

Nourishing the Body and Spirit

My earliest memory of food was my grandmother feeding me a spoonful of rice when I was very young. As she pulled the spoon from my mouth, she would make a gleeful noise and say “Masarap!” which means “delicious” in Tagalog. Throughout my life, food has undeniably been associated with family, especially my grandmother, who did most of the cooking. Every day, I would wake up to the loud crushing of garlic, the chopping of whole chickens, and heat coming from boiling water. If that didn’t wake me up, it was her screaming “EAT NOW!” instead of “Good morning.” Most meals included rice, even at breakfast. This is common in many Asian diets. Sometimes, when I ate with my grandmother, she would talk about her experience planting rice in the Philippines. She admirably spoke about her father owning a rice field, the carabaos that plowed it, and the sad, yet hopeful songs she sang while picking rice. Even today, the lyrics “planting rice is no fun,” come to mind as I wash rice before putting it in the cooker. This song reminds me to cherish the food that is harvested and prepared to feed our families.

The Filipino tradition of planting our own food continued when she and my grandfather immigrated to America. Our backyard was filled with vegetables, herbs, and a rack for drying fish. I was confused about why they spent so much time in the garden. To me, it was an eyesore when I compared it to backyards with a pool or swing set. Every time I went outside, I would see my grandparents behind all the vines, picking vegetables or removing weeds. The vegetables they grew were used in lumpia, sour soups like sinigang, and spiced vinegar. When my friends would visit the house, they commented on the smell of seafood and fermenting food. With a

scrunched up nose they would say, “Your house always smells like fish!” The smells didn’t bother me; it was a sign I was eating home cooked meals.

I didn’t think this then, but I ate well when I was younger. This changed when my family went through financial trouble and moved into houses where we couldn’t have a garden. Instead, we bought canned and processed food in bulk, such as Vienna Sausage and corned beef. These foods were meant for emergencies, when we couldn’t afford fresh food, but they were made often. Mornings were frantic, as many of us were getting ready to go to school and work. Spam and Hot Pockets became a staple in our diets, because they took less than 5 minutes to make and were inexpensive.

Luckily, one the last houses we moved into had a small area of dirt where my grandmother was able to plant camote tops - sweet potato leaves. We didn’t have a huge garden like we used to, but what she grew was enough to feed our family and neighbors. With this small garden she provided other working class families and senior citizens, who were living on rations, with fresh food. Since my grandmother past away, we don’t eat camote tops. We look for them in stores, but we rarely find them.

The camote tops my grandmother grew weren’t always in abundance. When she ran out, she didn’t add any fertilizer to make them grow faster. We waited for them to grow back. In Fukuoka’s argument that he creates in his text “Living on Bread Alone,” this humble farmer-philosopher emphasizes eating foods that are in season and naturally available. Fruit and vegetables are always in stock in our stores today, but many don’t grow organically year round. Since seasonal foods grow during certain times of the year, when they do grow, they are gifts from nature. Because these foods are gifts, Fukuoka attributes them to our spiritual wellbeing.

He states that food does not only give us energy to live, but are “directly connected with human spirit and emotions” (Fukuoka 72). He asserts, if we want to strengthen our spirit, we need to have a diet based on spiritual principles. In other words, the food we eat should invoke positive experiences to live a healthy life.

The spiritual aspect of food is not only how it is grown but how it is prepared. My family and I still eat the same cultural dishes that we ate growing up, such as caldereta, pancit and tocino, but we no longer cook them from scratch. Now we can go to the Filipino store and find them prepackaged, ready to be heat up. There are also many Filipino restaurants in our area, so food that was typically made for birthdays and anniversaries are available every day. Since the food is not made for a special occasion, it’s less satisfying. Often, we end our meals thinking we could have ate better if we had made it ourselves. The lack of satisfaction did not come from the taste. They did taste good. However, the effort that went into the food was not the same. We didn’t gather the ingredients or assign tasks to make the meal together. Traditional food that was meant to be eaten in celebration had the same taste as a frozen pizza.

Someone looking to have a spiritual diet shouldn’t rely on scientific data to help them make choices. Fukuoka claims, when trying to eat healthier, “Chemical analysis, nutritional ratios, and other such considerations are the main error” (Fukuoka 73). Western science has analyzed the chemical makeup of food and gave them nutritional values. People, wanting to eat healthier, look at these factors and create a demand for the foods they hear are the most nutritious. Even though these foods are supposed to be nutritious, how they are grown can alter its properties. Food grown non organically, such as foods that are not in season, have fewer vitamins and minerals. The need for specific nutrient dense food requires having all produce

available year round. In order for this to be possible, Fukuoka claims “Large-scale production and long term storage would become necessary” (Fukuoka 72). In turn, companies who want to fulfill this need, take over more land, need more labor, and use unnatural processes to supply people’s requests. This has become detrimental to non-western countries who are trying to adopt the same diet, thinking it’s better than what they were originally accustomed to.

People are always looking for ways to become healthier. Currently, people are looking at plant based diets to remedy diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Although fruits and vegetables can help cure illnesses, we need to consider how they were grown, where they are from, and how they are transported. If not grown organically, these nutritious food don’t have as much benefits. Instead of becoming healthier individuals, people are eating less vitamins and minerals and contributing to the demand of seasonal food all year round. People who want to have a genuine healthy lifestyle shouldn’t feel entitled to have specific foods accessible every day, especially since it negates the purpose of eating nutritious foods and harms others and the environment. The foods people believe are “good for them” are instead, harming the human spirit and disrupting the natural process of how food is grown. Rather than relying on the Western science which looks at the nutritional value of products to have a healthier diet, we need to be mindful of how food is provided to us.

Works Cited

Fukuoka, Masanobu. "Living by Bread Alone." *Food Matters: a Bedford Spotlight Reader*, by Holly Bauer, Bedford/St Martin's, 2014.