

Celebrating ethnicity: Ethnic flavor in an urban festival

PENNY VAN ESTERIK

Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University

This paper examines food as a symbolic marker of ethnicity and festivity. During an urban ethnic festival in a mid-western city, ethnic food booths attracted visitors who chose their own ethnic foods or sampled new foods. The festival context is defined as a cultural time out when events are cut off from everyday activity and normal rules of eating are suspended. The collective ethnic fantasy presented stereotypic ethnic foods to dramatize the myth of ethnic solidarity. The festival could be viewed as a mechanical way to create understanding between ethnic groups in the community for public relations purposes. The ethnic festival celebrates the cultural pluralism image of the new ethnicity, but the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in this position are expressed through the symbolic use of food.

Key words: ethnic foods

INTRODUCTION

FOOD IS an ideal symbolic marker of ethnicity and festivity, yet very little research has centered around food as an ethnic boundary marker or the role of food in festivity. In this essay, I will use the occasion of an urban ethnic food festival in a midwestern city to explore the relation between food, festivity, and ethnicity in a ritual context.

Food is an ideal vehicle for symbolic elaboration in part because of its natural properties, the substantial base of its meaning (Sperber, 1975, 13). Food is divisible and thus can be shared;

it can be sorted into discrete named units which can be described by reference to several sensory attributes — taste, smell, appearance. It is a common, easily available substance, but highly valued and emotionally loaded for both individuals and groups. From the wide range of potential food sources, foods are always culturally defined as edible and appropriate, and their use governed by both conscious and unconscious rules. Food can be transformed by cooking, and varied in both quantity and quality, making it potentially useful as a measure of prestige or social differentiation.

There is an extensive literature on how foods can be used to maintain ethnic boundaries created by religiously motivated dietary restrictions. The debate over whether ecological or symbolic explanations can best account for Jewish, Moslem, or Hindu dietary rules is extensive and at times heated (cf. Harris, 1966; Heston, 1972; Diener and Robkin, 1978). But this is not the only way foods can be used as ethnic boundary markers. Ethnic identity may be expressed by food and eating habits, both to members of that ethnic group, and to outsiders who associate particular foods with that ethnic group. Food, then, may become part of an ethnic stereotype.

In an older view of ethnicity, food traditions might be one attribute characteristic of a group of individuals who trace their descent to a common homeland. Then ethnic food traditions would be expected to gradually disappear as individuals become assimilated: "Being American is a matter of abstention from former ways, foreign food, foreign ideas, foreign accents, foreign vices" (Mead, 1975, 189).

A newer model of ethnicity which Schermerhorn sees emerging in the sixties (1974, 3) stresses cultural pluralism and a new consciousness of the worth of ethnic diversity. In this view, ethnicity is a synthetic composite of shared values, shared memories, and a sense of in group solidarity which is relative to time and place (Schermerhorn, 1974, 2). Lehman specifies that ethnic categories are reference systems or cognitive models which people make selective use of to guide real life actions (1967, 105). Ethnicity, then, is only a part identity which may be expressed in some social contexts and not in others.

By framing a limited context where awareness and expression of ethnic identity is approved, a special time and place may be set aside where ethnic differences are stressed. One special context is the ethnic festival, an event which brings together a range of ethnic groups from a community for a public display of ethnicity. If food is used as a symbol of ethnic identity, it should be apparent in this context.

Cut off in time and space from everyday activity, the festival represents not ethnic realities in the community but a collective ethnic fantasy (cf. Warner, 1959, 112) that signifies something about the nature of the community to participants and observers alike. In everyday meals, food may have ceased to be an external marker of a particular ethnic group; but it can serve as a symbol of ethnicity to observers unfamiliar with the actual food habits of a particular group, as well as to members of that group.

The ethnic festival described here is an annual part of July 4th celebrations in a moderate-sized midwestern city. Information on the festival came from participant observation, newspaper reports, and both structured and unstructured interviews with administrators, visitors, and booth organizers. During the course of the event, I visited each food booth and sat in the cooking area if the organizer permitted, asking about the foods they served. Twenty-seven families were formally interviewed¹ about their food choices and preferences. Additional information came from conversations in waiting lines and observations over the two day period. Ethnographic description and conversations are detailed elsewhere (Van Esterik, 1979).

Food metaphors are used in everyday language to express notions about ethnicity. We refer to the melting pot or salad to characterize the flavor of American communities. Novak criticized the assimilation ethic of the past by complaining that "the melting pot has had only a single recipe" (1977, 19). The metaphor of the "sizzling cauldron" (Stein and Hill, 1977, 126) communicates the tension and rage of white ethnics in the last decade. While these food metaphors are descriptive, they cannot substitute for problem oriented food research. In the following sections, I

describe the ethnic food festival, and suggest how analysis of food related behavior may clarify the meaning of this collective ritual.

THE ETHNIC FOOD FESTIVAL

The ethnic food festival held in a midwestern city drew about 50,000 visitors in 1979. Begun in 1974 as part of the preparations for the city's bicentennial celebrations, the festival has grown in size every year. In the first years, there were fewer booths, but from the start, ethnic identity was defined by foods, with flags, costumes and recorded music of lesser importance. Booths were set up by ethnic associations, church groups, charities, and individuals, and all operated to make a profit. The community redevelopment office organized the event with funds from the city council. The city government does not make money on the festival, but voting against the appropriations would be "like voting against the flag and motherhood," in the words of one volunteer organizer.

Festivals are set apart in time and space from ordinary activities, and contrast with mundane affairs on many dimensions. The mood is one of contagious anticipation and excitement accentuated by food, drink, and decoration.

This urban festival was set apart from daily routines and ordinary time by several temporal markers. Two days were set aside for the occasion. More significantly, the event commemorated the founding of the country. Advertised as a July 4th celebration, the festival began as part of the city's bicentennial celebrations. History as symbol (cf. Warner, 1959, 103) was also expressed through the constant reference to past fairs, as if visitors were trying to create continuity from a tradition only five years old.

The festival also focused attention on the ethnic roots of participants, many of whom were several generations removed from their European homeland. The process of renaissance of an older ethnic heritage (Schermerhorn, 1974, 5) is illustrated by the activities of individuals and groups of European descent. Reaching

back in time, they use symbols of a real or mythical peasant past-costumes, communal cooking of special foods — to give content to this heritage. Most of the money raised by the ethnic associations were used for “good causes” including scholarship and ethnic heritage studies.

For the duration of the festival several downtown blocks were closed to traffic and became the spatial focus of the festival. Festival goers wandered down the middle of streets decorated with flags and tents while police kept cars out of the area. On an ordinary routine business day, drivers would circle around these same blocks looking for a parking spot and police would ticket them if they stopped in an inappropriate place. For this occasion, city parking lots at the periphery of the festival space were opened for free parking, a concession that the revellers obviously appreciated.

The location was physically transformed by decorations and festive props such as striped tents, flags, and banners. In addition, booth attendants and other strolling players wandered through the festival site in colorful and unusual costumes.

In 1979, 26 booths were set up side by side in two downtown blocks. Former participants had first choice of location and tent color. More than one booth may offer the same ethnic food or represent the same country. The groups may agree to cooperate, as did the Mexican-American booths set up side by side, sharing the same clientele and coordinating their food offerings, or they may compete, as the two Hungarian and two German booths did, operating some distance apart.

Compared with some festivals which occur in this country, there were few excesses or indulgences permitted at this festival. The one excess which was encouraged was eating. (No alcoholic beverages were for sale in the festival area.) Eating was in fact, the basis for sociability and the focal interest of the festival. This was not a context for concern with either calories or the nutritional value of foods. Instead, festivity was expressed by excessive consumption of foods — complete indulgence in eating as a sensory pleasure.

Special foods often become associated with particular festivals

and thus evoke particularly fond memories; this can be seen, for example, in the way turkey has come to symbolize Thanksgiving. The food that has become symbolic of this ethnic food festival is elephant ears, a deep fried confectionary made from flour, oil, sugar, and milk. These large flat dough breads first became popular in New York and elsewhere in the northeast. The Mormon Church spread their fame through the country and sold one particular version at all their festivals. The recipe used at this ethnic festival was developed by a local family who now sell the confectionary at festivals throughout the area.

Elephant ears are particularly suitable for the ethnic festival since there are close analogies in Greek, Hungarian, German, Dutch, Middle Eastern, Indian, and Spanish cuisine. Although the recipe was based on a Polish dough recipe, the product was easily translated into everybody's traditional ethnic food. The operators recall people commenting that elephant ears “taste the same as the sweet my grandmother used to make.”

Table I summarizes the major food offerings from each booth. Two amateur baseball associations sold hot dogs and cokes, the “all-American” favorites. The booth operator stressed that the food offered was “real” American food, since “real coke and real hot dogs mean a lot to kids.” The booths selling soul food attracted customers — mostly black — who knew the booth operators and remained around the booths after their meals were finished. An older woman preparing dinners in one booth complained that potato salad and cole slaw were not real soul food; she wanted to serve black-eyed peas, okra, and greens — “real” soul food.

A stroll behind the Jewish booth revealed two young Jewish boys eating knishes which they said they had never eaten before. Visitors to the Polish booth usually used the Polish terms when asking for food items. But the Serbian booth had a recognition problem since “people did not already know about Serbian food.” Booth organizers, members of the Serbian Orthodox Church, wore buttons reading in Serbian “no one has what the Serbs have.”

Men of the Greek Orthodox Church roasted meat behind the booth for the Greek dishes. Inside the booth, a woman was teaching her teenaged daughter to make honey donuts the “authentic

TABLE I
Foods served at the ethnic food festival

Ethnic group	Number of booths	Principle food offerings
Standard American	4	hot dogs, coke, roast beef sandwiches, ice cream cones
Soul food	3	chicken, fish, chitterlings, or rib-tips with cole slaw, beans, or potato salad, sweet potato pie
Jamaican food	1	fritters, dumplings, salted fish, rum fruit cake, ginger beer
Jewish food	1	fruit blintzes, meat knishes, chicken liver pies, humus in pita bread
Mexican food	2	tacos, toastadas, burritos, frijoles refritos, sweet bread
German food	2	bratwurst on rye with saurkraut or warm potato salad, special pastries
Polish food	1	cabbage rolls, kielbasa (sausage), pierogi (cheese turnovers), special pastries
Serbian food	1	cabbage rolls, sausage and saurkraut, rice, special pastries
Hungarian food	2	cabbage rolls, goulash, sausage, noodles, special pastries
Italian food	2	ravioli, sausage, pizza, sandwiches, Italian pastries
Greek food	1	gyros, souvlaka (shish kabobs), special pastries
Vietnamese food	1	egg rolls, Bar BQ beef

Greek way." The Vietnamese booth, along with the Greek, served the most popular foods. While waiting in line customers discussed Chinese restaurants in the area and tried to figure out what was in the egg rolls.

The food festival gave visitors an opportunity to choose foods they were already familiar with or foods that were totally new to them. In the sample of visitors interviewed, ten chose foods they were already familiar with and knew they liked. They chose their

regular festival food. Seven visitors linked their choices to their ethnic heritage or that of their spouse. Two Polish men always ate Polish food, liked Polish food, and so chose it here. A woman of Greek ancestry went directly to the Greek booth for her favorite food. Two women chose Swedish donuts because they had Swedish relatives. A number of visitors simply chose the shortest line or experimented with new foods, returning to foods of their own ethnic group for the second round.

Style of eating at the festival differed completely from patterns followed everyday. For example, most visitors ate continuously for the three or four hours they attended the festival. They may refer to this as snacking; since the pattern contrasts so strikingly with our definition of meals. At the festival, food is consumed publicly and with strangers. People who have never seen each other before share tables and strike up conversations. As everyone who has attended a festival knows, food is not consumed neatly. Nor is it intended to be, since most food is sold as finger food; plates, napkins, and spoons are in short supply. As a result, visitors often spill food on their hands and clothes. (I recall that adults were often messier than children — a hint of the role/rule reversal accompanying some kinds of festive occasions). People regularly shared food during festive eating — splitting portions neatly to sample a wider variety of foods or eating simultaneously on a single crepe, sausage roll, or pizza. And clearly, many people freely experimented with foods they did not ordinarily eat.

Rules regarding the order of courses and the combination of foods were less easily suspended. In the sample of visitors interviewed nine visitors consciously planned their food choices so they would conform to their definition of a meal. Yet, there were differences in the way a meal was defined. For example, an adult male who identified himself as Polish said that his meal (which consisted of three orders of German sausages which he thought were really Polish wedding sausages) was just like he had at home. He never had desserts at home, so would not choose sweets at the festival.

Several visitors specified that they had a real meal or a whole

meal, with a meat course and a dessert. In two cases, the Vietnamese egg roll preceded the "real" meal. One woman who constructed two whole meals during her visit to the festival, also took home a full meal to eat later. The snackers clearly consumed no less food than those who defined meals for themselves, but they specified that they just ate whatever they wanted whenever they wanted — even eating sweets before their "main course."

One exchange confirmed that some people were quite aware of how their food choices broke certain rules: "Pizza and bratwurst? You've had a terrible combination." The reply? "That's not all; we each had a burrito and a hot dog too." Sweet desserts were eaten before, or after savories. In the festival context, a dessert did not signal the end of a meal as in British or American meals, but a festival indulgence.

Whenever people encounter foods they are not familiar with, the unfamiliar may be translated into the familiar by equating or relating the two and permitting easier categorization of foods. This is particularly apparent in the ethnic festival when foods were identified by non-English words. Many problems of translation concerned the food sold at the Vietnamese booth. Up and down the waiting lines could be heard the question, "What is a *chaq gio*? What's in it? What does it taste like?" One woman described the *chaq gio* as being like hard cabbage rolls. At the Jewish booth, there was discussion about the "real names" for various items like *humus*, and pita bread. The attendant at this booth only responded to orders phrased in the correct Hebrew terms, prompting negotiations among the visitors like, "Blintz, isn't that Jewish for pancake?" Even pastries were treated with caution, as a visitor asked "Is this sweet or more like a sandwich?" At first, she thought the item was topped with parsley like a sandwich, but on closer inspection, she saw the crystallized sugar and identified it correctly as a pastry. Others described the Italian cannoli as being "like an Italian éclair."

Foods were also evaluated by reference to a variety of standards. Even foods that were relatively unfamiliar to the visitors could be described and evaluated along several dimensions. Consider first

the contrast between "healthy" foods and "junk" foods. The Greek *gyros*, the Vietnamese Bar B Q beef, and cabbage rolls were often described as healthy, possibly because they contained meat. An interesting observation from a visitor who had just sampled Vietnamese food was that this food was probably healthy *for that nationality*. Pastries made with a great deal of cream, and elephant ears were identified as junk food.

Foods were also evaluated according to how authentic they were, particularly by women who claimed knowledge of that particular style of cooking. For example, one German woman critiqued the dough used to make the *pierogi* in the Polish booth. Another woman complained that the food was made too fast and was therefore sloppy in appearance. Another singled out several examples of greasy foods. Others commented that there was not enough meat in the sandwiches and that the desserts all tasted the same. Generally, ethnic foods that were clearly home-made were highly praised. Home-made foods meant personal attention, utilized expensive ingredients not generally available in the area, and were difficult to prepare.

Foods were regularly described as spicy or bland, with most people pleased that the food was "not too spicy." Mexican sauces were described as "too hot," and Greek dishes were described as "too hot" by some visitors and "too mild" by others. Cooks generally modified their spices in order to make their offerings acceptable to their customers.

Two delighted visitors with different foods in each hand communicated the spirit of the event: "I love all ethnics. I love all nationalities. We all love each other no matter what we say and do." "I don't care who makes it as long as it's food."

The community was really the beneficiary of all the time, money, effort, and knowledge that the various ethnic groups put into the festival. The festival could be viewed as a political or public relations statement about a community where there was a happy and well balanced ethnic mix, where groups cooperated for the good of the community. This view of the festival was apparent to many visitors who viewed the ethnic festival as a mechanical way to create understanding between various ethnic

groups represented in the community. As an expression of the ethnic spirit of the community, the festival expressed ethnicity in a positive way. Thus, the visitors viewed ethnicity as a "good thing" in this context. The festival gave people a chance to experience ethnicity "painlessly" by eating the foods of various groups and seeing what and how they cook. Ideally, appreciation for the food of other groups stood for appreciation of those groups. In this context, said one visitor, "it's good to be an ethnic."

The festival expressed to some a small town spirit where everyone knew each other, and to others, the spirit of a large urban center with distinctive ethnic sections. For both, the festival created a positive identity of the community which would attract outsiders to the area.

FOOD AND ETHNICITY

In a powerful critique of the new ethnicity, Stein and Hill write, "if ethnicity must be publicly declared and romanticized, it cannot be authentically lived" (1977, 8). The ethnic food festival is an example of the staging of ethnicity for American consumption. Food plays an important part in this staging. Where ethnics were often negatively defined as people who eat smelly, spicy foods, these same smelly, spicy foods are now valued and utilized in redefining their ethnic identity. Through food, then, a negative stereotype becomes "the basis of the inverted positive self-definition" (Stein and Hill, 1977, 215). Stein and Hill cite a reflection made by Monsignor Geno Baroni to illustrate this. He lashed out against the typical American tasteless, odorless Safeway boloney, compared with the spicy, greasy, robustly odored Italian salami: "Like the American culture it represents, 'Safeway boloney' is artificial; like the ethnicity it symbolizes, Italian salami is real" (Stein and Hill, 1977, 216).

This contrast between "bland, tasteless, artificial" American food and "authentic, flavorful" ethnic food is the symbolic basis of the ethnic food festival. To understand the role of food in the

formation of an ethnic identity, I will first examine what we know about the kinds of foods served and second, the kinds of message transmitted by these foods.

Novak points out that a phrase like "ethnic foods" is currently in wide use: "In New York, one could easily conjure up images and smells of Jewish, Italian, Chinese, Greek, black and other specialties. Would one include turkey, pumpkin pie, plum pudding, or fish 'n chips as ethnic foods?" (1977, 23). Clearly ethnic foods refer to the other group's food, not to the food of the majority. But the problems of defining ethnic foods and the implications of this for ethnic identity have received scant attention by social scientists.

Gravetti has pointed out the importance of distinguishing between foods that are part of an ethnic stereotype, and foods that a particular ethnic group actually eat, including "non-traditional" foods (1978, 190-212). He found, for example, that a high proportion of his sample of first generation Chinese ate tortillas regularly, a non-traditional food choice. Are tortillas Chinese ethnic foods because they are regularly eaten by that ethnic minority? They are not, but we can only make this judgment by defining ethnic foods as one attribute of an ethnic stereotype, and not as the foods that a particular ethnic group eats.

This is, in fact, the commonly understood meaning of ethnic food. The American Dietetic Association's study of cultural food patterns in the U.S.A. characterized the food habits of the Chinese, Italian, Japanese, Jewish, Polish, Puerto Rican, southern U.S. and Spanish American using commonly held stereotypical views of their food habits rather than surveys of what these groups actually ate (American Dietetic Association, 1976). Institutions providing occasional festive ethnic meals follow the same pattern. For example, the food services for a midwestern university included the following items among their selections for ethnic meals. corned beef and cabbage, lime jello, and cucumbers for an Irish dinner; bratwurst and sauerkraut, hot potato salad, red cabbage and apples and black forest cherry cake for a German/Austrian dinner; glazed pork, deviled eggs, banana pancakes and coconut ice cream for a Caribbean dinner; sweet and sour pork

over noodles, Chicken fried rice, rice pudding and fortune cookies for an oriental dinner; onion soup, ragout de boeuf (beef stew) and petits fours for a French dinner; tacos, chili, refried beans and Mexican apple pudding (apple brown Betty) for a Mexican dinner; and minestrone, spaghetti, lasagna, and spumoni ice cream for an Italian dinner. These choices, complete with directions for substituting standard American dishes such as beef stew and apple brown Betty, represent easily recognizable ethnic food stereotypes.

In a study of how people viewed the food habits of other ethnic groups, Panghorn and Bruhn (1971) found that neither adults nor students knew about the food habits of blacks or Mexican Americans, and Mexican-Americans knew little about the food habits of blacks or Anglos. When adults and students were asked to list foods typical of six American ethnic groups — Mexican, Chinese, Jewish, Negro, American Indian, and Japanese — they responded with stereotype foods associated with each group (Panghorn and Bruhn, 1981, 108).

In a class exercise, I asked 18 students to list the foods they associated with black Americans, Italians, Polish, Mexican, French, British, Swedish, Brazilian, Vietnamese and Hungarian. In addition, I asked them to rate from 1 to 5 their knowledge of that particular ethnic group (5 if it was part of their family tradition, 1 if they had little contact with people from that group). The foods students associated with each group were generally the same regardless of whether the students were part of that ethnic group or knew next to nothing about it. Experienced and non-experienced alike responded with stereotype ethnic foods. It is these stereotypic ethnic markers which were used by the ethnic food booths to communicate their authenticity.

Jerome distinguishes between core foods (foods eaten regularly), secondary core (foods eaten approximately once a week), peripheral or special interest foods, and marginal or ceremonial foods reserved for special occasions (1975, 92-3). The food booths offered both core and ceremonial food as ethnic identity markers, the prime criterion being that the food conform to the general public's stereotype of the food eaten by that ethnic group. For

example, the goulash, cabbage rolls, noodles, sausages, and blintzes were described by the booth attendants as core foods eaten regularly by members of that particular ethnic group. The sweet pastries and other desserts were identified as ceremonial foods made in conjunction with special religious holidays such as Easter or Christmas. The Vietnamese offered food that could be served with rice or as finger food with drinks. The foods served were described by several visitors as "Chinese favorites."

The foods presented to both other ethnic groups and to WASP. Americans conform to widely held stereotypes of ethnic foods, and acquire symbolic significance in contrast with WASP foods. "Slavic foods such as *kolachki*, *pirohki* or *halushki* are not good simply because one likes them, but because they are emblematic of Slovak or Slavic 'soul' food, hence totems or insignias of difference and distinction for public display. They acquire personal significance as good ethnic food because they are not American WASP food" (Stein and Hill, 1977, 215).

Foods can communicate other subtle messages in addition to ethnic identity. Foods may be a measure of acculturation, a "status symbol," a means of consciousness raising, and a marker of festivity.

Since food habits of groups change through time, they have been used to measure the degree to which persons of foreign background have internalized certain aspects of the American way of life (Weinstock, 1964, 50). Kolasa (1976) has shown how food habits of Polish Americans changed to reflect the availability of food products and their degree of acculturation. One on-going study is examining how the format for daily, weekend, and celebratory meals of Italian Americans changed over the past several decades (Goode *et al.*, 1979).

Food choices can also be manipulated symbolically to communicate certain messages about the status of a particular ethnic group. In 1943, Joffe wrote that "the fundamental premise of this study has been that there are no American Negro food habits" (1943, 1-2). Rather than triggering an outpouring of criticism, this obvious inaccuracy appears to have gone unnoticed by social scientists until the sixties. Scott recognized that food preferences

could be used as a measure of civil rights orientations among midwestern blacks, with segregationists preferring traditional rural southern foods and integrationists choosing foods associated with middle class whites (1966, 141). More recently, Jerome formulated a method for determining food patterns in an urban community from a sample composed largely of black families (Jerome, 1975). But the most interesting questions about soul food are yet to be asked. Consider the social processes, underlying the following observation: "As black Americans have asserted conscious identity, and the idea that 'Black is beautiful' has gained acceptance chitterlings and other soul foods are marketed not only in Harlem grocery store but in the gourmet sections of supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods often for a considerable price" (Giffit *et al.*, 1972, 45). Is it the fact that this food is recognized beyond the social group that normally consumes it that now makes chitterlings a high status ethnic food rather than simply a food item that blacks eat?

Consider, too, the meaning of changes in food preferences throughout an individual's life time:

As a lad, he had grown up in a poor family of Italian . . . was raised on blood sausage, pizza, spaghetti and red wine. After completing high school, he went to Minnesota and began working in logging camps where anxious to be accepted he soon learned to prefer beef, beer and beans, and he shunned all Italian food. Later he went to a Detroit industrial plant, and eventually became a promising young executive. . . . In his executive role he found himself cultivating the favorite foods and beverages of other young executives: steak, whiskey and sea food. Ultimately he gained acceptance in the city's upper classes. Now he began winning admiration from people in his elite social set by going back to his knowledge of Italian food and serving them, with the aid of a man servant authentic Italian treats such as blood sausage, pizza, spaghetti and red wine. (Packard, 1959, 146)

Foods may be used to promote or increase ethnic solidarity, as if eating the foods of different ethnic groups was a measure of one's acceptance of these groups. Consumption of ethnic foods can be one element of an ethnic "consciousness raising." For example, the Black-Polish Conference of Detroit sponsored a dinner where soul food and Polish food were served together

(Kolasa, 1976, 135). In many communities this past year, symbolic refugee dinners were served "to underscore the plight of the Southeast Asian refugees." In these cases, food was used to create empathy between groups.

During the ethnic festival, some visitors emphasized the similarity between "their" foods and foods from other groups. With obvious pleasure, a number of men and women of European descent compared the qualities of German, Hungarian, Polish and Serbian sausage and found that they all tasted alike.

But comparisons among the available ethnic foods may not succeed in establishing ethnic solidarity. Rather, the reverse may occur "out of the manipulation of exploitable differences for the purposes of clarification and definition. Within the new order established by the new ethnicity, a premium is placed on the enhancement of difference. . . ." (Stein and Hill, 1977, 187). A German booth attendant confided that their German sausage was made with veal and was therefore easier to digest than Polish sausage which was made with pork. Similarly, the Jamaican booth sold soul food in other years but specified that they were not serving soul food but Jamaican food this year. They distinguished themselves repeatedly from the booths selling soul food.

An interesting note on folk recipes as a measure of cultural interpretation demonstrated how little food habits of one ethnic group influence the food habits of other ethnic groups in the same community (Sackett, 1972).

This observation was confirmed by the women attending the ethnic food festival who were unwilling to add these foods to the regular diets of their families. The women who discussed this question felt that their husbands and children would not accept ethnic foods on a regular basis. Over and over, we heard the cliché, "my husband is a meat-and-potatoes man." Lack of spices, cost of ingredients, and lack of time would prevent these women from preparing ethnic foods for their family. In addition, many women expressed regrets at not knowing basic preparation techniques and recipes for traditional foods in their own ethnic tradition. Could a Pole make a Vietnamese egg roll? A Hungarian, an adequate taco? Not according to the women visitors who would

probably be cooking the regular family meals in the months and years ahead.

Food also communicated messages about the quality of time and the nature of the celebration. Leach writes, "All over the world men mark out their calendar by means of festivals" (1972, 113). Festival time represents a social interstice when regular cultural rules are suspended or even reversed in a cultural "time-out" (Shiver, 1979, 25; Leach, 1972, 115). In this special context, we experience the world as we wish it were, rather than the way it really is, in this case, a sense of community and appreciation of ethnic diversity that it not normally expressed.

The festival context was marked by excessive indulgences, the serving of festival food, and the suspension of normal rules of eating. Food is normally consumed at set times, with several hours elapsing between the next food event or meal. It is normally eaten in private with only close family members present, and in this society, it is usually consumed neatly with plates, forks, spoons, and napkins supplied to avoid messes. Generally all persons have their own portion of food, although some sharing is acceptable if common serving dishes are used. Food habits of individuals and families are usually quite conservative Giffit writes. "We shun unfamiliar foods for an assortment of reasons. We are afraid that we won't like the taste, or that it might not agree with us, or just that some indefinite evil thing might happen to us" (1972, 19).

Finally, food is usually consumed in a set order to conform to people's definition of a meal. These rules express both syntagmatic and paradigmatic order (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Mary Douglas, 1972). That is, there is a culturally approved order to the courses of a meal and an order of acceptable combinations within courses and meals. These rules of proper eating were suspended or reversed in festival time as the earlier description of messy, celebratory snacking in public confirmed. In addition, people were decidedly more sociable to strangers. In the festival context, blacks ate Polish food, Poles ate Mexican food, and Mexican-Americans ate Vietnamese food.

CONCLUSIONS

The urban ethnic festival is a cultural performance that dramatizes certain basic myths and values in American society. Following the work of Ortner on Sherpa ritual (1978) we need to ask what myths or values are celebrated here? What problematic realities underlie this symbolic construction? Why is the festival an appropriate context for expressing these values? And what part does food play in this cultural performance?

The American dream is an ideal encompassing a dream of freedom to move up and out, freedom to break with rigid rules of the past. It celebrates "Horatio Alger" myths of the self-made man who goes "from rags to riches." The melting pot, not cultural pluralism was the metaphor of the American dream (Stein and Hill, 1977, 46-80).

To fulfill the American dream, you must conform to American values; all foreign elements must be eradicated. But the new ethnicity based on cultural pluralism emphasizes not conformity to an American model, but acceptance of diversity — the right to be different. Stein and Hill refer to this contradiction as the American dilemma (1977, 70). The ethnic festival celebrates the cultural pluralism image. But the ambiguities are expressed and resolved through the symbolic use of food; cultural pluralism is accepted during festival time, as visitors accept everyone else's food — but standard American hot dogs and coke are still available as alternatives.

The second myth dramatized in the festival follows from the cultural pluralism model — the myth of ethnic solidarity. In the context of the festival Vietnamese, blacks, Mexican-Americans, Hungarians and other European immigrant groups work side by side, cooperating and eating each other's food. In real life, "ethnic solidarity is more a wish and an ideology than a fact" (Stein and Hill, 1977, 192).

Since 1972 when the Ethnic Heritage Studies Program Act was passed, urban ethnic festivals have become more popular. To explain their popularity, we must return to an analysis of festivity. Festival time reverses normal rules and contrasts with

everyday life, as we experience an ideal world for a day or two. Normal barriers to interactions with other ethnic groups are dropped. "Saturday ethnics" can celebrate their differences, while retaining intact the American dream. The participants avoid the American dilemma by ritualizing the myths in a narrowly defined context (recall the comment, "today, it's good to be an ethnic").

Stein and Hill point out that the new ethnicity which glorifies cultural pluralism was created "not when traditional ethnic culture was threatened, but when the American dream was threatened, that is, when members of various 'groups' felt the dream to be unrealizable for them" (1977, 43).

When the dream is threatened, there is a need to work through the myths again, and play them out in a ritual context. The festival provides a special context where all participants agree to act as if no problems or worries exist, and ethnicity can be safely expressed. The festivals succeed by "framing limited contexts for the awareness of ethnicity" (Novak, 1971, 8). Here, differences can be exaggerated, and individuals can safely brag about their ethnic heritage. In everyday interaction such chauvinism could disrupt a community by encouraging ethnic competition. But during festivals rivalry is played down and exaggeration expected.

Sharing food is a widely recognized symbol of compatibility and acceptance. Breaking bread together is particularly important among groups who are not structurally assimilated into American society. Commensality during the food festival celebrated the community as one big happy family breaking bread together — a model of ethnic solidarity. The underlying idea of food sharing is that one absorbs something of the qualities of the food one eats, so that eating the foods of different ethnic groups is a measure of one's acceptance of those groups.

In this festive world, blacks, Hungarians, and Vietnamese, and the other groups represented at the festival do not compete for community resources, but cooperate to offer the community a tasteful display of ethnic foods. Constraints of the everyday world are denied, and inter-ethnic tensions, discrimination and

exploitation cease to exist. And for two days the food habits of the community broaden, as men and women participate in a culinary adventure. And when they tire of the variety, they are reassured by the availability of coke, "It's the real thing."

Note

1. I would like to thank Diane Fair (University of Toronto) and Ann Jache (University of Notre Dame) for helping with interviews, and Lincoln Johnson, Julian Samora, Joseph Scott, Mikkie Dobski, and John Van Esterik for their helpful suggestions before and during preparation of the paper.

References Cited

- American Dietetic Association (1976). *Cultural Food Patterns in the USA*. American Dietetic Association, Chicago.
- Diener, Paul and E. Robkin (1978). Ecology, evolution, and the search for cultural origins: the question of Islamic pig prohibition. *Current Anthropology*, 19, 493-540.
- Douglas, Mary (1972). Deciphering a Meal. *Daedalus* (winter).
- Giff, H.H. et al. (1972). *Nutrition, Behavior and Change*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Goode, Judith et al. (1979). *Change in a Food System: External Influence on Internal Process*. Paper presented at the 78th annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Cincinnati.
- Gravetti, Louis E. and Marie B. Pagnette (1978). Nontraditional ethnic food choices among first generation Chinese in California. *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 10, 109-112.
- Harris, Marvin (1966). The cultural ecology of India's sacred cattle. *Current Anthropology*, 7, 51-59.
- Heston, Alan (1971). An approach to the sacred cow of India. *Current Anthropology*, 12, 191-210.
- Jerome, Norge (1975). On Determining Food Patterns of Urban Dwellers in Contemporary United States. In *Gastronomy*. M. Arnott, ed. The Hague: Mouton.
- Joffe, Natalie (1943). Food Habits of Selected Subcultures in the United States. In *The Problem of Changing Food Habits*. National Research Council, No. 108, Washington, D.C.
- Kolasa, K. (1978). I Won't Cook Turnip Greens if you Won't Cook Kielbasa: Food behavior of Polonia and its health implications. In *The Anthropology of Health*. E. Bauwens, ed. Saint Louis: C.V. Mosby.

- Leach, Edmund (1972). Time and False Noses. In *Reader in Comparative Religion* (third edition). W. Lessa and E. Vogt, eds. New York: Harper and Row.
- Lehman, F.K. (1967). Ethnic Categories in Burma and the Theory of Social Systems. In *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities and Nations*. P. Kunstadter, ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1969). The culinary triangle. *Partisan Review*, 33, 586-95.
- Mead, Margaret (1975). Ethnicity and Anthropology in America. In *Ethnic Identity: Cultural Continuities and Change*. G. De Vos and L. Romanucci-Ross, eds. Palo Alto: Mayfield.
- Novak, Michael (1971). *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. New York: Macmillan.
- Novak, Michael (1977). *Further Reflections on Ethnicity*. Middletown, Pennsylvania: Jednota Press.
- Ortner, Sherry (1978). *Sherpas through Their Rituals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Packard, Vance (1959). *The Status Seekers*. New York: McKay.
- Pangborn, Rose Marie and Christine M. Bruhn (1971). Concepts of food habits of 'other' ethnic groups. *Journal of Nutrition Education*, 2, 106-110.
- Sackett, Marjorie (1972). Folk recipes as a measure of intercultural penetration. *Journal of American Folklore*, 85, 77-81.
- Schermerhorn, R.A. (1974). Ethnicity in the perspective of the sociology of knowledge. *Ethnicity*, 1, 1-14.
- Scott, Joseph (1966). Social class factors underlying the civil rights movement. *Phylon*, 28, 132-144.
- Shriver, T.H. (1979). *Festivals and Society: Explorations Towards a Sociology of Festivity*. M.A. dissertation, DePaul University.
- Sperber, Dan (1975). *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stein, H.F. and R.F. Hill (1977). *The Ethnic Imperative*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Van Esterik, Penny (1979). *Ethnic Food Festival*. Urban Studies Institute, University of Notre Dame.
- Warner, W.L. (1959). *The Living and the Dead*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Weinstock, S.A. (1964). Motivation and social structure in the study of acculturation: A Hungarian case. *Human Organization*, 23, 50-52.