

# MAN IS WHAT HE EATS: THE PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS OF EATING

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## **ABSTRACT**

The article is based on Feuerbach's well-known ruling that "man is what he eats", to analyse its possible different meanings, even the most recondited ones. To do this the research winds through a long journey, which begins with a reflection on the role that food has in some Western religions, especially in Judaism and Christianity. Two processes which have deeply characterized the relationship of Western man with food are then examined: the process of industrialization and that of the medicalization of food. Finally, coming to the contemporary, the article goes into the merits of the relationship that different cultures have with food in a multicultural society and offers some indications for alternative models compared to those currently dominant. The conclusion, with Feuerbach and beyond Feuerbach, is that man is yes what he eats, but also what he does not eat and, above all, man eats what he is.

## **KEYWORDS**

Philosophy/Ethics of Food, Industrialisation/Medicalisation of food, Multiculturalism, Food Symbolism, Feuerbach.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Man is what he eats.* This sentence, arguably one of the best-known by Ludwig Feuerbach<sup>1</sup>, first appeared, in 1850, in a review of a book by chemist and physician Jakob Moleschott, in which the philosopher states:

Food becomes blood; blood becomes heart and brain, food for thoughts and feelings. Human food is the foundation of human development and feeling. If you want to improve the people, give them better food instead of declamations against sin. *Man is what he eats.* A man who enjoys only a vegetable diet is only a vegetating being, is incapable of action... (Grün 1874, 90)

In 1866 Feuerbach wrote a short essay that drew upon this sentence even in its very title: *The Mystery of Sacrifice, or Man is what He Eats* (Feuerbach 1990, 26-52). In this second essay, Feuerbach reflects on the topic of religious sacrifice and on the fact that man often sacrifices to the gods food which he himself eats. Performing a sacrifice to the gods thus means feeding the gods. Moreover, the food one chooses to sacrifice to the gods varies depending on the nature and features of the deity for whom the sacrifice is being performed. In this respect, then, a god too is what he or she eats. Finally, Feuerbach observes, if much care is put into the preparation of food, man also sacrifices this care to the gods, which is to say that he sacrifices himself.

Feuerbach's sentence has often been interpreted as encapsulating 19th-century naturalistic materialism. To state that man is what he eats would be to reduce man to his chemical-organic elements – the corollary being that, in order to think better, it is necessary to eat well. However, the human diet is made up of elements that transcend the mere boundaries of biology, and this also emerges from Feuerbach's reflection. If food must be carefully prepared in order to be sacrificed to the gods, according to a clear relation between the quality of the food and the god's characteristics, then Claude Lévi-Strauss is correct in arguing that it is not enough for food to be good to eat, but food must also be good to think with (Lévi-Strauss 1958).

Over the course of the 20th century, cultural anthropology sought to trace the boundaries of the edible and the inedible, as the product of various balances of power between nature and culture, and it invariably ran up against the fact that not everything which is biologically edible is also edible from a cultural perspective (Harris 1958). Through this process of separation and recomposition of the

<sup>1</sup> Feuerbach himself writes: "The proposition: 'man is what he eats', which I expressed in a review of Moleschott's *Lehre der Nahrungsmittel für das Volk*, 1850, is the only sentence from my writings which are well-known as being 'long-forgotten' and which certain people have ringing in their ears even today, but only as a dissonant note, as an insult to the honour of German philosophy and culture" (Feuerbach 1990, 27).

material and the symbolical, the biological and the social, components of food, dietary prohibitions, rejections, and acts of deprivation can find different explanations, undergo transformations, and be associated with different sacred and mundane contexts. To this day, the search for food that is both good to eat and good to think with is far from over.

## 2. FOOD IN JUDAISM

Jewish culture has always stressed the distinction between what can and what cannot be eaten, between what is pure and what is impure. In particular, in *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy* we find detailed instructions as to what food is permissible and what is not. Since time immemorial, Jewish cuisine has followed the rules for *kosher* food, which observant Jews still abide by:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Say to the Israelites: ‘Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud.’ “There are some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is ceremonially unclean for you. The hyrax, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you” (Leviticus, 11: 1-8).

In order to safeguard their rich and distinctive identity, communities of observant Jews uphold the injunctions of the holy law to this day – including the connection between eating practices and divine commandments. Besides, the material aspect and the supra-material one are present from Abraham’s sacrifice to the food that Jacob offers his father Isaac in order to obtain a blessing, prosperity, and an inheritance. His twin brother Esau, on the contrary, sells his birthright for a dish of lentils (an episode that leads one to reflect on the values which human beings choose in their lives). To this day, observant Jews do not eat the sciatic nerve, in memory of Jacob, who was made lame in his fight with the Angel – a fight which earned him the name Israel, meaning “he who struggles with God”.

The Torah instructs not to cook a kid in its mother’s milk and not to use butter as a condiment for any kind of meat. Jews keep two sets of plates and dishes in the fridge, and even separate sponges, for dairy and meat. Other instructions governing *kasherut*, Jewish food laws, apply to plant food. According to Scripture, every firstborn belongs to the Lord, so it is forbidden to eat the first fruit of any new tree. But the best-known prohibition concerns blood:

I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people.

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

Therefore I say to the Israelites, "None of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood."

Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth, because the life of every creature is its blood. That is why I have said to the Israelites, "You must not eat the blood of any creature, because the life of every creature is its blood; anyone who eats it must be cut off." (*Leviticus*, 17: 10-14)

### 3. CHRISTIANITY'S DIETARY REVOLUTION

Food taboos, and indeed the categories of pure and impure, are foreign to the Western world, in Europe as much as in North America. Here I shall only mention the fact that a development in consciousness and technology occurred that enabled man to free himself from religious trappings, and organise and orient his individual and social life in a different way. Yet, the lack of prohibitions with respect to food, just like the refusal to distinguish between pure and impure things, including pure and impure individuals, still reflects a religious dimension. Indeed, Christianity overturned the dietary taboos that the Bible had established for the people of Israel and which, in many respects, are also upheld by the Islamic faith. Matthew recalls the words by which Jesus described the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, who honoured God with their mouth yet not their heart, when he told the multitude:

What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles them (*Matthew*, 15: 11).

This represents not merely an anthropological and social change, but an ontological one; for what matters to the Divine and to human beings is the heart of man, his inwardness, not his external practices:

Again Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them."

After he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about this parable.

"Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a person from the outside can defile them? For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body."

He went on: "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft,

murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.” (Mark, 7: 14-23)

The law is founded on God’s loyal love for man and on the latter’s love for God. After the Babylonian exile, rabbinical rules had progressively been introduced alongside the law, initially to facilitate the observance of the latter. In Jesus’ day, however, rabbinical rules had often gone as far as to replace the law itself. God’s Word and its values were being neglected. Drawing upon Samuel<sup>2</sup>, Jesus urged his audience to obey the Word: the Word above all.

In his letters, St Paul repeatedly focuses on the issue: those who forbid us from eating certain foods are certainly impostors, “for everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (1 Timothy, 4: 4).

In Christian asceticism, mysticism, and folklore, traces survive of a form of control over food consumption that goes hand in hand with the governing of bodily pleasures. Even in the absence of rigid rules, dietary habits are modelled in accordance with the distinction between periods of fasting and periods of feasting. From this perspective, however, the concept of dietary prohibition disappears and the focus becomes the symbolic value of food, the assumption that carnal elements can be translated into human dynamics: from the giving of oneself to the acceptance of others.

#### **4. THE INDUSTRIALISATION OF FOOD: THE LOSS OF THE SACRED AND THE ENDURANCE OF THE SYMBOLICAL**

The processing of foods is part of the history of domestic traditions, which involve all the members of a family – if nothing else, as witnesses of this process. The processes of preparing and preserving foods and the various forms of food supply marked the daily rhythms of societies for centuries until industrialisation and the urbanisation that accompanied it profoundly changed things. Starting with the process of the industrialisation of the food sector in the 1950s, the agrifood revolution that shaped the next twenty years radically altered food consumption and supply habits, particularly in the new urban contexts. Sweeping industrialisation affected everyday rituals and eliminated the witnesses to the process of food production. Industrial food is removed from the domestic sphere and becomes an object to be manufactured, stored, advertised, sold, consumed, and disposed of. Industry becomes responsible for the standardisation of food products circulating at a global level, showing that it is possible to erase differences between foods and to level tastes.

<sup>2</sup>“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel, 15, 22).

The new productive processes have inspired new modes of consumption, as in the case of fast food restaurants, which are all perfectly alike, and which offer food products – always the same – with lightning-fast delivery, for a pittance. In the United States, the spread of fast food joints occurred in parallel to the initial development of the food industry, of which they are an extension: for they are based on the application of the Fordist system to dining. Through assembly lines, they are able to keep costs down and to speed up production processes, thereby satisfying the needs of customers, who get a product that is always perfect, always the same, while also having the opportunity to eat meat more frequently thanks to the low prices.

Fast food has become a symbol of capitalist consumerism. The very term evokes the distinguishing features of this dining model: the fast preparation and consumption of food. The speed at which fast food blots out other food cultures is matched only by the speed at which food is eaten within such restaurants.

Ultimately, this is a commercial operation based on time: fast food compresses dining time and leisure time, hunger and play. This time will always be limited and concentrated, so it must be spent well, through a meal capable of satisfying adults while entertaining younger customers. Furthermore, being suited to managers, office workers, and families alike, fast food lends itself to mass consumption and serves as a social leveller. The most revealing and famous expression of this model is the McDonald's chain, which – significantly – has opted for a playful and circus-like self-image in advertising. This model embodies American philosophy, by contrast to the European, which is more connected to tradition, local identity, and family relationships. In this regard, Vito Teti notes that:

this model has led to a profound change of the role embodied by food, which in certain contexts is serving increasingly less as a social bond, an educational factor, a means of socialisation and sharing, a highly symbolical element, and a form of initiation into life. It no longer constitutes a source of identification with a place, but is rather a loss of places, of one's relationship with the earth, with production, and with the seasons (Teti 2019, 107).

More generally, industrial models of food production and consumption have come over time to propose an increasingly individualistic eating style: industrialisation most notably has an impact on the opportunities to meet and socially interact with others – but also the contact with and knowledge of a specific territory – that food provides at every stage of its supply chain. Increasingly atomised into single, ready-to-eat packets, food is escaping shared preparation and sharing, in favour of a solitary, rapid, and inattentive mode of consumption. Food is being reduced to its nutritional value, broken down into the macro-nutrients and recommended daily allowance percentages on packets. The ritual of dining is being redefined according to increasingly personal dynamics that are gradually losing that

sacred quality which – albeit in a secularised form – has always been associated with the rural or artisan, manual or domestic, processing of food.

The convivial aspect is greatly weakened; yet, paradoxically perhaps, even in its most reductionistic, nutrition-centred form, food still carries a symbolic component that strongly influences its signification. As with all industrial products, the symbolical and identity-defining value of a food commodity is absorbed by a brand, and influences both its use value and its exchange value, conveying a social status that carries such iconic power as to overshadow even taste (consider the food industry icons of the 1980s). However, in more recent times, the power of brands no longer appears to suffice and goes hand in hand with the need for a narrative (Grassi and Viviani 2016).

## **5. THE CRITICISM OF FOOD INDUSTRIALISATION AND THE RETURN TO NATURE**

Over time, the alienation of consumption has given rise to a deep nostalgia, fuelling the desire for a kind of return to nature (Lepiller 2013). This yearning for a return to authenticity is the outcome of a sustained critical campaign against the food industry, which from as early as the 1970s has unfolded on various levels: from the “dietary” and “toxicological” level, whereby the industry is accused of poisoning people through junk-food, to the “environmental” level, which has more to do with exposing the environmental damage caused by industrial systems of production and offering possible models to restore peace between human beings and the environment (Larrère and Larrère 1997). Criticism of the food industry is also informed by aesthetic, political, and moral concerns. These are articulated in a series of arguments questioning the ethics of “industrial imperialism”: its deceitful advertising, exploitation of labour and of the resources of economically more fragile countries, the destruction of local traditions, and the exploitation of animals in factory farms (Chatriot, Hilton and Chessel 2004).

In an effort to reunite culture and nature by overcoming the rift caused by industrialisation, food is increasingly being described – well beyond its nutritional profile – in such a way as to convey values that transcend the product itself, set it in the context of its origin, and pay homage to the ideas, work, and care that lie behind its production. However, this narrative too conceals certain ambiguities. In the face of the collective boom in aestheticising and gourmet food preparations, countless occasions can now be found on which food is excessively dematerialised, imagined, represented, and recounted; in such a way, food is de facto being offered at a high price as one way – among others – to pander to individual tastes and needs for satiety and well-being (La Cecla 2016).

## 6. TOWARDS DIETARY INDIVIDUALISATION: FOOD MEDICALISATION PROCESSES

While not motivated by religious prohibitions, the distinction between what can and cannot be eaten in modern times has found a new basis in the medicalisation of food. We must eat what is healthy and avoid what is unhealthy. This process of medicalisation has led medicine to have a profound impact on sectors of society that were originally of little medical interest (Petersen and Bunton 1997). The list of domains that over time have come to be affected by medicine is open and destined to grow. However, to this day eating food consumption is certainly one of the areas most involved in this process, whose origins are intertwined with the history of the food industry and the evolution of mores.

At first, the serially produced and standardised products of the food industry, commercialised through the great distribution chains, were welcomed with widespread trust. After the initial enthusiasm generated by the economic boom, in the 1970s and 1980s the first health concerns drew attention to crucial questions such as diet-related illnesses, the need to control intensive farming and to regulate the market, and the potentially hazardous or harmless nature of entire food groups. The general mobilisation that followed involved industrial lobbies, the world of politics, and consumer groups, in an effort which was certainly influenced by commercial interests. Medicine and research were here called to safeguard both proper dietary practices and legitimate market demands (Fischler 1990).

Greater consumer options went hand in hand with an increase in health concerns over risks of virus contamination and toxicity, a concern exacerbated by environmental crises and genuine epidemics. In the 1980s and 1990s, a series of emergencies occurred, leading to more or less local psychoses involving individual or collective responsibilities. This was the case, for instance, with the spread of AIDS, infected blood transfusions, the Chernobyl environmental disaster, the epidemics that broke out in factory farms, and the use of pesticides and GMOs (Adamiec 2016).

Consumer behaviours gradually changed: with the dawn of the hyper-consumption era in the 1990s, the initial materialism oriented towards the affirmation of one's social status gradually gave way to a new "consumerism" focusing on consumers' well-being. The emphasis shifted from objects and possessions to experiences and emotions, and the impact of products on one's style and quality of life in terms of comfort and the expression of a mode of being (Lipovetsky 2006).

The growing interest in gastronomic hedonism went hand in hand with an increased perception of a widespread risk. On the one hand, this encouraged individuals to become better informed, increasing their freedom of choice; on the other, it promoted the implementation of preventive strategies. The concept of health merged with the vaguer one of well-being and became an object of – and



justification for – investments in several primary consumption and leisure-time sectors; subjects started witnessing and participating in the medicalisation of food, tourism, aesthetic culture, and sport.

Through the intertwining of these phenomena, tendencies such as the obsession with personal appearance, anxieties tied to prevention, and performance enhancement have emerged as recurrent features of the contemporary approach to everyday life, in relation to the whole sphere of basic needs.

Within the framework of these recurrent elements, the search for and spread of food that is as healthy as possible has taken the form of a range of practices and products, leading to the development of a well-defined language with a considerable social, symbolic, and material impact (Ostuzzi and Luxardi 2009).

By establishing diet at the root of medicine itself, Hippocrates suggested that food was “the primary medicine”. The ancient exhortation “let food be your medicine and let medicine be your food” suggests that cooking, diet, and medicine have not always been separate disciplines, but rather share a common yet at the same time problematic origin: they enable us to gain access to the bodily domain and for centuries have been vying for primacy over it (Foucault 1984).

In the modern West, the right to establish what is good and bad in relation to food has ultimately been assigned to medicine. The recognition of nutrition as a specialist discipline, in the late 19th century, has made it the only authority when it comes to defining physiologically correct conduct in terms of “balanced nutritional intake”. However, in the contemporary world, doctors, chefs, and companies are increasingly presenting food as something “healing”, as an ally to one’s health, thereby implementing a symbolical and conceptual shift: food is acquiring the power of drugs, drugs the qualities of food. Not only that, but their forms and modes of administration are also being inverted: nourishment can be provided by pills or other concoctions; likewise, “ordinary” – and preferably non-processed – food can boast the same healing power as drugs. In other words, those seeking treatment can find it by eating, while those seeking to nourish themselves ultimately end up ingesting quasi-pharmaceutical concoctions<sup>3</sup>.

All this also highlights the possibility that food, broadly understood, may have detrimental consequences for health, and hence that there might be healthy foods and unhealthy ones. Foods are regarded as good by virtue not merely of what they contain, but also of what they lack – hence the rhetorical use of the word ‘without’ that also spills over to other foods which are naturally devoid of this or that particular

<sup>3</sup> ‘Nutraceutical’ is a pharmacological and dietary category that includes food supplements, functional foods, and ‘pharma food’. Here the emphasis is on the properties of specific nutrients, which leads to capsules obtained by chemical synthesis, meal replacements, enriched processed foods, and unprocessed foods with a particularly high concentration of potentially beneficial nutrients to be viewed within the same category (Grassi and Viviani 2016).

harmful ingredient that is being targeted. The spread of products without specific ingredients on the one hand helps people with food allergies and intolerances in their choices; on the other, it constitutes a potential source of attraction for a broader consumer base, serving as a marketing strategy.

The process of medicalisation of food promotes control over the everyday and vital practice of eating, since this is closely associated with the maintenance of good health; through the use of artificial supplements, optimisation is encouraged. This also leads to an increased perception of food as a noxious agent, which can lead to preventive behaviours – at times bordering on obsession – that spread through the exchange of information online<sup>4</sup>.

One of the consequences of this equivalence between food and medicine is a loss of spontaneity in relation to what we eat. After all, we take medicines because they have been prescribed, and we take them according to the dosage rigorously established by a doctor, whereas the act of eating is intrinsically associated with pleasure and spontaneity. A medical perspective reduces food to its physical-chemical elements, which can positively interact with our organic matter. The reduction of food to the strictly nutritional level, itself deriving from the implosion of the definitions of food and medicine which may overlap yet are still distinct, paves the way in the field of food consumption to the medicalisation of health itself (Conrad 2005; Conrad 2007). Through the rhetorical filter of the “industry of nature”, the cosmetic field becomes juxtaposed to the aesthetic, which in turn becomes blurred with the ethical. The value of food is confused with that of nutrients, so much so that the people who feel the greatest need to change their dietary habits for preventive purposes are generally healthy individuals who find the prospect of preserving their health through their everyday consumer choices appealing. Since it is possible to improve health through the medicinal use of foods, health is becoming the new frontier of lay salvation (Sfez 2001). The purpose of control over food is dominion: over the body, over time, over the mind, over relationships, through a contemporary form of the will to power, in which food becomes involved as an accomplice. This “surplus power” sought in consumption was already foreseen by Roland Barthes in a 1961 essay on the semiotics of nutrition:

<sup>4</sup> This is the case with *orthorexia nervosa* (from *orthos*-, correct, and *-oreksis*, appetite – modelled after ‘anorexia’), a neologism coined by Steven Bratman, an American dietician specialising in alternative treatments. After examining the phenomenology of compulsive “healthful eating”, he came to argue that it needs to be included among eating disorders. His theory has been heavily criticised and the phenomenon has not been included in the DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*) among nutrition and eating disorders. Bratman’s observations, which are based on a collection of data and testimonies from online communities, has nonetheless led to the spread of the term “orthorexia” to designate as pathological a range of behaviours that are not yet officially acknowledged as such (Bratman and Knight 2000; Donini, Marsili, Graziani et al. 2004; Donini, Marsili, Graziani et al. 2005; Nicolosi 2007; Rangel, Dukeshire and MacDonald 2012).

This nutritional rationalizing is aimed in a specific direction. Modern nutritional science (at least according to what can be observed in France) is not bound to any moral values, such as ascetism, wisdom or purity, but on the contrary, to values of *power*. The energy furnished by a consciously worked out diet is mythically directed, it seems, toward an adaptation of man to the modern world (Barthes 1997, 25).

## 7. FOOD AT THE CROSSROADS BETWEEN THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY AND CULTURAL PLURALISM

One proof of the endurance of the relational role of food as a social bond is provided by the highly topical phenomenon of migration. When we examine this phenomenon, we note that the last element connected to material culture that the new generations of people with an immigrant background tend to forget is food – food culture. There are two sides to this process: on the one hand, it is possible to lose part of the specific features of one’s own food culture; on the other, eating the same food can serve as a way to bring people with different backgrounds together.

Sociology and cultural anthropology studies have shown that food is the cultural element which most easily enables identification. It makes social groups visible by marking its boundaries, differences, and specificities (Diasio and Julien 2019). This visibility can be associated both with closed identitarian boundaries (Sartori 2002), as in the case of the dietary rules followed by observant Jews, and with flexible boundaries, which can leave some room for exchanges and hybridisation (Habermas 1994). Vito Teti notes:

Through food, a relation of cultural continuity is maintained with one’s homeland, also through the collective rights of communities, such as lunch on feast days or Sundays. Food is a solid bridge to one’s own native land, it is an effective medicine against nostalgia. The preparation and consumption of certain dishes, linked to tradition, enables us to recreate the family milieu we have left behind; through food, we can embark on a journey that comforts the stomach but also the brain: it nourishes hopes and expectations, it enables us to live an experience that transcends all physical and temporal boundaries.

He continues:

A person’s connection with his or her native land is preserved in a living and direct way, since food has a physical nature and involves all five senses: smell, sight, touch, taste, and hearing. Food evokes and somehow represents an anthropological place, made up of words, memories, recollections, stories, people, and relationships. Through eating, the nostalgia of one’s place of origin unfolds, is consumed, is resolved, and is sometimes strengthened. A person gets to measure the kind of connection he or she continues to have with it (Teti 2019, 84).

At family meals, just as on those occasions on which people celebrate the rites punctuating life within a specific cultural tradition, the immigrant – particularly the first-generation immigrant – forced to explore and, at least partly, assimilate the

content of a new, different culture, is no longer a foreigner, but rediscovers the atmosphere, elements, scents, and colours of a familiar reality. This is why, compared to language, where an immigrant must, willy-nilly, at least temporarily set his native tongue aside in order to face a new social and cultural reality, eating behaviours prove more resistant to assimilation efforts. During the integration process, subjects may limit the use of their native language to the private sphere (family and friends), but they will find it much harder to replace their eating habits with those of their new country. The adoption of new foods is a slow way of approaching a new culture, and often this process of adaptation is sped up by the unavailability of certain ingredients or their costliness.

Tasting unknown dishes, while often motivated by curiosity, can represent a highly significant act, as it bears witness to the intention to get to know and understand a different reality: it is an act of trust whereby a person introduces into his or her body a new, unknown food, an element from a different culture. The richer and more solid the culinary tradition of a people, or ethnic group, the more open and curious it will be when it comes to novelties. Paraphrasing Simone Weil, we may argue that those who are well-rooted and confident of their own identity and heritage will be more open to exchanges and mutual engagement with those who are different (Abbots 2016). By contrast, those who are uprooted fear they might be overwhelmed and see difference as a threat (Weil 1952).

The new generations - immigrants' children and grandchildren - certainly appear to be more open to exchanges with different cultures. This is especially the case in big cosmopolitan cities, where even culinary specificities have become widespread and blurred (starting from the scents of different dishes).

Through this breakdown and recomposition of culinary codes, kebab has come to challenge the hamburger, by offering a 'wrapped' version of the grilled meat typical of Arab and Middle-Eastern traditions - often very different traditions - that has been standardised through the fast food model, to meet a broad range of tastes. It is interesting to note how particular ethnic minorities are carving out a place for themselves in their host culture through their cuisines. The latter, however, are invariably undergoing forms of adaptation, by adopting already widespread and consolidated consumption models, challenging them in a competitive fashion, or hybridising their own flavours through the use of local ingredients (Oussedik 2012). The popularity of Chinese cuisine in Italy certainly owes a lot to a sort of adaptation in terms of the choice of ingredients and presentation of dishes to suit the tastes of Mediterranean Italian cuisine. If this were not the case, Italians would be reluctant to fully experience food from the Chinese tradition. Yet a different approach has been adopted with the "all you can eat" model, which proves appealing on account of the wide range of food it offers at a very low price. From Japanese sushi, it has gone on to influence other local dining formulas. Other examples could be drawn from the culinary traditions of other immigrant cultures.

Across the centuries, food culture has undergone countless transformations, including radical ones, for instance through the introduction of spices. Other, less “invasive” changes are attributed to the hybridisation springing from migration processes associated with the phenomenon of colonisation. Indian and British cooking are two multicultural cuisines resulting from a complex two-way exchange between these countries. Curry powder, far from being Indian, is a British invention – this condiment, which spread in the mess halls of the British army, was unknown in India prior to Lord Robert Clive’s arrival – while the celebrated Worcester sauce is of Indian origin. The famous milky tea that is still served in many English living rooms also acquired huge popularity in the Subcontinent, so much so that chaiwallahs (tea-vendors) started setting up stalls at every bus stop. Moreover, it is important to stress that, although Great Britain does not have a single tea plantation, this beverage is one of the symbols of British identity – consider the five o’clock tea break. This practice was exported to India and other British colonies in which tea was cultivated and harvested. Thanks to the bond between these countries, today, after the colonial era, in the very centre of London we can find numerous Indian restaurants catering to the tastes of the native population (although we should bear in mind that, by now, the British capital is home to at least 80 different ethnicities and is essentially cosmopolitan in character). Indeed, chicken tikka masala – to take another example – is almost regarded as a traditional British dish that every good housewife knows how to cook. Food historians disagree as to the origins of this well-known and widespread dish, but even if we assume that it was invented in Great Britain, it is most likely that it is the creation of a chef from Bangladesh.

“It is wrong to believe,” Montanari explains, “that identity and exchange are two mutually opposed concepts and that the latter is a hindrance to the preservation of one’s own cultural heritage.” (Montanari 2002, VII-VIII) In fact, there can be no identity without otherness; it is precisely knowledge of the Other, of what we are not, that enables us to fully grasp our own identity. The identity of different cultures rests on engagement with the Other, which is crucial for self-definition (Bernardi 2001, 64).

As history shows, food culture is characterised by numerous exchanges, encounters, and forms of syncretism (Almerico 2014). After all, cooking offers the easiest way to access a culture, and food is a remarkable means of self-representation and communication, insofar as it easily enables subjects to approach a different reality: eating other people’s food is certainly easier than learning a foreign language. However, while apparently less demanding, such behaviour forces us to abandon, if only temporarily, our own cultural system; and this requires a considerable degree of trust in others, in those who are preparing and offering us food we are not familiar with (Montanari 2012).

## 8. ALTERNATIVE MODELS

For the past decade, if not longer, Europe and particularly Italy – which boasts a highly varied culinary tradition, and one widely appreciated at a global level – have witnessed the rise of slow food, which clearly stands in opposition to fast food and was established as a cultural movement in Bra, near Cuneo, in 1986. This movement is envisaged as a response to what has been dubbed as “junk food” and to the spread of the fast food *modus*; it presents itself in opposition to the frantic habits of modern life – even outside the sphere of food consumption – with the aim of studying, defending, and promoting the agricultural and food traditions of every culture. This model has encouraged the rediscovery of ‘small-scale’ products through the habit of visiting local dining venues focusing on the foods and dishes typical of local culinary traditions – just consider the spread of agritourism. In Italy, at least, this model has no doubt mitigated the success of fast food – at any rate in small urban and social contexts, which undoubtedly make up most of the country.

Another model that defends traditions, while at the same time providing opportunities for mutual discovery and exchange between different cultures (as already noted), is represented by ethnic restaurants. These are becoming increasingly widespread, especially in big cities, and significantly contribute to the process of integration. The sector of foreign restaurants offers an important opportunity for immigrants seeking to find a place in their host society – a fruitful alternative to other activities and, at times, to moonlighting. As already noted, they contribute to introducing host societies to new food cultures. These commercial enterprises represent the first real means of emancipation for immigrants. With little available capital and little or no familiarity with their new environment, these people find in cafes or small restaurants within their ethnic communities their first real means of economic success and social recognition. Food is at once an international communication system and an avenue for the emancipation of minorities, which enables immigrants to obtain immediate economic returns, not least through the employment of relatives.

Finally, the ethical challenges posed by food in relation to contemporary society are fostering a new awareness when it comes to eating and are further highlighting the need for models capable of newly establishing food at the centre of practices that have a considerable social impact, both as a common resource and as a means of communication and exchange between human beings, between different cultures, and between man and nature (Thackara 2017). Some of these practices involve social agriculture, educational farms, urban vegetable gardens, therapeutic horticulture, new models of communal distribution of locally produced food, and even models for the social integration of all forms of diversity through dining. To these we should add measures to limit waste, circular economy models for the reuse of leftovers, and the production of biomaterials.

The strong points of these projects include their hybridisation between urban and rural elements, their social and cultural inclusiveness, their integration of analogical and digital know-how, and cross-generational encounters and exchanges. These projects, which often start from grass-roots associations and small communities, operate within the urban fabric and inspire public policies at a local level. In various ways, by emphasising the value of hospitality, these new models promote solidarity, nourish new forms of social cohesion and territorial development, and transform the social fabric, to the point of having an impact on the very metabolism of cities.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

In the light of what has been argued so far, it is clear that food is never simply a matter of nutrition; on the contrary, it must always be envisaged within the context of care – rather than of mere consumption – as an element inspiring specific practices, encounters, gestures, and everyday rituals.

Despite the many changes in production, communication, and consumption, we have seen how food has preserved its essential dimensions: the nutritional, symbolical, and relational levels have been redefined, sometimes engendering great imbalances through the emphasising of one level to the detriment of the others, yet they never cease to characterise each and every meal, whether it be concretely experienced or only imagined. Ultimately, what we are dealing with are the inherent characteristics of each person, holistically understood as a bodily, spiritual, and social whole.

To deal with the consumption of food is to deal with more than mere subsistence. Food brings a series of markers of the human dimension into play, such as dignity, respect, and the accommodation of others' needs – and this is particularly evident if we bear in mind the first mode of nourishment, namely breastfeeding.

The otherness which food points to is the otherness of food itself. Eating offers the primary opportunity to encounter, discover, and merge with the Other. In the process of incorporation, otherness becomes established through the more basic dimension of the act of nourishment, which is always a way in which something external and unfamiliar comes to be known via contact. Exploring man's relationship with food, from childhood discoveries to social practices, thus means understanding how man relates with otherness, with that external reality represented by food – one's own or that of others.

Multicultural society merely confirms those anthropological balances that have been at work ever since primitive human communities – every human group, even the smallest one, is marked by specific symbolic dynamics, and among these, those related to the consumption of food stand out. Contemporary technological

societies, though they claim to be ‘emancipating’ themselves from early mankind’s mode of acting, merely follow in its footsteps. Medicine itself is part of this ‘return to the origins’, insofar as its premise lies not in a generic idea of health (such as the health of one’s organism), but in taking care of others: from a conception focusing on the organism, it is necessary to develop a holistic view of health.

Scientific and sociological studies are increasingly stressing the need for an encounter between of different disciplines to bridge the rift between nutrition and nourishment in the broader sense, so as to bring today’s marked individualisation back within a collective dimension (Poulain 2013).

Having reached the end of our investigation, we can now return to Feuerbach and his famous statement that “Man is what he eats”. To this sentence we should certainly add that “man is also what he does not eat”, as we have come to realise the fundamental role played by dietary prohibitions in the history of culture, from ancient religious taboos to their overcoming, and their return in the form of the medicalisation of food and orthorexia.

Alongside this crucial addition, it is necessary to read the sentence “man is what he eats” in two senses, by inverting subject and object. Man identifies with what he eats, because he assimilates foods and makes it become part of himself. But it is equally true that “man eats what he is”: for, as I have repeatedly stressed, man needs to eat food that is also good to think with, food that has received his care, which is to say food in which he can see himself reflected. “Man eats what he is” means that man must be able to rediscover himself in the food he eats.

In an enlightening essay on Feuerbach’s text, Andrea Tagliapietra reflects on the word play behind the German sentence “*Mensch ist, was er isst*”, which is essentially untranslatable. Tagliapietra writes:

By translating “man is what he eats”, we render the main meaning of the formula, yet not the allusive one conveyed not by the meaning but by the signifier of the words. It stems from the assonance, in German, between *ist* (= “is”, third person singular of the present indicative tense of the verb “*sein*, “to be”) and *isst*, i.e. *isst* with a reduplicated “s” (= “eats”, the same tense and person but of the verb *essen*, “to eat”). To provide a better idea of what proves untranslatable here, we might turn to the Latin language, which through a word play similar to the German – indeed, an even more sophisticated one, since the ambiguity in this case is not merely phonetic but even graphic – enables us to turn Feuerbach’s formula into *homo est quod est*, where the first *est* is the third person of the present indicative tense of the verb *esse*, while the second *est* is the third person singular of the verb *edere*, “to eat”. In this case, the graphic ambiguity enables us to read the “formula” in a perfectly mirror-like way, so we can translate it both as “man is what he eats” and as “man eats what he is” (Tagliapietra 2017, XXVIII-XXIX).



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