. Kim, for instance, stays away from artificial colors for their impact on her “learning abilities” and doesn’t eat red meat because it “closes up your arteries.” Anu avoids fatty foods because her family has a history of heart disease. Hudson, who comes from a family where “everyone is large,” lets himself eat a double cheeseburger only once a month. After giving birth to three children, Sara battles unwanted pounds by restricting sugars and starches. Since deciding to lose weight, John doesn’t eat doughnuts and bagels. As can be seen, the choice of restricted foods is a rational process. However, there is an emotional side to this. What these choices have in common is that, in most cases, the restricted foods are the ones that are also the most desired. They symbolize great sacrifice, which in turn articulates a love-hate relationship.

As our interviews show, favorite foods can become objects of desire not to desire. Beth admits that sometimes she is “a little upset” with herself for how much she is eating. Tom says it is snacks that make him feel “the guiltiest.” In their cross-cultural work, Belk, Ger and Askegaard (2003) also report that the American female interviewees critically associate their food desires with sin and guilt, while women in Turkey are found to be more permissive and frame such desires as matters of imbalance and lack of control.
Though our informants claim to try to “mentally block” themselves against whatever they deem to be bad for them, the battle between one’s mind and stomach appears to be constantly played out. They face this outcome with various emotional tensions. Some of them find a rationalized compromise by not becoming “overly paranoid about what you eat,” and this is, for instance, how Kim defines her personal strategy. The other variation is admitting the battle is lost and rebelling against it by ridiculing those who still engage in such everyday battles. To Lou, some people turn their lives into what he terms a “prison sentence”:

I’m now out of shape… Even the doctors have told me my cholesterol is too high. They tell you that you have to cut out salt, you have to cut out fat, you have to cut out cholesterol, and you can’t have this or that. Pretty soon I’m thinking, “What am I going to eat, just a piece of tree or something?” There’s nothing. They say, “But, if you want to live longer, you have to do these things.” I think that’s a terrible prison sentence to tell me. Okay, great, why should I want to live longer eating a piece of a tree? Why?” I would rather have a shorter life and eat whatever garbage I feel like eating. [laughter]

It is our society, believes Lou, which overvalues thin bodies and longevity and creates our desire to live to be “200 years old and be this decrepit little thing.” Societal pressure is also apparent in Chris’s account of his personal approach to dealing with food battles. Chris is a self-described negotiator and finds himself constantly bargaining with himself, doling out awards for everyday victories and punishments for everyday losses. He claims that the media is responsible for his everyday struggle to look like “these guys with muscles and no fat on them.” Here we find that gender boundaries are blurred when it comes to the appearance norms dictated by
modern society. Both our male and female informants tell us about their dieting experiences based on weight concerns. John has recently hit a weight that was “totally unsatisfactory” to him and went on a “managed diet plan.” Hudson stopped eating the way his family eats because he doesn’t want to be overweight. For Kim, food was always something that she enjoyed and was frustrated with because of the constant strain of wishing she was thinner.

While describing their personal relationships with food and uncovering food as a catalyst of an everyday drama, our informants reveal that negative emotions such as guilt appear to be present even when food plays a positive, comforting role. Thus, many food items are perceived to be a quick fix for everyday challenges like stress, loneliness, and busyness. “When I’m feeling depressed,” says Kathy, “or I’m lonely or I need to see my family or I start thinking, ‘Oh, my gosh, I have no husband,’ I go for my comfort food.” Comfort food for her includes Cheetos, cheese doodles, and cheese puffs. John turns to bagels and doughnuts to make him feel better, while ice cream gives Kim a sense of security and comfort.

However, permissive consuming of comfort foods is perceived as a sin after the wound is healed, and this constantly adds to the guilt feeling. Thus, we may conclude that as an object of desire, food is viewed by our informants as either contributing to or taking away one’s health, longevity, and beauty. Consequently, food consumption appears to present a complex interplay of self- and society-imposed prohibitive and permissive consumption. In addition, our research reveals that today’s consumers individually establish their personal relationships with food, easily and selfishly breaking up eating patterns established by their families. For instance, when Jane’s two daughters left home for college and later came back for a holiday, the previously existing family harmony was lost. Jane lamented the changes in her daughters, surprised to see the many years of her “Mom’s work” disappear: “And they came back, they were eating
different food. Before, when we had holidays, we were like, ‘What are we eating?’ And now they eat differently, they are like on their own diets, like cabbage soup diets.”

Food as a Globalized Commodity

As a marker of globalization, food is present in studies of the impact of globalization on consumer behavior. Researchers parallel globalization with McDonaldization (Ritzer 1993; Schlosser 2001) and point to the homogenization of the global consumer. However, this is not the only perspective from which food can be viewed in a global context, as Ger and Belk (1996) demonstrate. Analyzing consumer culture contact between what they term the “less affluent world” and the “more affluent world,” the authors suggest that we may be moving toward “sameness” throughout the world where, increasingly, consumers in almost every corner of the globe are able to eat the same foods. By the same token, food items from economically less developed regions are transported into more affluent regions where they become exotic and even integrated into everyday cuisine. The best example of this is how “Indian curry” is one of the most widely consumed food items in Britain. On the other hand, Ger and Belk provide samples of different meanings attributed to foods in home and host countries. Thus, if Coca-Cola is a symbol of longtime tradition in the U.S., in the less affluent countries it is often sold as a high status symbol of modernity and Western consumer culture.

As it becomes evident in our interviews, food in the context of globalization does not really agree with one of the major postulates of globalization: sameness. Though several observations on the sameness of food are voiced by the informants, they are not judgmental as they share impressions of the visited places. Thus, Liza who lived in France for a year, points
out that more and more people there, and especially of the younger generation, go to fast food restaurants. But this commonly accepted symbol of globalization does not tarnish her perception of country as one where food is a big part of the culture. She is amazed with its cheeses, cream, and wine and is puzzled at how the French can stay fit while consuming so much delicious but fattening food. Though in her twenties, Liza has already lived in several places. In addition to her French experience, she spent two years living in New York City and now resides in California. The best way to experience one’s new surroundings, she claims knowingly, is by trying new food: “The biggest part about culture is food. So, I wouldn’t even want to travel anymore. It would be no real appeal. The things that I remember when I travel are the food and the people.”

The “real appeal” here is cultural experience, which articulates a complex theme of authenticity. On the surface, it is not hard to divide foods into authentic and fake. In the reality of the contemporary consumer world though, it is not a two-way street. Our informants imply that the only way to guarantee an authentic experience is by traveling to a foreign country. As if to confirm this point, they share memories with appetizing stories of the best pizza eaten in Italy, the freshest pastries enjoyed in France, the sweetest papaya discovered in South America. Does authentic always imply superb? It doesn’t appear so. What it does always imply, however, is that truly authentic food is different from the food our informants normally eat at home, even when it comes to familiar meals and ingredients. “We’ve traveled all over the world,” says Sue, “South American papaya tastes totally different than the papaya we get, and it’s a different size and a different color. Yes, very different.” Sue explains these differences in a very rational way – by pointing to less developed economic conditions, such as the limited number of trucks and
trains which, in turn, restricts delivery options and results in people eating food close to its source. But she concludes rather emotionally: “It is much, much fresher.”

According to our informants’ accounts, local food resists globalization; thus, leaving the familiar boundaries of home promises an authentic experience, the extent of which depends on one’s openness. Authenticity can also be found at home. Jim recalls his ex-girlfriend, whose family was European and whom he credits with teaching him to appreciate unfamiliar food: “It was a different kind of food for me when I would go over her house. So, I learned to appreciate different foods by meeting her. I think that’s really where I started to learn to like different foods.” Chris was introduced to smoked squid by his Korean neighbor. Here we see different types of cultural agents who help our informants meet their desire for adventure without leaving their home countries.

However, authenticity appears to be a sensitive issue for our informants. On one hand, they describe as truly authentic their eating experiences at local ethnic restaurants: “You feel like you are in Morocco,” “I tried Peruvian food in Costa Mesa, I thought it was great.” Local stores also seem to contribute to easily accessible authentic adventures. For instance, Kathy’s favorite places to go at a supermarket are the “aisles that are not American.” She claims to start her routine grocery shopping with these aisles: “Ninety percent of the time, I go there first as opposed going to the fruits and vegetables and stuff like that. I like their sauces. It’s a different taste. Sometimes, it’s ‘Oh, this looks pretty interesting.’ I’ll pick up the bottle and read the label and I’ll see what’s in it and I think about what it could possibly taste like and it will say what they suggest to serve it with or whatever.” On the other hand, authenticity implies exclusivity, and this is disappearing with the proliferation of ethnic stores and restaurants that are distant from their countries of origin. Beth’s narrative communicates this concern clearly:
Morocco is the first place I had couscous, I love couscous. But here, you can get that at the grocery store. Morocco is the first place I had it. Saudi Arabia is the first place I ever had nan bread, which is Indian. It is just Indian flat bread, it’s like an Indian type of pita bread, real good, so I always associate that with Saudi Arabia, but you can get it in any Indian restaurant here. It’s one of the problems with being in America, it’s once you get exposed to something you can find it in the restaurants, or the grocery store.

Ideally, implies this account, truly authentic food shouldn’t be separated from its source, because when replicated in other countries, it loses its truly authentic appeal. This can happen not because of the “wrong” taste, but because of the easy access to foods that are expected to be exotic. Thus, the commercialization of authenticity appears to take away exclusivity and consequently cause the loss of authenticity as well.

As a globalized commodity, food performs as a medium used by consumers to express their adventurous nature. By voluntarily tasting unfamiliar foods that are consumed on a daily basis by others, they expand their personal worlds and extend their personal boundaries. In many accounts, our informants admit they didn’t even know what they were eating. For instance, MaryAnn describes her trip to Indonesia: “I had food that I don’t know what it was. I ate it. I only recognized that I never had something like it before and I can take some guesses as to what it might have been.” Sue recalls a dinner she had in Tibet: “Well, I don’t even know what it was. Something on a big, giant round table like this, with a center console. And it had all sorts of foods, some of which were moving, so I didn’t eat that. But some of the things that we ate there, I have no idea what it was. Nobody spoke English.” Jane proudly asserts that she and
her husband have eaten “everywhere [American] people would not eat.” She finds it an exciting part of her life to taste different foods and not only at fancy ethnic restaurants: “We have been halfway around the world and eaten all the street food… When we go to Tijuana we eat off the street. We have been to Turkey, we have been to India, we have been to places [American] people wouldn’t eat. We spent a month in Russia on a honeymoon, just driving.”

Whether perceived as cool or bizarre, whether tried with excitement or caution, food consumed in a global village is seen as an important part of this village’s patched culture. Not surprisingly, it can make one want to reproduce global delicacies in one’s own kitchen. Thus, Jim finds Italian food to be the most enjoyable food to make. He has never been to Italy, but he has experienced the country vicariously through his cooking adventures. Because he finds most recipes to be designed for families, he concludes that Italians seem to be very family oriented. In a similar vicarious manner, Liza claims to be acquainted with some parts of the world to which she has never been. While venturing into the cosmopolitan city of New York, she made it an exciting routine to go to different ethnic restaurants on weekends. Being familiar now with Peruvian and Ethiopian cuisines, she feels as if she had a brief tour to these exotic countries. These restaurants and ethnic meals made by one at home may only be commercialized versions of authentic foods, but they appear to be accepted as part of the exciting cultural game performed on the global stage.

**DISCUSSION: POSTMODERN VIEW OF FOOD CONSUMPTION**

Based on our empirical insights gleaned from the data analysis, we present a comprehensive picture of the categories of food consumption in table 2. The table represents the
complexities of food consumption that take into account its many social, cultural, and contextual dimensions. This summary also lets us analyze food consumption through the lenses of postmodernist perspective.

Insert Table 2 about here

A theoretical framework proposed by Firat and Venkatesh that relates the phenomenon of postmodernity to marketing (1993, 1995) and offers an alternative perspective on consumption highlights five categories that characterize the conditions of postmodernism: hyperreality, fragmentation, reversal of consumption and production, decentering of the subject, and paradoxical juxtapositions of opposites (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The authors' propositions maintain that the age of postmodernism makes image the essence of the product, prompts consumers to engage in a series of independent and separate acts, regards consumption as a constructive process of production of meanings, elevates consumers over objects for making sense of the world in terms of symbols and experiences, and provides an environment where such opposites as high art and mundane consumption coexist and are juxtaposed. Our study demonstrates the reflection of these five propositions in contemporary food consumption.

If we turn to a globalized commodity dimension of food, we clearly see the central role of consumers in the marketplace who engage in the construction of symbols in the process of adopting or, what Ger and Belk (1996) define as making sense of foreign goods. Consumers assign new meanings to these products in order to fit them into the familiar context. The local sense-making is a very postmodern function of consumption where creolized consumption patterns can become a fragmented postmodern pastiche. For example, a deeper analysis of perception of Coca-Cola among the residents of less affluent countries may reveal a whole range
of additional meanings created on the individual level within the culturally shared symbol. Thus, as a symbol of the Western world, Coca-Cola can also be a symbol of personal achievement and self-esteem for an individual consumer for whom being able to afford such drink means standing out of the crowd. This supports the postmodernist argument that "there is no natural link between a product and its use. Rather, the link is cultural and arbitrary" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p.256).

In the context of postmodern globalization, Appadurai (1996) talks about simultaneous homogenization and heterogenization of cultural experiences. On one hand, a conclusion about global consumer homogenization is based on the fact of the availability of the same foods in different countries. On the other hand, the physical presence of identical foods does not imply that identical images of these foods are shared by global consumers, which is a dehomogenizing factor. As a result, we witness the overlapping of physical properties of food with their symbolic meanings that together create unique products full of multiple and rich messages. While these messages are globally standardized, maintain Firat and Venkatesh (1993), globalization need not be treated as synonymous with homogenization. On this global scene, food, along with the cultural categories of clothing, fashion, music, entertainment, and aesthetic experience, becomes the instrument of homogenization that is still used to create heterogeneous markets and consumers.

Because of the attractive meanings assigned to foreign food items in the global context, consumer tastes change when traditional foods give way to new food categories. Even within a cultural system, sub-cultural influences play this mediating role, the case in point being Mexican food in the American context. Ger and Belk (1996) conceptualize the process of symbol transformation as the reconfiguration of meanings by consumers, and the reconstruction of these
reconfigured meanings into the context of one’s own culture. As a result of such transformations, claim the authors, global culture becomes a jointly shaped culture, because it is not only made by the foreign producers who bring new goods onto the market but also by local consumers who actively participate in shaping the images of these goods. For the consumers, this global postmodern culture is marked by creolization, incorporating old and well-known products made at home with those made in other countries.

The age of postmodernism also becomes the age of spectacle for providing an environment that artistically combines high art and mundane consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The following account by Lou of a dinner at an ethnic restaurant in Southern California demonstrates this clearly:

It’s an expensive Moroccan restaurant and when you go in there, you feel like you are in Morocco. The furniture is just cushions on the floor and they have belly dancers. The meal is a 12-course meal. It takes hours to have dinner there. It took me four hours I think to have dinner there. They only serve two times a night. There are a total of maybe eight parties; four in one shift and four in another. There is an Arabic guy dressed in something out of a Disney movie. He comes out with shoes with the little curly point on them and they wash your hands for you. They have a big, not a cauldron, but a vase or something. I forget what you would call this thing with water. They come and they pour the water on your hands and they wash your hands for you. Then, they start bringing in course after course, leading up to a main course and the courses are things like nuts and fruits and salads. Then, the main course, it’s this wonderful chicken dish. If I remember correctly it’s called “Bafia.” It looks like a cake, but it’s a chicken dish and it’s chicken
with I believe almonds and it’s baked to look like a cake. On the top of it is sprinkled very fine, white confectionary sugar with cinnamon. It is unbelievably wonderful. I’ve never had anything as wonderful as that.

The provided details are meticulous and reminiscent of props used for a show: shoes with the little curly point, a big vase, and the culmination – a chicken-made-to-look-like-a-cake dish. Though the parallel with a Disney movie emphasizes its unrealistic, artistic nature, one gets the sense of being a part of a play just by reading the above description. A reader of this narrative might easily assume that the narrator is describing a theater performance, and not a restaurant dinner.

Paradoxical juxtaposition of opposites is also present in the discussed earlier passages that recollect having gourmet meal of chicken marsala while enjoying far from any civilization pristine nature, savoring mundane green beans while sharing the company of a special friend, buying exquisite food on the streets of a remote village, and experiencing big personal drama over eating a little snack. Similarly, a recent study of cookbooks reports a mystification of a contemporary kitchen that becomes “a location for magical practices,… a site where acts of apparent mundane consumption assume the form of extraordinary consumption” (Brownlie, Hewer and Horne 2005, p. 23).

On the surface, postmodern hyperrealities may seem to embrace Levi-Strauss’s structural approach to viewing culture in terms of binary opposites; in a deeper sense, postmodern perspective emphasizes the fluid nature of the symbolic opposites that are never constant and are always in a switching mode. Thus, what symbolizes joy today, will become a symbol of guilt tomorrow, because these symbolic meanings are not permanently assigned to their material carriers, but are made up by the consumers. A plain cheeseburger for Chris is a symbol of
sacrifice when he denies himself a pleasure of eating it while competing with those muscle guys in the media; it transforms into a symbol of comfort when Chris grants himself a permission to a fast food restaurant; and it truly becomes a symbol of romance when Chris and his girlfriend share his favorite meal.

In postmodern hyperreality, joy coexists with drama, and virtue co-resides along with sin. In a similar manner, report several researchers, processed foods may have negative associations (plastic food) or be a positive sing of emancipation from chores, freedoms, and efficiency (Ger et al. 2000); packaged products may indicate modernity and cosmopolitanism (Reilly and Wallendorf 1987) but also represent avoided products (Englis and Solomon 1997). Though cornmeal is perceived to be a lower-class food in Haiti, claims Oswald (1999), it loses that pejorative status while being eaten in America by Haiti immigrants. The studies of consumer acculturation of immigrants (Oswald 1999; Penaloza 1994; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987) show that for the people who are geographically displaced and find themselves in a new culture, familiar foods take on new, comforting meanings. Such foods become a symbol of inner stability, both tangible and intangible signs of unbroken ties between the past and the present, between the home of origin and the adopted country, which is another demonstration that symbolic meanings are not inherent to goods.

Since the marketplace activity turns into the production and consumption of symbolic images, consumer culture largely becomes the construction of symbolic environments where cabbage soup eaten by grown up daughters may signify the loss of family harmony, and cheese puffs may symbolize the comforting substitute for the lack of husband. From our study it follows that any food item may become a conveyer of meaningful messages because symbolic framing is rooted not in the attributes of the food itself but in the expected function of food, namely, to
please, reward, appease, and so forth. McCracken, while providing a literature review of the history of consumption, also notices a principal role of food in consumer culture (McCracken 1988a).

Food values and habits function as key cultural expressions that are central to the processes by which people establish, maintain, and reinforce their (sub)cultural, ethnic, and individual identities (Penaloza 1994; Reilly and Wallendorf 1987). In that function, food is equated with other cultural categories playing similar roles: automobile, telephone, financial services, and media (Peñaloza 1994); religion and language (Oswald 1999); language and dress (Wallendorf and Reilly 1983); clothing, jewelry, music, and sports (Ger and Belk 1996); transport and hygiene (Ger et al. 2000); clothing, fashion, music, entertainment, and aesthetic experience (Firat and Venkatesh 1993); and diet and bodily images (Thompson and Hirschman 1995). According to the Hua people of Papua, New Guinea, the whole world can be divided into “that which can be eaten and that which cannot” (Meigs 1997). However, it is not the aspect of what can and cannot be eaten in contemporary postmodern society that makes food a rich phenomenon worthy of academic attention, but the message-bearing, symbolic character of food reflected in eating and cooking practices.

Because of the high value that is being placed on the non-nutritional function of food, we are witnessing a new tendency—thinking about food: “In the developed countries, food is ... thought out, not by specialists, but by the entire public, even if this thinking is done within a framework of highly mythical notions” (Barthes [1961] 1997, p.25). Because of this thinking that evolves around one’s creation of the desired symbols brought about by eating practices, it becomes an important task of marketing to also actively participate in the creation of these symbols and offer them to consumers. This task becomes even more challenging given that
scientific advances have significantly affected food products. For example, emerging biotechnology is changing the compositional structure of food plants by splicing genes. For consumers, this blurs the distinction between natural and unnatural (Kniazeva 2002, 2005). Consequently, new technologies prompt both consumers and consumer behavior researchers to redefine terms that have historically carried clear meanings – such as “food”. This opens a new direction for consumer behavior researchers and new questions to be addressed in future studies of postmodern culture.
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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What comes to your mind when I say “food”?

2. Describe your personal relationship with food. What is food for you? What place does it have in your life?

3. Tell me about your favorite food?

4. Tell me about the best meal you have ever had?

5. Tell me your favorite food/dish when you were a child?

6. Are you a finicky eater?

7. Describe your taste in food.

8. Did your taste change with age?

9. Do you like to try new foods?

10. Tell me about the strangest/most unusual food you have ever had?

11. Tell me about rules that you follow in your eating if you have any?

12. Are there any foods that you do not eat? Tell me about them.

13. Do you cook? What do you cook? How often do you cook?

14. How do you buy your groceries?

15. Do you spend a lot of money on food?

16. Do you spend a lot of time on food?

17. Do you read labels when you shop? What information do you look for?

18. Tell me about cookbooks you have if you have any?

19. Are there any places where you would not feel comfortable eating?

20. What food do you consider to be fresh?

21. What comes to your mind when I say “natural food”?
### TABLE 1

#### FEMALE INTERVIEWEES

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#### MALE INTERVIEWEES

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