Unit 2 Food Choices: Panorama and Politics
Lesson 1: What Are Food Choices?

"One should eat to live, not live to eat"
Cicero (106 BC – 43 BC) Roman orator and statesman. *Rhettoricorum*, LV¹

Defining Food Choice
To chose means to pick or decide from more than one option or the availability of different alternatives from which one can decide, based on individual or collective wants, needs and preferences. The word ‘food’ in the context of this unit refers to groceries, foodstuff, rations, provisions, meals, or victuals.

Food choice is directly connected with human health and involves selection and preparation of foodstuffs in order to furnish needed energy for the human body to maintain life (USDA, 1939, page 12).² Food choices may be limited or restricted due to availability of foodstuff. These restrictions may be simple or complex based on a myriad of factors including socio-economic, geographic or other conditions. The act of choosing or selecting foodstuff therefore is said to be food choice.

According to Eric Schlosser, author of *The Dark Side of the All-American Meal: Fast Food Nation Do You Want Lies with That?* "What people eat (or don’t eat) has always been determined by a complex interplay of social, economic, and technological forces (2008, page 3, ¶3).³

How Food Habits Develop
Consistent food choices over time become food habits. As the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) points out, food choice is an evolutionary process based on trial and error. Foods were selected both on their availability and value in promoting health and life extension. Foods that caused sickness, were unavailable in local communities, or were difficult to grow were not integrated into the food habits for that group (1939, page 6, ¶2).⁴ Food habits are further influenced by environment and conditioning as well as “fads, and fancies” (USDA, 1939, page 11, ¶26).

Influence of Agricultural Practices
The process of developing agricultural practices evolved over time based on crop successes or failure. If a particular foodstuff was successfully grown, stored and prepared, then the group utilizing that foodstuff became habituated to its usage. Thus geography and environment played a role in developing individual and collective food habits.

A people could be said to be ‘conditioned’ to a food or food group because of the habitual or repetitive growing and harvesting of certain foods. For example, indigenous peoples of America grew maize, beans, potatoes or other food products. The habit of using these food products sustained across time became the ‘norm’ for that area or region.

² Ibid.
Other food habits, according to the USDA, such as “Health foods” were advertised as panaceas to ills, real of imaginary…” (1939, page 11, ¶26). Food fads postulated that certain foods were not to be used together because of potential adverse results, yet still other foods were said to empower a person with improved physical or mental attributes or as cure-alls for certain diseases. Anthropological studies of human bones or analysis of human remains containing DNA (Deoxyribonucleic acid) have the potential to reveal prevailing dietary practices of a tribe or group. Research studies related to agricultural practices and environmental conditions provides organizations such as the USDA with information about the availability of food products (supply) which in turn influence food choices (demand).

Influencing Factors on Food Choices
Marion Nestle in Food Choices: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health focuses attention on “...the environment—that is the social, commercial, and institutional— influences on food choice” (2007, page ix, ¶2). Nestle claims that food choices are not just personal because if they were, to improve health outcomes educating people on how to eat better as part of personal responsibility would solve the problem (2007, page ix, ¶2). Influencing food choice rests on making societal changes. Nestle quotes U.S. Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher’s directive to address a “…urgent need to promote better food choices and more physical activity among all Americans…” (2007, page ix, ¶2).

Early Food Choices
According to Nestle, “Humans do not innately know how to select a nutritious diet; we survived in evolution because nutritious foods were readily available for us to hunt or gather” (2007, page 16, ¶3). However, since earliest time, people realized that food was necessary to sustain life. The influencing factors on early food choices were 1) availability 2) edibility and 3) ease of procurement and preparation. Food choices might be limited or restricted based on what food was availability within the area of habitation. Food had to be edible in order to be safely consumed and avoid sickness or death. Foodstuffs had to be adequately prepared for human ingestion.

Procurement of foodstuff by early peoples involved either hunting (primarily for meat) or agriculture or both. Schlosser describes how “…the Roman Republic was fed by its citizen-farmers…” (2008, page 3, ¶3). Therefore, farming or growing foodstuffs was a major influencing factor on food choice. The food supply rested on what food products could be grown, stored and distributed.

According to the U. S. Department of Agriculture, “All food comes directly or indirectly from the soil…” (1939, page 6, ¶3). Therefore, the availability of food products differs from one area to another due to the difference in elements in the soil. Some area soils “…furnish an abundance of critical elements that other soils lack” (1939, page 6, ¶3). The type and condition of the soil used by American farmers influences food choice because of what foodstuffs can be grown in that particular soil type and availability of water for irrigation.

5 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
Over the last fifty years, American agricultural practices have changed from that of small to medium sized family-owned farms to mega-sized corporate farms. This factor directly influences availability of food products as well as procurement and preparation of foodstuff for human consumption. Because of the cost-factors involved in growing food as a commercial enterprise (profit-making), modern food choices may differ from those of previous generations. For example, foods with a high profit margin are more likely to find their way into the food distribution chain because modern corporate farming is first and foremost about profit.

**Societal Influences**

“The fast food industry both feeds and feeds off the young.”

Eric Schlosser, author of *The Dark Side of the All-American Meal: Fast food Nation Do You Want Lies With That?*

Modern American food choices have been influenced by fundamental changes in American society. From 1973 to 1998, American workers earned less money per hour triggering an influx of women joining the workforce. Many women needed to assist the family in paying bills and by 1975, about one-third of American mothers with young children worked outside the home...as of 2008 two-thirds of such mothers are employed (Schlosser, 2008, page 4, ¶1).13

This one factor created a significant change in American lifestyle which ultimately influenced food choice. As more women began working outside the home, the need for services once performed by women who stayed at home increased. Cooking was one of the main services no longer performed by many women who joined the American workforce. The result, as described by Schlosser quoting sociologists MacDonald and Sirianni, “A generation ago, three-quarters of the money used to buy food in the United States was spent to prepare meals at home. Today, about half of the money used to buy food is spent at restaurants – mainly fast food restaurants” (2008, page 4, ¶1).14

Thus emerges the most significant factor on food choice or “What we eat” as discussed by Eric Schlosser -- the fast food industry. During a relatively short period of time this industry has transformed the American diet by dramatically altering food choices and perpetuating new food habits (2008, page 3, ¶3).15

Over the last three decades, fast food has infiltrated every nook and cranny of American society. An industry that began with a handful of modest hot dog and hamburger stands in southern California has spread to every corner of the nation, selling a broad range of foods wherever paying customers may be found (Schlosser, 2008, page 3, ¶3).16

Schlosser concludes, "Fast food has proven to be a revolutionary force in American life” (page 3, ¶3)17 and is a major component food choice by “...one-quarter of the adult population...” in America. Fast food seems to now be ingrained in the American psyche related to food selection. "Fast food is now so commonplace that it has acquired an air of inevitability, as though it were somehow unavoidable, a fact of modern life” (Schlosser, 2008, page 7, ¶3).18

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
From these beginnings, “The fast food chains now stand atop a huge food-industrial complex that has gained control of American agriculture.” The influence of the fast food industry is far reaching with effects on American rural life, environment, work and health. Schlosser states, “The fast food chains’ vast purchasing power and their demand for a uniform product...” (Schlosser, 2008, pgs. 8-9) dictate “...how cattle are raised, slaughtered and processed into ground beef” and to whom fast food is marketed (Schlosser, 2008, page 9, ¶1) (specifically to young children).

**Determinants of Food Choices**

Food choices are determined by myriad of factors and influences including, but not limited to

- convenience
- ingrained or learned habits
- environment conditions
- socio-psychological conditions (stress, anxiety)
- genetic inheritance
- emotional satisfaction
- hunger, education (or lack thereof),
- fashion
- health
- availability
- consumer buying power
- agricultural practices
- distribution
- transportation
- food sources

**Food Sources**

Examples of food sources are discussed by Williams’ (page 262) “...people have a number of sources to use for food choice; groceries come from retail grocery stores, farmer’s markets, consumer cooperatives, food discount stores, and food banks.”

The USDA describes how advances in preservation and storage of foodstuffs, means food products can be grown, transported and distributed over greater distances, which means more food variety or a wider range of food choices for consumers (USDA, 1939).

**Socio-psychological Conditions**

Griffiths and Wallace advance a theory related to food choice determination – that of “The modern feeling of powerlessness...” (1998, page 1, ¶2) and links between anxiety and food. Instead of food being used for consumption for ‘natural’ purposes of keeping the human body functioning, repairing the body and regulating internal activities, and avoid sickness and disease, food has become consuming. Instead of consumers having food, food has us.

According to Griffiths and Wallace quoting Shannan Peckhham, “At the turn of the century a connection was being drawn between the nation’s unsavory diet and the deterioration of the national physique” (1998, page 178, ¶2). The premise is that that food choice is now based on a philosophy and psychology of a feeling of powerlessness from living in an age of anxiety.

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
St. Louis, MO: Mosby Elsevier.
Mandolin.
Availability
Even in 1939 the USDA commented on the myriad of food choices available to Americans “Compared with those in other countries, diets in the U.S. are generous” (page 10, ¶3)²³ and noting changes in two generations. However, the change in food choices today is much more dramatic.

Between 1970 and 2001, which is not considered even one generation (a generation being equivalent to roughly 80-100 years) expenditures by Americans on fast food rose from $6 billion to more than $110 billion. This is an increase of $104 billion in 31 years or $3.35 billion per year (Schlosser, 2008, page 3, ¶1).²⁴ These statistics point to the dynamic change in food choices by Americans.

From home-grown to home-fries, from family-farm to mega merchants of food products, food choice today differs dramatically from those of previous generations. Food choice is directly connected with human health and influenced by many variables, all of which influence, motivate, dictate, direct and persuade Americans toward food choices which eventually become food habits. In Eric Schlosser’s words, “Far from being inevitable, America’s fast food industry in its present form is the logical outcome of certain political and economic choices” (Schlosser, 2008, page 8, ¶1).²⁵


²⁵ Ibid.