My Favorite Recipes: Recreating Emotions and Memories Through Cooking

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT - Nostalgia, a yearning for the idealized past (Havlena and Holak 1991; Hirsch 1992; Holbrook 1993), can be evoked by any object (Holbrook and Schindler 2004). Food, with its ability to engage multiple senses, may be particularly effective at transporting consumers back in time. While consumers, marketers, and popular writers, including cookbook authors, connect food with nostalgia and memories, the relationship between food and nostalgia has not been studied in a scholarly fashion in the consumer research literature. This research seeks to help fill that void by exploring why consumers choose recipes as their favorites, with a particular emphasis on recipes associated with nostalgia and memories.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/9107/volumes/v32/NA-32

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

Nostalgia, a yearning for the idealized past (Havlena and Holak 1991; Hirsch 1992; Holbrook 1993), can be evoked by any object (Holbrook and Schindler 2004). Food, with its ability to engage multiple senses, may be particularly effective at transporting consumers back in time. While consumers, marketers, and popular writers, including cookbook authors, connect food with nostalgia and memories, the relationship between food and nostalgia has not been studied in a scholarly fashion in the consumer research literature. This research seeks to help fill that void by exploring why consumers choose recipes as their favorites, with a particular emphasis on recipes associated with nostalgia and memories.

Holak and Havlena (1998, p. 218) define nostalgia as “a positively valanced complex feeling, emotion, or mood produced by reflection on things (objects, persons, experiences, ideas) associated with the past.” The “idealized past emotions [characteristic of nostalgia] become displaced onto inanimate objects, sounds, smells and tastes that were experienced concurrently with the emotions” (Hirsch 1992, p. 390). The actual experienced object, or perhaps even its substitute, has the power to re- evoke these emotions. Nostalgia is not only evoked by the personally experienced past, but it may also be evoked by collective understandings of the past, a past which even may have occurred before an individual was born (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Stern 1992). Stern (1992) distinguishes between personal nostalgia and historical nostalgia. Personal nostalgia idealizes “the personally remembered past;” whereas, historical nostalgia “idealizes the imaginatively recreated past” (p. 16).

Consumption artifacts are important cues in concretizing the past (Belk 1991; Havlena and Holak 1991), even when the past is vicariously experienced (Stern 1992). These consumption artifacts, such as recipes or food, may stimulate nostalgic emotions, and may also evoke “webs of associations” and memories (Belk 1991, p. 116). That is, objects may serve as retrieval cues to stimulate memories in storage (e.g., Roediger 1999). Given that there are different types of nostalgia that may be experienced, i.e., personal and historical, different nostalgia types indicate theoretically different memory processes. Autobiographical memory, memory for the personally experienced past, will be in use when personal nostalgia is evoked, and collective memory, a shared interpretation of the past, will be in use when historical nostalgia is evoked. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive as a web of associations may have elements of each.

The objective of this research is to investigate the nostalgic responses and webs of associations linked to favorite recipes. The primary contribution of this research is that it specifies the conditions necessary in the past for nostalgic associations to be evoked in the present.

Based on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, we analyze nostalgia and memory associated with favorite recipes. Respondents were first asked to describe their cooking habits and then asked to list three of their favorite recipes, after which they were probed as to why these recipes have special meanings to them. The subsequent analysis of the interviews led to the identification of three nostalgia-related associations connected to recipes: recipes as part of ritual, recipes as part of family construction and continuity, and recipes as part of self.

Ritualistic acts associated with recipes include the celebration of holidays and milestone events, the passing of time, and healing. Many of the informants’ favorite recipes are used only during holidays or special events, such as cinnamon rolls on Christmas Eve, black-eyed peas on New Year’s Day, and corned beef and cabbage on St. Patrick’s Day. The seasonal property of foods, such as blueberry cobbler in the summer, pumpkin bread in the fall, and stew in the winter, also seems to create a propensity for nostalgic association; the recipes help individuals mark the passage of time, yet also provide continuity from season to season. Some informants also had a recipe, commonly chicken-based, that they associated with healing, either because they had been served the dish when ill, or because they served the dish themselves to ill family members or friends.

Recipes also serve to help construct the family and provide intergenerational continuity. Some informants cited recipes that had been part of their families for generations. For many informants, the act of cooking a dish, as well as the smell of a dish, evokes the memory of a particular individual. A number of informants discussed how their children now cook (or that they hope their children will cook) a family recipe. Like cherished possessions and heirlooms (Curasi 1999; Price et al. 2000), recipes are bequeathed to loved ones in the hope that they will be appreciated and recalled as special times with the giver.

Consistent with nostalgia’s role in identity construction, maintenance, and reconstruction (Davis 1979), our informants provide evidence that recipes contain multiple aspects of self. Favorite recipes are often linked to happy or memorable events in childhood, such as birthdays or times spent with a loved one. Many recipes are also related to the informants’ social groups, particularly those associated with ethnic and/or religious heritages, such as Italian, Southern, Mexican, and Jewish recipes. In addition, places of attachments, such as vacation spots or homelands, can be linked to favorite recipes.

In summary, this research shows the nostalgic links and memories that can be evoked by recipes and the symbolic function that recipes can serve in the construction of family and the nurturing of intergenerational ties, the development of rituals, and the creation of self. Recipes encourage retrieval of emotions and experiences from the past that involve an inter-related web of associations across space and time including people, places, and events.

**REFERENCES**


