CASE STUDY

Food taste preferences and cultural influences on consumption

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Abstract Examines the influence of culture on food taste preferences and the implications for consumer research. The authors explore the roots of certain national and sub-cultural food taste preferences and consumption. Examples are drawn from the work of Pierre Bourdieu in particular, in demonstrating how taste is in some respects an expression of cultural capital. Postmodernist interpretations of the fragmentation in taste preferences are also described. This exploration of the deeper layers of our food taste preferences based on cultural setting should alert food marketers to both marketing and marketing research issues and opportunities.

Introduction
This paper examines the influence of culture on food taste preferences and the implications for consumer research. Taste is “coloured” not just by the gustatory properties of the food itself, but its smell, sound and appearance as well as by expectations generated by marketing communications and even country of origin (Jacoby et al., 1971; Leclerc et al., 1994). The paper discusses the importance of cultural development in relation to food preferences and sweetness in particular, drawing upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984). The paper notes ways of researching cultural influences on food preferences.

Food, taste and culture
Food is important not only as a source of nourishment but also for developing trading and cultural links between nations e.g. the spice trade of the East Indies and South East Asia with Western countries such as Portugal, The Netherlands, Spain, France and Great Britain. Food has a range of functions in addition to these: acting as a pastime for personal indulgence or as a focus for socialising with family, friends and others and in contributing to a general sense of individual and national well-being. From ancient days to the modern world, food taste preferences have been closely linked to cultural development. For instance, both archaeologists unearthing the physical ruins of lost
civilisations and anthropologists in their study of ancient cultures have a shared interest in where or how our ancient forebears ate, worked and played.

In the modern world the fashioning of “tastes” can take many forms in the way we display, prepare and cook our foods. Supermarkets display a wide variety of fresh produce, branded and own label processed foods from diverse locations, local and foreign, along with recipes to match. Food taste preferences are now inextricably linked to artistic design and media manipulation, as in advertising and in creating social status and prestige to the extent of elevating to a fashionable cult status some individuals who are presenters of cookery competition programmes, food fashion writers and celebrity chefs.

Since food taste preferences are influenced by the culture we live in, an understanding of what constitutes “culture” is a good starting point. The word “culture” itself is as varied as the people who seek to define it. The *Longman Dictionary of the English Language* (1984) defines “culture” as:

> The typical behaviour, customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group

and

> The enlightenment and excellence of “taste” acquired by intellectual and aesthetic training; refinement in manners, taste and thought.

Raymond Williams (1976) admits that culture is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language”. It is both an abstraction and an absolute (1961, p. 17). Culture was originally seen as the tending of natural growth (cultivation) and by analogy a process of human training. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it came to mean a general state of habit of the mind and then the intellectual development in society as a whole. Primarily Williams considers it has evolved across time to mean both “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development” and a “particular way of life” (Williams, 1976). In this latter sense it encompasses both high culture and aspects of popular culture such as food, music and clothes. There are common themes or themes with degrees of commonality that one could pursue. Hofstedde (1980; 1984) defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind” which differentiated one human group from another.

Writers have recognised the difficulties associated with studying cultural contexts and phenomena. Usunier (2000, p. xiii) stated that he had:

> No wish to describe cultures, either from an insider’s point of view or exhaustively ... provision for the reader (of his book) was a method for dealing with intercultural situations in international marketing.

From a more general business perspective cultural influences are clearly important (e.g. Venkatesh, 1995; Jeannot and Hennessey, 1998; Johansson, 2000) in how organisations structure themselves and in the shaping of beliefs marketers have about consumers and so their marketing and research practices (see Wicks, 1989). Craig and Douglas (2000) also noted problems of international marketing and cultural research:
The most significant problems in drawing up questions in multi-country research are likely to occur in relation to attitudinal, psychographic and lifestyle data... it is not always clear whether certain attitudinal or personality constructs – such as aggressiveness, respect – for authority and honour – are equally relevant or equivalent in all countries and cultures...

... even where similar constructs are mentioned in different countries, the specific items making up these constructs may not always be identical.

The task of studying culture and its influences is very complex, but not impossible.

As consumers become more affluent they move from satisfying basic physiological needs to fulfilling social and psychological needs (see Maslow's model) that are shaped by the nations and sub-cultures to which they belong. This search for identity through consumption is a key area of interest not only in cultural studies but also to marketers. Marketers need to recognise that in a changing world there are often tensions between the values and sentiments associated with deep-rooted local cultures and the new choices from other countries: for example, the very different reactions of older and younger generations to McDonalds in countries such as Italy, France and Japan.

**Contextual influences on culture and taste**

The geographical, historical and economic contexts of a culture all shape its food preferences. For instance, some countries, like Greece, have been traditionally geographically open to many influences whilst others, like Britain, have been comparatively isolated. Some countries, such as China, cover vast areas and display great regional diversity. In Europe overseas adventurers such as the crusaders and later, the empire-builders added immensely not only to the repertoire of spices and exotic foods available to many European elites but also to the staple diets of Britain’s industrialised masses – in particular, tea and sugar.

Just as the Industrial Revolution transformed Britain’s landscape so the Acts of Enclosure, as William Cobbett observed, “almost entirely extinguished the race of small farmers” (Williams, 1961, pp. 32-3). Fresh foods from markets quickly became a rarity in Britain’s rapidly spreading areas of industrialisation. However, the links between peasant and urban societies that broke down in Britain lasted much longer in many countries, especially, for example, in most Mediterranean societies.

Religion, too, can play a role in food preferences. Britain’s embrace of Protestantism and France’s strengthening Mediterranean and Roman Catholic focus in the sixteenth century had strong influences on social development. The Protestant ethic gave considerable impetus to the Industrial Revolution with its emphasis on hard work, wealth creation and individual achievement (Giddens, 1971). Its disavowal of anything that involved sensual pleasure meant that food soon came to be thought of as a fuel to sustain strength rather than something to be cooked and to provide hedonistic delights. Divergence in culture and tastes can be seen in Barr’s (1998) comment that French chefs: “turned their attention to the creation of delicate and complex meat dishes ... in England
they concentrated on the production of plain roast meats”. In Britain food became a taste of necessity for many, rarely of good quality and often in short supply, to the extent that many working class women in Victorian Britain subsisted on a diet of mainly bread and tea (Roberts, 1990; Tressaill, 1993). On the other hand, the diet of the middle classes was better but nonetheless relatively plain compared to an equivalent French diet.

The French retained stronger links with the peasantry, so the supply of fresh food from the countryside was maintained and the preparation and eating of food remained a very important and hedonistic ritual. This may explain why writers such as Michel de Certeau (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu have attached significance to food as a cultural phenomenon.

Countries that came later to the industrialisation process, for example, in the Mediterranean and the Far East, also tended to retain the influences of rural life and traditions on food taste preferences. There are, for instance, strong cultural differences between Chinese, Greek, French or English traditions of cooked foods. Strong family ties appear more significant in China and Greece than in more industrialised countries because of the greater emphasis within such communities on the inclusion of the extended family and the importance placed on food. For instance, the plethora of choice from expensive restaurants to cheap roadside hawker stalls reinforces the Chinese eating out habit as a part of its culture in entertaining and socialising with others within the community.

China has liberalised its trade with the outside world during the last two decades, but the teachings of Confucius are still held in high esteem. Confucianism is strong in its support of obedience to authority and the importance of good family relationships so that the principle of whom you know in China has a philosophical basis. Chinese “Guanxi” or “connections” represent a system of cultivating personal relationships. The value of strong family ties and a social system of getting things done according to “whom one knows” has meant that the building of long-term relationships and trust are central to the way in which people conduct relationships. Therefore, eating out with family, friends and work colleagues is an indispensable part of building informal relationships that can find their way into solidifying more formal ones. China, with its hierarchical systems, is still very much an economy of planning and control where notions of indigenous culture and food tastes have very strong roots even though there is the desire for imported foods in its commercialised areas.

The strong family and community ties are also significant in Greece. The importance of food and drink to Greek orthodox culture is represented in the adage that “Greeks are either feasting or fasting”. As Jain (1993) stated, “water is an element of socialization . . . refusal of any hospitable effort including the sharing of food is an insult . . . between Christmas and Epiphany all foods are hidden or disguised to prevent crippled ghosts (Kallikandari) from poisoning them”. The great majority of Greeks stay with their parents until the time they leave to create their own families and in many cases, parents live with their children’s families. Families gather on Sundays for meals and celebrate
together national events and birthdays especially in the smaller towns and villages (Theodorakioglou and Wright, 1997).

The search for identity through consumption is manifested in the way in which consumer “in-group” and “out-group” orientations have a significant bearing on choosing products and services, or whom to work with. A study of top management behaviour within Greek drinks and food companies (Theodorakioglou and Wright, 1997) showed that there was a distinction between in-group and out-group categories. In-group members were family members, relatives and friends. All others were out-group members and perceived as outsiders. In an in-group situation, Greeks retained the Hellenic cultural norms of being co-operative, accepting and self-sacrificing. The Greek cultural value, “philotimo”, can be roughly translated as “self-esteem” or “the respect given to a friend”. Perhaps this is a cultural heritage of the ancient Hellenes, who considered non-Hellenic speaking people to be Barbarians, and therefore, outsiders. There are indigenous food products and services that are symbolically favoured while there are others with all the attributes, values and meanings associated with external or foreign out-group offerings.

The barriers to out-group offerings are falling as the modernising influences of city life take hold in direct contrast to the decline of the local village stores. In addition to the growth of superstores, fast food chains and out of town retail shopping, there is also, particularly in Europe, a higher incidence of divorce or family break-up rates and the breakdown of formal family eating occasions. This offers an opportunity for everyone, and the younger generation in particular, to assert their own food preferences, which may have little in common with more traditional mealtimes.

**Taste preferences: in sweetness and in wealth**

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote about taste in the context of art, home decor, photography etc. and argued that food, too, is used to distinguish the bourgeois from other social classes. As he indicated, it is in tastes in food that:

One would find the strongest and most indelible mark of infant learning, the lessons which longest withstand the distancing or collapse of the native world and most durably maintain nostalgia for it (Bourdieu, 1984).

The idea that food tastes are shaped by childhood experiences or family norms and socialisation processes is supported by Fowler (1997) who observed that:

Supposedly natural tastes are in fact founded on social constructions which have been elaborated over generations.

Bourdieu attributed the working class taste for sweet, filling and fatty food to “a taste of necessity”, arising from the lack of choice and enjoyment of the sensation of feeling full. The idea of taste itself is a middle-class concept since it presupposes freedom of choice, whereas the disadvantaged classes can only have:
A taste for what they are anyway condemned to ... the pretext for a class racism which
associates the populace with everything heavy, thick and fat (Bourdieu, 1984).

For example, a penchant for very sweet food (a “sweet tooth”) is often passed
down from generation to generation – especially if the parents come from a
working class background. In England, we tend to associate sweet milky tea
with builders and unsweetened Earl Grey or espresso with the professional
classes (see Mintz (1985)) for interesting exposition on sweetness and power
and the historical link between Great Britain and the Caribbean as a part
explanation for Britain’s high consumption of sugar). While the professional
and the builder may nowadays have equal economic capital, the builder will
probably lack cultural capital. Cultural capital in this context is, according to
Bourdieu, knowing how to behave in keeping with middle-class sensibilities.
This may explain why the builder may even lack the desire to acquire cultural
capital. On the other hand, the professional, with a taste for the sophisticated,
may have been born into a middle-class home with its middle-class tastes. Of
course, some professionals may have acquired middle-class tastes after gaining
enough educational capital to realise the importance of taste as an indicator of
class. As Bourdieu (1984) famously noted:

Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier.

A taste for sweet food is, of course, today linked to what is perceived as an
overweight body shape. In contemporary Western societies, sweetness
conjures up associations of excess, indulgence, unhealthiness, rotten teeth and
obesity – working class rather than middle class weaknesses. A taste for the
unsweetened involves denial and virtue – seen as peculiarly middle class traits.
Bourdieu argued that control of the body was a peculiarly middle-class
preoccupation: “the body is the most indisputable materialisation of class
taste”: (p. 190) His large-scale social survey found marked differences in both
body shape and body image between lower socioeconomic groups and the
better-off; “the most sought-after bodily properties (slimmness, beauty, etc.) are
not randomly distributed among the classes; for example the proportion of
women whose waist measurement is greater than the modal waist raises
sharply as one moves down the social hierarchy” (p. 207).

Of course, it was not always thus – back when food was scarce, meat-eating
and voluptuousness were the mark of affluence. As Barr (1998) commented:

In the nineteenth century, to be fat was a mark of prosperity, a sign that one could afford
proper nourishment. Not until the mass of the population was able to feed itself sufficiently
did it become a mark of sophistication to be thin. Thinness has come to be esteemed because
it shows a self-restraint, an ability to rise upon the common gratifications of the table; it
shows one can afford to consume expensive, delicate food rather than relying on a simple
calorific diet based on starch and fat.

Similarly in other cultures, especially on the African continent and amongst
black communities elsewhere, a generous figure is a prized asset.

Clearly the ideal body shape has implications for both marketing (products)
and advertising (casting). This means that in societies where slimness is the
desired shape the advertising of a blatantly fattening product (perhaps Haagen Daz) carries apparently conflicting messages – indulge yourself but stay as slim as the models in the advertisement. Messages the audience wishes to hear.

Finally, the continuing rise of vegetarianism in affluent countries, especially amongst young women, could also be related not only to a heightened sense of animal welfare but to a feminine desire to control the body. Whilst some cultures, such as Hindu, have always been vegetarian, in most societies the eating of meat has traditionally had masculine, assertive connotations. Although it is unlikely Bourdieu would have come across vegetarianism as a phenomenon in France in the 1970s, it is possibly one of the most obvious contemporary ways of making what Bourdieu calls “distinction”.

The fragmentation of taste
It could be argued that contemporary tastes in food exemplify the postmodern condition of eclecticism, fragmentation, recycling and the triumph of style over substance. Global brands and modern forms of transport and distribution have meant that supermarkets in the major cities everywhere now stock a growing variety of produce from different parts of the globe, which were hitherto out of the reach of indigenous populations. The growth of ethnic minorities within countries have added to demands for indigenous foods which then become available to a wider consumer market. As consumers we live in a world where recipes have been invented and reinvented from different cultures and regions of the world. The “Indian Balti”, born in Birmingham, UK, is one example.

Supermarkets stock food which reflect the tastes of their customers whilst simultaneously stimulating their taste buds in new directions. Competitiveness between supermarkets and between processed food manufacturers in fighting for market shares have added fuel to the constant battle to update the best selling niche variations of each brand and product line. Consumers are “fed” the endorsements of celebrities.

Holt (1998) has argued that the time lag between innovation and diffusion of new styles of eating or new flavours is now so rapid between haute and mass markets that style leadership is only possible in terms of how something is consumed rather than through the product itself. For instance, ingredients such as balsamic vinegar or sundried tomatoes now move with such dizzying speed from expensive restaurants to crisp flavourings that it is only by demonstrating more authentic ways of consuming that superiority can be maintained.

Impact of globalisation
Usunier (2000, pp. 162-3) described globalised consumption as having a threefold pattern based on modernist, postmodernist and radically modern consumption. The first corresponded to low-cost, fair-quality, weakly differentiated, utilitarian products, embedded in low-context consumption experiences. The second was for fragmented, continually reassembled and re-interpreted products, particularly true for big brands. Conspicuous
consumption was seen a key driver for culture. The third behaviour is both opportunistic and more critical with a willingness to display diversity.

Therefore it may seem easy to agree with the postmodernists that we live in a media-saturated, new sensation-seeking world of proliferating culinary styles. Modern technologies and financial networks aid the globalisation of mass food production and marketing, providing better distribution networks and marketing communications to people all over the world. The net effect is that what appears to be fragmentation of tastes within a market such as Britain can alternatively be seen as an opportunity to create expanding “taste cultures” that transcend national borders.

Conclusions
What drives taste preferences in food? Taste in food reflects in part the consumer’s social and cultural origins, social ambitions and the cultural capital acquired, either as part of their upbringing or more deliberately. This makes the apparently straightforward task for marketers of researching taste rather more complex, especially in societies where upward social mobility is taking significant numbers of people away from their roots. It may be prudent to balance the rather seductive postmodernist’s view of the world with the exemplary research of writers like Bourdieu who argued for slower changes in basic tastes.

Taste, whether in clothes, home design or food may increasingly be less likely to be the “taste of necessity”, at least in the Western world, but will still remain a culturally sensitive issue. If this is the case, then marketing insights will be gained from analysis of the cultural differences within a society and clues to real taste preferences as against stated ones, the products of social posturing.

While food taste preferences constitute only a small part in comparison to all other cultural products, the importance of food to the national economy of countries cannot be denied. Many people are employed in the production, distribution, selling and marketing in the industries of food and drinks. These factors add greater value to the case for marketers to develop more research in food taste preferences grounded within cultural contexts rather than the short-term approach associated with bringing out more me-too products to add to already saturated and fragmented markets. As we have noted consumers need to create meaning in searching for what they buy and consume. It is therefore our contention that in increasingly multi-cultural societies and global markets the case for the study of food taste preferences is a rewarding one.

How can marketers research culture? The first resort should be secondary data and secondary research. There are two major international tracking studies that can provide valuable insights into cultural change and its impact on consumption (RISC and Henley Frontiers). RISC has specialised in monitoring socio-cultural change in Europe and other parts of the world and
Henley Frontiers covers macro and microenvironmental changes across Europe in particular. It is possible to link such analysis to other secondary and primary data and so build a representation of the cultural drivers of behaviour. In this way it may be possible to investigate how taste may permeate social strata. Likewise Henley Frontiers monitor lifestyle changes in food and drink as well as in many other consumer markets. The analysis of social mobility (taking into account Bourdieu’s work) may also be insightful.

Taking into account our observations on the trickle-down effect of taste across generations, some measure of the degree of social mobility may be useful in determining the extent to which stated preferences, for instance, non-sweet versus sweet, may not match actual product preferences. Blind taste tests might be used as a benchmark for branded product tests or product with different descriptors to establish “real ingrained taste preferences versus statements of preference” that simply amount to “social posturing” e.g. in wine tastings. Finally, Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) describe how ethnographic research using personal interviews and participant observations can contribute to the richness of cultural analysis. However, such methods can be slow and expensive and so conventional group discussions and depth interviews may remain the preferred qualitative research approaches.

References


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