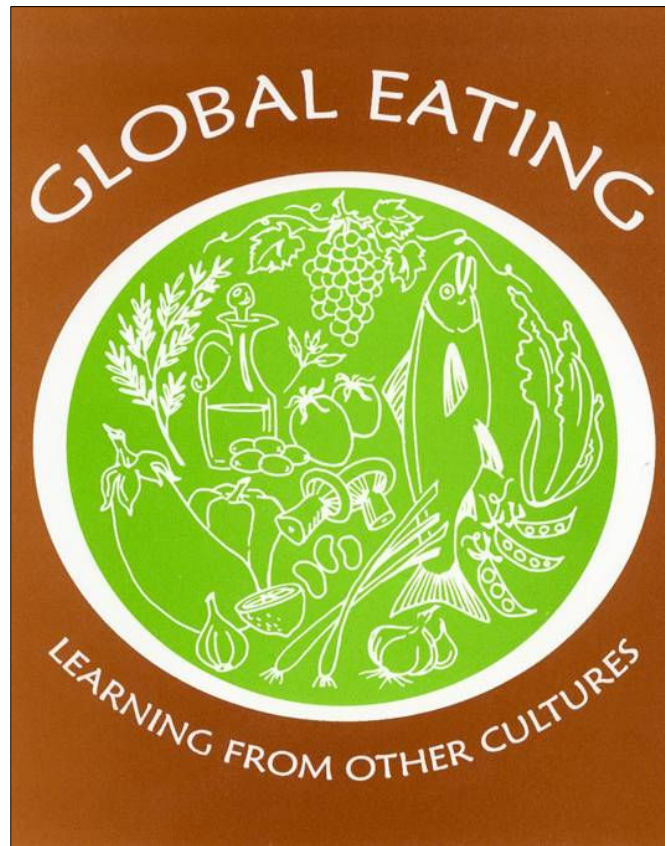


Global Eating



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The Video

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The Program

Summary

What can we learn from other cultures about food and nutrition? Some countries share our love for food yet manage to avoid our epidemic of obesity. How do they do it? By studying how they eat, we can gain some useful (and tasty) ideas to adapt to our own needs.

- Meet Contilo from the Greek isle of Paros and learn how the Mediterranean diet combines a zest for good food, healthful eating and long lives.
- Find out why olive oil (and other oils rich in omega-3 fats) can be a healthy alternative for cooking. Learn that the source of dietary fat might be more important than its quantity.
- Discover from the Japanese that eating is a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach.
- Share the discovery that healthy eating does not mean bland food and starvation diets.
- Learn what American versions of Mexican and Chinese food have in common.
- Discover the roots of Mexican food and explore its healthy ingredients.
- Learn that, although there is no single “Asian” cuisine, each shares a near obsession with freshness and flavor.

Discussion Questions

1. Give ideas about food or nutrition from each of the following that could help improve our eating patterns:

Mediterranean

Japanese

Chinese

Thai

Mexican

For a reminder of the foods and practices of each cuisine, see the video excerpts on the following pages.

Key items include:

Mediterranean: Fresh local foods, olive oil, emphasis on fish and poultry instead of red meat, lots of grains including whole grains, some cheese, yogurt, and legumes.

Asian: Emphasis on very fresh food with minimal processing, communal eating, rice and noodles, meals usually low in fat, tea, lots of vegetables, physically active lifestyle, appearance of food very important, soy beans as part of the diet.

Mexican: Fresh foods locally produced, fruits and vegetables as major part of the diet, seafood and grilled vegetables, beans and rice, physical activity.

2. What ideas are common to all these cuisines that might help us eat better?

A few common threads emerge including a dependence on fresh, locally produced food. Another cross-cultural finding is a diet based on grains with meat as a part of the meal instead of as its heart. A physically active lifestyle is another as is a generally healthy eating style instead of a dependence on dieting.

3. Why is olive oil a healthful substitute for other fats or oils?

Olive oil contains tiny amounts of chemicals that researchers think might help prevent heart disease and some cancers. Olive oil is not a saturated fat.

4. In what ways can soybeans be part of a balanced eating plan?

Soybeans can be eaten fresh (available frozen in many groceries and called edamame), as tofu in many foods, as tempeh, in soy milk, and even a peanut-butter-like paste made from soybeans.

5. What's wrong with the idea that "all fats and oils are bad for you?"

Every balanced diet needs some fat. The fats most likely to be a problem in excess are saturated fats found most often in meat and dairy products. Olive oil is often referred to as a "heart healthy" oil.

6. In what way do American eating patterns differ from those of much of the rest of the world?

Americans consume over three pounds of boneless meat (mainly beef and chicken) each week. That is about one and a half times as much as the British or Italians and double that of the Japanese. Americans also tend to eat more food away from home than in most other countries. Another uniquely American idea is the fascination with an unending series of fad diets followed by millions.

7. Would the Mediterranean diet be a good one to follow if you wanted to lose weight? Why or why not?

The Mediterranean way of eating is not one that is low in fat or calories, so it would not be a diet on which to lose weight. However, it can be part of a healthful, low calorie eating plan.

8. How does food served in typical "Chinese" or "Mexican" restaurants in the U.S. differ from the food served in the cuisine's home country?

Order carry-out at your local "Chinese" restaurant and you'll probably get lots of fat and calories. Most of the appetizers are fried. Many entrees are deep-fried, then wok-fried again. These foods bear only a passing resemblance to what is eaten in China. Some frying is part of Chinese cuisine but very little cooking oil is used – if for no other reason than it is expensive. A platter of fried something covered by melted cheese and a scoop of sour cream is no more Mexican than chop suey is Chinese. Americans were introduced to "Chinese" and "Mexican" foods by dishes that restaurant owners in past decades felt would fit prevailing tastes.

In general, "Americanized" versions of ethnic foods tend to have more meat and less vegetables or starch than the original foods.

Mediterranean

People who eat the Mediterranean Way tend to live long, healthy lives. It is a peasant diet, not one you will find in urban areas today, even in the Mediterranean. It includes:

- Lots of seafood and fresh vegetables.
- Few processed or convenience foods.
- Emphasis on grains, olive oil, nuts, and pasta.
- Grain in the form of bread, pasta, polenta, couscous.
- Cheese or yogurt but not much milk or ice cream.
- Fish and poultry up to three times weekly.
- Limited amounts of red meat in small portions.
- Deep frying is the exception.
- Braising, baking, and broiling are preferred.
- People remain physically active.
- Not really a low-fat diet. Low in saturated fat.

Seafood provides omega-3 oils that might offer some cancer protection. The same omega-3 oils are found in walnuts and flax seed as well.

Olive oil is a heart healthy oil. Olive oil is pressed from olives with much less processing than is needed to get oil from corn. Extra virgin olive oil has the least processing. Try whole grain breads and pasta.

Foods to try: olive oil, egg plant, seafood, tomato, feta cheese, onions, garlic, honey, nuts.

Restaurants to try: Some Italian, Greek, Tuscan, Spain, Southern France, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Moroccan.

Asian Cuisines

There is no single Asian diet. The cuisines of Japan, Indonesia, China, India, Thailand, and Vietnam differ, but they share some ingredients and cooking methods.

All agree freshness and flavor are key. They also share a closeness to food. In various Asian languages a common greeting translates something like “have you eaten yet?”

The tradition in Asia is to shop local markets daily for vegetables picked this morning and fish that were swimming yesterday. A chicken or a fish at the market usually looks like a chicken or a fish, not like frozen strips ready to zap in a microwave. Fruits and vegetables are often locally grown.

The path from farm to the dinner table is usually shorter in Asia than in American homes. The eater might know the farmer.

This closeness to food continues in HOW the food is served. Eating is often a group activity, even in a restaurant. The dishes appear all at once and are shared in what Americans call “family style.”

Dining tables are more likely to be square or round to give everyone access to the food. Elongated western tables require food to be passed and separate diners.

In most Asian cuisines, grain is the center of the meal and meat, when present, is one taste instead of THE taste.

Rice is the most common grain in countries near the equator. The Chinese prefer a fragrant long-grain jasmine rice, the Japanese a starchier short-grain “sticky” rice, and Thais and Indonesians use a more glutinous rice to sop up curry sauces. Indians prefer the fragrant basmati variety. Farther from the equator, wheat is the favored grain usually in the form of noodles or pancakes.

China

A major study found that the Chinese are less likely to die of heart disease or develop colon cancer and diabetes than Americans. There could be many reasons, but diet is probably one of them. The Chinese eat a third less fat than Americans and get less than 10% of their protein from animals compared to 70% in American diets.

The average person in China eats about 300 pounds of rice each year. A meal without rice is hardly a meal.

Not all Chinese eat the same foods. There are at least four major cuisines in China – Cantonese, Sichuan, Hunan, and Beijing or “Northern.”

The traditional diet includes about a pound of produce a day. It often includes deep green vegetables such as Chinese cabbage, bok choy, mustard greens, and broccoli – all nutrient rich and with disease fighting ingredients.

The Chinese beverage is tea, now known to be rich in disease fighting antioxidants. American style soft drinks were unknown until recently.

Chinese, especially in rural areas, are more physically active than typical Americans. Transportation by bicycle or walking is common.

Chinese foods as eaten in China are among the healthiest in the world, but you would never guess it by the choices at an American-Chinese restaurant. Chinese who opened restaurants in the U.S. after the 1920s invented foods they could sell to Americans. Pu pu platters, barbecued spare ribs, sweet-and-sour pork, chow mein, chop suey, egg rolls, and fortune cookies all fit that description.

Order carry-out at your local “Chinese” restaurant and you’ll probably get lots of fat and calories. Most of the appetizers are fried. Many entrees are deep-fried, then wok-fried again. These foods bear only a passing resemblance to what is eaten in China. Some frying is part of Chinese cuisine but very little cooking oil is used – if for no other reason than it is expensive.

Japan

In Japan, how the food is presented and how it looks are as important as taste. Foods are often kept separate when served, typically in small serving dishes. The eater rather than the cook mixes food together. The idea is to respect the individual flavors of the ingredients.

You could say the Japanese “eat with their eyes.” Food is carefully prepared and presented with a sense of harmony. That care can easily be seen in sushi preparations.

Sushi does NOT mean “raw fish.” Sushi is a dish of rice often with fish or other food in the center, wrapped in seaweed.

A Japanese dinner ends with fruit instead of a rich dessert. An orange, artfully presented will do quite nicely. High calorie fat laden desserts are rare in Asian cuisines.

The Japanese eat noodles by the ton - cold or hot. The two main types of noodles are soba, a brown noodle made from buckwheat flour and udon, a thick white noodle made from white flour.

A lesson we could learn from Japan and China is the value of soy beans. Soybeans provide the highest quality protein in the vegetable world. Fresh green soybeans (called edamame) have a sweet, nutty flavor and make an easy snack. Soy is available in meat analogs such as tofu or tempeh, in soy milk or even soy butter.

Thailand

Thai food is closest to Indian. Both Indian and Thai foods are often hot and spicy. But the method of cooking – cutting into small pieces and stir frying in a wok – more closely resembles China than the Indian style of stewing.

Seafood, fresh vegetables, fruits, plus rice and noodles are the main components of the diet.

Coconuts are used in many Thai dishes. Coconut gained a bad reputation as a source of saturated fat calories, but it does NOT raise cholesterol as once believed. Coconut oil is a naturally saturated oil, offers some health benefits and contains no harmful trans fatty acids.

Most coconut oil in American diets is found in baked goods and processed snack foods in a partially hydrogenated form. This form of coconut oil does raise blood cholesterol levels through the presence of trans fatty acids. The “villain” is more in the processing of the oil, not the coconut oil itself.

Mexico

A platter of fried something covered by melted cheese and sour cream is no more Mexican than chop suey is Chinese.

As with Mediterranean and Asian foods, Mexican food starts with a local market filled with fresh foods. Fruit is a key part of the Mexican diet. Freshly picked tomatoes are used in countless recipes.

Mexican food is a mix of mestizo and Spanish influences.

Markets features foods flown in from around the world, but the emphasis is on locally grown foods. As in many other cultures, people shop daily for fresh foods.

Some foods resemble those the Aztecs ate – chiles, corn, beans, avocados, tomatoes, tomatillos, squash, sweet potatoes, cocoa beans, peanuts, and papayas.

Mexican food often means lots of seafood. For example, a whole fish marinated in citrus juices and spices and grilled.

It also means grilled vegetables and soups and stews with lots of fresh vegetables. A variety of beans and rice are common parts of a meal.

Traditional Mexican foods are often made with lard – animal fat. But vegetable oil can be substituted, and in fact is throughout Mexico today.

Avocados are common. They contain surprisingly large amounts of fat, but not the artery clogging saturated variety.

What we can learn from Mexicans is a devotion to local foods and recipes. Food markets in Mexico change from region to region.

Resources

The Mediterranean Diet by Marissa Cloutier and Eve Adamson (Harper Collins, NY, 2001) explains the science behind the Mediterranean Diet and supplies wonderful recipes.

30 Secrets of the World's Healthiest Cuisines by Steven Jonas, M.D. and Sandra Gordon (John Wiley & Sons, NY, 2000) explains nutritional benefits of eating Mediterranean, Chinese, French, Scandinavian, and West African.

Mexican Cooking For Dummies by Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken with Helene Siegel (Hungry Minds, Inc., NY, 1999) punctures the myths of Mexican food as overly spicy and swimming in cheese and guacamole. Plenty of recipes and practical ideas.

Japanese Cooking by Emi Kazuko (Hermes House, NY, 2001) could pass for a coffee table book judging by size and illustrations. The book features lots of recipes as well as the story of the development of Japanese cuisine.

Oldways Preservation and Exchange Trust at www.oldwayspt.org is an excellent website for information about healthy traditional food and dietary patterns of various cultures and world regions. The initiative is an outgrowth of a conference series on "Public Health Implications of Traditional Diets," jointly organized by Harvard School of Public Health, the United Nations World Health Organization, and Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust.