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CONSIDER THIS

THE FIRST TIME I taught my seminar on "Food and American Life," I asked Sandy, an undergraduate who had started a community gardening program at a housing project near campus, to speak to my class. I had been impressed to hear about her negotiations with university administrators, the New York City Council, and building residents, as well as the educational programs and oral-history projects she had already begun. Students were inspired by Sandy, and her presentation sparked a lively discussion about local politics, food, and social justice.

I also couldn't help noticing that the palms of Sandy's hands were bright orange.

It was early spring, and last fall's root vegetables were the only local fresh food around. Sandy told us she had procured a large supply of carrots from a community-supported agriculture program, or CSA, which she had used as the basis for a cooking class at the housing project. By all accounts, the meal was a success, leaving residents pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to make a healthy and delicious carrot soup. Sandy planned to offer a series of classes on cooking with locally grown, seasonal ingredients.

Looking at her slender body and orangey skin, I wondered whether she was living off carrot soup. I knew that eating an abundance of carrots can result in an excess of beta carotene, which causes the skin to turn orange. It isn't a dangerous condition, but it also doesn't seem healthy for any diet to revolve so narrowly around a single food. I left class wondering whether Sandy's admirable commitment to social justice was intersecting with less salutary eating habits.

I'm still wondering. I admire my students, who enroll in the class because they care about where their food comes from and how it affects the environment and the well-being of the workers who grow and distribute it, as well as about cooking for maximum nutrition and flavor. Many of them work at farmers' markets and community food programs, run eating clubs on campus, blog on

food-related topics, and participate in the university's sustainable-food project.

Every year I see a good number of vegetarians, a few vegans, a smattering of flexitarians, locavores, and, most recently, several "paleos," who claim to follow a diet close to that of their Stone Age ancestors. I've also encountered idiosyncratic foodies, like a young man who shot his own meat whenever possible (no mean feat living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan), the son of local Brooklyn cheesemakers, the heir to a Central California citrus empire, a food photographer and assistant to the French chef Daniel Boulud, a military veteran who had worked with food transports in Iraq, a freegan who often ate from local Dumpsters, and a young man who had cooked in the galley of a Philippine cruise ship. I like to believe that my class gave those students historical perspective and analytic tools to help them think about their experiences and passions. For every lesson I taught, I also learned from their stories, reactions, and insights.

My seminar belongs to the growing field of food studies, which began in the 1990s and analyzes food through a variety of disciplinary lenses. Food studies coincides with, and participates in, a more widespread interest in the culture of food, evident in growing numbers of television shows, cooking competitions, magazines, blogs, Web sites, celebrity chefs, food vacations, and culinary tours. Cookbooks are one of the few growing sectors in an otherwise moribund publishing industry. During her tenure as first lady, Michelle Obama has highlighted issues of nutrition and sustainability by planting a garden at the White House and encouraging exercise and healthy eating among schoolchildren.

Graduate students can enroll in master's programs in gastronomy at Boston University and in food studies at Chatham University and at the University of Adelaide, in Australia, and in the doctoral program in nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University. They can concentrate in the anthropology of food at Indiana University at Bloomington. A growing number of colleges also offer undergraduate majors or concentrations in food studies, as well as opportunities to work on farms and campus gardens.

Colleges and universities now compete for students with increasingly lavish dining halls, some of which provide education in nutrition and environmental sustainability. Given that genetically modified food; monocultures of wheat, corn, and soy; climate change; population growth; the increasing use of pesticides; horrific and unsanitary conditions for raising and slaughtering livestock; and hunger all point to a mounting crisis within our global food system, the study of food could not be more important for this generation.

Almost always, these programs envision the study of agriculture, food, and nutrition as closely tied to concerns with social justice. That gives an ethical bent to the way they approach what would have once seemed like politically neutral topics. Students who come to my seminars often are inflamed by a moral fervor that can be both inspiring and daunting.

I'm also struck by how many of my students subject themselves to strictly regimented diets, while suffering persistent guilt, anxiety, and stress over what, where, and how they eat. I'm concerned that the campus food movement may enable disordered eating by allowing students to conjoin dietary

extremes with commitments to social justice and sustainability.

THAT EATING DISORDERS are prevalent among college students is hardly breaking news. Nor is the fact that fat phobia is alive and well, as was evident in the scandal when Geoffrey F. Miller, an evolutionary psychologist, tweeted his unfortunate remarks about obese graduate applicants. When I was a student, excessive concern with diet was almost exclusively about wanting to be skinny. I count myself among the ranks of the obsessed who exercised to exhaustion, guzzled diet soda, and skipped meals. As long as a food was low in calories, we didn't ask where it was grown, whether it was genetically modified, sprayed with pesticides, or picked by workers living in slavery. That isn't to say that nobody was concerned with those social and environmental problems, but they were much less visible to us than to the current generation of students.

Among today's students, an estimated 20 to 40 percent of women have an eating disorder, and 91 percent have attempted to control their weight through dieting. While always more pronounced among women, eating disorders are also on the rise among male college students. Indeed, eating disorders may be more likely to afflict men when couched in terms of activism and social responsibility. They may also be harder to detect in students who tie diet to environmental or political commitments.

My experiences in the classroom corroborate the statistics. It's hard to teach a class on food and culture without asking students to examine their most deeply held beliefs and habits. This year I began the spring semester with some readings on taste, which the cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes as one of the "proximate senses" that yield our most primary and intimate experiences of the world.

I encouraged students to consider how food defines their cultural and socioeconomic identities, and to think about their shopping, cooking, and eating practices. We discussed how childhood experience shapes taste and culinary identity; who grows, harvests, and distributes the food they eat; the social contexts in which food is prepared and consumed; and how dietary practices vary from culture to culture. We also studied the historical and political forces that gave rise to the contemporary food system: the evolution of American agricultural policy, the invention and standardization of pesticides, the mechanization of farming, the rise of refrigeration, food mixes, packaged and prepared food, poverty and globalization, as well as our focus on health and fitness.

Even as they eagerly absorbed historical knowledge and analytic skills, my students struggled to look at their own dietary practices. On the day we read Yungxiang Yan's fascinating 2008 "Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald's in Beijing," which describes how Chinese consumers encourage their children to eat American fast food because they associate it with modernity and nutritiousness, students saw that conceptions of health vary across time and culture.

On the same day, a student brought a box of strawberries to share. She told us she ate a lot of them because of their high Aggregate Nutrient Density Index score. When somebody commented that the ANDI score had been invented for Whole Foods stores, which profited from encouraging consumers to buy and eat a lot of strawberries, I attempted to link our conversation back to the reading by

asking whether we could see this as yet another example of how standards of health might be culturally specific. The student seemed confused and troubled by my question, and asked if I could direct it to someone else in the group.

I was suddenly aware of the plastic bracelet she wore to measure how many steps she takes per day, and of the container on her desk, holding the remains of a gelatinous brown mass she consumed exactly halfway through each class. It is one thing to recognize the cultural and historical specificity of somebody else's dietary practices; it is quite another to confront a challenge to your own.

The fact that we are seeing a growing number of programs, concentrations, and classes on food is all for the good, since the unsustainability of our global food system presents challenges that will need to be resolved by this new generation. I'm confident that my students are up to the task.

But it is clear that the health of the environment and social world does not always go along with personal health, and that the health of the body cannot be easily equated with healthful attitudes and feelings toward food. To be sure, the very idea that anyone living in a culture so saturated with mixed messages about beauty, diet, and consumption could have an uncomplicated, trouble-free relationship to food must sound terribly naive. At the same time, it is worth putting this kind of healthful eating alongside other aspirations of the campus food movement.

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