
An Agenda for Food Studies



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There are many possible approaches to constructing university level educational programmes in food studies. Some encourage historical analysis, others are firmly grounded in the social sciences and an increasing number are focused on political and ethical issues.

This is a somewhat personal agenda. It reflects a framework adopted at one university that might stimulate consideration of the value of studying food and drink from cultural perspectives. At Oxford Brookes University our approach continues to evolve. It is built upon exploration of our relationships with food and drink – what shapes them and what are their consequences, both positive and negative, for individuals and society? It is interdisciplinary and, I hope, challenging and engaging. We aim to provide students with ample opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge through regular interaction with influential and thoughtful practitioners.

Our relationship with food and drink is increasingly complex. The soaring popularity of celebrity chefs who dominate our television schedules; glossy

magazines that reinforce the merits of local and seasonal ingredients; and beautifully produced cookbooks that rise to the top of best-seller lists, might suggest that we live in a culinary utopia. Yet our reliance on mass-produced, pre-packaged meals, pandemic health crises that have catastrophic consequences, the devastation of our natural environment through industrialised production, and the contamination of our lengthy and opaque food supply chain, present a very different version of reality. Such complexity makes it an ideal time to be involved in food and drink studies, and it ensures an audience predisposed to learn.

This chapter provides contextual information about the development of food studies programmes. It then outlines the approach adopted at Oxford Brookes University, which rests on the principles of *interdisciplinarity*, *integrity* and *learning through experience*. The chapters and case studies have been written by academics, food and drink writers, journalists, broadcasters and activists, most of whom make direct contributions to the learning experience of our students. By cross-referencing to each, I will show how their input supports our educational objectives and enriches our learning environment.

The context

Outside of the sciences, food studies is a relatively new area of focus for universities. Given that it draws on numerous academic disciplines, something that does not rest well within established academic structures, it is perhaps not surprising that it is still an emerging field. While intense media attention may fuel interest, it also ensures that what is considered in vogue can change on a regular basis.

Atkins and Bowler (2001) provide a useful overview of dominant approaches to food studies that have been adopted over the years, reflected not only in academic publications, but also in a limited number of university degree programmes worldwide. These are:

- **Historical approaches.** Work of this nature is largely focused on the study of food at particular points in time or on the nature of produc-

tion and consumption over periods of history. The common goal is to provide evidence-based social commentary on issues such as diet and nutrition, poverty and wealth, and lifestyles. Contributors to the 'developmental' school have gone further by exploring food habits in the context of broader influences such as social interplay and class hierarchies. For example, Elias (1939) proposed that increasingly complex and inter-connected 'figurations' (social networks) have a continuously civilising impact on individuals and communities. He argued that the imposition of self-restraint, manifest through dining etiquette, is a necessary prerequisite for the effective operation of society. The work of Mennell, most notably *All Manners of Food* (1985), has greatly influenced such approaches to food studies. While using historical works on food and drink as his source material, Mennell goes beyond the cataloguing of behaviour or the observation of social change. Instead, he adopts the developmental or 'process' approach of Elias to analyse how conflict and competition between social groups has shaped food habits in England and France, through the ages.

- ***Cultural and sociological approaches.*** Anthropologists from the functionalist school have examined the role of food customs in maintaining stable societies. While their work has been criticised for underplaying societal change and progression, it has contributed to our understanding of how apparently esoteric and anachronistic rituals surrounding food production and consumption carry valuable symbolic significance and are part of broader cultural frameworks. Less concerned with the functional use of food in our daily lives, structural sociologists have focused on the way in which our culinary taste and food-related behaviour are products of social conditioning derived from the contexts in which we exist. One of the most influential contributors in this field was Pierre Bourdieu, a Marxist structuralist, whose work has had a profound impact on food studies. In *Distinction: a social critique on the judgement of taste* (1984), he argued that taste is not only an expression of class, but that it also shapes and reinforces class distinctions. He explored class as a construct of cultural and