

Does travel influence what's good to eat and bad to eat?

Every culture has food taboos. Some, of course, have more than others. Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Thailand, for example, tend to have a more diverse cultural diet than do European countries. I conducted a survey to see how a country's food taboos correlate with the personal eating habits of those who have traveled there. I found that people who have traveled to Asian countries tend to have less food taboos than do those who have traveled to Europe. In fact, people who have traveled to Asia often could not cite one food that they refuse to eat. Everyone who has been to Europe on the other hand, could name at least one food that they personally consider to be inedible. I believe that the reason for this disparity can be found in the economic differences between the East and the West, and also, in the personal reasons people have for traveling to either Europe or Asia.

Southeast Asians lack specific food types they refuse to eat. Besides the more conventional meats, i.e., beef, pork, poultry, they also eat dogs, cats, dingoes, and insects. An explanation for this can be traced to historical, ecological, and economical aspects of Southeast Asia. Marvin Harris, anthropologist and author of *Good to Eat* explores this specific field, and says the following about one of the unconventional meat eating trends in Southeast Asia. "Dog-eating cultures generally lack an abundance of alternative sources of animal foods, and the services which dogs can render alive far outweigh the value of their flesh and carcass. In China, where perennial shortages of meat and the absence of dairying have produced a long-standing pattern of involuntary vegetarianism, dogflesh eating is the rule, not the exception." (Harris, 179). Basically, types of meat people in the West have stereotypes against are good to eat in other cultures depending on "how it fits within a culture's overall system for producing food and other goods and services." (Harris, 179) Because the benefits of eating dogflesh and other pet

meat outweigh the costs, the inhabitants of Southeast Asia eat this type of meat. However, in regions like the United States, where beef and chicken are the ruling meat industries, one rarely goes to a supermarket to ask for dog meat.

Insect eating can also be traced to economic factors. "Europeans never acquired a taste for locusts." (Harris, 171) By analyzing the costs and benefits of eating insects, it can be shown that although insects are abundant, "they are nonetheless inherently among the least efficient and least reliable sources of these nutrients [protein and fats] in the entire animal kingdom." (Harris, 165) Consequently, one must understand this cost benefit relationship (from a time and energy costs per-harvested unit standpoint) in order to fully comprehend why "insects are sometimes avoided and sometimes preferred..." (Harris, 165) On the other hand, "since locusts are responsible for devouring crops and natural pasture, they alter the availability of higher-ranked items-crops and domesticated animal products-and assure themselves a place in the optimal diet." (Harris, 170) Basically they follow the "eating the eaters" principle. This is precisely what has happened in Southeast Asia, which has caused many people to eat insects. Because of this vast availability, utilization, and consumption of insects in Southeast Asia over history, people who travel there, may have to eat insects in order to survive. Moreover, one may have to eat insects, dogflesh, and other forms of meat that are taboos in the West (as described earlier as also an accepted good to eat food), in order to fit into Asian culture. Most of the subjects who had traveled to Southeast Asia didn't refuse to eat these unconventional types of meat, while subjects who had traveled to Europe had more occurrences where they refused to eat insects, dogflesh, or another type of food. The duration of travel was not mentioned in the survey, however it is not of importance here.

The second factor that needs to be taken into consideration when examining a correlation between travel and food choice is reasons for travel. Because of experimental limitations, the personal reasons for travel were not known, however a plausible schema could be drawn out. Europe is known to be more of a "cultured," and perhaps a safer place to travel. Americans can go to Europe without leaving the comforts of Western society. Travelers looking for a more exotic trip, on the other hand, may choose to go to Asia. These people may be more

adventurous by nature, and thus more inclined to try new things, such as eating insects or dog meat. Such travelers, once they have gotten over the taboo, may have acquired a taste for insects. Of course, it is difficult to show data that could examine the validity of this statement. However, the idea of what type of person the traveler is greatly depends upon where that person will travel, and what he/she will eat.

Furthermore, it's important to note that 65% of the subjects, who had traveled to countries in Southeast Asia, said they ate to survive. On the other hand, only 29% of subjects who traveled to somewhere in Europe said they eat to survive. In this category of travelers, almost all of the other subjects said they ate because they love food. This shows the significance of eating as a means of survival for people who have experienced Thailand or China. For example, my uncle who happens to be a very outgoing and adventurous person travels to Thailand every year. Here, he eats a variety of bugs and insects. He savors these little creatures, and when he comes back to Los Angeles, he describes the crunchiness of a grasshopper. Before he traveled to Thailand, he had never even come close to a bug, much less ate one. In fact, in my culture this is seen as an "abnormal" behavior. When his trip is over and he returns to the states, he doesn't really crave insects. But every year when he travels to Southeast Asia, he eats it as not only a means of survival, but also because he's grown fond of eating bugs. I interviewed him for this study, and he said, "They're [bugs] actually very tasty. Why wouldn't I eat them? Everyone else there seemed to be enjoying them." Everyone else eating it makes it more acceptable and "good to eat," not to mention the fact that my uncle's a very open-minded person. I guess if he wasn't he wouldn't go to Thailand every year.

Europe is a different story. Imagine someone walking into an Italian restaurant and getting mad that they don't serve fried spiders or ants. First, everyone would look at this person like she escaped a mental asylum. And second, it's a pretty accepted view that Italy (or other countries in Europe) is famous for other types of food, such as pasta, pastries, bread, rather than insects.

Where one travels tells a lot about a person. In addition, what one eats reveals aspects of a person. These two factors, although seemingly distant from one another, are actually closely

related. Because of the economic situation of countries in Southeast Asia, where people eat insects as a viable source of protein, travelers of Southeast Asia also eat insects. On the other hand, a person traveling to London not only refuses to eat insects, but also tofu. With globalization and everyone being connected, it's strange that food isn't really globalized. The fact remains that, what's good to eat in one part of the world is bad to eat in another.

Reference

Harris, M. (1986). *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture*. Simon and Schuster.