



THE DIPLOMAT'S DAUGHTER™

ON CUISINE AND CULTURE

By Ariane Sommer

You can learn culture through cuisine. Next to living within a country and speaking the language, food is one of the most important means to understanding a culture.

The way we consume and acquire it, the fashion in which it gets cooked and by whom, who is invited to the table and who eats first, such tradition is a form of nonverbal communication – a social code abundant with meaning.

Cuisine is a source of pleasure and pride, elevating the basic act of eating from a purely biological necessity to an art. In many places of the world it is one of the main instruments of socialisation and identification.

Every culture has designated what it considers to be edible, which type of animal can be eaten and how it should be prepared – Judaism and Islam being among the most prominent instances. Food often is used symbolically by nations; it tells us what is important to them and can educate us about their history.

The concept of *joie de vivre*, for example, is reflected in the finesse of the French cuisine, with unique national dishes such as *coq au vin*, and *pot-au-feu*. France is probably the country in the world most obsessed with food definitions. Tremendous protocol is involved in the act of branding a product. People can deliberate for hours on what a French baguette is supposed to be, and will defend their position furiously. But we forgive them, after all, *Brie de Meaux* isn't just any brie, champagne isn't just any sparkling wine – and a French baguette has a very specific recipe, a fact reaffirmed when I returned to LA from my trip to Paris and searched in vain for a decent equivalent.

So-called 'national dishes' render a concise picture about how a culture interacts within and how it wishes to be seen from the outside. The Sachertorte from Austria comes to mind, a result of the vibrant late-19th century Vienna coffee-house culture which prevails to this day. Or the Yorkshire pudding and chicken tikka masala of Great Britain, the incorporation of the latter being evidence of a long-standing history of colonialism and immigration with India. National dishes, or what we perceive as such, also function as stereotypes. Although most of these have positive or neutral connotations, they can as well acquire a derogatory tone.

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Being German-born I am regularly amused and also slightly offended when confronted with the ideas of many foreigners about typical German food: sausages, beer, and sauerkraut. 'Krauts' was what American GIs used to call the Germans in World War II. A term that is still used gleefully by British tabloids in the event of a soccer match against Germany, or when discussing the matter of beach towels and sunloungers. To designate German nationality through the name of a food, that in most cases Germans very rarely eat, is really quite absurd.

Stereotypes about a culture's food make it easy to fall into misconceptions about its people. An issue that China knows well. To many Westerners the thought of Chinese food evokes images of chop suey and fortune cookies. In reality, neither of these are originally Chinese.

'Chinese' fortune cookies were invented in 19th-century Japan and sold in Japanese confectionary shops in San Francisco, until World War II when Japanese-Americans were interned and the business was taken over by the Chinese.

The emergence of chop suey is a mystery. According to legend, the Chinese ambassador, Li Hung Chang, had his cooks invent the dish in New York for his American guests at a dinner on 29 August 1896. The meal was presumably created to satisfy both the Chinese and American tastes. Ambassador Li skilfully used the instrument of food to create good relations with the United States. As the saying goes, the way to a person's heart is through their stomach.

Many people conclude they don't like Chinese food after eating something that likely did not even come from China, but is a demonstration of the commercialising of Chinese fare in foreign countries. The list of recipes which have incorporated local taste preferences, resulting in dishes that say more about the country they are consumed in, goes on endlessly. Examples are the salt and pepper frog-legs of France, the fried gelato in Italy, and the crispy shredded beef in England.

These presumptions are not trivial. Erroneous beliefs are a basis for false judgements and distorted worldviews.

Zhongguorende kouwei, food cooked to Chinese taste, is a simple expression comprising a culinary tradition with longstanding history and thousands of named dishes. The flavours are so diverse it blew me away when I sampled the real thing on my first visit to China.

On that trip (before I became a vegetarian, and I have to say I never found a more varied vegetarian cuisine than in China) I made up my mind to eat anything my hosts would put in front of me. A decision that took courage, considering the Chinese word for animal is *dong wu* [moving thing].

I tried Sichuanese snails, birds nest, fried scorpions, sea cucumber – which I found so delicious I had three servings, to the delight of my generous hosts – and frog spawn in a delicate vanilla-cream filled pastry. After

all, taste is an acquired thing; a lobster is not much more than a cockroach of the sea and cheese is arguably rotten milk.

While there, I fell in love with the philosophy behind food in China. The principles of yin and yang – hot and cold, male and female – lie at the heart of Chinese cuisine and can be found in any of its dishes. While certain foods are regarded as having warming, or yang properties, other foods have cooling, or yin properties. The goal is maintaining a balance between yin and yang.

Illnesses are more often treated with herbal teas and dietary changes than with pills, the idea being that the kind and the amount of food one consumes is directly related to one's health. Diet is used as a means of prevention from illness and as a cure. Food, therefore, is medicine.

Few other cultures are as food oriented as the Chinese. A meal with friends or family can easily become a several-hour affair. For the Chinese it is an opportunity to affirm the importance of the people they are spending time with. It would be rude to hurry through a meal.

In fact the meaning of eating is of such significance that one of the most common greetings when meeting one another, instead of 'How are you?', is 'Have you eaten?' Historians believe this custom stems from the times of great famine in China.

In the appreciation of culture, the importance of cuisine lies in its unlimited variety that is not essential for human survival. For mere survival people everywhere could eat the same basic types of food. The very fact that we all eat so intricately differently from each other reflects a deeper aspect of human existence: the way we understand ourselves in the context of the world. Whoever is aware of this holds the key for friendship, or at least a better understanding for one another. Something utterly necessary in a world that gets smaller every day. ○

The Diplomat's Daughter™ Ariane Sommer was born in Bonn and grew up all over the world due to her father being a German ambassador. Sommer has lived in some of the world's most diverse cities, including Freetown in Sierra Leone, New Delhi, Madrid, Barcelona, Paris, Antananarivo in Madagascar, Miami, Berlin and London.

Currently this cosmopolitan, who has embarked on learning Mandarin and speaks five languages fluently (German, English, Spanish, Italian, French) resides in Los Angeles and New York. Sommer is an international columnist and author of *The Bible of Behavior* which has been hailed as "the style guide for the Sex and the City generation" and is presently being translated for the US and Chinese markets. Her book *Foreign Affairs*, a short story collection, will be published on the German market in June.

