CHAPTER 1

Introduction: The Social Life of Food

Food must not only be good to eat, but also good to think.
Claude Lévi-Strauss 1968a

The wonderful thing about studying food is that one cannot unravel the biological aspects of food use and traditions without considering the cultural aspects as well. Food is a principal medium for social interaction, for human comfort and reassurance, for anxieties and fear; it is at the heart of ideological construction. It is difficult to separate the economic uses of food from the political or individual customs from those of one group. The study of food production, of cuisine, and of meals, of preparation and presentation, gives rise to grand views of regional economic production or intimate portraits of families sitting around hearths. Food, curiously, also brings into focus the hidden aspects of power relations and social life, as well as the production of social facts and people. These are just some of the reasons anthropologists are drawn to the study of food – it is indeed the definitive anthropological topic reflecting our fundamental natures, those of sociality, transformation, and sharing.

Although there are many ways in which one can study the past, in this book I explore the past using social and cultural approaches to food traditions. One of the goals of this book is to unravel the way food creates identity. I want to explore how food traditions energize and naturalize power differences, what roles cuisine plays in social discourse, and the signification of food in social contexts, reflexively creating the person, the family, and the group. I attempt to do this by focusing on what food activities look like today as well as what they looked like in the past.

How does archaeology participate in food history and social theory? Traditionally archaeologists have theorized about food in terms of its use to stave off hunger, by studying calories, effort, and carrying capacities or...
land and technological productivity. Social anthropologists and sociologists, on the other hand, tend to theorize about food by considering health, consumption, social practice, personhood creation including the desire for and valuation of food, and its contexts and meanings. I want to bring this theorizing into archaeological inquiry while also opening up food theory to include archaeology. Throughout this book I make what might be called sweeping statements about cultural manifestations. These ideas might at first appear to belong to one specific time or place, but I expressly leave these statements open, hoping that readers will decide for themselves if they fit in other settings, allowing us to make them “good to think with.”

How do we begin to think about eating in the past? We know that food and shelter are necessary for humans to stay alive. Eating, in fact, is so basic to life that we at times overlook its centrality in our studies of the past. We often enter the past through plant and animal taxa lists, both of which provide substantial information and represent much work. But as the British archaeologist Andrew Sherratt aptly noted, “we do not eat species, we eat meals” (1991:50). The creation of food is an act of cognitive as well as physical transformation, signaling many layers of meaning while being an agent in our lives. We must recognize the powerful forces of production operating before food gets to the table, as well as the significance of food’s capacity to create culture in such a mundane act. Eating is both banal and fraught with emotional consequences (Fishler 1988:279; Rozin 1976).

Emotions around food can run high, as one person’s aphrodisiac gourmet meal of raw oysters is another’s horror of incorporation. As do all animals, we assign categories to food options that identify what is edible and what is not, making some perfectly edible food items unacceptable for consumption while other, even poisonous foods are sought after. Food does not exist without classification and identification, like all of our symbols and things that receive meaning. Ingredients must be identified as edible before they are consumed or cooked. This requires a cognitive transformation. This categorization process engages with the agency of food, as food alters our bodies and experiences. Food therefore reflects embodied practical knowledge of people engaging with their environment. In the archaeological record, food remains have a materiality that archaeologists harness to gain an understanding about the past. Tracking abstract cultural concepts that are made visible through storage, preparation, and eating practices brings the web of meaning and signification into the realm of interpretation through this materiality of food remains.

I begin with the concept that food is a social fact. I assume that it is a transformative agent operating in all societal processes, both materially
and psychologically (Gell 1998; Latour 1993). Looking at food this way, in modern and in past settings on group, family, and individual scales, heightens one’s sense of the active role food has in creating, enacting, and sustaining cultural and social processes. It highlights food’s agency – not only with the possibility of being entrapped by and even addicted to some foods but also being enchanted by them. Equally important is the active role of the associated objects within these processes. People express their agency through food as the cultural act of eating brings the diverse material and social aspects of life together in a unified framework, as cultural worlds are reconstructed through material spaces, architecture, and the consumption of new objects. A meal condenses social life, which is then amplified outward. Thus we engage with practice and agency when we study meals. In fact, one of the main tensions in this discussion is whether food reflects social life or are foods active agents in social life. This tension is present throughout this book, as we tack between different theoretical approaches to the past. I side with food being an agent in social life, as you will see, but you will find places where the other dynamic also operates.

Food is also engaged with identity. It is ultimately social, the first and most quintessential gift, and the glue that forms interpersonal relations: mothers feeding children, families eating together, communities gathering to celebrate or mourn (Mauss 1980 [1925]). Food sharing is therefore a nexus for giving; the locale where social life is formed and renegotiated, where inequalities are materialized and persons are formed. Societies are made manifest in their food traditions, recipes, and the daily cycles that meals create, formed in the sharing of meals and dishes. These actions create society, which in turn becomes the milieu of identity formation (Simmel 1992 [1910]). It is this dense web of social life and agency that we delve into.

Food cultures are created through memories. Recipes and cooking methods passed down from grandparents, parents, and other relatives evoke and maintain the memory of the family, with cooking becoming an identity-making experience whatever the emotional associations (Sutton 2001). There is a cultural importance to food that participates in creating the largest society as well as the individual. Eating is associated with evocative and emotional experiences and memories, but constructed appetites are what drive people to complete tasks that will result in a particular taste and sensation. Proust’s memory of the smell and taste of the madeleine cookie in tea evoked such an emotive memory of his childhood that it formed the core of his four-volume Remembrance of Things Past (1934) and launched modern social theory disciplines.
Food sharing is probably the most common social act in human history. “. . . those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation . . . We are to remember that the act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all those who share the meal are brethren (Robertson Smith 1889:247). In some societies eating alone is considered inappropriate, even sinister; in others, it is a requirement. Identifying eating habits can convey views about social interaction as well as personhood. How one shares food speaks about the place of the participants in society, their age, status, and situation.

The Classical Greeks called food *trophe*. The same word root is in their concept of nurturing people, *anatrepho*, which includes raising children and making kin through feeding, but also teaching them manners and enculturing them into society (Stella Souvatzi 2003, pers. comm.). Commensal or communal sharing and eating therefore intimately interweaves the individual into society at all levels. Many archaeologists have begun to use the term *commensal* to mean communal eating, especially eating at feasts, after Dietler’s important 1996 article on political food. In Middle English it means sharing a meal at a table, from the Medieval Latin *commenslis* (*com*, “with,” and *mnsa*, “table”). Commensality therefore infers eating together. The word also has a second meaning, as an unequal symbiotic relationship of two species that is beneficial to one party while the other remains unharmed and unaffected. This might be a concept to think about in some social settings.

The Place of Food in Archaeological Research

Food-related archaeological studies have tended to emphasize diet, efficiency, and production rather than food and its expansive social field. Diet and subsistence questions, plant and animal husbandry, and evolutionary modeling have been core topics in processual and environmental archaeological approaches, to great effect (e.g., Gremillion 2011; Khare 1980; LaBianca 1991). These studies concentrate on where edibles were procured, their health benefits, eating costs, and what was consumed. We will spend some time looking at what such studies have brought to our understanding of the past, especially the particular success of the newer, microanalytical work of organic molecules, phytoliths, isotopes, pollen, starches, stable isotopes, bones, and parasites. These remains and the methods to identify them can enable us to direct archaeological inquiry toward the social questions of people and their lived values. This trajectory is complex.
and requires the weaving together of data and perspectives, perhaps in a more multifaceted manner than that with which most archaeologists are comfortable. Working with these approaches and data sets precludes focusing on one thing, for as you pull at one data thread you unravel others. This exercise is messy, rich, and complex, like a dense midden.

The materiality of food allows us to complete an archaeology of human experience, as both material and emotional aspects of a lived life surround food. What are the materialities of meals, food traditions, and cuisines? Our word for “meal” comes from the Old English for ground cereal grains, but its meaning has been transformed to an eating occasion, at a specific time and place. A meal can be composed of several dishes, but it need not be. How do the different parts of a meal, currently called “dishes,” something prepared to be eaten, link people to ingredients and ingredients to society? How many linking arguments are sufficient for the identification of a social trend in the material data? Vestiges of past repasts are present in the archaeological record and can be investigated, but we are on slippery ground if we want the full picture. Food traditions are repeated ingredient combinations of meals. Cuisines are styles of cooking and preparing food, their temporal and contextual placements. Can we study food traditions and cuisines, especially their social dimensions, without a full range of the material correlates in the archaeological record? The objects that we dig up are part of a larger system of cultural entanglements. We can make these links between object and meaning because of the embodied practical knowledge that food activities encompass. Whereas social relationships are not always recoverable from archaeological data, human experience can be materialized. Given our expanding research capabilities and an emphasis on the new results that can be gained, these networks of interaction deserve to be explored.

A social approach to studying past culinary traditions should be able to incorporate all of these approaches while offering insights into past cultural and political dimensions of social life. Food’s capacity to order experience and to direct courses of action grows out of its ubiquitous presence in social life as much as its materiality. The most prominent archaeological hesitation to incorporating a social approach has been the lack of tight correlates between the social aspects of food traditions and the material record; archaeologists can never watch people of the past cooking or eating. It is through our own food experiences that we can begin to trace food culture as it permeates social life in the past.

Feasts: Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics and Power (Dietler and Hayden 2001) framed the debate between ecological
functional approaches and the culturally constructed meanings of large meals and their contexts. As this debate gathered momentum in archaeology, archaeological examples on the study of past foodways present issues of cultural identity, cultural change, and meaning (Gerritsen 2000; Gosden and Hather 1999; Hagen 1992, 1995; Hamilakis 1999; Jones 2007; Miracle and Milner 2002; Parker Pearson 2003; Stroeven 2005; Twiss 2007; van der Veen 2003, 2008; Wright 2004). In these works we can see the value in how archaeologists are opening up cultural vistas about the past through food archaeology. These publications illustrate how humanistic archaeology can be while applying rigorous scientific methodologies. Food has become a point where archaeologists can cross over into other disciplines because it is a quintessential interdisciplinary topic, harnessing many disciplines while also requiring multiple data sets and scales of analysis. We increasingly see articles that address values at the same time as they apply molecular or isotopic data.

Do we accept that studying food and cuisines moves us closer to lived lives and that studying eating in archaeological settings can provide insights into the past? The subdiscipline of food archaeology is not yet ubiquitous in current archaeological practice, although it is increasingly becoming so. It is exciting to read articles in which the authors use food to think critically about the past (e.g., Dietler 1996; Hard et al. 1996; Haaland 2007, Hastorf and Johannessen 1993; Hayden 1996; Jones 1999; Klarich 2010a; LeCount 2008; Lightfoot et al. 1997; Mills 2004; Potter and Ortman 2004; Scott 2001; Thomas 2007; Twiss 2012a; Wright 2000). Topics such as cuisine, appetite, taste, food preferences, and disgust have been harnessed to study identity in the past, as in the studies about group identity by Gasser and Kwaitkowski (1991), Johannessen et al. (2002), and Smith (2006), senses and taste by Hamilakis (2004), or cuisine by Atalay and Hastorf (2006) and Stahl (2002, 2014). Some ask whether these topics can be addressed in archaeology. In this book I propose that these avenues of inquiry can indeed be pursued in archaeology.

This accent on the social aspects of food is channeled by our sister disciplines in which food is an increasingly important investigatory lens. In addition, the social theory momentum in archaeology opens space for theorizing about food in past social formations. Although the ecological constraints on what people ate are significant and form the basis of our investigations on food, there are also strong sensory traditions and symbolic codes that influenced eating habits. Highlighting these social, cultural, and historical aspects of the past can open up questions about our hard-won material evidence. Through daily food activities people not only stay alive;
they remake themselves mentally, psychologically, and physically. In these practices the actions and material remnants connect to unlock the past, as we increasingly link the small bits of data together into a picture of seasonal cuisines and cultural preferences such as that presented about the Neolithic world by Atalay and Hastorf (2006).

Many aspects of past food activities are not visible. The actions themselves are gone: the stirring of the pot, people’s conversations, the sounds and smells of cooking, savoring the taste as the cook checks the sauce, the anxious hunger of the onlookers, the sated feeling after eating, or the sequence of courses consumed. Our work here requires an acknowledgment of these invisible practices. Nevertheless, food archaeology begins with specific contexts of food remains, the meals, the kitchens, the technologies harnessed, and the rubbish left over. Studying the procedures linked to this evidence enables us to learn more about how people acted out their social and cultural dynamics through their food habits and styles.

Five Themes in This Book

This book builds on a series of tenets. In addition to the fundamental premise of the agency of food in creating our identities, done so through memory, I build on five related concepts that thread throughout my presentations. The first premise is materially driven, another one is social, the third is sensory, the fourth economic, and the fifth cultural. All are framed by the belief that meals are not just cultural events, they are also agents; they are techniques of the body and exist through meaningful practices that get carried along through bodily repetition and memory. Based on these notions, the study of food allows us to investigate many issues of interest to archaeologists.

Materiality

The first theme derives from the disciplines of materiality and identity and how artifacts reflexively and actively influence social worlds (DeMarrais et al. 2004; Dietler and Herbich 1998; Gosden 2005; Miller 1998a, 2005). The material culture of food creates as well as reflects social relations. In the following chapters I examine how food actively renews society and engages the participants through the things that are involved in food creation. Food – the material and the idea – is an ethnic marker, a group identifier, and a medium for exclusion and inclusion. In Barthes’s (1979) study of French and U.S. eating habits, for example, we learn how the way
of eating fish, meat, and salad communicates the identity of the individual as well as their social class. The French, Barthes noted, eat by class and gender; men eat meat in large bites, women nibble at salads. There is little snacking. In the United States, on the other hand, snacks are common and iconic foods are traditionally shared between genders. Barbequed meat is the core meal on the Fourth of July in the United States; unleavened bread must be served at a Jewish Passover Seder feast; and a baked cake, preferably layered and white, is essential at a wedding. Ingredients and their preparation signal and define activities and events. This premise of the material links to societal formation can help focus our application of plant taxa, ceramic wares, and animal bone frequencies to gatherings, ceremonies, differential power at social events, and social relations within communities. These interrelationships help us sense the material agency of things in the manner that Alfred Gell (1998) proposed.

Social Agency

The second tenet engages with and reflects the social world and therefore entails social agency – how a meal can be a political, social agent, reaffirming, transforming, or realigning relations among the participants (Appadurai 1981; Fajans 1988:145; Gell 1998). Eating partners exist in many societies, forming special bonds of trust and support in a fictive kinship that operates beyond dinner. The social world never operates far from food that people share. Acquaintances reach a different relationship if they eat together. People clearly manipulate food presentation to channel social outcomes (Appadurai 1981; Klarich 2010a:2; Weismantel 1988). Reflect on an important family meal at which someone wants to make an impression. The agency of the dishes, their presentation and flavors, are there to enchant the guests. All participants consume the meal, but each person is entrapped in a different social position; those that helped prepare the meal have a different social outcome than those that are invited. Food can be shared evenly or selectively, eaten quickly or slowly, left on the dish to signal satiation or fed to the dog under the table. The end result realigns the participants. Each of these acts is a construction of the social relationships that are played out around the table.

Identity is created through these acts of social eating. The restaurant is a benign example in which people are generally allowed to choose what they want to consume, communicating their personality and mood to others at the table. Power relations can be enacted behind the scenes. We hear of the power of chefs over their subordinates in professional kitchens, with
scenes of melodramatic power displays during food preparation. There are evocative ethnographic examples of power relations seen in feasting and presentation too, with aggressive serving to neighboring communities on the Goodenough Islands presented by Young (1971) or the elegant wedding feasts of India, famously described as gastropolitics by Appadurai (1981).

A good meal and its setting enliven conversation and create consensus and social cohesion. Meals do this by resonating with past meals and the people who prepared and ate them, by evoking food memories through the sensory tastes and displays. Satiation – the sense of physical well-being, transformation, and communion – becomes the collective memory of a meal that can be called up in the future. This transformative experience resonates long after the meal is over, in the corporeal sensation of the meal and the affirmation of social relations, tucked away in memories. Like material heirlooms, past food experiences can evoke strong emotions and even sustain people when there is little else (Sutton 2001). Thinking about eating leads to thinking about people in their social world. In Memory’s Kitchen records recipes remembered by women who were in the Terezín concentration camp during World War II, written down as these women tried to retain their sense of identity and community through remembered recipes and meals (De Silva 1996). Food heirlooms such as written-down recipes illustrate the active power of social memory and enchantment. By talking about and remembering past foods and recipes people connect to their past social worlds and to themselves. This is a common activity for those away from home.

The Senses

The third, related premise of this book concerns sensory and physical engagement with food. Eating is a sensual act, since each meal physically transforms mood and energy levels. Anticipation occurs throughout the production, collection, storing, and processing of the ingredients as the remembrance of smells, tastes, and feelings resonates with the meals to come. Disgust as well as desire can be aroused by these sensations (Jones 2000). Food transforms each person’s body through their eating and drinking; we can get ill from poor diet, or regain health through a good one. Corporeal transformations ensue with fermented beverages, poisons, or excessive calories; change can also come from hunger. All the senses are engaged in meal preparation and consumption; taste, smell, touch, hearing, and sight (Lalonde 1992). The pot bubbles as the cook tastes the stew with a wooden spoon. The senses are activated, physically transforming
mood and bombarding the body with an increase in serotonin and insulin. Socially acquired tastes such as spicy or bitter foods are constructed, as seen in the cult-like engagement with chile peppers (*Capsicum*) that “chile heads” have, now around the world (www.chileheads.com/; Nabhan 2005; Weismantel 2004). Given that food preparation and the produced meals are physical, interactive events, we can track how corporeal transformations locate the participants in their social world through such sensory actions. This perspective leads us into the realms of identity, since archaeologists are increasingly realizing that certain foods, their production, preparation, and accompanying sensations create individuals and communities over thousands of years (Fuller and Rowlands 2009). This is what Elizabeth Rozin (1973) called core flavors.

**Economics**

The fourth premise to be discussed is how food engages with cultural economics – the economics of value, access, desire, and control. This standpoint asserts that caloric efficiency and “energetic practicalities” do not guide everyone’s actions with regard to food choice, but that people do include some economic constraints, costs, inputs, and outputs and production styles in their decision making. A strong component of cultural tradition – affective feelings, familiarity, and the understanding of what food is acceptable – enters into food consumption decisions. Further, the notion of power and control of production and access can never be removed from food. Who has the right or agency to harvest a crop or hunt an animal, procure a rare mushroom or bake a specific recipe? Part of this economic equation of food acquisition is the history and memory of tactics and practices. Some food ingredients are passed over while others are sought out. These actions are not based solely on cost and availability, although such criteria play a role in crafting cuisines. Organic matter becomes edible when it embodies desirability within an historical food tradition – what constitutes good food or proper eating situations is defined within a network of economic and historical influences (Logan 2012; Logan and Cruz 2014; Wilk 2006).

**Taste**

Taste, the fifth theme, is an important cultural force that weaves through every example in this book, being both enabling and constraining (Bourdieu 1984; Elias 1939; Falk 1991; Giddens 1979; Warde 1997). Taste
is not only one of the five senses, the sensory impression of food or other substances on the tongue and body; it is also an awareness of subtle differentiation, in value and quality. This cultural valuation carries embodied preferences and emulations, manifested in practices through unconscious and conscious regular encounters with the material world, responding to the memories of past meals. What is the relationship between disgust and good taste, and how do they interact with tradition, emulation, and individual taste (Jones 2000:62)? Bad taste and good taste are created through sensory experiences that are culturally filtered, feeding back onto the individual’s perception (Jones 2000; Rozin and Fallon 1987). Personal taste is especially active at the point of refusal, when people do not readily adopt foreign foods or when disgust is stimulated. This action (disgust and/or refusal) can appear to be passive or unconscious, but it is active, based on meanings that have been incorporated into the mind and body through memories and cultural constructs. These taste traditions may seem conservative, but they are scalar – that is, taste continuities and change have to do with embodied forms of practical knowledge and cultural settings. People do not add new ingredients or techniques into their cuisine or preparation technology randomly, but in structured, historically contextualized ways (Bourdieu 1984; Fajans 1988; Farb and Armelagos 1980; Lyons and D’Andrea 2003; Roddick and Hastorf 2010). The North American Thanksgiving meal is a good example of embodied taste preferences. Reenacting grandma’s preparations in the kitchen, gathering the ingredients, following the old recipe sequence, presenting food on the same or similar platters – these acts embody both conscious and unconscious actions, created through repetitive, meaningful practices recalled from the past in this community of Thanksgiving practice (further discussed in Chapter 7). Such sedimented embodiments shape every Thanksgiving meal. Preferences are not fixed but are reframed continuously. These canons of taste operate in food choice and commodity consumption in our own lives. When taste is added to the mix, it reminds us of how food economics of convenience and price are only two of the many components that go into our decision making concerning what we eat and drink (Jackson and Moores 1995; Krondl and Lau 1982; Miller 1998b; Sahlins 1976). Added to the economic realities in food consumption – what can grow where, transport costs, weather patterns, access – are practices of taste and valuation that frame the reception or rejection of food selection, including beliefs, health, flavors, emotions, desires, hedonism, self-esteem, memory, tradition, political implications, social position, capacity to make decisions, and even fame.
The Centrality of Cultural Food Studies Today

It (food) can instill power, prestige, substantiate kinship, create social relations, effect social control . . . participate in formation of person or aspects of identity, an operator in rites of passage, feasts, myths.

Fajans 1988:143

The disciplines of sociology and history have placed food centrally in their intellectual agendas. Long-term histories have highlighted the cultures of food in historical change (Drummond and Wilbraham 1994; Forster and Ranum 1979; Mennell 1985; Mennell et al. 1992; Mintz 1996; Ramírez 2005; Scholliers 2001). Sociologists discuss how the generative structures of food are a critical and productive entry into the investigation of social classes as well as ethnicity (Barthes 1979; deCerteau 1989; deCerteau et al. 1998; McIntosh 1994; Warde 1997). Anthropology also has joined in with edited volumes by Counihan and Van Esterik (2013) and Forson and Counihan (2013). These disciplines note how food is constituted by historical conditions as it participates in and reflects long-term social change. The authors discuss how food reflects both large- and small-scale cultural processes. The number of wonderful historical and sociological publications relevant to food archaeology makes this a rich moment to address this issue in archaeology as well as to contribute to the greater discussion in food studies.

To gain a sense of the recent explosion of food studies in many disciplines, one need only visit the food section of a library and see the new shelves that have been added, with huge compendia such as *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Davidson 1999) and the two-volume *Cambridge World History of Food* (Kiple and Ornelas 2000). These books cover the gamut of approaches and cultures. The Oxford book is more a food preparation and processing volume, whereas the Cambridge set focuses on the study of society, history, and culture through food. Not only are many foods (raw and prepared) discussed but also attitudes, national trends, food policies, food disorders, and prehistoric diets. Methany and Beaudry (2015) have recently mimicked this in archaeology with their *Archaeology of Food Encyclopedia*. The vast quantity of recipe books and shows on television, often with a twist of cultural context or Braudelian long-term history, spans virtually every area of the world and group. Some television channels are now completely devoted to food programs. These presentations suggest that food will be tastier (and also more meaningful) if consumers know more about the history of what is about to go into their mouths. This plethora of recipes and preparations has led some commentators to critique this obsession in
scholarship as a fad. Many are equally vehement about its centrality to our understanding of human existence (Counihan 1999; Counihan and Van Esterik 2013; Lupton 1996). Food scholars wax eloquent about food as a nexus in society. “Understanding people through their food, or satisfying curiosity about individuals’ eating habits, is an activity which certain puritanically minded scholars claim to despise. If however we associated food with generosity, pleasure, and the basic texture of life itself, it becomes a matter of more than simply ephemeral interest” (Allen 1994:viii).

Why exactly has food studies burgeoned across so many disciplines? As we learn in Barthes’s (1979) food analysis, emulation is central in food traditions. But more central to my mind is the universal appeal of food. Daily life is signposted by food preparation and consumption, by meal times, by gaining foodstuffs, by making dates to eat together. This attention to food results from concerns about the body, existence, and identity, which are directly related to incorporation and corporeality. But this interest also engages with satiation and sensation. We enjoy feeling good, and eating helps us feel good.

Thinking about eating is reflective. One can learn about oneself and others through the foods being consumed and what people think about those ingredients. Vestiges of past repasts are still with us in our own meals. Some food habits are long-lived. We still consume what can be called Neolithic foods, such as muesli and hummus, or Paleolithic foods, such as raw nuts and berries. Combinations of flavors and local specialties can be traced over many generations. Cooking equipment has not changed all that much. A container to hold liquid and a spoon are required for soup preparation, with a bowl to drink it from; these too are Paleolithic tools.

Book Outline

In this book I propose food archaeology as a subdiscipline in its own right, moving it into a more central position in our discipline’s and research projects’ goals. Many of the artifacts we excavate and study are associated with food. Why not let food studies open up our views of the past? Likewise, food scholars also need to bring archaeology into their agendas as a serious contributor to the discipline.

Archaeology is a preeminently material endeavor, and fortunately for archaeologists, many artifacts are material correlates of past foodways: plant and animal remains are central, but so are ceramics, chipped and ground stone, organic residues, architectural layout, hearths, baskets, human bone,
stable isotopes, molecules, storage pits, middens, and environmental indicators also directly speak to foodways. Many current archaeological research projects are multidisciplinary, incorporating methodologies that integrate multiple data sets. A surprising range of historical records, storage tallies, shipping orders, menus, shopping lists, stock inventories, cookbooks, health treatises, and diaries provides information, adding strength to our interpretations of the excavated material.

The study of foodways is “the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization, procurement, distribution, preservation, preparation, and consumption” (Anderson 1971:2). Foodways allows for broad trends and tropes. But such an approach suggests a sweeping view of long-term food cultures, and archaeologists know that we in fact study individual deposits and events in archaeological analysis, making us tack between the individual and the group. As we pursue the agency of food – that is, the relationships of identity and food in specific sites or lived lives – we can focus on food events, food activities, and food practices of both the small and the large temporal scope.

Rather than focusing on a world filled with symbolism, signs, discourses, and meanings, or one based on economically driven efficiency, I hope include the spectra of the pressures we experience in daily life when thinking about the past, delving into what was occupying people’s minds, hands, and stomachs, filling their workdays, carried around the countryside, and prepared at their hearths. Foods are well suited to serve as metaphors for understanding less well-understood but equally important aspects of social life, be it human solidarity, loneliness, or engagement with the divine. Food, including processed and prepared foods, as with all objects made or modified by people, are metaphorical expressions of culture and therefore link to the identity of the maker, producer, and consumer.

In this book I present several avenues of study that can be applied to archaeological settings, but I do not systematically cover all possible archaeological approaches to food studies. For example, I do not deal with caloric constraints, seasonality patterns, or dietary reconstruction (see Pearsall 2015 chapter 7 and Gremillion 2011 for a good explanation). I do not cover food as it relates to healing, chemical nutrition, or other biocultural aspects important to human existence (see Etkin 2006). Instead, my aim is to pursue past social life through the study of food and cuisine. I discuss the cultural, economic, political, social, and symbolic aspects of cuisines, corporeal experiences, tastes, smells, and meanings surrounding food, and at the political relations and social identities that are expressed and created in food activities. My strategy is to investigate these approaches to the past through both
ethnographic and archaeological examples, interweaving them within each topic. By juxtaposing modern examples with archaeological food studies drawn from a wide literature I try to bring our inquiry into sharper focus through the lens of food.

I wrote this book to focus on the agency of food in ideological formation, social identity, and personhood, to engage with the critical work of food in society, as well as to show the potential of these trajectories to help in understanding the human past. Building on the five premises outlined here, the following chapters concentrate on some of the classic archaeological questions while folding in new perspectives and methods. The cultural examples I use throughout the book are introduced in the early chapters and will be seen again in later chapters, highlighting different issues in the same material. Other examples are only used for specific subjects. My mixing of ethnographic and archaeological examples was done purposively to help disrupt our usual thought patterns and to seek the past in new ways.

The three parts of the book follow a vaguely temporal intellectual path. The first part, consisting of Chapters 2 and 3, lays the groundwork with foundational themes and scales of study. Frameworks in this study of food are outlined in Chapter 2. This chapter begins with food as the quintessential gift. Foods are infused with values, built on a full range of beliefs, rules, and experiences, which is addressed in this chapter. The crafting of taste and emulation are traced through two histories of taste in Europe and China. This leads to how food systems are created and classified. There are many analytical scales in the study of food, from landscape and climate to biochemistry; Chapter 3 covers the smallest – the meal. I focus on this analytical level not only because it is the moment of incorporation and satiation but also because the actions surrounding the preparation of the meal have material correlates and are often found in the archaeological record. From the meal we can follow many cultural dimensions of identity and society.

Part II’s three chapters present what archaeology scholarship has been engaging with, the many steps and activities in food provisioning. By unpacking the chaîne opératoire of food preparation options (the sequence of practices in food preparation), the techniques of the body in Chapter 4, as well as food activities across the landscape, we begin to envision the possibilities of food-work in the past (Dobres 2000; Ingold 2000). These activities are self-creative dimensions of mundane tasks, bodily memories clearly leading to a range of past meals. The obligation is on us to remember and engage with this triangle of technology, knowledge, and agency when we deliberate about cuisines in the past. Chapter 5 turns to one of the more common themes in food studies – food economics. Food production
models have contributed much to our longer views of societies. Food is often considered a mere staple in economic discussions, yet it also is and has been the basis for wealth and the focus of state power. The potential for inequality is ever present in ownership and access and that includes food, making this a common and important strand of food studies, as is so clear in today’s current pressing issues in many urban settings. Chapter 6 presents the political side of food, where the gastropolitical ideas of Appadurai (1981) are the focus. While issues of gender roles and social positions stream throughout this book, they are directly discussed in this chapter. All meals have a political edge to them, but the overt power operating at feasts makes it an obvious meal to discuss. These orientations clearly lead to the other axes of social life, issues of community and identity, which are brought to the fore in the next part of the book.

Part III turns to the potential of food studies, mainly focusing on identity formation. In the two chapters comprising it the creation of identity at different scales of inquiry is addressed. Chapter 7 begins with the larger social entities. Here we look at community foods and how food creates group identities. Tracking food indigenization and assimilation helps us see how ingredients and dishes participate in the nuanced recreation of social identities, especially in the confusing environment of colonialism (Dietler 2007; Wilk 2006). This social creation is accessed through thinking about boundaries and bounded actions. In most settings, not just what communities produced on their own land – and therefore had access to – but also how they prepared their food is created by the boundaries of a group (Adapon 2008; Young, 1971). We look at household creation and identity through food sharing, with all of its tensions and solidity. In Chapter 8 the scale is the individual, and the creation of personhood through food and its incorporation into the body. This theme includes concepts about the body, embodiment, and personhood. Corporeality and the power of the senses are important in individuation or lack thereof. Identity formation is relational and bounded, not only with other people, plants and animals but also with things – and what is more common than interacting with things to eat? Chapter 8 does not contain as many examples as the earlier chapters do; my goal is to think about these concepts as we push ourselves farther along this trajectory. Chapter 9 assesses the study of food in a social context, bringing together the themes of the earlier chapters to see where food studies can guide us as we look into the past. Ultimately food keeps us alive, and in turn making us invested in it.