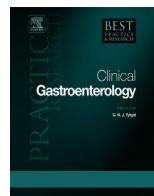




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‘Please, sir, can I have some more?’ Food, lifestyle, diets: Respect and moral responsibility



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A B S T R A C T

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This article is about respect for food, responsibility for lifestyle and diet and responsibility for those who suffer from lack of food. After some general reflections on food, feasts, flatulence, taboos and waste, I argue that we have a responsibility to live a healthy lifestyle, but that there are also morally good reasons for taking risks with our health as we cherish other goals and values. Then I discuss situations, using the example of obesity, in which people are not free to choose their lifestyle. Governments and doctors have responsibilities in enabling people to choose healthy eating habits, e.g. by facilitating access to healthy foods and by criticizing scientifically unfounded weight loss diets. I continue to defend that we need to respect food and those who prepare it, and that we have a moral responsibility to contribute to the solution of the food gap in the world.

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‘Please, sir, can I have some more?’¹ Food, lifestyle, diets: respect and moral responsibility

‘Food glorious food’,² croissants, lemon pie, basil and seduction

The smell of a fresh croissant on an early spring morning (spring makes a difference), the aroma of basil being added to a tomato sauce, the texture of Greek yoghurt, the fluffiness of whipped cream, the

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¹ Oliver Twist, Charles Dickens.

² Song from the musical Oliver based on the story of Dickens’ Oliver Twist.

resilient softness of a raspberry, and of course my brothers inimitable lemon tart: we all have our susceptibilities to seduction, just by the food itself or its aphrodisiac qualities. We can all think of food that represents important memories of past occasions, immortalized by Proust's Madeleine; food we dream of, food we hate, food we fear. Apart from my age and general unfitnes I would not qualify as an astronaut because I would find the thought of having to live on astronaut's food for a prolonged period of time unpalatable. Therefore I would also be a bad mountaineer and a lousy hermit. And I fear I would find it very hard to have to live on tube feeding should I be struck by disease. So I'm spoiled. I have not lived through a famine, have not had to eat tulip bulbs as my countrymen did during the hunger winter in 1944–1945, I can have a (rather) serious discussion on whether a certain cake should include cardamom. I'm well-stocked to cater for unexpected guests. I'm able to ask my children what they would like for dinner, I have witnessed their choice to become vegetarians, and I have travelled and had the opportunity to taste interesting and sometimes exotic dishes, ants eggs the most recent one. These are luxuries that many do not have. Luxuries that create responsibilities. This article is about respect for food, responsibility for lifestyle and eating habits and responsibility for those who suffer due to a lack of food. After some general remarks on food and waste, I will argue that we have a *prima facie* responsibility to live a healthy lifestyle but that there are also morally good reasons for taking risks with our health, that we need to respect food and those who prepare it, and that we have a moral responsibility to contribute to the solution of the food gap in the world. I will not go into respect for animals and a sustainable agriculture. Not because it is not important, it certainly is [1,2], but because it would require another article.

Surströmming, liquorice, Christer Fuglesang, Willy Selten, and Trimalchio

Before it ends up in our intricate digestive system, food gives raise to ethical, esthetical and medical questions. Its origin, its production, its preparation, its symbolic value, its social meaning, its sensual message, its presentation, its scarcity, its distribution: what we eat (and not eat) is permeated with ethical questions [3,4]. There are religious diets, medical diets and eating habits, and preventive diets aiming to increase health and longevity. Eating habits are part of our lifestyle in a more general sense, that is: the way we live our lives and the choices we make.

Food is more than caloric intake, more than substances to survive, more than nutrition. Food is a source of life and of pleasure. We can eat too much. Affluent (Western) societies that struggle with obesity, have been accused of immoderation, gluttony, lack of discipline and of control. Food is associated with sin. As novelist Francine Prose argues in *Gluttony* (part of a series on the seven deadly sins): 'The traditional solution to the problems of gluttony and lust has been to suggest that the element of sin enters in only when we allow ourselves to relax and *enjoy* satisfying the needs of the body. We are allowed to eat and have sex as long as we don't *like* it. Just as the challenge facing the true believer is to be fruitful and multiply without experiencing lust, so it should be possible to eat without savoring our food. So the notion of gluttony considers the limit of what we need to survive and attempts to disassociate the minimum daily caloric requirement from the contaminating influences of craving, obsession, or pleasure.' [5, p. 9].

Food has to do with culture, hospitality, friendship, care, intimacy, solidarity [6,7]. We eat for social reasons, ask any serial dieter what the most difficult moments are and they will tell you that celebrations and parties are difficult; because carrots and mineral water are not a gourmet's delight and because it feels rude as someone has gone through the troublesome effort of preparing festive food. We also eat for emotional reasons, to console or to comfort ourselves. Chocolate has built quite a reputation for itself when it comes to providing comfort. Most of us remember some consoling dishes prepared by our mothers when we were ill or sad. Food is associated with feasts. Certain feasts require certain foods. Or not. Swedish astronaut Christer Fuglesang was not allowed to bring reindeer jerky with him on board a shuttle mission as it was unthinkable for the Americans so soon before Christmas. He had to go with moose instead. [<http://www.astronautfoods.com/>].

In all societies and groups within societies food can be a symbol for identity. Surströmming is a Swedish fermented fish [www.allscandinaviacom/surstromming.ht] about which the German food critic Wolfgang Fassbender wrote that 'the biggest challenge when eating surströmming is to vomit after the first bite, as opposed to before.' [<http://myths-made-real.blogspot.com>] Or consider the Dutch

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