

Chapter Two: Relationships with Food

Love food as it gives us life.

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Food Principles

1. All life needs energy and nutrients to live and grow. Plants, algae, phytoplankton, and some bacteria produce their own food through photosynthesis and by absorbing nutrients from soil or water. These beings depend upon growing conditions that allow them to photosynthesize their food: healthy soil, adequate water, sunlight, and temperatures within their tolerance range. A life that cannot produce its own food eats plants and other living beings. Decomposers, such as bacteria, fungi, and some insects, eat dead bodies and recycle their nutrients into the soil or water for plants to absorb.
2. People eat other living beings. A whole food consists of one ingredient – a taken life such as plants, animals, or an animal's milk and eggs. If we do not eat other living beings, we die of hunger.
3. It takes time and effort for life to provide itself with food. People and other living beings who live off the land make collecting, processing, and preparing food a major daily activity. Self-sufficient growers and gardeners spend much of their time growing and processing their food. It takes time and effort to make meals from scratch. People eventually found shortcuts to pouring so much of their time and energy into the food they eat: make or pay someone else to do it for you. Yet even then, it still takes time and effort to get food onto our plates, just not our own.
4. We live in an interdependent wholeness with the Earth Interbeing, which gifts us food, water, shelter, beauty, and life. For this flow of gifts to continue, we must give back equally for what we take. If we do not enact reciprocity, we end up with what we have today: extremely imbalanced planetary life systems, the oppression of people of color, and the great suffering of other beings. Reciprocity begins with gratitude and respect for the Earth and all life.

Traditional relationship with food: Over the eons, our ancestors experienced, learned, and adapted to these food principles. Today, the world's remaining indigenous people prove the durability of their food system, which relies on managing the landscape for sustainably hunting, gathering, and cultivating foods. Indigenous people learned from trial and error what plants they could eat, which ones healed them, and how to sustain the animals they hunted and plants they harvested. They passed this accumulated knowledge about how to live within a place from one generation to the next.

Traditional commoned communities survived through a culture that practiced and taught interdependencies and kinship with Earth and all living beings through ceremonies, stories, and doing. Most settled people saw themselves as equal to all the other beings who shared their place, respecting and honoring them, and reciprocating for the gifts of food and medicines they received. Giving back fulfilled obligations incurred from taking, preserving the balance and harmony within a network of relations between and among people, other living beings, and the land. Indigenous people avoided hunger by sharing what everyone in the community had. Caring for those without food strengthened the wellbeing of the community.

Within traditional place-based food systems and cultures, people, by necessity, had to care for the land and for the other living beings who shared the place with them. Yet nobody within their communities

had the authority or power to tell another what to do. People adhered to these cultural necessities to share, cooperate, and reciprocate because they wanted to eat and to survive, needs that only the well-being of their interbeing could provide.

Global corporate food system relationship with food: The global corporate food regime views food as a commodity. The Western world has defined primary commodities to mean natural resources for use in production or consumption, such as oil, metals, fuels, electricity, water, and agricultural products. The market treats a commodity as equivalent no matter where or who produced it. Profit maximization rules the global food system, which constantly seeks to cut costs and increase prices.

Corporate food systems develop the traits and goods to fit with the mechanized practices of industrial farming and government food safety regulations. The corporate food system selects and processes foods for their appeal at the point of sale: external beauty, standardization, and long-shelf life.

This transformation of food into a commodity has stripped food of all of its non-economic values, including the primary purpose of food: to secure our survival, health, and well-being. Highly processed industrial foods replace locally grown foods, eroding cultural identity and traditions. By reducing access to key valued food items, the global corporate food system reduces the food diversity of cultural cuisines. It alters patterns of food sharing as people tend to share food less if purchased. Food tastes become standardized, beginning with baby foods. Industrialized processed food minimizes food preparation and devalues home cooking, which leads to a loss of cooking skills. New technologies replace traditional skills with the loss of food sufficiency knowledge. We lose the rhythm of seasonal foods by having year-round fresh produce supplied by the global market.

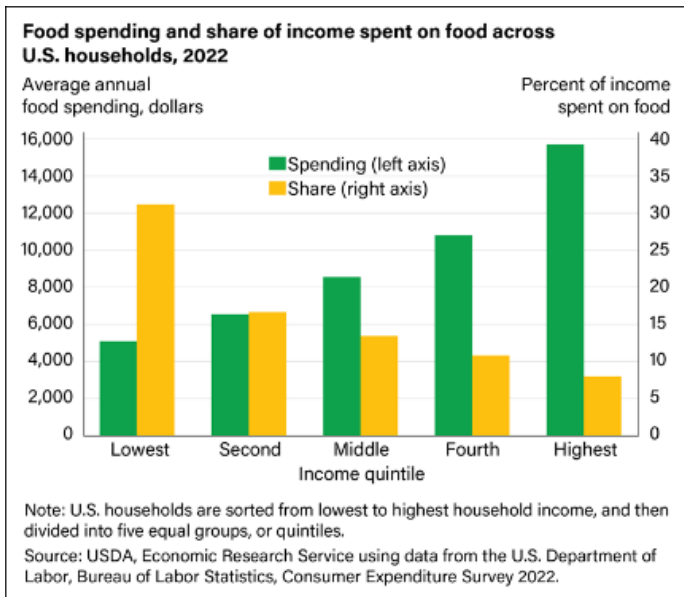
Relationship of starving people with food: When faced with starvation, the body fights back. Within days of not eating sufficient calories, the body begins feeding on itself by consuming its stored sugars, fats, and then the protein parts of the tissue. Metabolism slows, the body cannot regulate its temperature, kidney function begins to fail, and the immune system weakens. People weaken once the body uses its reserves to provide basic energy needs. The heart, lungs, ovaries, and testes shrink along with muscles. People feel weak. Body temperature drops, and people can feel chilled. People become irritable and find it difficult to concentrate.

Death nears when the body starts consuming its own muscles, including the heart muscle. In the late stages of starvation, people experience hallucinations, convulsions, and disruptions in heart rhythm. Finally, the heart stops.

Globally, 9 million people die each year of hunger-related causes. 331 million face acute levels of hunger. One-quarter of the world's children have stunting, a form of impaired growth and development due to malnutrition. Starving people need food.

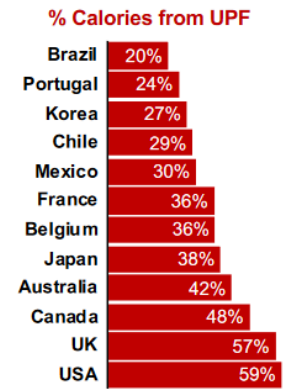
Relationship of people with food who eat the Standard American Diet: The global corporate food regime produces the ultraprocessed foods (UPF) that most Americans and an ever-increasing global population consume daily, called the Standard American Diet (SAD). These foods include fast foods, packaged snacks, commercial baked goods, instant soups, ready-to-eat meals, candy, drinks, protein bars, and more. UPFs are typically calorie-dense and high in free sugars, refined starches, unhealthy fats, sodium, and additives. The average American consumes 59% of their calories from UPFs (U. NC, 2021), which make up nearly 70% of what children eat (Wang, 2021). UPFs, designed and

manufactured for maximum profit, contain low-cost ingredients, have long shelf lives, have an incredible taste and mouthfeel, and get heavily marketed, especially to children and youth. The Standard American Diet also includes consuming meat at such high levels to endanger health. On average, U.S. women exceed U.S. government guidelines for protein intake by 177% and men by 156% (Stanford Medicine).



42% of wealthy people eat fast food daily, compared to 32% of poor people (Vox 2018). Food-away-from-home spending accounted for 56% of total food expenditures in 2022 (USDA). Similarly, the consumption rate of store-bought ultra-processed food does not differ greatly between high and low-income groups, with 52% for both (NYU, 2021).

U. NC, 2021



People say they eat the foods produced by the global corporate food system because they do not have time to make a meal. They find the widely available foods easy to buy and prepare. Many report lacking cooking and meal-planning skills and that their families prefer ultraprocessed foods more than homemade meals.

Americans find the Standard American Diet irresistible.

Relationship of food sovereignty movement with food: The food sovereignty movement began in the late 1990s when small growers came together to form La Vía Campesina, today a worldwide social movement that focuses on the rights of people to control the foods they grow and eat. The following *Pillars of Food Sovereignty*, written at a gathering of the global movement gathering, defines its relationship with food (National Family Farm Coalition, 2024).

1. Food for people: Food sovereignty puts the right to sufficient, healthy, and culturally appropriate food for all at the center of food, agriculture, livestock, and fisheries policies. It rejects the use of food to increase the wealth of the wealthy.

2. Values food providers: Food sovereignty values and supports the worker rights of women and men, indigenous growers and small-scale family farmers, all food producers, and all workers who cultivate, grow, harvest, and process food. It rejects those policies, actions, and programs that undervalue them, threaten their livelihoods, and eliminate them.

3. Localizes food systems: Food sovereignty brings food providers and consumers closer together to make joint decisions on food issues that benefit and protect all. It protects food providers from unfair competition of large producers in local markets and protects consumers from unhealthy food, inappropriate food aid, and GMO seeds. It resists trade agreements and practices that depend on and promote unsustainable and inequitable corporate subsidies and give power to remote and unaccountable quasi-government organizations.

4. Puts Control Locally: Food sovereignty protects and respects the rights of local food providers to use and share natural resources in socially and environmentally sustainable ways which conserve diversity. It ensures the right of local communities to inhabit and use their traditional territories. Food sovereignty rejects the privatization of natural resources through unaccountable governmental structures, laws, trade agreements, commercial contracts, and intellectual property rights regimes.

5. Builds Knowledge and Skills: Food sovereignty builds on the skills and local knowledge of food providers and their local organizations that conserve, develop, and manage localized food production and harvesting systems. It supports developing appropriate research systems to support this knowledge and passing on this wisdom to future generations. Food sovereignty rejects technologies that undermine or threaten local knowledge and skills or contaminate food sources.

6. Works with Nature: Food sovereignty uses nature's contributions in diverse, sustainable production and harvesting methods that maximize the contribution of ecosystems and improve resilience and adaptation, especially in the face of climate change. It seeks to heal the planet so that the planet may heal us. Food sovereignty rejects methods that harm beneficial ecosystem functions, depend on energy-intensive monocultures and livestock factories, destroy fishing practices, and other industrialized production methods, all of which damage the environment and contribute to global warming.

Relationship of wholeness with food: We understand that our survival depends upon the taking of the lives of other living beings, opening our eyes and hearts to the beingness of others and committing us to minimize the suffering we inflict in the taking of their lives. We understand that plants, algae, and other photosynthesizing beings, the keystone of our food web, depend upon a narrow range of conditions for survival: water, fertile soils, sunlight, and tolerable temperatures, conditions that we act to preserve, recover, and sustain. We understand that we live within an interdependent and interactive wholeness with the Earth and all living beings, the Earth Interbeing, for which we act to rebalance through sharing food and reciprocating for what we have taken, giving back to the wholeness through the gifts of our species. We understand that it will take much time and effort to repair the damage the industrialized food system has inflicted upon the Earth Interbeing. Still, we begin to fulfill this responsibility by standing in solidarity with those oppressed by the current food system and by each of us humbly recovering our own wholeness and the wholeness of our community's self-sustaining relationship with food in ways that respect and honor the Earth Interbeing.

Resources

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<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2021/october/ultra-processed-foods.html>
- Stanford Medicine News (2019): *5 Questions on the intersection of meat, protein and the environment*. 2019.
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USDA (2023): *Food Prices and Spending* <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending/>

University of North Carolina Chapel Hill: (2021): *Ultra-Processed Foods (UPFs): A Global Threat to Public Health* published by Global Food Research Program.

Vox (2018): *The more money you make, the more fast food you eat.* <https://www.vox.com/the-goods/2018/10/24/18018544/fast-food-cdc-class-rich-people>

Wang L, Martínez Steele E, Du M, et al. (2021): *Trends in Consumption of Ultraprocessed Foods Among US Youths Aged 2-19 Years, 1999-2018.* *JAMA.* 2021;326(6):519–530. doi:10.1001/jama.2021.10238

World hunger facts: *What you need to know in 2023: (2023).* Concern Worldwide US, <https://concernusa.org/news/world-hunger-facts/>

Study questions

1. What is your relationship to food?
2. What other group would you have included in this chapter? What is their relationship?
3. What recommendations do you think all the non-human creatures might give us about our relationships with food?