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Edited by
Thomas A. Sebeok
Jean Umiker-Sebeok
Assistant Editor
Evan P. Young

As American as Apple Pie—and Sushi and Bagels:
The Semiotics of Food and Drink
Adrienne Lehrer

Like all other animals, we need food and liquids to survive. But in addition to availability and personal preferences, the food and drink choices of human beings are imbued with symbols. Although there are many aspects of the symbolic nature of food and drink that can be explored, I will concentrate on the following three: (1) food and drink as symbols themselves; (2) the language of food and drink—that is, the way we employ linguistic symbols to describe what we consume; and (3) the nature of advertising for food and drink. This last aspect combines the first two, in that the language used to persuade us to buy and consume specific items is reflected in the symbols associated with the items.

Food and Drink as Symbols

To say that food is necessary for life is a rather trivial truism. Beyond the minimal requirements that food provide nourishment and satisfy hunger, there are other basic expectations: it should taste good and be culturally palatable. These factors vary across cultures, of course, and individuals differ in what they like. Moreover, choice changes rapidly as new products are introduced into and spread through a culture. Although my observations are based largely on contemporary American practices, parallels can no doubt be found in most parts of the developed world.

First of all, we see that foods and cuisines are associated with ethnicity—pasta and tomato sauce with Italians; bamboo shoots and stir-fry with Chinese; grape leaves and souvlaki with Greeks; croissants with French; bagels with Jews; and fry-bread with Native Americans. However, the enormous change in sophistication and quality of American cuisine over the past 30 years has resulted in all of these foods and cuisines spreading throughout the population. Ethnic restaurants of all kinds are thriving in American cities and towns everywhere. Whereas most Americans would have considered snails and raw fish disgusting in the past, many people frequent sushi bars, and escargots often appear on menus. A recent Miss
America, a Minnesotan of Swedish ancestry, said in an interview that her favorite dish was sushi.

Food also serves as a marker of class (Veblen 1899). Although Veblen did not develop the theme of food and drink as examples of conspicuous consumption, he did mention that the leisure class must develop a taste for certain foods and beverages, and individuals must submit to 'training and intellectual activity' to achieve this goal. They must also provide costly entertainment. An example of such conspicuous consumption is the invention of consommé during the late feudal period. The best beef was used to make soup, but only the clear broth was served at the lord's table, while the beef used for cooking it was given to servants (Maier-Bruck 1975: 74).

Russell Lynes (1949) described (parodied?) the preferences of highbrows, middlebrows (upper and lower), and lowbrows. At that time highbrows drank red wine and ate salads made from greens with oil and vinegar in unwashed salad bowls. Upper middlebrows drank martinis and ate tossed salads with Roquefort dressing, while lower middlebrows drank highballs and ate a wedge of lettuce with thousand island dressing. Lowbrows drank beer and ate cole slaw.

Although foods and beverages are still associated with socioeconomic classes, the inventory of associations has changed dramatically. Consider, for example, alcoholic beverages. Wine drinking has grown dramatically in this country among all classes (and the consumption of hard liquor has declined). Beer, whatever its past symbolic value, has taken on some of the aura of wine, and can no longer be considered a low-class drink. Supermarkets and restaurants carry a wide range of imported beers. Beer ads and labels sometimes try to describe the taste, using a lexicon comparable to the rich vocabulary used to describe wines. Most recently, mineral water and seltzer have been added to the gourmet beverage list. Perrier has become chic, and supermarkets and restaurants offer selections of such waters. There is a store that markets a mail order water-of-the-month (Jennings 1990), and a restaurant in Beverly Hills opened a Water Bar which features more than a hundred waters, starting at $1 a glass (Vegetarian Times, January 1987, p. 64).

We can see the interaction of class and a taste for exotic food by looking at what could be called yuppy food. Although the associations for yuppy food have changed over the years, the contemporary stereotype includes people from the professional classes who seek out and enjoy unusual food. These are the people who go to Mexican, Indian, Japanese, Thai, and Brazilian restaurants. They also enjoy nouvelle cuisine (a concept that means many different things—see below) and unusual combinations: a pizza with smoked duck, peanuts, and avocado, for example.

Stereotypes of occupational roles also involve food and drink preferences. Solomon and Assael (1987) explored such symbols by asking subjects to list attributes of various occupational social roles. In their data, professionals drink French wine, suit salesmen and unskilled workers drink Miller beer, attorneys drink Michelob, public defenders drink Molson, and salesmen and janitors drink Coca-Cola. (Janitors also drink Sunkist orange soda.)

Another aspect of the symbolic value of food and drink can be observed in what is served on what occasion. Turkey is served on Thanksgiving and Christmas, ham on Easter. Thornton (1987) describes the different occasions on which sekt (sparkling wine) and schnapps (whiskey) are served in Austria. Sekts is served on certain holidays and for formal occasions, whereas schnapps is used to create and sustain bonds. Similarly, in the United States, champagne is served to celebrate something—a special award, a wedding, or the coming of a new year. It would seem ludicrous to celebrate with a glass of club soda; even teetotalers might get non-alcoholic sparkling wine for such occasions.

Food can also symbolize lifestyle. Although there is much controversy surrounding healthy diets, with purported facts and theories constantly changing as new studies are carried out, certain foods represent healthy or non-healthy lifestyles. Currently olive oil, yogurt, and (maybe) oat bran are good (healthwise), while bacon and butter are bad. (Verba and Camden [1987] provide some of the concepts that cluster together.) In line with low calories, plus a suspicion about the safety of such chemicals as Nutrasweet, we see one of the motivations for the popularity of waters, as described above. Looking at the information on one brand of seltzer water, the company has chosen to emphasize in easy-to-read letters that it contains 0 calories, 0 protein, 0 carbohydrate, 0 fat, and 0 sodium. Below that, in small letters, is the information about nutrition—that it contains less that 2 percent of the USRDA of the various vitamins and minerals contained therein.

Unfortunately, many tasty items are on the list of not-so healthy foods: for instance, rich chocolate desserts, which contain chocolate (caffeine), butter and cream (cholesterol), and sugar (calories without vitamins). People often discuss eating such items as sinful or wicked—half-facetiously, of course. Consider the name decadence given to a particular type of torte made with dark chocolate. It appears that the sinfulness of eating certain foods has become secularized; in an age which values thin bodies and proclaims healthy foods, at the same time down-play-
ing former sexual taboos, it is interesting to notice how a moral vocabulary has been borrowed for gustatory pleasures that are ‘forbidden’. 2

Food and drink can have political and social effects because of their symbolic associations. One black political leader was criticized by other blacks for publicly stating a preference for steak over chitterlings. At festivals associated with ethnic groups (e.g., an Italian-American or Greek-Armenian celebration), foods and drinks served will be those associated with the cuisine of that culture.

Since the symbolic value of foods varies from group to group, there is the possibility of misunderstanding. For example, many years ago my husband and I had close friends in a neighboring town, and we frequently invited each other over for dinner. One time when we were hosts, we served them a dinner of delicatessen foods: corned beef, pastrami, potato salad, cole slaw, rye and pumpernickel breads, and kosher dill pickles. After that meal the friendship cooled suddenly, and I never understood why. In thinking back I suspect that the cause was a deep misunderstanding about that meal. For us delicatessen foods were a real treat, partly because they were relatively expensive. At that time, hamburger was $3.5 a pound and sirloin steak was a dollar a pound, but sliced corned beef cost over $4 a pound. Moreover, a cold deli buffet was something served at large family reunions, and it symbolized a meal with intimates. For our (former) friends, the meal may have been an insult, implying that we were not willing to bother cooking something proper.

Gift-giving appears to be a universal practice, with a semiotic of its own. In contemporary America, food and drink gifts are common, and there is an interaction of the two semiotic systems. As a result, there are constraints on what constitutes appropriate food and drink gifts. Many sorts of wines and liquors are considered good gifts (for alcohol drinkers), provided that the item is at least up to the quality the individual normally drinks. Candy (especially chocolates) is another popular gift for recipients not on diets. Home-made products (bread, cookies, jam and other preserves) are almost always considered acceptable, as are home-grown fruits and vegetables. Such items signify giving something very personal—something that comes from individual labor. Given that so many families consist of two working parents, such gifts constitute luxury of time, at least as precious as money. Other acceptable food and drink gifts are generally more tailored to a recipient—such as special herbs, mustards, or dried mushrooms for a gourmet cook. However, these items should be rather hard to obtain if they are to count as a suitable gift. Bringing a jar of French’s mustard, store-bought carrots, or ordinary white flour would count as funny or simply inappropriate. Moreover, to bring basic necessities as a gift is potentially insulting, since it can signal that the recipient is too poor to afford such necessities. 3

On February 1, 1990, in Moscow, McDonald’s opened its first branch in Russia. This event was widely publicized in the American media, and it is interesting to speculate on why. Obviously, McDonald’s is more than a food establishment—it is a symbol of contemporary American mass culture. McDonald’s food is uniform and bland; McDonald’s restaurants are fast; servers are friendly and young; the packaging is disposable; and the decor is family-oriented; that is, it is a place you can go to with any number of children of any age. The opening of McDonald’s in the Soviet Union is open to any number of interpretations, of course. It could be read as the triumph of capitalism over communism. A darker interpretation might be that while American industry has fallen behind in durable goods—automobiles, machinery, and steel—Americans still have something to export: fast foods.

The Language of Food and Drink

There is a rich vocabulary used to describe wine (Lehrer 1983), much of which is used in describing other beverages, such as beer, coffee, and tea. Although mineral and seltzer waters have become fashionable, it is still funny to think of such a rich vocabulary to describe, differentiate, and evaluate waters; but it is not unthinkable.

One of the results of the wine study, which involved empirical testing to see how much consensus there was among speakers, is that words are applied to wines quite differently. A wine served to two individuals at the same time and poured from the same bottle might be judged sweet and fruity by one taster and dry and bitter by another. Two factors that partially explain such inconsistencies are (1) different preferences and (2) different implicit norms. Much of the wine vocabulary is value-laden: thin mean ‘too dry’ and carries a negative evaluation, unlike the neutral light. Therefore a judge who likes a wine would not use thin. Most descriptors are relative: light and heavy imply a norm, and since many wine drinkers regularly drink different kinds of wines, they internalize different norms. Since Italian red wines are heavier than Austrian reds, an Austrian wine drinker would find a particular sample to be heavy, whereas an Italian might judge it light.
Indeterminacy of reference can be found elsewhere in the vocabulary of food and drink. The term *nouvelle cuisine* is one of these. Originally applied to a cuisine developed in France, it was brought to America and modified, especially in California, where it became known as *California nouvelle*, and then generalized to other regions, giving rise to terms like *Southwestern nouvelle*. 4 I have asked many individuals to define *nouvelle cuisine* and to provide a list of its attributes. Responses show considerable variation, with different individuals picking out different aspects. For some, the term applies to small portions. ‘At a *nouvelle* restaurant, you go away hungry.’ Another cluster of responses center around using unusual ingredients and combining them in strange ways: for example, chicken livers with prickly pear pads in a raspberry sauce. Still others mention a beautiful presentation, such as steamed vegetables arranged on a plate to form a flower. Finally, the concept includes the use of fresh, local ingredients (accounting for the prickly pear pads in the Southwest) and low-calorie, light sauces (in contrast to the rich sauces of traditional French cuisine).

The linguistic devices for naming food and drink are quite ordinary and common. We can see this in the opacity of compounds and in euphemism. Although much of the vocabulary for food is completely transparent (for example, *fish soup* is a soup made with fish), much is not, and to master this vocabulary requires the assimilation of many facts. The meanings attached to the various ethnic cuisines depend on ingredients, cooking methods, and finished results (see Rozen 1983). To understand what a particular dish contains or how it is made also requires specialized information. *Florentine* refers to a dish with spinach; anything *Provençal* probably has olive oil, tomatoes, and lots of garlic. Many dishes are named after people (e.g., Oysters Rockefeller and Pavlova), and one simply has to learn what they are. Related to the class differences alluded to above, the members of certain classes are expected to know what these terms refer to.

Euphemism is the act of making something intrinsically unpleasant or embarrassing sound better by applying a nice name. An example is ‘mountain oysters’ for testicles. A European friend mentioned that during World War II, when food was scarce, hungry farmers ate cats, referring to them as ‘country rabbits’.

The need to make food products sound appetizing can be clearly seen in the names of pet foods, which are devised for the benefit of the purchaser, not the user. One popular brand of cat food has names like ‘country-style dinner’, ‘mariner’s catch’, ‘prime entree’, and ‘tender turkey and giblet entree’. Notice that high-status terms like *dinner* and *entree* are used, along with positive descriptors like *tender*. How could it not be tender, since the food is all ground up? Or, if not ground, it comes in *morsels*. If one reads the small print on the labels, one finds lists of ingredients starting with ‘meat by-products’ and ‘poultry by-products’. These descriptions are not only not appetizing; they do not even identify the species of animal they come from.

Another common linguistic device is the narrowing or widening of word meaning, a process which can be seen with *light* (lite). Although this term began with a specific brand of beer to denote a beer with fewer calories than regular beer, it spread to all brands and is currently widening to include other foods. The Quaker Oats Company, for instance, produces a line of Lite Pancake and Lite Syrup.

Related to euphemism (or perhaps part of that concept) is the practice of upgrading terminology. ‘Spaghetti and tomato sauce’ is replaced by ‘pasta in marinara sauce’. *Stew* and *soup* are replaced (in some recipe names and on some menus) by foreign-language equivalents such as *potage*, *bourilabaise*, *bourguignon*, or *goulash*. (The latter three refer to specific kinds of dishes, however.)

In addition, we find instances of innovative word formation, which involves the processes described in Lehrer (1983: chapter 2). A good example is the term *breezer* to denote a beverage with rum and fruit juices. Why should a drink be called *breezer*? Presumably the word is a play on *cooler* from ‘wine cooler’, a term for a mixture of wine and fruit juices. The motivation for *cooler* is fairly clear, since a *cooler* presumably cools one. The association of breezes with cooling can then be used, and the instrumental ending -er on breeze provides the analogy. I suggest that without the prior existence of *cooler* in the language, referring to an alcoholic beverage, *breezer* would be semantically opaque and therefore not as good a term.

Zwicky and Zwicky (1980) have investigated the genre/register of menus in American restaurants, which serve the purposes of both informing and advertising. Names of dishes are often followed by descriptions: for instance, ‘Entrecote au Poivre Madagascar—sirloin steak topped with green peppercorn, served with cream sauce and cognac’ and ‘Sautéed Shrimp in Garlic Butter—The zesty garlic butter brings out the best in this epicurean treat from the sea’. The first example describes and the second advertises.

Zwicky and Zwicky also observe that French is used on menus frequently, because of the traditional association of French with fine food. In fact a restaurant need not be French, and the language need not be grammatical French. Therefore, one finds ‘Cuisine de Holland’, ‘Stuffed Tomato aux Herbs, Shoreham Style’, and
Advertising Food and Drink

Magazine advertisements provide a good way of investigating the symbolic nature of food and drink, since advertisers attempt to sell their products by appealing to the desires and needs of the public. Different individuals have varying needs and preferences, and not every product or ad can please everyone. In addition, the nature of the ad will vary with the publication in which it appears, since readership differs among publications.

The advertising of food and drink in a sample of about a dozen different magazines can almost all be categorized into appeals to taste, health, class (in the sense of 'classy'), and trailing far behind, price and ease of preparation.

As one might expect, items that are not considered healthy, such as butter, alcohol, and rich desserts, are promoted on the basis of taste and class. Items that are supposed to be healthy, such as yogurt, cereals, bran, and vegetables, are promoted not only for their health benefits, but often for their good taste, to overcome any bias that healthy foods do not taste good. Some ads even play up this conflict. For example, in an ad for Ralston Oat Bran Options, there is a picture of a horse with a feed bag attached to his head. The caption reads, 'If this is how you feel about oat bran...you need a tastier option' (Sunset, June 1989, p. GF 19). Many items such as ham and mayonnaise, which are not considered healthy because of their supposed high calories and/or cholesterol, use advertising appeals based on health, arguing that the product in the ad has fewer calories, less cholesterol, etc. than similar products. Oscar Mayer advertises smoked cooked ham, with a caption 'only 25 calories a slice'. A picture of the ham package says '95% fat free' (Mademoiselle, May 1989, p. 252). Or a company may try to promote one of its products over another, such as a Häagen-Dazs ad for a light fruit sorbet (Food and Wine, August 1988, p. 47). Such an appeal is intended to counteract the appeal of traditional Häagen-Dazs ads, which boast of the product's richness and heaviness.

Liquor and wine ads appeal primarily to class, elegance, smoothness, etc. The few ads I found that appeal to low price were those for liquors. Appeals to low prices are common in local newspapers for supermarkets, where prices of individual items are listed. But these ads are more concerned with attracting the shoppers to that store for their weekly shopping than with promoting any particular brand or products.

Ease of preparation was seldom found in my sample. An ad for Shake and Bake displayed the caption 'Cut out frying' under a picture of three pieces of chicken in a frying pan (Sunset, June 1989, p. 149). However, the appeal could play on the fact that frying as a cooking method has connotations of high calorie count as well as the mess involved.

It goes without saying that the purpose of advertising is to promote a product, but products and the ads that promote them can be divided into two classes: (1) those that are promoted at the expense of a competitor—e.g., 'buy brand X instead of Y', or 'eat pasta instead of rice'; and (2) those that are promoted as additional items. Items in the second group include herbs and seasonings, since these items are not substitutes for the food items.

In marketing the products in the last category, it is common to provide recipes for delicious dishes that can be made with the item. Attractive photographs of the finished item are typically included. A good example can be seen in an ad for Knox gelatin which provides a recipe for margarita sorbet (Food and Wine, August 1988, p. 87). Since few recipes call for gelatin, the company wants to promote new uses for its product.

Many ads for food and drink are accompanied by beautiful photographs, sometimes with a photo of the item being promoted, like a bottle or wine or mustard, or a photo of a prepared dish made from that product. In fact, pictures of appetizing foods constitute the most common illustration for such ads. However, often the connection between the photograph and the product is more remote—such as a connection between a product and a place. An ad for single malt Scotch whiskey shows a beautiful color photograph of a castle on the edge of the sea, with a mountain behind it. Kikkoman, in an ad for teriyaki sauce, shows a cute color picture which suggests Hawaii: a bed of rice serves as the sand, slices of cooked meat are arranged to look like rocks, and palm trees made from carrots stand upright, pointed end up, topped with snow peas to serve as leaves. The text says, 'Add a touch of Hawaii with the original Teriyaki' (Food and Wine, August 1988, p. 31).

A second kind of photograph shows family scenes of happy, loving families getting together and enjoying each other's company over food or drink. A closely related image involves a romantic scene between a loving couple, usually drinking something alcoholic—cognac, wine, or liqueur. Since socialization often involves
eating and drinking, these themes are to be expected. (Many of the essays in the
collection on drinking edited by Douglas [1987] stress the fact that constructive
[and acceptable] drinking takes place in social groups and is a part of interpersonal
relationships.)

Food and drink can also be used to advertise other things as well, but my small
sample contained only one example of this—an ad from Mexico Tourism with a
buffet of tempting foods.

Conclusion

We have seen some of the ways in which food serves as a semiotic system, and
how it interacts with other semiotic systems and systems of values: gift-giving,
personal beauty, theories of health, conspicuous consumption, and advertising.
There are many other aspects of food and drink that are involved in cultural institu-
tions and semiotics: what foods are served at which meals, what eating utensils
and dishes are served with which kinds of meals, etc.5

A second aspect that has received attention is cooking methods and the lexical-
ization of these in a culture (Lehrer 1972; Lévi-Strauss 1966). Related to this
study would be an analysis of the great popularity of cookbooks and TV shows
that demonstrate cooking.

Another topic that deserves study is the interaction of food with political groups
such as animal rights advocates, organic food proponents, and ecologically
concerned citizens; such groups criticize many aspects of food production. If these
movements gain in popularity and influence, they will certainly have an impact on
the semiotics of food.

The role of alcoholic beverages has always been problematic and controversial in
our society, as traced through the history of prohibition and its repeal. Some reli-
gious groups, such as the Mormons, are opposed to alcohol, but economic forces
are pushing in the ‘pro-drink’ direction; thus Utah, a state with a large Mormon
population, has changed its laws in order to permit restaurants to serve alcoholic
beverages.5 The health benefits and dangers of alcohol are much debated. Moderate
use of alcohol may reduce the possibility of heart attacks, but may increase the
risk of other diseases, such as breast cancer. However, there is wide agreement that
people should not operate motor vehicles or other machinery under the influence of
alcohol, and that pregnant women should not drink. Since social and political

factors interact with other cultural sign systems, the controversies involving health
may also change the symbolism of alcohol.

Notes

1. The Harper’s article contains some of the following information, but most is
reconstructed from memory of another article by Lynes in a social sciences
textbook I read many years ago and can no longer locate.

2. I owe this point to Keith Lehrer. Food taboos that stem from religious
beliefs and practices are still in the sacred domain, of course (see Douglas
1975). Verba and Camden (1987) also allude to this conception of rich food
as sinful, describing the phenomenon as a triumph of the sacred over the
profane, which ‘signifies a suppression of sensual desire (calories)’ (1987: 175).

3. There are, of course, circumstances where such gifts are appropriate: e.g., for
the invalid who has trouble getting out to shop, or the very close friend or rela-
tive who is poor and needs such basics. But even in the latter case, the
giving may count more as a donation than as a gift.

4. Sometimes new regional cuisine is described with the noun cooking, as in
’southwestern cooking’ (see Bancroft 1989).

5. Why do some people insist on using chopsticks for eating Oriental food?
Elaborate table settings have many kinds of forks and spoons for specific
items, even down to a distinction between chowder spoons and soup spoons.
There are also specific types of glasses for each wine type, and in a fine restau-
rant, where the table is set with a Bordeaux glass, if the customer orders, say,
Burgundy or Rhine wine, that glass will be removed and replaced with the
’proper’ one. Wine connoisseurs will insist on having champagne in tulip
glasses.

6. Previously, Utah was not ‘dry’, however. Many restaurants allowed
customers to bring their own liquor, or they had special ‘stores’ connected to
them that sold 1.7-oz. bottles of liquor and bottles of wine. Liquor could also
be purchased in state-owned stores, and bars and restaurants could serve 3.2
beer.
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Adrienne Lehrer (b. 1937) is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona. Her principal research interests include lexical semantics, pragmatics, and psycholinguistics. Among her publications are Semantic Fields and Lexical Structure (1974), Wine and Conversation (1983), 'Representing and representing prose' (1989), and 'Polysemy, conventionality, and the structure of the lexicon' (1990). Address: Department of Linguistics, Douglass Building 208, The University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721.