

Food and culture: the exercise of commensality

Romilda de Souza Lima¹
José Ambrósio Ferreira Neto²
Rita de Cássia Pereira Farias³

¹ Universidade Estadual do Oeste do Paraná. Centro de Ciências da Saúde e Centro de Ciências Sociais Aplicadas. Grupo de Pesquisa em Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Francisco Beltrão - PR, Brasil.

² Universidade Federal de Viçosa. Centro de Ciências Agrárias, Departamento de Economia Rural. Viçosa - MG, Brasil.

³ Universidade Federal de Viçosa. Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes, Departamento de Economia Doméstica. Viçosa - MG, Brasil.

The present work is a small excerpt of the theoretical framework of the doctorate thesis: *"Eating habits and sociability in rural families of the forest zones of State of Minas Gerais: changes and permanences"*. The thesis is coming to a close and it will be presented before November 2015, at the Rural Extension Doctoral Program of the Federal University of Viçosa - MG.

Correspondence
Romilda de Souza Lima
E-mail: romislima2@gmail.com

Abstract

This article, presented as an essay, brings forward a conceptual reflection on food and culture. In this context, part of the discussion is geared towards commensality and its importance throughout the historical and social process involved in the formation of different peoples, presenting use of fire as a major cultural and social factor that promoted the integration, as well as the core piece for the change of eating habits. The dynamics of commensality, dietary habits in the contemporary era and its connections with the traditional and the modern. This debate also brings forward the approaches used by some authors on the anthropology and sociology of food, the difference between nourishment and food – when it comes to physiological and automatic aspects, such as a support for human survival and the meaning given by the cultural bias – when eating also acquires a symbolic importance. Therefore, this article is based on a cultural and social understanding of food. It is that sense in which, through socially established rules, bonds between the eater and other dynamics involving commensality are created.

Key words: Commensality. Eating Habits. Culture.

Introduction

Much beyond a biological attitude, food also plays a cultural role. Biological, as a matter of survival, but it also represents an irreplaceable factor for maintenance of life and a prerequisite for all human beings. It is directly related to the vitality of the individual, to the physiological need to absorb nutrients that help to maintain body's vital functions, and in this respect, it is a behavior concerning human nature. What to eat and the quantities to be consumed to meet the needs vary from person to person, depending on factors such as age, height, weight, type of activity, clinical picture, among others.

Corresponding to a natural attitude of instinctive trait does not necessarily transform the act of feeding oneself into something conscious from the nutritional viewpoint, because not all individuals know the composition aspects of foods. Those who are aware of that not always think about it when having a daily meal, an issue addressed by Harris¹ and García².

Food choice process

De Garine,³ based on Margaret Mead's concepts,⁴ points out that the dietary choices of human beings are related to the possible foods made available by nature and according to their technical potential.

The survival of a human group obviously depends on a diet which satisfies its members' nutritional needs. However, the level of satisfaction of those needs, the definition of which is a matter of controversy, varies from one society to another both quantitatively and qualitatively. It also varies within each one according to categories such as age, sex, economic status, among other criteria³ (p. 4).

According to Contreras & Gracia,⁵ and Woortmann,⁶ food choices, which form the eating habits, are part of the cultural overall. For Contreras & Gracia,⁵ it can be said that “we are what we eat”,⁸ both in the physiological and the spiritual aspect, when we psychosocially “incorporate” cultural elements of foods we take in, elements that can be connected to spirituality as well as to affective memory. For the same reason, they also support the idea that “we eat what we are”.

* A well-known aphorism by the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach⁷, na obra: he mystery of sacrifice or man is what he eats. Also Brillat-Savarin⁸ wrote in his essay *The taste of physiology*, "Tell me what you eat and I will tell you who you are". Both aphorisms are often used by those who write about food.

We eat what make us feel good, we take in foods that appeal to the senses and provide us pleasure; we fill up the shopping basket with products available in the supermarket or in the street market and that we can afford; we serve meals or we are served according to our characteristics: if we are men or women, children or grown-ups, poor or rich. And we choose or refuse food products based on our dietary, religious or philosophical ideas⁵ (p. 16).

In the light of this perception, Woortmann,⁶ in studies on social dimensions of food among the peasants, considers that “food” for this group acts a “cultural nucleating agent” that is linked to “work” and “land”, and that dietary choices that include forbidden, permitted and preferred foods are associated with gender, memory, family, identity and religious dimensions, among others.

DaMatta⁹ argues that que “the way to eat defines not only what is consumed but also who consumes” (p. 56). It can be said, therefore, that eating is more than just an act of survival; it is also a symbolic and cultural behavior.

The present essay is founded on the cultural and social understanding of food. This is that sense that creates, through socially established rules, links with those who eat, with what is produced and with other dynamics that involve commensality.** Or in the sense given by Cândido:¹⁰

Whatever food position, its importance as the core sociability component is always highlighted – not only what is organized around it (work systems, distribution, etc) but those in which it appears as a tangible expression of acts and intentions¹⁰ (p. 30).

The difference between food as a biological factor and food as culture is discussed mainly by Montanari,¹¹ Delormier et al.,¹² DaMatta,^{9,13} Maciel,¹⁴ Ishige,¹⁵ Silva Mello,¹⁶ Crotty,¹⁷ De Garine,³ Câmara Cascudo¹⁸ and Woortmann.¹⁹

Although the act of eating accompanies the human species since its origins, the term “food” appeared, according to Poulain,²⁰ around the year 1120, but its current meaning was only used from the sixteenth century, when it began to replace the term “meat” and the latter started to refer only to the meat as we know it, i.e., edible animal products. The author explains that, previously,

** Etymologically, commensality derives from the Latin “comensale”. The act of eating together, at the same table. “Com”: together, and “mensa”, table. It implies having the meal at the same time and place. For Poulain,²⁰ commensality establishes and enhances sociability. “It is through cuisine and eating habits that the most fundamental social learning is produced and society transmits and allows the internalization of its values. Food is one of the ways to intertwine and keep social ties.” (p. 182).

the term “meat” was used to refer to everything that was good to maintain life, whether it was meat or not. For this author, a food product must have these four qualities: nutritional, organoleptic, hygienic and symbolic. Regarding the symbolic quality, he highlights:

To be a food, in addition to the first three quality characteristics, a natural product must be the object of projections of meaning by the eater. It should be able to become significant, be part of a communications network, an imaginary constellation, a world view²⁰ (p. 240).

Crotty¹⁷ *apud* Delormier et al.¹² argues that feeding practice covers two meanings: the one after food intake and which is related to the sphere of biology (physiology and biochemistry); and the one prior to ingestion. The latter is related to cultural and social issues, in other words, the social nature of eating. According to the author, in the field of Nutrition, too little emphasis is given to this aspect, also because its technical and scientific objectives. In accord with Crotty’s notions, Delormier et al.¹² support the idea that ignoring social and cultural aspects of the field in question represents, in one sense, a limitation to any discipline. The authors also consider that the process of food choice, in most cases, does not occur, in a first instance, due to the nutritional option, but because of the influences of daily social interaction, which may be present in family relationships, but also in the workplace, at school and in other convivial spaces that allow exchanges and help to shape the individuals’ food systems.

The symbolic status assigned to food and to the act of eating is defined, according to some authors, by the semantic difference between “food” and “aliment”. DaMatta,¹³ when studying the Brazilian food, noticed that all nutritional substances constitute aliment, but not all food constitute aliment. Aliment, the author affirms, is universal and general, is what the person eats to stay alive; on the other hand, food helps to place an identity and define a group, a class, a person. “We have aliment and we have food. Food is not only a nutritional product, but it is also a manner, a style and a way to feed oneself”⁹ (p. 56). Similar to DaMatta,¹³ Woortmann¹⁹ suggests that “food” as the opposite of “nourishment”, although deriving from it, as food is the transformation of the nourishment through cooking.

In this sense, the act of eating provides an intimate relationship with the human being as there is a psychosocial investment in the food choice. The intake process itself sufficient shows details of the intimacy between the food and the body, considering that it comes to, what, according to Mintz,²¹ “is placed inside the body” (p. 31). The author argues that “no other non-automatic behavior is só deeply connected to our survival”. Corroborating Mintz concepts, Câmara Cascudo¹⁸ affirms that “there is no point in thinking that food only contains the essential elements for nutrition. It contains unimaginable and decisive substances for the spirit, joy, creativity, good mood” (p. 348).

Maciel¹⁴ also agrees with the idea of differentiating “food” from “nourishment”, recognizing the connection between nature and culture when it comes to food, because a few hours after birth, instinctively, the child cries and searches for breast milk. However, breastfeeding in humans is also a cultural act, considering that the newborn, while being breastfed, experiences the feeling of coziness, favoring the mother-child emotional attachment and also the pleasure of eating. Children like the taste of milk and do not reject it. Milk is, therefore, food and nourishment – nature and culture .^{***}

Hence, food is the nourishment transformed by social and cultural representations. It is also suggested by Montanari,¹¹ to whom, unlike other animal species, man make use of foods found in nature and also creates his own food using staples found, transforming them through the use of fire and applying technological practices developed in the kitchen. “The basic values of the food system are defined as a result and representation of cultural processes that envisage domestication, transformation and reinterpretation of nature” (p. 15). Food consumption is also considered as culture by the author, given the fact man chooses what to eat based on economic, nutritional criteria, preferences, but also on symbols attributed to nourishment – therefore, food. For these reasons, “food is presented as a decisive element of human identity and one of the most effective tools to communicate it” (p. 16). For example, nature produces food, but the culture brings out important codes, such as the different options menus, recipes, habits, which in turn are related to taste, to the pleasure related to the organoleptic properties of food and, above all, to the pleasure of tasting.

The social and cultural importance of the use of fire and its relation to commensality

The cultural value of food becomes stronger when fire was discovered and at the start of the process of cooking foods. Social scientists as Claude Lévi-Strauss,²⁴ Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,⁸ Richard Wrangham²⁵ and Massimo Montanari¹¹ were the first to give an emphasis on the essential role of fire for nourishment transformation, assigning it a cultural function besides the biological one.

According to Montanari,¹¹ for human beings, food is culture and not only pure nature, due to the adoption – as an essential part of their techniques – of production, preparation and consumption modes, as well as the knowledge about vegetables suitable for human consumption. For the author, the use of fire is fundamental to transform raw nourishment into a cultural product, into

^{***} Silva Mello,¹⁶ Sandre-Pereira,²² Mead,⁴ Bosi & Machado²³ are scholars who also discuss on the issue of breastfeeding and culture.

food. In relation to this notion, Lévi Strauss²⁴ discusses, in “The raw and the cooked”, how the use of fire has, in a way, enabled man to change from a natural state – by referring to the intake of nourishment obtained by hunting, collecting or in its raw state – to a cultural state, from the transformation of the nourishment into a cooked food. In an analogy to the verbal language of communities, he proposes to explain the relationship nature-culture using the food language. Through this explanation, the author, in his article “The culinary triangle”, giving food the status of universal language, affirms: “if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook, in some manner, at least some of its food” (p. 25). The culinary triangle proposed by the anthropologist is formed by the raw, the cooked (roasted and boiled) and the rotted.

It is clear that in respect to cooking the raw constitutes the unmarked pole, while the other two poles are strongly marked, but in different directions: indeed the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, whereas the rotted is a natural transformation. Underlying our original triangle, there is hence a double opposition between elaborated/unelaborated on the one hand and the culture/nature on the other. No doubt these notions constitute empty forms: they teach us nothing about the cooking of any specific society, since only observation can tell us what each one means by “raw”, “cooked” and “rotted”, and we can suppose that it will not be the same for all”²⁴ (p. 25).

On a scale of cultural relevance, raw is at the lowest part of the scale, followed by the cooked, which occupies the second position, as it only requires the fire. Therefore, the most elaborated are the boiled and the roasted, which due to the fact that they require greater human involvement and a pot containing water, are placed on a more complex level of elaboration and thus on a scale of higher cultural relevance.

Fire plays an important role in the discussion of food as culture since the early days of mankind. This is so true that Lévi-Strauss analyzed the mythology of Amerindian peoples and their “culinary world” attempting to translate, among other issues, the myths about the origin of fire from the representation of this group. After Lévi-Strauss, other studies highlighting the importance of fire in cooking were carried out, and one of the latest is the one performed by the anthropologist Wrangham,²⁵ who also supports the notion that the discovery of fire and cooking were mankind determinants and responsible for distinguishing humans and apes, resulting in the genus Homo. A similar a statement is made by García²⁶:

The conquest of fire led to (metaphorically) a definitive separation of the living creatures into two groups: men and other animals. The fire made us human. The domestication of fire generated a breakthrough in human history, an impulse that allowed the production of new and advanced techniques that have opened doors to new developments, causing a chain reaction that culminated in the complex and technified contemporary world²⁶ (p. 167).

Cooking increased the food value. Thus, the use of fire physically altered the human body, reducing the digestive tract and increasing brain size, but it also changed the use of time and social life. The impact falls also on relations with nature, which, according to Wrangham,²⁵ “it made us into consumers of external energy and thereby created an organism with a new relationship to nature, dependent on fuel” (p. 7). Cooking facilitated the intake and digestion of many types of foods such as cereals, for example, as well as legumes and most tubers.

“People do not have to cook their food, they do so for symbolic reasons to show that they are men and not beasts” (Leach²⁷ *apud* Wrangham,²⁵ p. 15). After all, we are the only animals that are able to cook their own food. On the other hand, one cannot say that eating raw food has no cultural characteristics, as Giard²⁸ argues: “even raw and harvested directly from the tree, the fruit is already a culturalized food, before any preparation, due to the simple fact that it is considered edible” (p. 232). For the author, the notion of edible food will vary from one group to another, that is, it is defined by culture, issues previously mentioned in the present article.

One can highlight another important factor, which can be attributed to the discovery of fire, the fact that it provided people and groups the opportunity to come together around it to keep warm, but also to prepare food, distribute it and eat it. Thus, this facilitated the establishment of commensal relationships, which, over time, became daily encounters and were transformed into a socializing activity.

In accordance with Fladrin & Montanari²⁹ arguments, regardless of the form and the differences in the rules of behavior of every society, the fact is that “commensality is perceived as a ‘founding’ element of human civilization in its creation process” (p. 109) and, for Carneiro,³⁰ constitutes “a complex symbolic system of social, sexual, political, religious, ethical and aesthetic meanings, among others.” (p. 2).

Around the fire one can warm up and prepare food, but also establish a dialogue. According to García,²⁶ in the early days of mankind, the daily meetings of groups took place around the fire to share experiences about had gone on that day and draw out hunting strategies, for example. For Wrangham,²⁵ the advent of the fire changed the way our ancestors interacted. They spent more time together to warm them up and eat together. In volume 1 of the first work directed by Philippe Ariès & Georges Duby,³¹ *A history of private life*, the importance of fire is immediately highlighted at the beginning of a chapter written by Yvon Thébert,³² and the private life and domestic architecture in Roman Africa are examined. Houses did not have chimneys or stoves, but fireplaces, “whose smoke vented out through a hole in the roof and, paradoxically, constituted one of the celebrated pleasures of the rude rural existence, when snow covered the fields” (p. 303).

According to Flandrin & Montanari,²⁹ the use of fire allowed man to eat together, initially around it, and over the years, with the creation of food social space, in the household (kitchen and the dining room) and, subsequently, with the creation of outdoor public spaces (restaurants, coffee shops, etc.). Therefore, food, which is nourishment transformed by culture, would also have an integrative function for humans. This function is called “commensality”, which means the ability to establish important social relationships, since it implies bringing people together around the table. That is to say, while eating, the group also has the opportunity to dialogue and exchange everyday experiences.

For Fischler,³³ commensality is one of the most significant features concerning human sociability, not only related to food intake, but also to manners of eating meals, involving cultural habits, symbolic acts, social organization, and the sharing of experiences and values. In this sense, Woortmann¹⁹ clarifies that, in Brazilian culture, a “meal” is considered a social act and, therefore, should be taken with other diners to be effectively regarded as a meal. Also, in this culture, according to the author, different meanings were created for this type of action, such as daily eating every day and eating at special events, eating at home and eating out .

The ritual-symbolic character of eating is clearly expressed in the habit of inviting people for a dinner at home, in the habit of “dining out” on certain occasions or the “Sunday lunch”. In those and other similar occasions, there is much more at stake than nutritional needs. We do not invite people to have dinner at our house to feed them as biological bodies, but to feed and reproduce social relations, in other words, to reproduce the social body, which means that we are in turn invited to eat in the house of our guest. What is at stake is the principle of reciprocity and commensality. The presence of food, however, is central, transforming biological needs into social needs¹⁹ (p. 3).

Similarly, Algranti³⁴ points out that there are past records showing that, since the colonial period in Brazil, family gatherings during meals at least once a day became a habit, which has been perpetuated in rural households as well as in urban areas. And according to Giard,²⁸ moments like these demarcated social and emotional relationships between family members and also the development of personal food tastes. In this sense, “eating” is both a social and a political act and involves customs, dialogues, uses, tastes, smells and even labels, which correspond to the ways of eating that are learned throughout the commensality process itself that appears in social groups.

It should be emphasized, however, that not all cultures enjoy eating together. Thus, precepts of commensality cannot be considered as a rule. As shown by Geertz³⁵, in the Balinese culture, eating is considered an activity that generates feelings of revulsion: “[...] but the act of eating is seen as an unpleasant activity, almost obscene, it must be performed hastily and privately due to its association with animality ” (p. 190).

The place of fire and the practice of commensality in the domestic architecture

Whether or not eating in group, in almost every culture there is a specific place where fire and heat are present. In Western society, the location of the fire is mainly in the kitchen, which was first attached to the house, and the stove is the equipment that represents it. The kitchen, according to Flandrin,³⁶ arises as a result of changes in social customs over time. Thus, the pleasure of eating and drinking together was modified concurrently with the social changes. Technological advances and encounters with other cultures favored the life and the creation of internal spaces in the houses geared towards commensality, for example. The kitchen, which was previously shared with several people around the courtyard, is now inside of each house. The private area is associated with intimacy and refuge, in contrast to the public area from which the daily family life goes gradually deviates. Meals, which were taken outdoors or in easily accessible places, are now taken in brick houses, whose front doors are closed, preventing unauthorized access, except for invited persons.

Even though the kitchen has initially remained separate from other rooms, it had a privileged position in the housing characteristics, from the simplest to the most exquisite, since the colonial period in Brazil, as Lemos³⁷ points out in a study on Brazilian urban and rural housing. “In Portugal, until recently, and in Colonial Brazil, the house was always called ‘fire’ or ‘stove’. Every census affirmed that a specific city had a particular number of inhabitants living in a particular number of ‘fires’” (p. 11).

In the Brazilian colonization period, the kitchens always faced the outside area of the house, in its back, away from bedrooms and chambers, keeping them free from the smell of smoke and fat. Due to the fact that piped water supplies were not available at that time, the kitchen was often located in the outside area of the house.^{38,39} In order to facilitate the use of this space and to maintain the kitchen facilities close, the best alternative was to create a subdivision.⁴⁰ Thus, in the nineteenth century, the “dirty kitchen” (where meats, sweets and fried foods were prepared), remained outside the house, while the “clean kitchen” - where coffee, cakes, salads were prepared - was coupled to the residence.

According to Abdala,⁴¹ The kitchen area in the houses of the nineteenth century-colonial period in Minas Gerais was large, well-ventilated, and the wood-burning stove, made of clay or soapstone, occupied a prominent place. It was still an intimate space, and strangers were not allowed to enter.

The dining room appears between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Previously, every room in the house was used for this purpose, even in huge castles where there was no great degree of comfort, despite the large areas. Both rooms constituted, throughout history, the main spaces for commensality.¹⁸ And it was also an area, as well as the kitchen, where

women had to prove their skills as housewives, their ability to receive guests, an activity which was part of the knowledge transmitted from mothers to daughters, so that no matter how simple they were, the dining rooms reflected the personality of the house owner.³⁸

Changes in the size and structure of these domestic spaces in recent times indicate that the arrangements for this activity are being socially redefined, but did not disappear. In southern Brazil it is still common, nowadays, to have wood-burning stoves, even in residences located in inland cities. Unlike the Southeast, especially the State of Minas Gerais, where the wood stove is mostly made of masonry, in the southern States, they are made of enameled cast iron in an industrial style. On cold days, family and friends gather around it to cook and taste the pinion, for example, accompanied by wine and long conversations. In Minas Gerais, the wood-burning stove is present in almost all rural households and it is assumed that its use is constant to prepare daily meals. The permanence and the use of the wood-burning stoves nowadays in the surveyed rural areas, are the main topic of empirical research for the doctoral thesis that includes the discussion presented in this essay.

In rural Brazil, the kitchen and the relations established therein occupied different places over time, but always played an important role, as shown by Luís da Câmara Cascudo¹⁸ and Gilberto Freyre.⁴²

Freyre⁴², intending to address the characteristics of the houses of the sugar cane cycle, explained that there were differences between the kitchens in big farm-houses, two-story houses, suburban houses and the mill house. In the latter, the author affirms, the kitchen was the most important space. These differences were also reflected in the size of the table destined to meals and to host those who came for lunch.

*Travelers and peddlers, besides the compadres who never missed, the manioc mush eaters, the poor relatives, the administrator, the overseer, the chaplain, the cowboys and daily guests: whole families coming from other mills in oxcarts. Rosewood tables were sometimes six, eight meters long as we still observe in the big-house – a large rural two-story manor located in the Noruega mill.*⁴² (p. 143)^{****}

The author explains that the large tables - usually five per two meters - to receive large families were common in rural manors and houses, however, in cities and suburbs the lifestyle was more restricted and without the hustle, unlike what occurred in the mill houses where “travelers were received at any time with a silver bowl, linen cloth, a place at the table, a hammock or a bed to sleep”⁴² (p. 144).

**** This mill was portrayed as a watercolored engraving, in 1933, by Cícero Dias. The watercolor make up the book *The Masters and The Slaves*, by Gilberto Freyre⁴³ (1st volume), as an annex attached to the volume in the form of a paper folding.

However, not always this piece of furniture, the “table”, is or was used. Sitting on the floor to eat is part of the indigenous and also the Asian culture. The Indians sit directly on the bare ground or on mats, and Asian peoples sit on rugs, affirms Câmara Cascudo.¹⁸ According to the author, in colonial Brazil the poor also ate this way, which spawned the term “mat food”. The slightly less poor ate at a wooden table. “The history of food on mats precisely stems from the cabocla heritage, the black slaves, the humble mestizos” (p. 794). Even among the rich in the nineteenth century the table existed, but was improvised, made of planed boards, in most cases.

Despite being a common utensil used as support for plates, cups, drinks and bottles containing the foods, in anthropological and sociological discussions its figurative sense related to the act of “eating together” is what matters most, whether sitting on the floor, on a couch or around a table made of wood or iron.

Marcel Mauss,⁴⁴ in his *Essay on the Gift*, mentions the “Round Table” of King Arthur’s chronics, whose circular shape had the symbolic purpose to help his knights to live in harmony, as they had constant disputes and used to feed hatred and envy. The idea was that when sitting around, all knights recognized themselves as equal in power, as there was no prominent location or superiority.

The bretons, and the Chronicles of Arthur, tell how King Arthur, with the help of a Cornish carpenter, invented that wonder of his court, the miraculous Round Table, seated round which, the knights no longer fought. Formerly, ‘out of sordid envy’, in stupid struggles, duels and murders stained with blood the finest banquets. The carpenter said to Arthur: ‘I will make you a very beautiful table, around which sixteen hundred and more can sit, and move around, and from which no-one will be excluded. No knight will be able engage in fighting, for there the highest placed will be on the same level as the lowliest.’ There was no longer a ‘higher table’, and consequently no more quarrelling. Everywhere that Arthur took his table his noble company remained happy and unconquerable. In this way nations today can make themselves rich, happy and good. Peoples, social classes, families and individuals will be able to grow rich, and will only be happy when they have learnt to sit down, like the knights, around the common store of wealth⁴⁴ (p. 314).

What matters most is to understand the role of commensality in the socializing and integrative process, as that used by Poulain,²⁰ considering that it involves the act of eating together, a concept which is also similar to the meaning assigned by Sobal & Nelson.⁴⁵ Fischler³³ adds a space attribute to this sense and states that it literally means “eating at the same table” The table in this case may be even a circle in the middle of a forest, a towel set for a picnic or a circle of people in a social event.

Rarely a social event occurs without any food or drink - the famous cocktails. Food plays a facilitator of relationships and dialogue in events, in addition to its power to gather those who

are present. On such occasions, one might eat up, not necessarily due to hunger, but because of the pleasure derived from an interaction, even if only for a moment, according to Flandrin e Montanari:²⁹

Civilized men eat not only (and less) due to hunger or to satisfy a basic need of the body, but also (and especially) to turn the occasion into a moment of sociability, in an act of strong social meaning and great power of communication ²⁹(p. 108).

Conforme reforçado por Giard,²⁸ “the table is a complicated social machine, but also effective: it makes people talk, ‘we take a seat at the table’ to confess that we would like to omit. There is nothing better than a conversation after dinner to further the work, business and love affairs” (p. 266). It is at the table that ways of eating are recognized, the differences between what we eat and ways of eating. However, modern lifestyle has changed commensal relations that were formerly more traditional and more frequent in gatherings.

The new lifestyles tend to provide a number of modifications in the ways of eating, in commensal relations and in the food identity of individuals, both in urban and rural areas, and can also interfere with dietary habits. Family recipes that were on kept on notebooks and passed on from generation to generation, now can be found on the back of food packaging, in the Internet, in magazines or television programs; family members' food schedules do not always coincide ; neither the domestic space is used only for this purpose. Contemporary life compels to make adjustments to new developments that constantly appear. In this context, changes also affect rural households that need to find a way to adapt themselves, creating alternatives to deal with the new reality.

Due to these aspects, some authors critically examine the contemporary trend of the homogenization of eating habits, which is a point of no return. This homogenization equal eaters of modern times under the influence of globalization, thus they would soon acquire very similar food habits and tastes. These considerations are present in the analysis performed by Arnaiz,⁴⁶ who presents, based on the study of the dietary habits of the Spaniards and on the arguments of authors such as Warde⁴⁷e Germov & Willians,⁴⁸ four trends of the modern food system:

The phenomenon of consumption homogenization in a mass society; the persistence of a differential and inequitable consumption; the increase of personalized supplies (post-Fordist, the exact term of the authors), endorsed by the creation of new popular lifestyles, and finally the increasing food particularism, caused by the growing anxiety of contemporary diners ⁴⁶(p. 148).

Fischler⁴⁹ corroborates this idea of homogenization, which he calls “hyper-homogeneous”. Based on this, and mentioning the study carried out by Mennell et al.,⁵⁰ Fischler³³ draws attention to the fact that contemporary food jeopardizes commensality as a power of sociability, integration, considering that the modern world has facilitated the particularism, including with regard to food. A clear example of the above is the growing number of people, even at home, that prepare a meal and sit in front of the television or computer. Situations that indicate that other dynamics have emerged in the sphere of commensality in the contemporary world.

Concluding remarks

The present analysis leads to a reflection on the different meanings of food and its representations, and indicates the need to understand eating habits as a relationship to which physiological, symbolic and cultural factors may be linked. In this sense, understanding food as a higher attitude than just eating, especially a pleasurable act enabling the connection with meanings involving cultural heritage, affective memory and social moments.

It also points out to the challenge of this coexistence in the contemporary world, where the time devoted to take daily meals becomes increasingly scarce and hence it reduces the number of family meals. Similarly, practicalities offered by technology and the modern way of life create new habits as well as more individualized practices that are thus reflected in food choices.

The discussion presented in this article also indicates the importance of the anthropological viewpoint as a contribution to the dialogue in the fields of Nutrition and Health.

References

1. Harris M. *Bueno para comer*. 3ª ed. Madrid: Alianza Editorial; 2011. 390 p.
2. García JL. Antropología de la alimentación: perspectivas, desorientación contemporánea y agenda de futuro. In: Garrido Aranda A. *Comida y cultura: nuevos estudios de cultura alimentaria*. Córdoba: Universidad de Córdoba; 2009. p. 25-61.
3. Garine I. Alimentación, cultura y sociedad. *El Correo UNESCO* 1987; 40(5):4-7.
4. Mead M. *Sexo e temperamento em três sociedades primitivas*. São Paulo: Perspectiva; 1969. 316p.
5. Contreras J, Gracia M. *Alimentação, sociedade e cultura*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Fiocruz; 2011. 496 p.
6. Woortmann EF. Padrões tradicionais e modernização: comida e trabalho entre camponeses teuto-brasileiros. In: Menasche R, organizadora. *A agricultura familiar a mesa: saberes e práticas da alimentação no Vale do Taquari*. Porto Alegre: Ed. UFRGS; 2007. 198 p.

7. Feuerbach L. O mistério do sacrifício ou o homem é o que ele come. 1862.
8. Brillat-Savarin JA. A fisiologia do gosto. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras; 1995. 379 p.
9. DaMatta R. O que faz o Brasil, Brasil? Rio de Janeiro: Rocco; 2001. 126 p.
10. Cândido A. Os parceiros do Rio Bonito: estudo sobre o caipira paulista e as transformações dos seus meios de vida. 6ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: Duas Cidades; 1982. 284p.
11. Montanari M. Comida como cultura. São Paulo: Senac; 2008. 207 p.
12. Delormier T, Frohlich KL, Potvin L. Food and eating as social practice: understanding eating patterns as social phenomena and implications for public health. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 2009; 31(2):215-228.
13. DaMatta R. La cultura de la mesa em Brasil. *El Correo UNESCO* 1987; 40(5):22-23.
14. Maciel ME. Cultura e alimentação ou o que têm a ver os macaquinhos de Koshima com Brillat-Savarin? *Horiz. Antropol.* 2001; 7(16):145-156.
15. Ishige N. El hombre comensal. *El Correo UNESCO* 1987; 40(5):18-21.
16. Silva Mello A. Alimentação, intuição, cultura. 4ª ed. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio; 1956. v. 1, 2.
17. Crotty P. The value of qualitative research in nutrition. *Annual Review of Health and Social Sciences* 1993; (3):109-118.
18. Câmara Cascudo L. História da alimentação no Brasil. São Paulo: Global; 2004. 954 p.
19. Woortmann K. A comida, a família e a construção de gênero. Brasília: UNB; 1985. 43 p. *Série Antropologia*.
20. Poulain JP. Sociologias da alimentação: os comedores e o espaço social alimentar. Florianópolis: Ed. UFSC; 2013. 285 p.
21. Mintz SW. Comida e antropologia: uma breve revisão. *Revista Brasileira de Ciências Sociais* 2001; 16(47):31-41.
22. Sandre-Pereira G. Os bastidores de uma escolha: o aleitamento materno no Brasil e na França. In: Menasche R, Alvarez J, Collaço J, organizadores. *Dimensões socioculturais da alimentação: diálogos latino-americanos*. Porto Alegre: Ed. UFRGS; 2012. p. 81-99.
23. Bosi MLM, Machado MT. Amamentação: um resgate histórico. *Cadernos Escola de Saúde Pública do Ceará* [Internet] 2005; 1(1). [acesso em: 10 jan. 2015]. Disponível em: http://www.aleitamento.com.br/upload%5Carquivos%5Carquivo1_1688.pdf
24. Lévi-Strauss C. O triângulo culinário. In: Cordier S, organizadores. *Lévi-Strauss*. São Paulo: Documentos; 1968. 102 p. *Série L'Arc*, 2.
25. Wrangham R. Pegando fogo: porque cozinhar nos tornou humanos. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar; 2010. 226 p.
26. García LJ. Una historia comestible: homínidos, cocina, cultura y ecología. Gijón: Trea SL; 2013. 270 p.
27. Leach E. Lévi-Strauss. Londres: Fontana; 1970. 153 p.

28. Giard L. Cozinhar. In: Certeau M, Giard L, Mayol P. A invenção do cotidiano II: morar, cozinhar. 11ª ed. Petrópolis: Vozes; 2012. p. 210-331.
29. Flandrin JL, Montanari M, organizadores. História da alimentação. São Paulo: Estação Liberdade; 1998. 885 p.
30. Carneiro H. Comida e sociedade: uma história da alimentação. Rio de Janeiro: Elsevier; 2003. 185 p.
31. Arriès P, Duby G. Coleção história da vida privada. v.1. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras; 1985. 635 p.
32. Thébert Y. Vida privada e arquitetura doméstica na África Romana. In: Veyne P, organizador. História da vida privada 1: do império romano ao ano mil. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras; 1990. p. 301-398.
33. Fischler C. Commensality, society and culture. Social Science Information - 50th anniversary issue 2011; 50(3-4):528-548.
34. Algranti LM. Famílias e vida doméstica. In: Souza LM, organizadores. História da vida privada no Brasil: cotidiano e vida privada na América portuguesa. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras; 1997. p. 83-154.
35. Geertz C. A interpretação das culturas. 13ª. ed. Rio de Janeiro: LTC; 2008. 323p.
36. Flandrin JL. Formas de privatização: a distinção pelo Gosto. In: Chartier R, organizador. História da vida privada 3: da renascença ao século das luzes. São Paulo: Companhia das letras; 1990. p. 267-310.
37. Lemos C. História da casa brasileira: a casa Colonial, casas urbanas e rurais, a habitação burguesa. São Paulo: Contexto; 1996. 83p.
38. Lemos C. Cozinhas etc.: um estudo sobre as zonas de serviço da casa paulista. São Paulo: Perspectiva; 1976. 226 p.
39. Abrahão FA, Bruit HH, Abrahão EM, Leanza DA, Kassab F. Delícias das sinhás: história e receitas culinárias da segunda metade do século XIX e início do século XX. Campinas: Arte Escrita; 2007. 127 p.
40. Silva PP. Farinha, feijão e carne seca: um tripé culinário do Brasil colonial. São Paulo: Senac; 2005.149 p.
41. Abdala MC. Receita de mineiridade: a cozinha e a construção da imagem do mineiro. 2ª ed. Uberlândia: EDUFU; 2007. 180 p.
42. Freyre G. Sobrados e Mucambos: decadência do patriarcado e desenvolvimento do urbano. 16ª ed. São Paulo: Global; 2006. 968 p.
43. Freyre G. Casa-grande & senzala: formação da família brasileira sob o regime da economia patriarcal. 1º e 2º Tomo. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio; 1964. 1165 p.
44. Mauss M. Ensaio sobre a dádiva. In: Mauss M. Sociologia e antropologia. São Paulo: Cosac-Naify; 2003. 281-314.
45. Sobal J, Nelson MK. Commensal eating patterns: a community study. Appetite 2003; 41(2):181-190.
46. Arnaiz MG. Em direção a uma nova ordem alimentar? In: Canesqui AM, Garcia RWD. Antropologia e nutrição: um diálogo possível. Rio de Janeiro: Fiocruz; 2005. p. 147-164.

47. Warde A. Consumption, food and taste: culinary antinomies and commodity of the consumer. London: Sage Publications; 1997. 240 p.
48. Germov J, Williams L, editors. A sociology of food and nutrition. Oxford: University Press; 1999. 332 p.
49. Fischler C. Gastro-nomie et gastro-anomie. *Communications* 1979; (31):189-210.
50. Mennell S, Murcott A, van Otterloo AH. The sociology of food: eating, diet and culture. Londres: Sage Publications; 1992. 160 p.

Received: April 15, 2015

Revised: May 12, 2015

Accepted: June 6, 2015