

“The Gentleman who pays the Rent”
Pork and Its Role in Defining Cultural Association

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Introduction

Food is life, and life can be studied through food. (Counihan and Van Esterik)

There is no doubt of how important food is to society. Our very civilizations are based on the search for food, shelter and security. Anthropologists have studied food as a social construct, as a means of observing social relations within and without the household or social structure. The growing of food or the seizing of food supplies was the foundation of many civilisations. Food is the commonest denominator, in every society, food reaches everyone, it is a mark of who we are, and a means of how we see, identify and differentiate ourselves¹. Our age, ethnicity, regionality, and our families, habit and custom, determine what we eat. It is also determined by what we earn, our social scale, our religious belief, and in modern times, more and more by mass media.

In the 1930's, Dr. De Pomaine (1976) a famous Gastronomer, describes three types of guest in the household, *“Those one is fond of, those one is obliged to mix with, and those whom one detests. For these three different occasions, one would prepare respectively, an excellent dinner, a banal meal, or nothing at all...”*

Douglas (1997) also deciphers the meal, and shows the direct relationship between the type of meal offered and the social standing of the invited. Douglas also cites the popularity of the Barbeque in modern culture, as a bridge between intimacy and distance, a modern solution to an ancient problem.

Cooking and eating are immersed in tradition, a culinary acculturation, and it is tradition that is the foundation of this paper. Tradition means that even the most lukewarm Christian will have pancakes on Shrove Tuesday or forgo meats twice or three times a year. It is tradition that we eat certain foods at certain times of day, week, month or year. It is religious tradition that shapes our eating of certain foods, either from the aspect of hygiene, or from custom. It is these customs of avoidance, particularly the avoidance of Pork in Jewish and Islamic cultures, and the almost total acceptance of pork in western culture that this paper attempts to address.

The Gentlemen Who Pays the Rent

“Look at Pork. That's a subject! If you want a subject, look at Pork!”

According to Dickens in *Great Expectations*, there was no finer topic of conversation. There is, it would seem, no animal that has its equal, in causing controversy in gastronomy, religion, culture or literature. No other animal is used in such a negative fashion to describe perceived human traits. There seems to be no positive porcine descriptors in our languages in comparison to other animals. But no other meat permeates through our society and culture in the way that the “abominable pig” manages to. Where did the belief in the impurity of pork evolve? What was the social-cultural theory behind the taboo? Why is pork acceptable to Christians, but not to those of Jewish or Muslim faith? Many Buddhists and Hindus refuse to eat pig meat, although in both cases this avoidance arises more from vegetarian convictions rather than an explicit religious taboo.

¹ *Food and Culture: A Reader* (1997) Counihan, C Van Esterik, P (Eds): London Routledge.

Why do western and Chinese cultures embrace the pig while cultures and religions emanating from the Middle East abhor the pig? Cockburn (1996) describes the New Testament as the “meat eater’s manifesto”, and describes where Peter saw the heavens opened and all manner of beasts were delivered with the instruction, “rise, Peter, kill and eat”. (Acts 10:11-13) But why of all the beasts that Peter could have eaten, the most productive in food conversion, reproduction, protein and fat to water ratio, apparently denied to him? Peter questioned the eating of impure or unclean animals and thrice received the reply “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

Little is known about the human diet in ancient times, only that early man was primarily a hunter-gatherer. McGee (1986) describes these early humans as “opportunistic” meat eaters, only eating meat when he could find it. The turning point in human dietary and societal change was with the first scratchings of agriculture and the domestication of animals. The first domesticated farm animals, (sheep, cattle, goats) were attracted to the sprouting grain fields, and dogs and the pig to the community dumps. Perhaps this is how the unfortunate pig got its first bad press.

The Pig in Irish Culture and Heritage

Pork, Ham and Bacon are without doubt the most traditional of Irish foods, featuring in our diets for thousands of years. The early Irish pig is derived from the Western European wild pig, the Razor Back, or Greyhound Pig. Sexton (1998) shows in the Annals of Clonmanoise (1038) a recording of a bumper harvest of acorns that “*Fattened the pigges.*” The wild Boar *Sus scrofa* was recorded being hunted in the medieval period, (500-1200) but in legend, the association with the pig goes much further back.

Mac Datho’s Pig, a story from the Ulster Cycle, describes in detail, vats of boiling salt pork and beef for MacDatho’s guests. Simoons, (1994) describe other ancient texts and legends, showing the hunting of swine, to fighting mighty supernatural boars, and powerful swineherds. Irish saints are often portrayed as being swineherds, before coming to their calling. In medieval times the work of fattening the pigs, belonged exclusively to women, and so important was this work, that if she divorced her husband under Brehon Law, she kept whatever Bacon and tracklements (offal and blood products) she had stored.

There is ample evidence in Irish history and literature of the importance of the pig in Irish rural society, primarily as a valuable source of food and secondly as the lender of last resorts. The pig’s ability to reproduce, its quick growth rate, and its ability to live on scraps and mast, ensured a steady economic income for the farmer. The pig therefore, was a means, in times of poor harvest, of settling rent or other expenses of the rural dweller.

The association with the pig grew to such an extent, that in 1841, the Irish rural pig population was estimated at over one and a quarter million beasts. Sexton describes how in 1770, Arthur Young, an English agriculturalist, described how children and hogs basked and rolled about together, so much so, that he had difficulty in distinguishing one from the other. He further described Mitchelstown as having more pigs than humans. Sexton also shows the value and importance of the pig to the Irish small farmer with the justified description “*the gentleman that pays the rent*”²

Other Celtic countries, notably Wales and Scotland, do not show the same strong association with the pig, but with sheep and goats. Simoons, (1994) describe how the bite of a pig was believed to be cancerous in Highland Scotland. Tannahill (1988) describes how the famine in Ireland affected pork consumption. With the failure of the potato harvests and the resultant famine, there were no potatoes to feed the pigs, and to generate income, the pigs were sold and slaughtered, and the “gentleman who paid the rent” finally had to default.

Why is the Pig abhorred and adored?

All of today’s porcine population are derived from the wild Boar, (*Sus scrofa*) which has laid foot in most continents, but the earliest archaeological records (c. 7000–5000 B.C.) have been concentrated in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean. But bones older than any of those from these sites were uncovered in 1994 in south eastern Turkey. There, the pig was apparently kept as early as 8000 B.C., making it the oldest known domesticated creature besides the dog. Moreover, pig keeping at this site³ was found to predate the cultivation of wheat or barley.

² As cited by Sexton: An Irish saying, describing the Pig’s value to the household. Attributed to a Rev. H. Reynolds in the 1800’s

³ Cambridge World History of Food (2000) Kiple, K. Ornelas.K (Eds.) Cambridge. Cambridge Press.

Both findings contradict the long-held twin assertions that sheep and goats were the world's earliest domesticated herd animals and that crop growing preceded the raising of herd animals. The love hate affair with the pig is as old as civilised society itself. Despite the pigs propensity to wallow in mud and filth, (the pig lacks sweat glands, so, they wallow to keep cool) eat garbage, and that they seem to have no redeeming features at all, this is all forgiven when the abominable beast is cooked. Charles Lamb⁴ described roast pig, as, "*Of all the delicacies in the whole mundus edibilis, I will maintain it to be the most delicate -- princeps obsoniorum*"

The Spanish explorer Pizzaro, who came from Extramedura, the Spanish equivalent of Parma, introduced the pig to South America. The pigs that were brought were particularly hardy and were well able to keep up with a mounted expedition. Polynesian island pigs were introduced either deliberately by mariners to provide food for passing ships, or accidentally by shipwreck. The pig arrived in the North American continent, via Cuba, courtesy of de Soto's expedition. The pig in Ireland was resident long before human habitation. The Irish pig, as with nearly every country in Europe, has a special place in legend and culture, in our shared history, language and gastronomy.

Religious Avoidance

But why the abhorrence of pork particularly in Judaism and Islamic Faith? If you look at scripture, the Old Testament and the Koran point the way, as cited by Harris (1997)

Leviticus states: "*Of their flesh you shall not eat, and their carcasses you shall not touch, they are unclean to you*" (Lev.11: 1)

The Koran states: *These things only he has forbidden you: carrion, blood and the flesh of swine*" (The Holy Koran. 2:168)

Harris (1997) goes on to show that the practice of pork avoidance predates both the Israelites and Muhammad. It was custom and practice in many Middle Eastern cultures, (Phoenician, Babylonian, and Egyptian) to avoid eating pork, primarily due to the pig's unfortunate habit of wallowing in garbage, mud and filth.

According to Grivetti⁵(2000) before 3200 B.C., Egypt consisted of two distinctive geographical-cultural entities: a pork-consuming north or Lower Egypt, and a pork-avoiding south or Upper Egypt.

"Shortly after 3200 B.C., both regions were united politically when the Southerners invaded and conquered the north. One result of this conquest was the institution of broadly based pork avoidance throughout the Egyptian Nile valley and delta that pre-dates the Jewish pork prohibition by more than two thousand years."

The pig's propensity to carry parasitic worms such as Trichinae and Tapeworm was also a factor. Another theory put forward by Simmons (1994) was the proximity of the pig to human dwellings in the Middle East. The woodland areas had been cut back or down completely in order to facilitate crop growing or the herding of cattle, goats and sheep. In early pre-Christian Ireland, and other European countries, there were still plenty of Forests, especially oak, and the pigs were kept away from the dwellings and allowed to forage for mast, so any particularly nasty traits the pig had were not as visible. In the Middle East, however, the lack of forests and woodlands meant that pigs congregated in and around dwellings, so their unfortunate habits could not be ignored.

European and Chinese cultures show no such qualms. The pig was a useful animal both as a source of recycling and taxation. In parts of ancient China, pigs were bred specifically to consume garbage and to process human excrement. In Europe taxes on masting (allowing pigs to feed on nuts, bark and acorns in the landlord's forest) were a valuable source of income. The pig in Irish and English culture was not just a source of food throughout the year but was often kept in the dwelling during the long winter months. In fact this practice had to be outlawed in England⁶, as the urban pig population exploded. In Western and Chinese society, nothing is wasted from the pig carcass. A walk through any supermarket or delicatessen in any European country will demonstrate the western love affair with the Pig. Cured Hams such as *Serrano* (Spain), *Westphalia* (Germany), *Prosciutto* (Italy), *York* (Britain), *Liver Pate* (all countries), *Salami* (Italy), *Bratwurst*, *Beirwurst*, *Bockwurst*, *Frankfurters* (Germany, Switzerland), *Rillettes*, *Boudin noir*, (France), *Chorizo*, (Spain, Latin, and Mediterranean countries)

⁴ "Dissertation on roast pig"

⁵ Cambridge World History of Food (2000) Kiple, K. Ornelas.K (Eds.)

⁶ Hartley, D. (1954:101) *Food in England*. London Macdonald

Bacon, black and white puddings, sausages, Rashers, Ham Hock's, Drisheen, pig's cheek, Bath Chaps, Spare Ribs, Cumberland sausage, Crubeen's (Ireland & Britain)

Bourdain (2002:21-24) gives a graphic and stomach churning description of how the pig is killed and processed in rural Portugal. This is a far cry from Leviticus and Mohammad. For observant Jews and Muslims the unclean explanation is self-evident. Harris (1997:67) quotes a Rabbinical authority “*anyone who has seen the filthy habits of the swine will not ask why it is prohibited*”

In the sixteenth century, during the Spanish Inquisition, pork eating was the acid test of Christianity⁷, a means of confirming your religion and cultural identity, as the Moors and Jews would not eat the unclean meat. Even pork avoidance by Christians, could be interpreted in the wrong way and lead to investigation by the religious courts. Soler (1997:55:67) shows in detail the other dietary restrictions that members of the Jewish faith undertake as part of their belief structure. Food is an important part of religious observance and spiritual ritual for many different faiths, including Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. The role of food in cultural practices and religious beliefs is complex and varies among individuals and communities. Judaism can be Liberal or Orthodox, based on the degree of adherence to the Jewish laws. “Kashrut” refers to the laws pertaining to food in the Jewish religion. 'Kosher' means that foods is permitted or 'clean', while anything 'unclean' is strictly forbidden. The Jewish food laws contribute to a formal code of behaviour that reinforces the identity of a Jewish community. Food forms an integral part of religion in life for a practising Jew.

Harris (1997) argues that it was these structures that hampered the spread of Judaism in comparison to Islam and Christianity. Muslim dietary restrictions applied only to Pork, alcohol, Carrion (rotten flesh) and Blood. The fact that Camel meat was not restricted by the Koran, (as it is by Mosaic law) was an aid to the expansion of Islam. This simple fact meant that Islamic traders and Imams could reach further into the interior, eventually developing slave and trade routes across Africa into Asia, Southeast Asia, and further afield. Islamic regulations surrounding food are called “halal”. Prohibited foods are called “haram”. It is thought that the Creator turns a deaf ear to a Muslim who eats haram foods.

The Christians, once over their initial reluctance of eating unclean meats and fish, (Judaic conversions) aligned with Gentile conventions, had no dietary restrictions, and so had free reign over all animals that the Christian God declared clean. The spread of Christianity was indirectly related to the ability of the Christian to sit down at any table and share a meal and the Gospel.

The literature review tends to indicate that from an anthropological view, the usefulness of food as a marker of social boundaries, which would seem to stress, for want of a better word, that it is not so much that food is “good to eat” as that it is “good to forbid.” Catholics, for example, could find a bond between each other and a mark of difference from Protestants by substituting fish for meat on Fridays. Simoons (ibid) indicate that many scholars point to pork avoidance as a social construct, not just a religious taboo.

Pork avoidance is not just restricted to cultures emanating from the Middle East, is common in many cultures far removed from the Nile delta. Some Native American Indians, for example, avoided eating pork, because they believed that they might take on some of the undesirable characteristics of the pig, i.e. pig-like, rather than a religious or hygienic avoidance. This avoidance was not left to the pig alone. Hare, Deer, Peccary, Horse, Beef, Chicken, Dog, Fish, Camel and countless other meats are all subject to avoidance by different cultures and religions for reasons such as these.

Summary/Conclusions

It has been shown how food permeates through all of society, and how our tastes and food habits are a result of social and cultural conditioning. In investigating pork and its place in society, the literature shows why the “abominable pig” causes so much controversy. The literature also shows how cultural conditioning, either by moral or religious teachings, affects our choices of food. The fact that pork avoidance was custom and practice in the Middle East long before the arrival of Muhammad or the Israelites, indicates that there may have been assimilation or acculturation of a practice that was ratified and codified by Judaic and Islamic teachings, to instruct their peoples in hygienic eating practice, and to indicate that these practices were for the common good, and with that, as a mark of their beliefs, would identify and mark themselves as chosen by their God.

⁷ Cambridge World History of Food (2000) Kiple, K. Ornelas.K (Eds.)

The literature also shows how the pig, in western and European cultures, and particularly, Irish culture, instead of being vilified and untouchable, was adopted and integrated seamlessly into rural, and sometimes urban culture.

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