CHAPTER 5

Meal as Metaphor

Because of values that go far beyond filling the stomach, eating becomes associated, if only at an unconscious level, with deep-rooted sentiments and assumptions about oneself and the world one lives in. In the central African country of Chad, for example, four tribes who live in close proximity have different attitudes toward the beans, the rice, the millet, and the many other kinds of food that are grown in the area. Each group ridicules the others about what they consider edible. One object of raillery is the rotted meat which one tribe not only devours, but in fact holds in special regard as appropriate for rituals. The name explorers gave the Eskimo — who proudly refer to themselves as Inuit, “the true people” — is a variant of eskimantsik, a derisive word applied to them by neighboring Indians, meaning “eaters of raw meat.” Similarly, North Americans are making metaphorical reference to the supposed eating habits of the French, the Germans, and the Italians in speaking of “Frogs,” “Krauts,” and “Macaronis.”

Most notably in simpler societies, but in some complex ones as well, eating is closely linked to deep spiritual experiences, as well as to especially important social ties. In North America and Europe, weddings and birthdays are celebrated with a cake, formal good wishes are offered with a glass of wine, the Christian rite of communion is celebrated with the distribution of bread and wine, and the Jews observe Passover by eating unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Various states of spiritual exaltation are spoken of in terms of eating, as when Jesus declares, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” Often particular food plants are endowed with metaphorical qualities, as was the olive tree in the Mediterranean world of antiquity to indicate hope, peace, and plenty. A dove bringing an olive leaf
to Noah presaged the subsiding of the flood waters; the olive branch was traditionally extended as a peace offering; and Jeremiah described (11:16) Israel in the days of its prosperity as "a green olive tree, fair, and of gladly fruit."

Once a particular food has been elevated to symbolic status, its nutritional use may become secondary. The pumpkin nourished both the American Indians and the settlers from Europe, and was part of the Thanksgiving feasts held by the Pilgrims of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In more recent decades it has been largely symbolic, a decoration associated with Halloween and Thanksgiving, little used for food. Nearly three million pumpkins are sold in Massachusetts each autumn, but ninety percent of them rot away after being carved into jack-o'-lanterns or used to ornament front porches, window sills, and dining tables. Even today's holiday pumpkin pie is usually made from other orange squashes rather than from the one that has become symbolic of the season.

That food is often more circumstance than substance is clearly demonstrated by the "milk tie" — a belief, widespread from the Balkans eastward to Burma, which holds that unrelated children who have been nursed by the same woman maintain a lifelong social connection with her and with one another. Among Arabs, a male child and a female child fed by the same wet nurse are regarded as blood relatives who are forbidden to marry exactly as though they were actual brother and sister. In India, a child who is given milk at the table of another family is bound to it by special obligations on both sides. The milk tie would be less charged with sentiment were it not for the uniqueness of milk itself as the single food all mothers offer to their young, a food manufactured by their own bodies for that purpose and for no other. Besides milk, only one other substance eaten by humans is produced specifically to provide food: the honey produced by worker bees. People in many societies have made the link between milk and honey as the only natural foods. Not only was the Promised Land described to Moses as "a land flowing with milk and honey," but the two are often coupled in myth and religious rite as sacrificial offerings or as the food of the gods.

The vocabulary of eating has long been used to categorize and describe a variety of experiences. In American English, a casual conversation is chewing the fat, an argument is a rhubarb, a complaint is a beef. Shoddy workmanship is cheesy and a defective automobile is a lemon; a misleading statement is a waffle; an over-emphatic actor is a ham; a person may tell a corny joke and lay an egg; the meat-and-potatoes man objects to pork-barrel corruption; a statement may be full of baloney; someone who jeers is giving the raspberry. The taste of food is likewise applied to personalities: A woman can be spicy, delectable, a dish; she may have a sweet or a sour disposition; a man may be described as peppery or bland, as an oily sort, one who knows how to butter you up, and a sugar daddy. And a particularly trying person might be asked, "What's eating you?"

The categories of each language reveal unconscious conceptual assumptions not only about eating, but also about the world in general. Peasants throughout Latin America, for example, assign all foods to a continuum ranging from "very hot" through "temperate" to "very cold," but which has nothing to do with the actual temperature of the food and little to do with its seasoning. Rather, categories from hot to cold express these peasants' belief in a system of antagonistic opposites that control the universe: life and death, sickness and health, night and day, war and peace, and so on. Eating an excess of food that is either hot or cold is believed to produce sickness, which can be cured only by restoring a balance between the two. The mixing of foods that are very hot and very cold at the same meal will have no ill effects, these peasants believe, because the contrasting foods blend in the stomach and thereby temper each other.

These same peasants believe that the hotness of a food comes from the sun, or from the energy the plant or animal contained while it was alive. Nocturnal animals are therefore necessarily cold, as is the potato because it grows underground, unlike the sun. Coldness can also come from contact with water — and cooked soups are accordingly described as cold because they are made from water, even though they may be boiling hot. For some foods, such as the egg of a chicken, the categorization is complex: The egg as a whole is temperate, but the yolk is hot and the albumen cold (yellow being a hot color and white a cold one).

Latin Americans have extended the categories of hot and cold to the whole of the world they live in. Comets, stars, and the sun are hot, being made of fire; the moon, as a thing seen at night, is cold; clouds carry rain water and are therefore cold; the world itself is temperate because it encompasses both hot days and cold
nights. Everyday behavior, too, is constantly influenced by these concepts. A peasant woman is careful not to go outside while she is cooking tortillas; the collision of cold air with the heat of her body will supposedly make her sick. If a hailstorm threatens the crop, palm leaves (obtained from the lowlands, and therefore hot) are burned to drive away the cold hail. A woman who cannot sleep at night eats raw lettuce, whose temperateness will dispel the warmth of her insomnia.

Such beliefs can ultimately be traced to the Hippocratic doctrine of the Four Humors, which not only flourished in the ancient world, but became entrenched as well in Europe during the Middle Ages. According to this doctrine, the human body is made up of four substances or "humors" to which the qualities of heat, cold, moisture, and dryness were intrinsic in various combinations: Blood was thought to be hot and moist, yellow bile or "choler" hot and dry, phlegm cold and moist, and black bile or "melancholy" cold and dry. An imbalance of the humors was believed to produce an illness that could be treated by restoring the equilibrium. Even William Harvey, the seventeenth-century discoverer of the circulation of the blood, was a firm believer in humoral medicine, at a time when the doctrine had already been abandoned in much of Europe. It persisted on the Iberian peninsula, to which it had been brought originally during the Moorish occupation, and from there was carried to the colonies of the New World, where it was accepted with almost no reservations by physician and priest alike. By the time educated Latin Americans had ceased to believe in the doctrine, it had filtered down to the peasants and become established as a strongly held conviction about the world in general.

Somewhat similar to the hot–cold dichotomy is the duality of yin and yang in Chinese culture, which has been traced back 5,000 years and is still a dominant concept. Yin is the passive, feminine force that complements the active, masculine yang. The Chinese believe that the qualities of foods can be classified as either yin or yang, and that a balance between the two in the body will maintain the equilibrium necessary for good health. Yang foods are very spicy, take a long time to cook, include much fat, and tend to excite whoever eats them; they include most meats, alcoholic drinks, and dishes prepared by deep frying. Bland foods, such as grains and vegetables harvested from the passive earth, have traditionally been categorized as yin. Each sex achieves health and well-being by balancing the yin and yang foods appropriate to it. Men, in whom the yang element already predominates, are counseled not to consume too many yang foods, which will bring a loss of harmony, with attendant fevers, aigue, digestive disorders, and the aggravation of venereal disease. In women, on the other hand, an imbalance toward yin can cause weakness and a loss of vital energy.

From a nutritional point of view, the yin–yang system has been beneficial, implausible as some of its precepts might appear to outsiders. Varying the diet leads to a balance in the amounts of animal protein, starchy staples, and vegetables, together with an adequate variety of minerals and trace elements. Those who are pregnant, who are feeling weak, or who have just given birth—who, in other words, have an imbalance toward yin—eat yang foods to restore the equilibrium, and thereby obtain the proteins necessary for repair of the cells; those suffering from common digestive ailments (indicating an imbalance toward yang) eat the lighter and more easily digested yin foods (such as rice, potatoes, porridge, and certain vegetables). The system confers the further benefit that no foods are tabooed; rather, eating a wide range of foods is encouraged, thereby promoting good nutrition.

North Americans and Europeans tempted to belittle as quaint the hot–cold and yin–yang folk taxonomies should be aware that equivalent systems of belief pervade their own societies. We too unconsciously categorize certain foods as hot or cold, as in the expression "cool as a cucumber." Many people still think of the stomach in much the same way described in humoral medicine—as a physiological stove where food is cooked to supply energy to the rest of the body. With this notion of cooking comes the belief that body temperature rises above normal for at least an hour after eating, a belief which has produced a number of precautionary rules that are still observed: against bathing immediately after eating, drinking cold water with meals, or going into the cold night air right after eating. The saying "Feed a cold, starve a fever" similarly reflects humoral beliefs about the stomach. Since eating produces heat, heavy meals are thought to generate the means of driving out a cold; reducing food to a minimum, on the other hand, is supposed to lower the temperature of the stomach and thereby to counteract a fever.
North Americans and Europeans are also thinking in yin–yang metaphors when they classify certain foods as masculine (such as thick steaks) and others as feminine (salads and thin soups), or when they assign a hierarchy of values to a fancy dinner and to a meal composed of leftovers, which nutritionally differ very little. In North America, being served leftovers so lowers the status of the food which at its first serving might have been considered a prestigious meal that the food may even be regarded as waste. The borderline between the categories of leftover and waste is often a shifting one. Food not eaten at the original meal might be regarded as appropriate for a meal of less social importance — in which case it may reappear in disguise, as part of a casserole or a stew. It might also be considered as waste, suitable only for servants, charity cases, and pets — or discarded outright as garbage.

In much the same way that Malaysians use the presence of rice to define the difference between a meal and a snack, English working-class families differentiate the two according to whether or not the event is structured. A meal always entails certain combinations of food served in the appropriate sequence, while breakfast — which might consist of toast, cereal, a milk product, fish, and fruit, but served in any sequence — is almost always regarded as snack. At what they call a meal, careful distinctions are made by working-class families between salty and sweet, moist and dry, and hot and cold foods. With food that is piping hot, the accompanying drinks must be cold. A dessert accompanied by hot tea or coffee, on the other hand, should be a cold, dry solid. The plates for warm courses are stacked above the oven so as not to cool the food, and a cold teapot is heated before hot water is poured in.

A working-class “main meal” properly consists of at least three courses, each with its own qualities of temperature, sweetness, and moisture. The main course is always hot and salty; it consists of a staple (potato), a centerpiece (a joint of meat, a fowl, or fish), trimmings (hot vegetables), and liquid dressing (a thick gravy). Working-class families would never think of eating anything sweet (such as an appetizer of fruit) or cold (such as a salad) before a hot, salty main course. The second course or “sweet” lacks the trimmings but otherwise also consists of a staple (a cereal product), a centerpiece (fruit), and a liquid dressing (cream) — ingredients that might be in the form of a fruit tart, a trifle, or a pudding. Up until the third course the foods have been hot and the bever-

ages, such as plain water, cold; the final course of hot tea or coffee and cold biscuits reverses that situation. The demand in England for expensive biscuits has been increasing every year, while the demand for almost all other kinds of breads, cakes, and pastries has declined — because the biscuit holds a special place in the metaphors of a working-class meal, a signal that the final course has come to an end.

When people in modern societies organize various social events, they are using food and drink as metaphors for the character of a relationship. Cocktails without a meal are for acquaintances or for people of lower social status; meals preceded by drinks are for close friends and honored guests; those entertained at meals are almost always entertained also at cocktails, but the reverse is not true. A cold lunch is at the threshold of the intimacy that is symbolized by an invitation to a complete dinner (characterized by sitting down for a sequence of courses contrasted by hot and cold). Other such bridges are the buffet, the cookout, and the barbecue, which extend friendship to a greater extent than an invitation to morning coffee, but less so than an invitation to a sit-down dinner. Once such values have become attached to eating, then any invitation to share a meal or a snack conveys its own nuance of social information.

Such subtleties can be seen in the way Japanese entertain with dinner. Unlike North Americans and Europeans, who often entertain business associates at home, the Japanese much prefer a restaurant. Home to a Japanese is a very private place, reserved for the family, for close relatives, and for old friends. Should a Japanese family for some reason entertain at home, guests are taken to a room specifically designed for outsiders, where they are expected to remain for the duration of the visit. Dinner guests are never shown around the house as they are in North America and Europe. A traditional Japanese restaurant is usually chosen over one of the new-style, Western restaurants for several reasons: The guests will be served by attentive geishas instead of impersonal waiters, in a private dining room; host and guests alike will eat the same foods, as a metaphor of shared values, a communion through commonality. In a Western-style restaurant, on the other hand, each diner is given a menu from which to select whatever is preferred — a metaphorical expression of individuality.

Even more important is that traditional Japanese restaurants
serve saki, a liquor made from fermented rice, throughout the meal rather than cocktails before dinner and wine during it, as the Western restaurants do. Saki was originally brewed as an offering to the gods; mortals would then gather to share it at the altar. Although saki is no longer regarded as a sacred beverage, its communal function is still deeply imbedded in an elaborate drinking etiquette. Everyone pours for someone else, as an indication that each is at the service of the others. Because saki cups are extremely small and need to be refilled frequently, every diner must remain attentive to the others throughout the meal. A cup to be refilled is invariably lifted from the table, as an acknowledgment that in the pouring of the saki service is being rendered.

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The most extended effort to understand the symbolic character of eating is the one made in recent decades by Claude Lévi-Strauss of the Collège de France. His approach is summed up in his statement that human attitudes toward plants and animals have less to do with what is good to eat than with what is "good to think" — in other words, that the conventions of human society decree what is and is not food and what is appropriate to a particular social occasion, all revealed through a people's myths and folk sayings.

The foods available to a North American or European who shops at a supermarket, and to an Amazonian Indian who obtains food from the garden and forest, are of course almost entirely different. Nevertheless, according to Lévi-Strauss, the categories and sub-categories for both are remarkably alike, in that the foods will be raw, boiled, roasted, fried, steamed or rotted. In fact, Lévi-Strauss sees each category of food as having its own level of social prestige, roasted foods being in general highly prestigious and identified with masculinity, whereas boiled or steamed foods are for everyday consumption by women and children. In both complex and simple societies, a roasted bird, for example, is suitable for a festive occasion, but the same bird is usually considered an everyday dish when it is merely boiled. Although the specific pattern is not exactly the same in every society, Lévi-Strauss believes that a contrast between roasting and boiling is universal. The Trumai, Yagua, and Jívaro Indians of South America and the Ingalik Eskimo of Alaska, among others, prepare roasted foods for men and boiled food for women. The Maori of New Zealand considered it fitting for a noble to eat roasted foods but to avoid all contact with boiled foods, more appropriate to people of low birth.

Lévi-Strauss sees human beings as straddling a position between Nature and Culture. As biological organisms, they are obviously a part of Nature; but as sentient beings they are a part of Culture. Eating is important in such a view because, although food is a part of Nature, humans impose their own cultural categories upon it. Lévi-Strauss has developed this line of thought in what he calls the "culinary triangle." Since in every human society at least some food is prepared by cultural methods, a system must exist, he states, for deciding which foods to prepare in what ways. So he visualizes a triangle in which the three categories of the raw, the cooked, and the rotted (intentionally, as in Stilton, Roquefort, and Limburger cheeses) compose the three points. Cutting through this triangle are two continuums: Culture vs. Nature and prepared vs. unprepared. Roasted food is directly exposed to the natural force of fire and thus belongs both to Nature and to the unprepared category; boiled food, on the other hand, must be immersed in a liquid contained in a vessel made by humans, and thus belongs to the realm of Culture and of prepared food; rotted food, which is a transformation of Nature, although to a lesser extent than boiled, is also a prepared food.

Lévi-Strauss observes that roasted food has an affinity with raw because it is never uniformly cooked, being either done on the outside but uncooked on the inside or else roasted only on one side. The affinity of boiled food with rotted, he believes, is attested by such familiar words as the French pot-pourri and the Spanish olla podrida, both of which mean literally "rotted pot" and refer to various meats cooked together with vegetables. Smoking as a method of preparing food has an affinity with the cooked category. Thus a simplified culinary triangle would look like this:
It can, as Lévi-Strauss points out, be expanded to incorporate other categories of food preparation. In some cuisines, roasting may include grilling as a subdivision—the difference being mainly in that the latter places the food closer to the fire. Similarly, some cuisines distinguish between boiling and steaming, in the latter of which water is more distant from the food. The triangle assumes the complex geometrical shape of a tetrahedron when the categories of fried (boiled in oil instead of in water) and braised (boiled in a base of water and fat) are added to it. Lévi-Strauss believes that a system eventually emerges that can be superimposed on other dualities in the society: men and women, sacred and profane, the village and the bush, family and society, high status and low. In short, Lévi-Strauss looks upon the ways people prepare food as a sort of language which at an unconscious level communicates the structure of society. He furthermore believes that such unconscious categorization is applicable to human beings everywhere.

This book is not the place for a detailed exposition of all of Lévi-Strauss' hypotheses, or even for a detailed critique of his position. (Some of these critiques, based on his far-fetched examples and his careless use of facts, are listed in the Reference Notes on page 238.) An otherwise sympathetic critic, Edmund Leach, calls the culinary triangle a "tangle", adding that "the whole operation suggests a game of acrostics in which the appropriate words have been slipped into the vacant slots of a prearranged verbal matrix." One study of the cooking vocabularies used in nine languages around the world uncovered no evidence for the linguistic associations that Lévi-Strauss claims for the culinary triangle, but rather showed that different languages make different distinctions about preparing food.

Typical of the way Lévi-Strauss is unreliable in his generalizations are his statements about how different kinds of cannibals can be expected to cook human meat: Cannibals who eat their relatives will invariably boil them because kin are associated with Culture, whereas cannibals who eat strangers will roast them because these belong to Nature. A sample of sixty cannibal societies does not at all support this generalization. About thirty-five percent of these cannibals roasted the meat, regardless of whether it came from kin (Culture) or from strangers (Nature). Out of twenty-six cannibal societies who ate only their relatives, and who therefore would be expected to boil them, according to Lévi-Strauss, only two actually did so. The cannibals not only unpredictably roasted or boiled relatives and strangers alike; they also baked them, smoked them, or ate them raw—a veritable smorgasbord of human flesh.

Such objections notwithstanding, the culinary triangle has been an important contribution in that it has encouraged scholars to examine more closely the linguistic categories connected with eating. The English language, for example, employs at least thirty-five words for ways of cooking. Some of these (such as coddle) are little used, some are compounds (pan-fry, oven-bake), and some are applied to specific dishes (such as to scallop potatoes, to plank meat, or to shirr eggs). And some, such as the verb roast—for a process that overlaps with both broil and bake because of a change in cooking methods in recent centuries—are ambiguous. Roasting used to be done on a spit over an open fire, until modern stoves made it possible to prepare meat with much the same result by baking it in the oven. The amount of time required for a cooking process accounts for other distinctions made by speakers of English: Stewing is boiling that goes on for a long time, parboiling for a short time. A large or a small amount of the cooking medium makes the difference between deep-frying and French-frying (both of which use large amounts of fat) and sautéing (which uses a small amount). Still other distinctions are based on the use of a special utensil (such as a covered pot for braising), a special ingredient (barbecue sauce), or even a special purpose to be achieved by cooking (such as poaching to preserve the shape of the food or stewing to soften it). Food served flambé requires the presence of alcohol; rissoles are cooked by prolonged frying, whereas searing in fat is brief; to toast is to brown by applying direct heat without fat, to parch is to brown by baking without fat in indirect heat.

In these ways most speakers of English unconsciously categorize the preparation of food. Other languages make similar distinctions, including some not made in English. For example, the Amharic language spoken in Ethiopia has distinct words for the boiling of solids and of liquids—unlike English, in which the boiling of eggs is not set apart from the boiling of soup. Speakers of French similarly distinguish between rôtir ("to roast") and griller ("to grill") according to the shape of the food: rôtir being applied
to a leg of lamb, a potato, or any other rotund food item, and
griller to a strip of meat, toast, or any other flat one.

A remarkable thing about cooking vocabularies is not that
distinctions made in one language are lacking from another, but
rather that speakers of each language choose from certain possi-
bilities and then arrange these conceptually in ways that are
culturally indicative. Even more remarkable is the very small number
of categories used to describe the preparation of food, no matter
what language is spoken. Anyone could easily suggest other cate-
gories — such as one set of terms for everyday cooking and another
for ceremonial cooking, or one group of words for the morning
meal and another for the evening meal — but no language makes
these distinctions.

Meals are taken at more or less fixed times of the day; they are
eaten in certain places, such as at the hearth or in a dining room
set apart for that purpose; and they are prepared under the super-
vision of people designated in each society to perform that task,
usually females but also sometimes the surrogates known as chefs.
The sequence of meals is inseparable from the day’s routine, and
even events in the world beyond the family are often associated
metaphorically with the domestic hearth, as when the Basuto of
southern Africa refer to the evening star as sefalaboho (“dish-
cleaner”) or as kopa-selalolo (“ask for supper”). In simple societies,
almost everything about eating is hedged in by metaphorical asso-
ciations, magical practices, ceremonies, and taboos — and to a
somewhat lesser extent the same thing is true in complex societies
as well.

The important metaphorical associations a society has are usu-
ally with the staples. In the Near East and in Europe, the staple
is bread. Called “the staff of life,” it is referred to not only in the
Lord’s Prayer but in 265 other instances throughout the Old and
New Testaments. Jesus established the intimate symbolic connec-
tion between bread and Christian ritual in saying of it, “This is
my body.” The bread Jesus ate at the Last Supper (actually the
Jewish festival of Passover) would have been the matzoh or un-
leavened bread symbolizing the flight from Egypt when the Israel-
etes had no time to take leavening with them. Bread is also given
a sexual symbolism. The ancient Egyptians fashioned it in the
shape of a phallus, an association that may have been suggested
by the way the loaf swells as it rises and bakes. The oven in which
it was baked is likewise a symbol of the female organ in many
societies — including North America, where the slang expression
“put bread in the oven” refers to sexual intercourse.

The hot-cross buns eaten by Christians during Lent had their
origin in pagan antiquity. The Egyptians offered cakes marked
with the horns of sacrificial oxen to the goddess of the moon, and
the Phoenicians presented horn-imprinted cakes to Astarte, the
goddess of fertility. The horns were later modified into the form
of a cross to represent the four quarters of the moon, and the
Romans are known to have eaten buns marked in this way at
religious feasts. The Saxons also marked loaves with crosses to
honor Eastre or Ostara, the Teutonic goddess of the dawn, who
was worshiped with a feast at the spring or vernal equinox. All
these practices came together in the celebration by the early Chris-
tian Church, around the time of the vernal equinox, of the resur-
rection of Jesus. The festival acquired the name Easter for the
Teutonic goddess, and the associated custom of making bread with
a cross at this season was assimilated to it. The cross cut into the
surface of the bun also has a practical purpose: It allows the loaf
to expand without cracking as it rises.

Bread was of enormous symbolic importance to the ancient
Egyptians, a people who were referred to by Herodotus and others
as “The Bread Eaters” because they were said to have baked about
fifty different kinds. Sacred animals, even cats and wasps, were
offered bread to eat. Graves were stocked with huge amounts of
bread as food for the deceased — although these were sometimes
in the form of clay models, as both more durable and less likely
to tempt pilferers. Throughout the whole ritual life of the Egyp-
tians — the stocking of tombs, the cults and their endless offerings
to the gods — bread was a central symbol. During certain festivals
in which pigs were to be sacrificed, the poor who could not afford
living pigs made models of them out of bread dough and offered
these instead.

In the modern world, probably no one gives more symbolic
attention to bread than the Greek peasants. Christmas breads are
decorated with a cross made of dough, and are embedded with
the walnuts said to symbolize the fruits of the earth; sometimes
the cross is made from eggs, which are regarded as symbols of
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Fertility. At the new year, breads are baked with a coin inside to insure good fortune. Easter breads are baked in a variety of shapes, but most often they are round to symbolize eternity. On Easter Day itself, people give their godchildren presents of decorated breads indicative of sex roles: a horseshoe shape for the boys, who might someday become officers, and an ordinary loaf shape one for the girls, who will remain at home to be bakers of bread. A man going into the army is given a piece of bread to carry in his knapsack because it is thought to confer power. As protection against harm, workers carry to the fields a crust of bread that is kept separate from their lunch and is eaten only after safely returning home in the evening. Children are similarly protected while they sleep by a small piece of bread placed under their pillows.

Such richness of symbolism might seem irrelevant to people in industrial societies for whom bread is often cottony commercial loaves. The white loaf, though, is nothing new, for it has long symbolized well-being and prosperity. It was esteemed by the Romans as the bread of aristocracy. When Rome was besieged by invaders from the north, the people are said to have thrown white bread at them as though flaunting their wealth and their confidence that they would not be reduced to famine. In possibly all societies that consider bread a staple food, its color has been associated with rank: white bread for the wealthy and prestigious, black bread for the peasants. Vestiges remain today of times when bread symbolized fertility. The shoes tied to the back of the newly married couple's car are a relic of a custom in some parts of Europe: A piece of bread was put in the bride's shoe to assure that her marriage would be a fruitful one. The ancient Greeks spread barley around the temple of Demeter to encourage fertility; the barley later gave way to wheat, the wheat to rice, and the rice finally to the confetti that today is often thrown after a bride and groom.

A meal in North America or Europe involves certain assumptions having to do with the time of day, the seating arrangements, and the sequence of the courses. Most families also observe certain rules: Who sits where is based either on status or on habit; there is a restriction on moving about; conversations are expected to be free from disgusting topics; and usually there is a prohibition of other activities (such as speaking on the telephone). A meal also presupposes certain minimal requirements about the food itself. A serving of baked beans with coffee usually does not qualify in North America as a proper lunch or dinner, but the same beans cooked with chopped meat and chili peppers—in short, chili con carne—would qualify. That is because people in North America know intuitively that chili con carne is in accord with the formula \( A + 2b \) for a meal— that is, one central ingredient \( A \) (in this case, beans) together with two unstressed ingredients \( b \) (meat and chili peppers). For the same reason people given eggs, bacon, and toast will feel that they have been served a meal, whereas those given eggs alone (that is, \( A \) without \( 2b \)) will not.

Such intuitive assumptions about what a meal must consist of led to the invention of the dish known as Chicken Marengo. In 1800, when victory over the Austrians at the battle of Marengo, in Italy, seemed assured, Napoleon ordered his chef to prepare a festive dinner. The supply wagon had not caught up with the advancing army and so the master chef sent his men to scavenge for food. They managed to collect only a hen, three eggs, six crayfish, four tomatoes, a little garlic, and some oil—out of which the chef produced a dish consisting of chicken surrounded by eggs, fried with tomato sauce and garlic, and crayfish, with a sauce poured over it. Chicken Marengo qualified as an appropriate meal because it incorporated the fish, egg, and fowl courses traditionally regarded by the French as essential to a feast.

Eating is symbolically associated with the most deeply felt human experiences, and thus expresses things that are sometimes difficult to articulate in everyday language. Nowhere are the metaphors of eating stronger than in the taboos that societies around the world place upon certain foods.