

Sharvani

The Taste of Diversity

“Gross! What is that?” screamed my friend when she saw my lunch: Puri Sabji (Bread and Vegetables). I told her the name of the dish, and she retorted, “It must taste horrible!” I asked her whether she had ever eaten it before, and she responded by quickly shaking her head. Then, I asked “Then, how do you know that it tastes horrible?” Even after my question, she refused to try a tiny portion, yet still maintained that it probably tasted terrible. Unfortunately, many people, like my friend, simply reject a foreign dish and even a culture, however, as global citizens, we must break down these preconceived notions others have about culture and cuisine.

I have learned, “food is the simplistic way to understand another culture” through a famous chef, author, and traveler by the name of Anthony Bourdain, who travels to exotic places and eats the traditional local food no matter what it may be. Food offers insight to many different aspects of a culture from its geography to its cultural beliefs. An example of food revealing a cultural belief, is that in India, the most common meals are vegetarian and every single dish and ingredient clearly has labeled whether it is completely vegetarian or has some animal products in it unlike in the United States where one must check the ingredients to see whether it is entirely vegetarian or not. The fact that tasty vegetarian dishes outnumber meat dishes and the emphasis placed on the categorization of ingredients as vegetarian or not reveals an important aspect of Indian culture: the fact that a dish is vegetarian is very important (many Indians are vegetarian due to religious beliefs) unlike the United States, where the fact if a food product is vegetarian or not is not given as much importance.

Food can also provide insight into the geography of a culture. Depending on the types of ingredients incorporated into dishes, one can tell which part of the world the culture since that area will have an abundance of the ingredients used.

An important aspect of a culture that food provides insight into is its social structure. Some food is reserved for the rich, while other food is considered low-class, and left for the poor. An example of this is in England during the Renaissance. Depending on what a family used to sweeten its desserts, it became evident of what social standing the family was. If a family bought sugar, then they were members of high society. On the other hand, if a family bought honey, then they were members of a lower social group.

A history shapes a country's culture, and food reflects a country's history. For example, in northern India many Moghal dishes such as Kabobs and Roghan Josh can be found. Simply by eating one of these dishes, one can tell that at one point in history there was a large Moghal influence in India, leading to Moghal cuisine being mixed with local cuisine to create what exists today.

Though food is one of the best ways to learn of another culture, it is also one of the hardest barriers to overcome. Mostly, people label food as "gross" because of its unfamiliarity and looks, and thus, do not try new types of food. Though the United States has many cultured restaurants, these cuisines sold in the United States are rarely authentic, and have instead, been changed so as to fit the American tastes. Thus, eating at these restaurants does not break down the barrier, it simply fortifies it.

Since this huge food barrier exists, we must find a way to tear it down. To contribute in the destruction of this barrier, I keep an open mind, and hope that by me keeping an open mind towards all food, I can lead by example and inspire others to also keep an open mind to all types

of food. For example, when in Jamaica with family friends, for breakfast one day, we were served kidneys. My friend refused to try it, but I took a few pieces on my plate, and as a result, my friend, too, took some of the dish as well. We both tried it, and chipped off a little piece of the barrier.

The path I take towards breaking this barrier is education. I have tried to teach my peers the importance of keeping an open mind, and how to be brave enough to try new things. I help expose others to different kinds of food. One such instance is of my close-minded family's friends. One time we had asked them to join us in eating at a Lebanese restaurant, however, they refused. After much persuasion on our part, they agreed to join us. As they ate, they chipped off a portion of the barrier since they tried something new.

Another measure I have taken is to educate myself as much as possible. I have taken many cooking classes for a variety of different cuisines such as Indian, Mexican, Japanese, and Italian and eat at restaurants of many different cuisines. I take what I learn, and try to teach it to others. At a dinner party, I made a dish from as many different countries as I could. These dishes were not conventional such as Chinese Chow Mein, however, something more authentic such as Plum Chicken. Also, every year our school holds International Night, and every year, we Indian students make a different Indian dish so as to expose everyone else to our culture. In ways like this, I hope to open minds towards different food.

Though my contributions may seem tiny, others are taking very similar steps, though they have much more influence than I do. Anthony Bourdain from *No Reservations* and Andrew Zimmern from *Bizarre Foods on the Travel* keep open minds, and through their example, others develop open minds; I am a living example. Though the food barrier still stands, through the contributions of many, small holes have been made in it.