

The everyday meals

- and the time we spend in the kitchen

Sharing food and meals has always been an important part of our common history. One of the most famous reference points is probably the wall-painting by Leonardo da Vinci from 1498, *The Last Supper*, where Jesus shares his last meal with the most important people in his life, his friends the apostles. The painting of the supper takes us with the apostles to the table with Jesus, and the encounter is imprinted in the minds of the spectators. The renaissance interpretation, putting the meal in a perspective, of *The Last Supper* sets I believe a standard for the meal as an important part of our culture.

Meals are essential for any culture, and they symbolize so many things. This is something that humans have broadly in common. No matter race, status, or religion we all sit down at one point during the day and share a meal. We share a meal on special occasions or festivities, and all kinds of different customs are built around the sharing of food. Whenever people come to our home, we welcome them with something to either drink, or eat, or both. If guests leave a home without being offered anything, they will comment: "they did not even offer us a bit of bread", which is to say: we were not welcome.

The meal is where we meet each other every day. We sit around a table set for dinner, it is like a small society. We have all these rules that apply to sharing a meal. Everybody has to sit down at the same time, then all the food goes around, we do not pile up food on our plates, but only what is appropriate. We make sure everybody has a bit of everything on their plates, the host is the last to fill up his or her plate, we wish each other bon appétit, and some even thank their God for the meal. Then we start eating, we sit up straight, we do not burp or fart at the table, we do not eat with our mouth open, or speak with food in our mouth. We do not criticize the food, we do not start taking second helpings before everybody is ready, or we ask the host politely for permission, or we wait and sit still until asked. When we are done, we place our fork and knife in a special position on the plate to indicate to the people we are eating with that we are done. Then we wait for the host, or hostess, to finish the meal and allow everybody to rise. In this description the meal may sound like a very formal and uptight affair, but I do not at all think it is like that in real life. It is rather a more relaxed proceeding that goes like a tide through the meal without having to be a strict system with no time for breaking or bending the rules, or for having fun.

Anyway, this is how I was raised and how I raised my children. Of course, the rules and the way we eat are different according to historical circumstances, culture, or religious customs. In other cultures we might eat with our fingers, sit on the floor, and so on. But the point is that the rules of the meal are made to create order out of, what could have been chaos. We maintain a socialized order, where we control our greed for food our survival instinct, we learn to behave toward other people with respect. We also take part in an everyday ritual and celebrate that meals are something life-giving.

I strongly believe it is immensely important to sit down on an everyday basis together as a family and eat your daily food, at least once a day. This is where you meet, this is where you raise your children, teach them about basic behavior, and this is where they get familiar with your values and beliefs just by sitting there and listen to everyday talk about life, problems, joys, work, and friends. We exchange all our stories; we educate our children about life, while eating our supper.

Eating with friends is also where you exchange life and your life story. Thinking about my dinner table in my kitchen and all the meals I have shared there with my friends: that is an important part of my life, eating well prepared food, talk, laughing out loud, cry, and enjoy all the other stories that were told.

It is actually very interesting that, if you want to stay healthy then it seems to be important to be eating food jointly together with other people, thus having a meal. Food must be a joy, not a burden. This includes the social aspects of eating. Home cooked food with lots of flavours is a basic necessity and a natural part of our lives, but dining together implies a set of rules and rituals (as described above), which are also beneficial from a health perspective. You must not stuff yourself, eating quickly is rude, and the impression left by a person – leaning over his plate eating everything within seconds without even noticing other people around him – is something we think of as wrong. That is rude behavior in our culture but it is, more importantly, also bad for that person itself because he or she will end up eating way too much. As you properly will recall, nobody wants the last potato. We eat slower and less when we eat with other people. The social order of good behavior helps us stay healthy at the dinner table. Eating alone in front of a television, or while reading, or on the move means that you pay less attention to what you eat. Do therefore not be stressed about food, but enjoy and get pleasure out of eating. Make sure that the meals you have during the day are main meals, and only have light snacks in between if you feel really fatigued or hungry. Some scientists suggest that there is more to our eating pattern than just calories. The way in which we enjoy food may have really important psychological effects on our health, but also how we feel in general.

However, the time people spend eating together with other people seems also to be significant. Thus, countries have relatively low obesity rates where it is common that people cook daily meals in their kitchen from fresh ingredients and sit down and eat together at tables. Compare to countries where less time is spent in the kitchen and more readymade meals and junk food are broadly common as everyday meals, that might suggest there is relation between the two.

Food is about feeling good, fulfilling your senses, and you do that when you share a meal, when you are part of something, and you know somebody has cooked for you, and put an effort into pleasing you. Food cooked with love can never be substituted. This is basic psychology.

I cook all the time for my family and friends and my children's friends. As my daughter says: "Don't worry, my mom shows her love with food". There is some truth in it. I cherish the moment when I have a house full of people to an everyday meal and I can hear them saying "ahhh" and complimenting my food, enjoying it and getting nourished.

When my children grew up, TV dinner was a special treat, something my children would ask for. I would say okay: "Sunday we can have one", then I would arrange a picnic in the living room, serve a quick pasta or homemade burgers, and they thought it was a feast. I really think it is sad that eating in front of the television becomes an everyday occurrence, and sitting at the dinner table becomes equivalently rare.

Getting back into the kitchen, start cooking healthy food from fresh ingredients, then setting a table nicely and sit down sharing a meal on an everyday basis: this is one of the keys to healthy and happy living. I talk about this all the time, and the response I most often get is: we do not have time, we work late and before everybody is home it is too late. The reasons for not doing so are endless. I would like to emphasize that

this is not necessarily true. You have plenty of time, and you have a whole life full of time. Time is your capital. It is actually the most precious thing you have. Time goes, but there is more every morning when we wake up.

The thing you have to do is to choose how you want to live your life with all that time on your hands. You have to ask: do you want a healthy life that includes one of the most important things for your body, proper food and exercise? Then plan it to be so, and make a conscious decision that home cooked food and eating together is part of your everyday life, and one thing you want to spend time doing in your life.

Cooking

Even before cooking became my profession I loved it and considered it to be some of the best spend hours of my day. Fortunately, it became my profession. I think that cooking is some kind of therapy, and the kitchen is actually a wonderful place to be in with all the smells and action. Think about the fact that most private parties end up in the kitchen. That we as nations should be losing the ability to cook is for me really a tragedy. However, over the last century cooking has evolved into something wonderful, we have so many ingredients to choose from and all kinds of machinery and knowledge, and I do not know how many cook books to be inspired by.

It is a decisive moment in society when women enter the workforce. Everything changes, including family relations and eating habits. Now we have to adjust to these changes making sure everybody can cook. It is an important life skill to master, it means having control when you can cook. Everybody can learn to cook, not to be master chefs, but to master the art of normal healthy home cooked food. When you are not dependent upon food made by industry, restaurants, or other sources but can cook the meals yourselves then you gain full control over your diet. This is the key to healthy living.