"Food: The Ultimate Active Learning Tool"

Jeffrey M. Pilcher, Professor, History Department, University of Toronto
Summarized by Stephen Pitcher

Professor Pilcher first taught the history of food twenty years ago, and feels that interest in the topic has grown of late, in recognition that something so fundamental had been habitually overlooked. "We eat three times a day, but don't really think about it," he said. Pilcher suggested three ways in which food could be investigated in a classroom setting: first as a lens—a means of thinking about other topics; second as a topic in itself; and finally as a material—the consummate "active learning tool." In this context Pilcher adduced the "Columbian Exchange," a term coined by historian Alfred W. Crosby to address the impact of living organisms traded between the New World and the Old. This trans-oceanic foodway is not only a point of entry of Latin American history onto the World History stage, but an area that's utterly fascinating to students, many of whom are astonished to learn, for example, that the potato did not come from Ireland, nor the tomato from Italy. Such data tend to have an unusually high retention rate, because, as Pilcher put it, they're "about food—something that *grips* you."

In keeping with the notion that food itself could activate the learning process, and that lecturing *per se* would therefore be incongruous, Professor Pilcher opened the floor to discussion, first bearing on the extent to which food could relate to the major themes teachers sought to convey in their various disciplines: what were the things they most wanted students to have learned at the end of the year?

Participant: The question of who you are.
Pilcher: [writes "Identity" on the board]

Participant: Systems, especially in nature.
Pilcher: [writes "Environment" on the board]

Participant: Clues to civilization, identifying markers.
Pilcher: [writes "Civilization" on the board]

Participant: Similar to identity, "How did I come to be here?" [referring to the large percentage of students who have immigrated from other countries]
Pilcher: "Immigration?" Or, as in the United States that phrase tends to leave some people out—African slaves weren't immigrants; Native American peoples weren't immigrants—so rather than use the phrase "immigration," use "peopling," the peopling of the Americas, or of the world. [This is] very "big history" that gets beyond our parochial notions of how we got here. [Writes "Peopling" on board] There's actually a movement to create a museum in Washington, D.C. of the Peopling of America.

Participant: How law developed.
Pilcher: [writes "Law" on board]

Participant: Power.

Participant: World transformation, the transformation that comes about when you exchange food.
Pilcher: That's a big thing: I think of transformation as what history means to me—it means change over time, as well as continuity. You can't understand one side without the other; so: "History."

Participant: Going along with "peopling," settlements. In ancient history and everywhere, food determines where people settle—why they settle along a river, as in Egypt, the Nile, which gets into transportation too.
Pilcher: That's part of the "peopling" category: on one hand settlement, on the other, mobility.

Participant: Students seem to be interested in *response*—how people in a hot climate respond to how to preserve something, and the development of crops or food. More than just what was there, how did they put it there?
Pilcher: So, "Economy."

Participant: Essential issues of where food's coming from.
Pilcher: Globalization?

Participant: But within a country, too; which links with labor issues.
Pilcher: Commodities.

Participant: The biggest theme in my classes is the historical narrative constructed from fragments, multiple perspectives.
Pilcher: How de we know what we know—what are the sources of that knowledge?

So, going through this list, how could you create a lesson plan using food? Start with identity. "Autoethnography" is a popular form of assignment—the autoethnography of Thanksgiving, for instance, of food consumed in a festival, which leads directly into who you are, what your traditions are, notions of citizenship and how those notions differ going around the classroom. Have students write about an event important to them.

Pilcher alluded to the work of religious studies scholar Corrie Norman with respect to the cosmological import of food (e.g., the apple in the Garden of Eden), whether sacred (Thanksgiving with Grandma) or profane (a run to McDonalds). The "food voice" is a term used by Annie Hauck-Lawson to refer to a mode of speech people enter when talking about food, as when a child ordinarily hesitant to speak up in class nevertheless feels comfortable discussing his or her native foodways. Students having linguistic difficulties in school, or unable to grasp certain subjects, may profit from the sense of power they derive from realizing that they have something to teach their fellow students: "In our family, we do this; this is *us.*" Scholars have found the food voice to be a useful means of eliciting information from marginalized communities, but it is also a powerful tool in the classroom.

A list was compiled of themes investigated in the 2002 ORIAS institute centered on food: nutrition; technology; scarcity; farming; the Columbian Exchange; the Silk Road (which might, as Professor Pilcher pointed out, be viewed as something of an Asian version of the Columbian Exchange); aesthetics of food; technology (the Industrial Revolution); seasonal and local food; and the contribution of women, given their dominance in food production, processing, and growing.

The Columbian Exchange can be viewed in demographic terms: there are few moments in history in which so many people were killed so rapidly as in the conquest of the Americas; while, by contrast, the populations of Europe and Asia increased dramatically. The population of Africa, meanwhile, remained stable: why is that?

Participant: Because they had nothing to exchange?
Pilcher: No, there was the slave trade, which diverted ten, fifteen, maybe more millions of Africans elsewhere, who could otherwise have contributed to the economies of Africa.

In addition to the demographic consequences, there are practical questions of gendered labor and food preparation: *why* did certain foods get adopted in certain places? Certainly, as Crosby points out, ecological considerations can be seen—potatoes tend to grow in cold climates, while corn can't grow too far north—but sociological factors are in play, too. Europeans looked down on corn and chose *not* to plant it: the crop carried a strongly lower-class social stigma. It also has the remarkable characteristic of being able to flourish in terraced fields on mountain sides (a fact boggling to the minds of those farming the flat fields of Iowa). This attribute led to corn's being planted on marginal land—places previously used for pasturing livestock—by marginal peoples, some of whom lacked the knowledge of how to prepare it. Gendered knowledge comes into play here, as Latin American and Mississippian women were the ones who knew to soak corn in lime (calcium oxide), thus preventing the onset of the potentially fatal disease pellagra. This gendered knowledge was not transported with the seeds. So the consequences of the Columbian Exchange extend beyond geographical into social systems: corn tended to go to the hungriest populations. Viewing the Columbian Exchange through the food lens one sees not only where plants go, but how they are used (and misused).

Gendered knowledge might also be seen in the interesting new cooking combinations which arise, as the comparatively poor protein of corn is complemented by legumes (as in the traditional "three sisters"—corn, beans, and squash—of native Latin America) to create a healthy diet. From the Columbian Exchange and the Silk Road up to contemporary globalization, one sees the inventive mixing and remixing of foods—corn and beans in the Americas, rice and soybeans in Asia, wheat and broad beans in the Mediterranean region—resulting from the labors of women in the world's first scientific laboratory: the kitchen.

Another important consequence of the Columbian Exchange was the onset of an insatiable craving for sugar among the populations of early modern Europe—a

development that was fundamentally bound up with the slave trade. Slavery is a topic you simply can't ignore in the classroom when discussing world history.

Food is a material: you touch it, you ingest it, you *embody* it. Why bring it into the classroom? In Pilcher's words, "I could PowerPoint you until the end of the millennium and it would not have the impact of a single bite of food." With this he produced some bags containing hard blocks of *piloncillo* sugar and began to break it into smaller pieces which he distributed among the Institute participants. As people began to pick up and taste—to embody—his offering, Pilcher went on to explain that sugar was a grass, from which the sap was extracted using mule-powered rollers, then separated into the lighter juice suitable for European elites and the darker, heavier juice (molasses) consigned to the local population (and frequently turned into rum). Various sugars can be extracted from cane, beets, and corn; at the chemical level they are all the same, but there are pronounced cultural preferences for one type of sugar over another. Sugar became emblematic of race in America: darker sugars were for darker people, with Puerto Rican children gnawing on sugar cane in a field occupying a sharply different register from the white, middle-class, "one lump or two?" household. In fact, the *piloncillo* circulating in the conference room was unlikely to be the same sugar as that consumed by the participants' students.

Professor Pilcher gradually brought the room's sugar sampling to a stop with the following bitter tale: At harvest time on cane plantations, the slaves charged with feeding the cane into the mills put in back-breaking eighteen-hour days fueled, basically, by the consumption of sugar, under which circumstances it sometimes occurred that an exhausted and under-nourished slave might push too hard on a piece of cane and be pulled through the roller and mangled to death. Since this was detrimental to production, each plantation had a slave armed with a machete, so that a worker's limb could be hacked off before his entire body might clog and/or break the apparatus, such that every plantation boasted a number of mutilated slaves—a graphic reminder of the human cost of agriculture.

Marcel Proust wrote, and neuroscientists find, that food inscribes memories at a very deep level of the brain. Whether used as a lens or as an active learning tool, it can increase the educational impact of lessons in any discipline. In seeming illustration of this idea, Professor Pilcher passed out sweets made of tamarind and chili—the Columbian Exchange meeting the Silk Road, in candy form—and the classroom exploded in convivial chatter.

Q&A

Participant: Food means sustenance to us, but spices are different—more like drugs. Spices, drugs, medicines [relate to] different trades in different commodities. The sugar trade is sort of like the nutmeg trade combined with a drug trade: it's very hard to understand the sugar trade as a food trade, but it makes complete sense as a drug trade.
Pilcher: Paul Freedman's book *Out of the East: Spices and the Medieval Imagination* [deals with] these categories. In the first chapter he treats spice as a food, then spice as a

perfume, then as a drug, then as a moral failing (as in using too much). In modern times we've separated [these categories] out again: Michael Pollan writes about nutritionism, in which foods are no longer thought of as foods but as Omega-3, protein, whatever we need to live.

Participant: There are lines everywhere, but especially lines for restaurants—MacWorld globalization viewed negatively. . . . In your perspective, in the future will we look at [increased commoditization of food]?
Pilcher: I talked about that in *Planet Taco.* There's a book by James Watson, *Golden Arches East*, in which anthropologists went to Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Seoul, and ate at McDonalds—that was their research. The Chinese were not there to get Big Macs—the fries were okay, but they were there not for the hamburgers, but for the experience of being in America—going as a tourist to America without leaving home. Globalization is a process actively committed by the people themselves. Chinese consumerism may have run amok, but it's *Chinese* consumerism, with Chinese characteristics (like capitalism with Chinese characteristics). Globalization changes things, but often not in the Americanizing way people imagine: McDonalds are not the same everywhere. Now McDonalds is kind of low class (though it was originally aimed at the middle class: there was a huge civil rights fight to get it into black communities), but in other societies it's a very middle-class phenomenon. In Rio you could at one time—perhaps you still can—order Dom Perignon along with your Big Mac.