

Differences

I've always been fascinated by what I now recognize as cultural or regional differences. I started studying such differences in a broad way by taking languages in school, where we looked at some cultural characteristics of the people who spoke Spanish and French. At the same time my world literature classes indirectly showed some of the development of cultures and ways of people through the years.

Later I experienced some of those differences first hand as our academic life brought us into contact with people from different countries. Sometimes the differences were amusing and unexpected, such as the time in Dallas when we entertained one of Paul's Mexican students and his charming family. At dinner I was surprised when the Alois's nine-year-old Roberto asked about the little gherkin pickles I had served on a whim to go with the roast chicken. He tasted them with obvious delight and embarrassed his mother by consuming pickles to the exclusion of all the other food. He had never tasted tiny, sweet, cucumber pickles. At that time, I thought that almost all pickles came from cucumbers or peaches and, preferably, were sweet.

When I met Champa Sheshadri who had moved to Dallas from Madras, I expected to learn about a great many differences between our two cultures. There were many differences for us to explore over several years. Some of the most interesting ones concerned food. The day after she arrived, I accompanied her to the doctor, who diagnosed the digestive difficulties she'd had on the flight from India as an ulcer. He cautioned her to limit her consumption of spicy food and to eat small meals several times a day. At home, I asked her what she would like for lunch, suggesting several foods which she declined. After she looked in my pantry, she selected a can of Niblets corn, saying that was all she wanted. I heated the corn, which she peppered to an almost black state. She ate the whole can hungrily, denying that it was spicy at all. I found out why when she prepared dinner for us at their home a few weeks later. She had tried to serve us food that was only mildly hot. When one dish was too spicy for our taste, she told us how to quench the heat with bits of ghee (clarified butter). Then she shared with us a delicacy she had just received from home – pickled lemons. Now that's a real taste experience! My eyes still water and my lips pucker when I recall the pain of the heat that even ghee didn't soothe.

Champa's first memorable encounter with American cuisine came at her request in our home. She asked for fried chicken to experiment in trying to change her vegetarian diet. When I served it, she asked me to put a piece on her plate (she apparently couldn't bring herself to touch it whole); then she asked me to cut it up. She ate several bites, which she appeared to like. The next day, however, when she was telling one of her Indian friends about her experience, she described her first taste of meat this way: "It was bland and almost tasteless, like all American food," she said, "It was something like chewing rubber!" Later, much later, I heard that she had become the lasagna queen of Montreal.

But it's not necessary to limit ourselves to food from other countries to observe cultural differences. We've discovered that Thanksgiving dinner shared with friends can provide some interesting examples. Frank and Helen Brook, from southwest Virginia, brought a delicious Sally Lunn as one of their contributions to our communal Thanksgiving feast. It was a standard part of the meal to them. We thought it was a welcome addition. They were unexpectedly fascinated with a part of our traditional meal - giblet gravy containing sliced hard-cooked egg. Giblets they recognized but had never heard of the egg part. Later our friend Mary Leitman, from Ohio, also commented on that strange, to her, addition to gravy. To us, the egg is a necessary part of turkey gravy.

It's fairly easy to imagine how differences in national cuisines occur. But Thanksgiving is a tradition that is peculiarly American. We talk about turkey and dressing and cranberry sauce as the basis of the meal. Why should there be differences in our menus? A look at the origins of two peculiarities may help to show why there are variances in what different people expect from their Thanksgiving feast.

I think I can account for two differences that others have commented on. The addition of eggs to giblet gravy is not peculiar to our family. As long as we had live poultry which we killed and plucked, Mother, and probably her mother before her, had always used the several embryonic eggs in the turkey and chicken hens. She cooked them and added them to the giblets in the gravy. It was my favorite part of the meal. When super markets supplied our turkeys with only the heart, liver, and gizzard, Mother began to boil eggs to add to the giblet gravy. Apparently, that evolution began in other households, too, for I've talked to other folk who make their giblet gravy with hard-cooked eggs, although I believe the custom may be regional.



However, the ritual appearance of brussels sprouts on the Thanksgiving board must be unique with our family. Mother always served brussels sprouts as a part of our dinner. But neither of our sons liked the vegetable. When they were little boys, my sister Martha playfully gave each a small serving and insisted on their trying at least one sprout. They meekly obeyed. After several years of Martha's treatment, the boys began calling her "Aunt B.S." - for brussels sprouts, of course. Before long, they both considered the undesirable dish a fixture of the meal. Now, we serve it ceremoniously and each adult son will help himself to a single sprout, calling attention to the fact that he is eating it. I suppose both of them consider their reward to be their choice of dessert, a piece of all three of our traditional pies: pumpkin, mincemeat, and apple.



We usually cook the B.S., though

From languages and literature through Indian and Mexican food and finally to variations in traditional American food, cultural differences are still a preoccupation of mine. I would love to hear some of your special customs for family feasts.