

What Food Says About Class in America

By Lisa Miller, Newsweek

Filed: 11/22/10 at 8:00 AM | Updated: 11/22/10 at 2:42 PM

Photos: How We Can Bridge the Food Divide Christopher Anderson / Magnum for Newsweek

Filed Under: Culture

For breakfast, I usually have a cappuccino—espresso made in an Alessi pot and mixed with organic milk, which has been gently heated and hand-fluffed by my husband. I eat two slices of imported cheese—Dutch Parrano, the label says, “the hippest cheese in New York” (no joke)—on homemade bread with butter. I am what you might call a food snob. My nutritionist neighbor drinks a protein shake while her 5-year-old son eats quinoa porridge sweetened with applesauce and laced with kale flakes. She is what you might call a health nut. On a recent morning, my neighbor’s friend Alexandra Ferguson sipped politically correct Nicaraguan coffee in her comfy kitchen while her two young boys chose from among an assortment of organic cereals. As we sat, the six chickens Ferguson and her husband, Dave, keep for eggs in a backyard coop peered indoors from the stoop. The Fergusons are known as locavores.

Alexandra says she spends hours each day thinking about, shopping for, and preparing food. She is a disciple of Michael Pollan, whose 2006 book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* made the locavore movement a national phenomenon, and believes that eating organically and locally contributes not only to the health of her family but to the existential happiness of farm animals and farmers—and, indeed, to the survival of the planet. “Michael Pollan is my new hero, next to Jimmy Carter,” she told me. In some neighborhoods, a lawyer who raises chickens in her backyard might be considered eccentric, but we live in Park Slope, Brooklyn, a community that accommodates and celebrates every kind of foodie. Whether you believe in eating for pleasure, for health, for justice, or for some idealized vision of family life, you will find neighbors who reflect your food values. In Park Slope, the contents of a child’s lunchbox can be fodder for a 20-minute conversation.

Over coffee, I cautiously raise a subject that has concerned me of late: less than five miles away, some children don’t have enough to eat; others exist almost exclusively on junk food. Alexandra concedes that her approach is probably out of reach for those people. Though they are not wealthy by Park Slope standards—Alexandra works part time and Dave is employed by the city—the Fergusons spend approximately 20 percent of their income, or \$1,000 a month, on food. The average American spends 13 percent, including restaurants and takeout.

And so the conversation turns to the difficulty of sharing their interpretation of the Pollan doctrine with the uninitiated. When they visit Dave’s family in Tennessee, tensions erupt over food choices. One time, Alexandra remembers, she irked her mother-in-law by purchasing a bag of organic apples, even though her mother-in-law had already bought the nonorganic kind at the grocery store. The old apples were perfectly good, her mother-in-law said. Why waste money—and apples?

The Fergusons recall Dave’s mother saying something along these lines: “When we come to your place, we don’t complain about your food. Why do you complain about ours? It’s not like our food is poison.”

“I can’t convince my brother to spend another dime on food,” adds Dave.

“This is our charity. This is my giving to the world,” says Alexandra, finally, as she packs lunchboxes—organic peanut butter and jelly on grainy bread, a yogurt, and a clementine—for her two boys. “We contribute a lot.”

According to data released last week by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 17 percent of Americans—more than 50 million people—live in households that are “food insecure,” a term that means a family sometimes runs out of money to buy food, or it sometimes runs out of food before it can get more money. Food insecurity is especially high in households headed by a single mother. It is most severe in the South, and in big cities. In New York City, 1.4 million people are food insecure, and 257,000 of them live near me, in Brooklyn. Food insecurity is linked, of course, to other economic measures like housing and employment, so it surprised no one that the biggest surge in food insecurity since the agency established the measure in 1995 occurred between 2007 and 2008, at the start of the economic downturn. (The 2009 numbers, released last week, showed little change.) The proportion of households that qualify as “hungry”—with what the USDA calls “very low food security”—is small, about 6 percent. Reflected against the obsessive concerns of the foodies in my circle, and the glare of attention given to the plight of the poor and hungry abroad, even a fraction of starving children in America seems too high.

Mine seems on some level like a naive complaint. There have always been rich people and poor people in America and, in a capitalist economy, the well-to-do have always had the freedom to indulge themselves as they please. In hard times, food has always marked a bright border between the haves and the have-nots. In the earliest days of the Depression, as the poor waited on bread lines, the middle and upper classes in America became devoted to fad diets. Followers of the Hollywood 18-Day Diet, writes Harvey Levenstein in his 1993 book *Paradox of Plenty*, “could live on fewer than six hundred calories a day by limiting each meal to half a grapefruit, melba toast, coffee without cream or sugar, and, at lunch and dinner, some raw vegetables.”

But modern America is a place of extremes, and what you eat for dinner has become the definitive marker of social status; as the distance between rich and poor continues to grow, the freshest, most nutritious foods have become luxury goods that only some can afford. Among the lowest quintile of American families, mean household income has held relatively steady between \$10,000 and \$13,000 for the past two decades (in inflation-adjusted dollars); among the highest, income has jumped 20 percent to \$170,800 over the same period, according to census data. What this means, in practical terms, is that the richest Americans can afford to buy berries out of season at Whole Foods—the upscale grocery chain that recently reported a 58 percent increase in its quarterly profits—while the food insecure often eat what they can: highly caloric, mass-produced foods like pizza and packaged cakes that fill them up quickly. The number of Americans on food stamps has surged by 58.5 percent over the last three years.

Corpulence used to signify the prosperity of a few but has now become a marker of poverty. Obesity has risen as the income gap has widened: more than a third of U.S. adults and 17 percent of children are obese, and the problem is acute among the poor. While obesity is a complex problem—genetics, environment, and activity level all play a role—a 2008 study by the USDA found that children and women on food stamps were likelier to be overweight than those who were not. According to studies led by British epidemiologist Kate Pickett, obesity rates are highest in developed countries with the greatest income disparities. America is among the most obese of nations; Japan, with its relatively low income inequality, is the thinnest.



Photos: 10 Things That Changed the Way We

EatPictorial Parade

Adam Drewnowski, an epidemiologist at the University of Washington, has spent his career showing that Americans' food choices correlate to social class. He argues that the most nutritious diet—lots of fruits and vegetables, lean meats, fish, and grains—is beyond the reach of the poorest Americans, and it is economic elitism for nutritionists to uphold it as an ideal without broadly addressing issues of affordability. Lower-income families don't subsist on junk food and fast food because they lack nutritional education, as some have argued. And though many poor neighborhoods are, indeed, food deserts—meaning that the people who live there don't have access to a well-stocked supermarket—many are not. Lower-income families choose sugary, fat, and processed foods because they're cheaper—and because they taste good. In a paper published last spring, Drewnowski showed how the prices of specific foods changed between 2004 and 2008 based on data from Seattle-area supermarkets. While food prices overall rose about 25 percent, the most nutritious foods (red peppers, raw oysters, spinach, mustard greens, romaine lettuce) rose 29 percent, while the least nutritious foods (white sugar, hard candy, jelly beans, and cola) rose just 16 percent.

“In America,” Drewnowski wrote in an e-mail, “food has become the premier marker of social distinctions, that is to say—social class. It used to be clothing and fashion, but no longer, now that ‘luxury’ has become affordable and available to all.” He points to an article in *The New York Times*, written by Pollan, which describes a meal element by element, including “a basket of morels and porcini gathered near Mount Shasta.” “Pollan,” writes Drewnowski, “is drawing a picture of class privilege that is as acute as anything written by Edith Wharton or Henry James.”

I finish writing the previous paragraph and go downstairs. There, in the mail, I find the Christmas catalog from the luxury retail store Barneys. HAVE A FOODIE HOLIDAY, its cover reads. Inside, models are covered—literally—with food. A woman in a red \$2,000 Lanvin trench has an enormous cabbage on her head. Another, holding a green Proenza Schouler clutch, wears a boiled crab in her bouffant. Most disconcerting is the Munnu diamond pendant (\$80,500) worn by a model who seems to have traded her hair for an octopus. Its tentacles dangle past her shoulders, and the girl herself wears the expression of someone who's stayed too long at the party. Food is no longer trendy or fashionable. It is fashion.

Tiffney Davis, a single mom, lives about four miles away from me, in subsidized housing, in a gentrifying neighborhood called Red Hook. Steps from her apartment, you can find ample evidence of foodie culture: Fairway, the supermarket where I buy my Dutch cheese, is right there, as is a chic bakery, and a newfangled lobster pound. Davis says she has sometimes worried about having enough food. She works in Manhattan, earning \$13 an hour for a corporate catering company (which once had a contract with NEWSWEEK), and she receives food stamps. She spends \$100 a week on food for herself and her two kids. Sometimes she stretches her budget by bringing food home from work.

Davis is sheepish about what her family eats for breakfast. Everybody rises at 6, and there's a mad rush to get the door, so often they eat bodega food. Her daughter, Malaezia, 10, will have egg and cheese on a roll; her son, 13-year-old Tashawn, a muffin and soda. She herself used to pop into at

Dunkin' Donuts for two doughnuts and a latte, but when New York chain restaurants started posting calories on their menus, she stopped. "I try my best to lessen the chemicals and the fattening stuff," she says, "but it's hard."

Time is just part of the problem, Davis explains, as she prepares Sunday dinner in her cheerful kitchen. Tonight she's making fried chicken wings with bottled barbecue sauce; yellow rice from a box; black beans from a can; broccoli; and carrots, cooked in olive oil and honey. A home-cooked dinner doesn't happen every night. On weeknights, everyone gets home, exhausted—and then there's homework. Several nights a week, they get takeout: Chinese, or Domino's, or McDonald's. Davis doesn't buy fruits and vegetables mostly because they're too expensive, and in the markets where she usually shops, they're not fresh. "I buy bananas and bring them home and 10 minutes later they're no good...Whole Foods sells fresh, beautiful tomatoes," she says. "Here, they're packaged and full of chemicals anyway. So I mostly buy canned foods."

In recent weeks the news in New York City has been full with a controversial proposal to ban food-stamp recipients from using their government money to buy soda. Local public-health officials insist they need to be more proactive about slowing obesity; a recent study found that 40 percent of the children in New York City's kindergarten through eighth-grade classrooms were either overweight or obese. (Nationwide, 36 percent of 6- to 11-year-olds are overweight or obese.) Opponents of the proposal call it a "nanny state" measure, another instance of government interference, and worse—of the government telling poor people what to do, as if they can't make good decisions on their own. "I think it's really difficult," says Pickett, the British epidemiologist. "Everybody needs to be able to feel that they have control over what they spend. And everybody should be able to treat themselves now and again. Why shouldn't a poor child have a birthday party with cake and soda?"

But Davis enthusiastically supports the proposal. A 9-year-old boy in her building recently died of an asthma attack, right in front of his mother. He was obese, she says, but his mom kept feeding him junk. "If these people don't care at all about calorie counts, then the government should. People would live a lot longer," she says.

Claude Fischler, a French sociologist, believes that Americans can fight both obesity and food insecurity by being more, well, like the French. Americans take an approach to food and eating that is unlike any other people in history. For one thing, we regard food primarily as (good or bad) nutrition. When asked "What is eating well?" Americans generally answer in the language of daily allowances: they talk about calories and carbs, fats, and sugars. They don't see eating as a social activity, and they don't see food—as it has been seen for millennia—as a shared resource, like a loaf of bread passed around the table. When asked "What is eating well?" the French inevitably answer in terms of "conviviality": togetherness, intimacy, and good tastes unfolding in a predictable way.

Even more idiosyncratic than our obsession with nutrition, says Fischler, is that Americans see food choice as a matter of personal freedom, an inalienable right. Americans want to eat what they want: morels or Big Macs. They want to eat where they want, in the car or alfresco. And they want to eat when they want. With the exception of Thanksgiving, when most of us dine off the same turkey menu, we are food libertarians. In surveys, Fischler has found no single time of day (or night) when Americans predictably sit together and eat. By contrast, 54 percent of the French dine at 12:30 each day. Only 9.5 percent of the French are obese.

When I was a child I was commanded to "eat your eggs. There are starving children in Africa." And when I was old enough to think for myself, I could easily see that my own eaten or uneaten eggs would not do a single thing to help the children of Africa. This is the Brooklyn conundrum, playing out all over the country. Locally produced food is more delicious than the stuff you get in the supermarket; it's better for the small farmers and the farm animals; and, as a movement, it's better for the environment. It's easy—and probably healthy, if you can afford it—to make that choice as an individual or a family, says the New York University nutritionist Marion Nestle. Bridging the divide is much harder. "Choosing local or organic is something you can actually do. It's very difficult for people to get involved in policy."

Locavore activists in New York and other cities are doing what they can to help the poor with access to fresh food. Incentive programs give food-stamp recipients extra credit if they buy groceries at farmers' markets. Food co-ops and community-garden associations are doing better urban outreach. Municipalities are establishing bus routes between poor neighborhoods and those where well-stocked supermarkets exist.

Joel Berg, executive director of the New York City Coalition Against Hunger, says these programs are good, but they need to go much, much further. He believes, like Fischler, that the answer lies in seeing food more as a shared resource, like water, than as a consumer product, like shoes. "It's a nuanced conversation, but I think 'local' or 'organic' as the shorthand for all things good is way too simplistic," says Berg. "I think we need a broader conversation about scale, working conditions, and environmental impact. It's a little too much of people buying easy virtue."

Even the locavore hero Pollan agrees. "Essentially," he says, "we have a system where wealthy farmers feed the poor crap and poor farmers feed the wealthy high-quality food." He points to Walmart's recent announcement of a program that will put more locally grown food on its shelves as an indication that big retailers are looking to sell fresh produce in a scalable way. These fruits and vegetables might not be organic, but the goal, says Pollan, is not to be absolutist in one's food ideology. "I argue for being conscious," he says, "but perfectionism is an enemy of progress." Pollan sees a future where, in an effort to fight diabetes and obesity, health-insurance companies are advocates for small and medium-size farmers. He dreams of a broad food-policy conversation in Washington. "The food movement," he reminds me, "is still very young."

Berg believes that part of the answer lies in working with Big Food. The food industry hasn't been entirely bad: it developed the technology to bring apples to Wisconsin in the middle of winter, after all. It could surely make sustainably produced fruits and vegetables affordable and available. "We need to bring social justice to bigger agriculture as well," Berg says.

My last stop was at Jabir Suluki's house in Clinton Hill, about two miles from my home. Suluki has toast for breakfast, with a little cheese on top, melted in the toaster oven. He is not French—he was born and raised in Brooklyn—but he might as well be. Every day, between 5 and 7, he prepares dinner for his mother and himself—and any of his nieces and nephews who happen to drop by. He prepares food with the confidence of a person descended from a long line of home cooks—which he is.

Both Suluki and his mother are diabetic. For them, healthy, regular meals are a necessity—and so he does what he can on \$75 a week. "To get good food, you really got to sacrifice a lot. It's expensive. But I take that sacrifice, because it's worth it." Suluki uses his food stamps at the farmers' market. He sorts through the rotten fruit at the local supermarket. He travels to Queens, when he can get a ride, and buys cheap meat in bulk. He is adamant that it is the responsibility of parents to feed their children good food in moderate portions, and that it's possible to do so on a fixed income.

For dinner he and his mother ate Salisbury steak made from ground turkey, with a little ground beef thrown in and melted cheese on top "because turkey doesn't have any taste"; roasted potatoes and green peppers; and frozen green beans, "heated quickly so they still have a crunch." For dessert, his mother ate two pieces of supermarket coffeecake.

Suluki thinks a lot about food, and the role it plays in the life of his neighbors. He doesn't have soda in his refrigerator, but he opposes the New York City soda proposal because, in light of the government's food and farm subsidies—and in light of all the other kinds of unhealthy cheap foods for sale in his supermarket—he sees it as hypocrisy. "You can't force junk on people and then criticize it at the same time." Suluki is a community organizer, and sees the web of problems before us—hunger, obesity, health—as something for the community to solve. "We can't just attack this problem as individuals," he tells me. "A healthy community produces healthy people." That's why, on the weekends, he makes a big pot of rice and beans, and brings it down to the food pantry near his house.