Extreme Foods: Expanding the Boundaries of Taste

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - The purpose of this paper is to explore variations in individuals’ food preferences as examined through an analysis of people's encounters with new and unusual food. The theoretical foundation of this study is the omnivore's paradox (Fischler 1980, 1988; Rozin 1976), which juxtaposes the attraction and distrust with which human beings (and other omnivores) approach new foods. The main thesis of the Omnivore's paradox is that the survival of omnivores depends on a predisposition to seek novelty and variety (neophilia), juxtaposed with a natural distrust of the unfamiliar (neophobia). In an evolving world, the durability of a species depends on its ability to adapt to the changes in its environment. Still, at the same time, the omnivorous creature must operate caution as it samples new options, taking care not to introduce harmful or poisonous substances into its system.

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The purpose of this paper is to explore variations in individuals’ food preferences as examined through an analysis of people’s encounters with new and unusual food. The theoretical foundation of this study is the omnivore’s paradox (Fischler 1980, 1988; Rozin 1976), which juxtaposes the attraction and distrust with which human beings (and other omnivores) approach new foods. The main thesis of the “omnivore’s paradox” is that the survival of omnivores depends on a predisposition to seek novelty and variety (neophilia), juxtaposed with a natural distrust of the unfamiliar (neophobia). In an evolving world, the durability of a species depends on its ability to adapt to the changes in its environment. Still, at the same time, the omnivorous creature must operate caution as it samples new options, taking care not to introduce harmful or poisonous substances into its system.

In the U.S. today we are exposed to an unprecedented variety of food, due to agricultural and commercial innovations, improved transportation and distribution systems, and global trade. According to Rozin (1999), we currently know very little about how people acquire food preferences. Individuals are born into a culture of biological and cultural tastes, and while socialization surely plays an important role in the acquisition of tastes, the correlation between the food preferences of parents and their adult offspring has been shown to be surprisingly low (Rozin 1991). The phenomenon by which consumers enlist tactics to protect themselves and their families from unsafe food in the face of an environment of increasing food choice has been called “strategies of confidence” (Sellerberg 1991) or “coping strategies” (Beardsworth and Keil 1997). These analyses provide important insight in addressing how consumers evaluate the safety hazards of unknown foods in the face of food risks, such as GM foods and Mad Cow Disease. However, in addition to food safety, there are surely other dimensions that consumers evaluate when encountering new and unusual food items that are also important to recognize.

The main focus of this study is the experiences of consumers with new and unusual foods. Data for this study were analyzed from transcripts of 250 face-to-face interviews. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by trained undergraduate students of a large midwestern public university, with the aid of an interview guide. The interview transcripts were systematically analyzed, and the findings of the research were organized around three central questions that emerged from the depth interviews. How do consumers define “extreme” foods? What are the meanings that consumers derive from eating or avoiding “extreme” foods? Under what conditions are consumers most likely to sample “extreme” foods, and how do consumers characterize these experiences?

The findings show that the list of foods that U.S. consumers consider to be “extreme” is highly individualistic, but commonly includes endangered animals, animals that are viewed as pets, game, animal organs, raw meat, spicy foods, and odd food combinations. While the demarcation of edible and nonedible is too diverse and idiosyncratic to provide easy categorization, bipolar characteristics that seem to aid consumers in classifying foods according to edibility include familiar/nonfamiliar, safe/unsafe, and bland/spicy. How consumers approach food that they consider unusual depends on individual evaluations and characteristics as informed by social forces. In particular, the meanings derived by experiences with unusual foods are influenced by the degree to which the consumer can feel safe ingesting the food, and the raw emotions evoked by the encounters with the food.

An individual characteristic that appears to be of paramount importance in every encounter with new foods is the extent to which a consumer is a neophilic who embraces novel food items or a neophobic who avoids unknown foods. The findings seem to indicate that this characteristic is more of a dichotomous trait than one of gradation, as most respondents readily self-classified themselves into one of the two extreme positions of “willing to try anything” or “picky.” Neophilic consumers are more likely to view unusual foods in a positive light and to embrace situations involving new foods as “adventures.” Neophobic consumers, on the other hand, view unfamiliar foods with disgust and purposely avoid events in which they might be expected to taste unusual foods.

The findings also shed light on conditions that result in changes in food tastes. The contexts in which consumers are most likely to encounter and sample new foods includes incidents involving travel, while dining in trusted restaurants, and during social events in which the consumer feels pressure to conform. As Fischler would predict, encounters with new food often involve an evaluation of food safety. Still, many experiences with novel foods occur in situations in which food safety anxieties must yield to more pressing concerns. In fact, as the findings show, many experiences in which people find themselves consuming unusual foods actually occur by accident. As such, the food preferences that people form from birth are altered and amended as they live out their lives while engaged in social relationships with others. Altogether, this study underscores the influence of psycho-social forces on food tastes, with neophilic/neophobic tendencies and the formation, maintenance, and alterations of identities and relationships informing encounters with novel foods.

References