



# Food and Culture in America

**A Nutrition Handbook**

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MELA GOYAN KITTLER • KATHRYN P. SUCHER

# FOOD AND CULTURE IN AMERICA

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## A Nutrition Handbook

Second Edition

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**West/Wadsworth**

I<sup>T</sup>P<sup>®</sup> an International Thomson Publishing Company

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London • Los Angeles • Madrid • Melbourne • Mexico City • Minneapolis/St. Paul  
New York • Paris • Singapore • Tokyo • Toronto • Washington



TEXT IS PRINTED ON 10% POST CONSUMER RECYCLED PAPER

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data. A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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A Division of International Thomson Publishing Inc.  
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Printed in the United States of America  
2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

For more information contact Wadsworth Publishing Company, 10 Davis Drive, Belmont, CA 94002;  
or electronically at <http://www.thomson.com/wadsworth.html>

International Thomson Publishing Europe  
Berkshire House 168-173  
High Holborn  
London, WC1V7AA, England

International Thomson Editores  
Campos Eliseos 385, Piso 7  
Col. Polanco  
11560 Mexico D.F. Mexico

Thomas Nelson Australia  
102 Dodds Street  
South Melbourne 3205  
Victoria, Australia

International Thomson Publishing Asia  
221 Henderson Road  
#05-10 Henderson Building  
Singapore 0315

Nelson Canada  
1120 Birchmount Road  
Scarborough, Ontario  
Canada M1K5G4

International Thomson Publishing Japan  
Hirakawacho Kyowa Building, 3F  
2-2-1 Hirakawacho  
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102, Japan

International Thomson Publishing GmgH  
Konigswinterer Strasse +18  
53227 Bonn, Germany

International Thomson Publishing Southern Africa  
Building 19, Constantia Park  
240 Old Pretoria Road  
Halfway House, 1685 South Africa

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# Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kittler, Pamela Goyan, 1953–  
Food and culture in America: a nutrition handbook/Pamela Goyan  
Kittler, Kathryn Sucher. -- 2nd ed.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-314-20487-3 (soft: alk. paper)  
1. Nutrition—United States—Cross-cultural studies. 2. Food  
habits--United States. I. Sucher, Kathryn.  
TX357.K58 1998  
613.2'0973--dc21

98-4468  
CIP

# PREFACE

The topic of food and culture is inherently complex. It has been approached nutritionally, anthropologically, sociologically, psychologically, historically, ecologically, geographically, and from the perspective of the folklorist. Research in the field has ranged from anecdotal to academic. Yet despite these efforts, information that can be used by practicing health and nutrition professionals has been lacking.

The need for culturally sensitive nutrition resources is undisputed. The population of the United States is increasingly heterogeneous, moving toward a cultural plurality of uncounted ethnic and religious groups. Each of these minority groups has traditional foods and food habits that may vary significantly from the so-called typical American diet. Effective nutrition education and counseling require that these variations be acknowledged.

Foods and food habits are best understood within the context of culture. It is our goal to provide dietitians, nutritionists, and food service professionals with both the cultural overview necessary to avoid ethnocentric assumptions and the reported nutritional data concerning the diet of each minority group discussed. We have attempted to combine the conceptual with the technical in a way that will prove useful to other health care providers as well.

Chapter 1 details the methods that can be used to study culturally based foods and food habits. New to this second edition are Chapters 2 and 3, which examine traditional health belief systems (focusing on the role of diet) and review intercultural communication strategies, respectively. Chapter 4 describes the major Western and Eastern religions, discussing their dietary practices in detail. Each subsequent chapter concerns a minority population. We have chosen depth over breadth in our selection of cultural groups; rather than providing minimal amounts of information on all minorities, we have included only those groups with significant populations in the United States, and the recent immigrant groups who have had an impact on the health care system (though, it should be noted, that every cultural group discussed warrants the detail an entire book on each population would provide, not just the generalized overview available through our limited format). Information on every group from the first edition has been updated and expanded. Added to this second edition are separate sections on Central Americans, Koreans, and Pacific Islanders, as well as data on East Africans and South Africans. The order of presentation is historical, determined by the approximate arrival sequence of the various groups in the United States.

The first section of each cultural group chapter outlines the history of the country or the region of origin, the history of immigration to the United States, and current demographics. Worldview (outlook on life) is examined, including typical family structure and religious affiliation; an addition to worldview in this second edition is information on the traditional health beliefs and practices of the group. This background provides the cultural setting from which foods and food habits emerge and evolve. The second section of each chapter describes the traditional diet, including ingredients and common foods, meal patterns, special occasion items, the role of food in the society, and therapeutic uses of foods. The third section explains the contemporary diet, such as adaptations made in the United States and changes made in majority American food habits due to influence by the group. Reported nutritional status is reviewed; counseling guidelines for the minority group, expanded in this second edition, conclude each chapter.

One or more cultural food group tables can also be found in each chapter. The emphasis is on ingredients common to the populations of each region. For example, although the cuisines of Great Britain and France differ markedly, the foods that go into their dishes are similar. Protein foods are fundamental to each cuisine; milk and milk products are featured; and the same temperate-zone fruits and vegetables are available. Thus, they are listed together as northern European. Important variations within each region and unique food habits are noted in the “Comments” column of each table. Foods are divided into protein (including milk and milk products), cereals and grains, fruits and vegetables, and additional foods, such as seasonings, nuts and seeds, beverages, fats and oils, and sweeteners. Known adaptations common in the United States are noted. The tables are intended as references for the reader; they do not replace either the chapter content or an in-depth interview with a patient or a client.

New to this second edition is a glossary of ethnic ingredients, designed for quick referral to foods mentioned in the chapters and cultural food group tables. The section of additional references on food and culture has been expanded.

There are numerous difficulties in attempting to provide dietary data within a cultural context. First, food is integral to ethnic and religious identity. Dietary descriptions must be as objective as possible to prevent inadvertent criticism of the underlying culture. Yet, as members of two western ethnic and religious groups, the authors recognize that our own cultural assumptions are unavoidable, and in fact, serve as a starting point in our investigations. One would be lost without a cultural footing. Nevertheless, we have attempted to exclude personal prejudice, and any instances of bias are inadvertent. Second, any definition of ethnic or religious foods and food habits implies cultural homogeneity. In daily life, however, each member of a minority group has an individually distinctive diet. The fare of minority groups influences the majority American diet and vice versa. Every person practices culturally based food

habits to a different degree. We do not intend to stereotype the diet of minority groups. Rather, we hope to provide a basis for understanding specific foods and food habits compared to general trends.

Further, research on food and culture is multidisciplinary. We have tried to go beyond our expertise in nutritional science to explore the wealth of information found in other fields. Even so, the data on specific minority group diets in the United States are scanty and sporadic. Although the number of published reports on foods and food habits have certainly increased since we worked on the first edition of this book, they have not been evenly distributed among all ethnic and religious populations. It is still not unusual for there to be only one or two current studies on the diet or nutritional status of a particular group. In some cases, there is no data available. Our references, by necessity, include some citations that are now 10, 20, or even 30 years old. As is usually the situation with nutrition research, cautions about extrapolating the findings from small samples to larger populations apply in culturally based dietary studies as well. In our continuing effort to obtain further information on the cultural groups discussed, we invite readers to forward any personal observations or data, so that we may share it in future editions.

One final note on terminology used in the text: We have attempted to be sensitive to the designations preferred by each ethnic group, although sometimes there is no consensus among group members regarding the proper name for the group. Also, there may be some confusion regarding dates referenced in the book. Nearly all religious traditions adhere to their own calendar of events based on solar or lunar months. These calendars frequently differ from the Gregorian calendar used throughout most of the world in business and government. Religious ceremonies frequently move around according to Gregorian calendar dates, yet usually are calculated to occur in the correct season each year. Historical events in the text are listed according to the Gregorian calendar, using the terms *before common era* (BCE) and *common era* (CE) in place of the abbreviations for *before Christ* (BC) and *of the Christian era* (AD).

We believe that this book will do more than introduce the concepts of food and culture in America. It should also encourage self-examination and individual cultural identification. We hope that it will help dietitians, nutritionists, other health care providers, and food service professionals work effectively with members of different ethnic and religious groups in a culturally sensitive manner. If it sparks a gustatory interest in the foods of other cultures, too, we will be personally pleased.

## Acknowledgments

The authors want to thank the many colleagues who have graciously given support and advice in the development of this book: Dileep Bal, MD; Chuck Darrah, MPH; Norma Jeanne Downes, MS; Lillian Estrada-



Castillo, RD; Caroline Fee, MS; James Freeman, PhD; Francine Genta; Pat Goyan; K. C. Kraven, PhD; Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD; Jessica Lower; Melinda Poliarco, MS RD; Naswa Saah, MS RD; Tar Toyafuda; Rose Y. Tseng, PhD RD; Irene Tupper; Cathy Williamson, MA RD; and Virginia Ziegler, MS RD. The second edition has been immeasurably improved through the careful critique and recommendations of our expert reviewers. We extend our appreciation and gratitude to Stella Cash, Michigan State University; Louise Little, University of Delaware; David Newman, Johnson & Wales University; Audrey Spindler, San Diego State University; and Christine Thompson, Johnson & Wales University.

# CONTENTS

Preface	xi
<b>1 FOOD AND CULTURE</b>	<b>1</b>
Food and Culture	2
Factors that Influence Food Habits	7
The Study of Foods and Food Habits	12
Nutrition and Food Habits	18
The American Melting Pot	23
Self-Evaluation of Food Habits	24
References	25
<b>2 TRADITIONAL HEALTH BELIEFS AND PRACTICES</b>	<b>29</b>
Worldview	29
What Is Health?	35
Disease, Illness, and Sickness	40
Pluralistic Health Care Systems	50
Self-Evaluation of Therapeutic Food Use	52
References	53
<b>3 INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION</b>	<b>57</b>
Role of Communication in Health Care	57
Intercultural Communication Concepts	62
Successful Intercultural Communication	69
Intercultural Nutrition Education	76
References	79
<b>4 FOOD AND RELIGION</b>	<b>83</b>
Western Religions	83
Eastern Religions	102
References	110
<b>5 NATIVE AMERICANS</b>	<b>111</b>
Cultural Perspective	111
Traditional Food Habits	118
Contemporary Food Habits	131
References	138



<b>6</b>	<b>EUROPEANS</b>	143
	Early European History	143
	Northern Europeans	144
	Cultural Perspective	145
	Traditional Food Habits	154
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	164
	Southern Europeans	168
	Cultural Perspective	168
	Traditional Food Habits	174
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	183
	Central Europeans and Russians	184
	Cultural Perspective	185
	Traditional Food Habits	198
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	206
	Scandinavians	210
	Cultural Perspective	210
	Traditional Food Habits	213
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	218
	References	219
<b>7</b>	<b>AFRICANS</b>	225
	Cultural Perspective	225
	Traditional Food Habits	233
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	244
	References	249
<b>8</b>	<b>LATINOS</b>	253
	Mexicans	253
	Cultural Perspective	254
	Traditional Food Habits	261
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	271
	Caribbean Islanders	277
	Cultural Perspective	278
	Traditional Food Habits	285
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	293
	Central Americans	297
	Cultural Perspective	298
	Traditional Food Habits	302
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	307
	References	309
<b>9</b>	<b>ASIANS</b>	315
	Chinese	315
	Cultural Perspective	316
	Traditional Food Habits	325
	Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	335

Japanese	340
Cultural Perspective	341
Traditional Food Habits	347
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	354
Koreans	356
Cultural Perspective	356
Traditional Food Habits	362
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	368
References	372
<b>10 SOUTHEAST ASIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS</b>	<b>377</b>
Southeast Asians	377
Cultural Perspective	378
Traditional Food Habits	392
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	406
Pacific Islanders	413
Cultural Perspective	413
Traditional Food Habits	420
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	423
References	429
<b>11 THE PEOPLE OF GREECE AND THE MIDDLE EAST</b>	<b>435</b>
Cultural Perspective	435
Traditional Food Habits	445
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	455
References	458
<b>12 ASIAN INDIANS</b>	<b>461</b>
Cultural Perspective	461
Traditional Food Habits	469
Contemporary Food Habits in the United States	481
References	486
<b>GLOSSARY OF ETHNIC INGREDIENTS</b>	<b>489</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>503</b>
General	504
Cookbooks	505
Food Composition Tables	509
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	<b>511</b>
<b>APPENDIX B</b>	<b>513</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>521</b>

# FOOD and CULTURE

What do Americans eat? Meat and potatoes, according to popular myth. There's no denying that more beef is consumed than any other protein food in the United States and that franchise restaurants sell more than \$5 billion worth of hamburgers and french fries each year. Yet the American diet cannot be so simply described. Just as the population of the United States contains many different ethnic and cultural groups, so are the foods and food habits of Americans equally diverse. It can no more be said that the typical U.S. citizen is white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant than it can be stated that meat and potatoes are what this typical citizen eats.

Data from the 1990 U.S. census and other demographic data show that one in every four Americans is of non-European heritage. These figures greatly underestimate the number and diversity of American cultural groups, however. For instance, data do not list members of white ethnic or religious groups, nor do they account for mixed ancestry. Since 1989, infants have been assigned the race of their mothers on birth certificates. Census terminology, such as the category "Hispanic" (which may be defined as persons who were born in Latin America, whose parents were born in Latin America, who have a Spanish surname, or who speak Spanish), are sometimes ambiguous and confusing to census respondents. Furthermore, the census does not survey the millions of U.S. residents who are not citizens (it is estimated 200,000 arrive in America each year). Thus the proportion of American ethnic group members is larger than statistics indicate and, more important, it is rapidly increasing.

Asians are the fastest growing ethnic group in America. Their population more than doubled between 1980 and 1990; 4 out of every 10 immigrants to the United States in 1993 were born in Asia. African-Americans are numerically the largest ethnic group (approximately 12 percent of the total U.S. population), although Latinos, with a growth rate of more than 50 percent between 1980 and 1990, are expected to surpass blacks by the middle of the twenty-first century.

Each American ethnic group has its own culturally based foods and food habits. Many of these traditions have been influenced and modified through contact with the majority culture. The foods and food habits of the majority culture have, in turn, been affected by those of the many diverse ethnic groups. Today, a fast-food restaurant or street stand is just as likely to offer pizza, tacos, egg rolls, or falafels as it is to offer hamburgers. The American diet encompasses the numerous varied cuisines of the U.S. population. To understand this diet fully, one must study not only

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*As suggested by their names, not even hamburgers and french fries are American in origin. Chopped beef steaks were introduced to the United States from the German city of Hamburg in the late nineteenth century, popularized at the St. Louis World's Fair. Although the potato is a New World vegetable, it was brought to America by the Irish in 1719. The term french fried potatoes first appeared in the 1860s and may have come from the way the potatoes were cut or cooked. Other foods considered typically American also have foreign origins, such as hot dogs (frankfurters), apple pie, and ice cream.*

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*Due to differences in definitions of race and ethnicity for birth certificates, statistical surveys, and death certificates, it is possible to be born one ethnicity, to be counted as another in census data, and to die as a member of yet a third ethnic group (Hahn, 1992).*

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*The term majority describes the culture shared by the dominant white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant population in the United States.*

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the traditional foods and food habits of the many ethnic groups but also the interactions between these traditions and those of the majority culture.

## Food and Culture

### *What Is Food?*

#### Feeding versus Eating

*Food*, as defined in the dictionary, is any substance that provides the nutrients necessary to maintain life and growth when ingested. When animals feed, they repeatedly consume those foods necessary for their well-being, and they do so in a similar manner at each feeding.

Humans, however, do not feed. They eat. Eating is distinguished from feeding by the ways in which humans use food. Humans not only gather or hunt food, but they also cultivate plants and raise livestock. Food is thus regularly available to most humans, permitting the development of food habits, such as the setting of mealtimes. In addition, humans cook food, which greatly expands the number and variety of edible substances available. Choice of what to eat follows. Humans use utensils to eat food and create complex rules, commonly called manners, about how food is actually ingested. Humans share food. Standards for who may dine with whom in each eating situation are well defined.

*Americans collectively consume approximately 900 billion calories each day.*

*Humans create complex rules, commonly called manners, as to how food is actually eaten. (© Mary Kate Denny/PhotoEdit.)*



### Development of Food Habits

The term *food habits* refers to the ways in which humans use food, including how food is obtained and stored, how it is prepared, how it is served and to whom, and how it is consumed. A. H. Maslow's theory of human maturation as applied to food habits (Lowenberg, 1970) explains how food use progresses from eating for existence to eating for self-actualization:

1. *Physical needs for survival:* This is the most basic use of food, nearly equivalent to feeding. Daily needs for nutrients must be met before more complex food use can occur.

2. *Social needs for security:* Once the immediate need for food is satisfied, future needs can be considered. The storage of food, in a granary or in a refrigerator, represents security.

3. *Belongingness:* This use of food shows that an individual belongs to a group. The need to belong is satisfied by consuming the foods that are eaten by the social group as a whole. These foods represent comfort and happiness for many people; during periods of stress or illness, people often want the foods they ate during childhood.

Sometimes people adopt a special diet to demonstrate belongingness. For example, African-Americans, who live outside the South may choose to eat what is called *soul food* (typically Southern black cuisine, such as pork ribs and greens) on certain occasions as an expression of ethnic identity.

*Etiquette*, the appropriate use of food, is also a way of demonstrating belonging. Entirely different manners are required when lunching with business associates at an expensive restaurant, when attending a tea, when eating in the school cafeteria, when drinking with friends at a bar, or when picnicking with a lover.

4. *Status:* Food can be used to define social position. Champagne and caviar imply wealth; mesquite-grilled foods and goat cheese suggest upward mobility; and beans or potatoes are traditionally associated with the poor. Status foods are used for social interaction. When a man picks up his date, he brings her chocolates, not broccoli. Wine is considered an appropriate gift to a hostess, a gallon of milk is not.

In general, eating with someone connotes social equality with that person. Many societies regulate who can dine together as a means of establishing class relationships. Women and children may eat separately from men, or servants may eat in the kitchen, away from their employers. This attempted separation by class was also seen in some U.S. restaurants that excluded blacks before the civil rights legislation of the 1960s.

5. *Self-realization:* This stage of food use occurs when all previous stages have been achieved to the individual's satisfaction. Personal preference takes precedence, and the individual may experiment with the foods of different ethnic or economic groups.

*Drinking rituals, such as making a toast and participating in the round of drinks, date back to ancient magical rites of communal inebriation.*

*The status of food can change over time. In the early years of the United States, lobster was so plentiful it was considered fit only for the poor (Root & deRochemont, 1976.)*

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*The term restaurant comes from the French for "restorative" and was first used in the 1800s.*

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*National Restaurant Association surveys found that one-third of entrees on menus were adaptations of ethnic dishes and that more than one-half of all Americans would like to eat ethnic meals more often (Monsen, 1992).*

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*Hispanics frequent restaurants more often than any other group in the United States: 53 percent of Hispanic adults eat out daily, compared to 43 percent of adults nationally.*

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*The symbolic importance of bread can be seen in some of the superstitions associated with it: Greek soldiers took a piece from home to assure their safe, victorious return; English midwives placed a loaf at the foot of the mother's bed to prevent the woman and her baby from being stolen.*

### Food as Self-Expression

The correlation between what people eat, how others perceive them, and how they characterize themselves is striking. In one study, researchers listed foods typical of five diets: vegetarian (broccoli quiche, brown rice, avocado and bean sprout sandwich); gourmet (oysters, caviar, French roast coffee); health food (protein shake, wheat germ, yogurt); fast food (Kentucky Fried Chicken, Big Mac, pizza); and synthetic food (Carnation Instant Breakfast, Cheez Whiz). It was found that **each category was associated with a certain personality type**. Vegetarians were considered to be pacifists, drug users, and likely to drive foreign cars. Gourmets were also believed to be drug users, liberal, and sophisticated. Health food fans were described as drug users, antinuclear activists, and Democrats. Fast-food and synthetic food eaters were believed to be religious, conservative, and wearers of polyester clothing. These stereotypes were confirmed by self-description and personality tests completed by persons whose diet fell within each of the five categories (Sadella & Burroughs, 1981).

Food as self-expression is especially evident in the experience of dining out. Researchers suggest that restaurants often serve more than food; they also meet emotional needs such as belongingness, status, and self-realization. In Japan, for example, homes are private; therefore, guests are entertained in the homelike environment of a restaurant. The host chooses and pays for the meal ahead of time, the guests are all served the same dishes, and the servers are expected to be part of the conversation. Although some segments of the American restaurant business also cater to the family meal experience (i.e., those that offer playgrounds or children's entertainment), others emphasize other dining functions—the business club for financial transactions, or the candlelit neighborhood restaurant for romantic interactions (Wood, 1995). The newest restaurant, with a locally acclaimed chef, that requires making reservations a month in advance represents status to some people. Ethnic restaurants appeal to those individuals seeking authenticity in the foods of their homeland or are a novelty to those interested in culinary adventure. Conversely, exposure to different foods in restaurants is sometimes the first step in adopting new food items at home (McComber & Postel, 1992) (Figure 1.1).

### Symbolic Use of Food

It is clear from these uses of food that for humans, food is more than simply nutrients. Humans use foods symbolically. **A symbol is something that suggests something else due to relationship, association, or convention.** Bread is an excellent example of food symbolism. Bread is the "staff" of life; one "breaks bread" with friends; bread represents the body of Christ in the Christian sacrament of communion. White bread was traditionally eaten by the upper classes, dark bread by the poor. A person of wealth has a lot of "bread," and whole wheat bread is eaten by people in the United States who are concerned more with health than with status. It is the symbolic use of food that is important to each cultural







Typically, first-generation immigrants remain emotionally connected to their ethnicity, surrounding themselves with a reference group of family and friends who share their cultural background. (© Peter Mengel/Stock, Boston.)

tional origin or race (which may include numerous ethnic groups), it is a social identity associated with shared behavior patterns, including food habits, dress, language, family structure, and often religious affiliation. Members of the same ethnic group usually have a common heritage through locality or history, and participate together with other cultural groups in a larger social system. As part of this greater community, each ethnic group may have different status or positions of power. Diversity within each cultural group, called *intraethnic variation*, is also common due to racial, regional, or economic divisions as well as differing rates of acculturation to the majority culture (Hardwood, 1981).

When people from one cultural group move to an area with different cultural norms, adaptation to the new majority society begins. This process is known as *acculturation*, and it takes place along a continuum of behavior patterns. Typically, first-generation immigrants remain emotionally connected to their culture of origin. They integrate into their new society by adopting some majority culture values and practices, but generally surround themselves with a reference group of family and friends who are from their ethnic background. For example, Asian Indians living in the United States who consider themselves to be “mostly or very Asian Indian” may encourage their children to speak English and allow them to celebrate American holidays, but do not permit them to date non-Asian Indian peers (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). Other immigrants become *bicultural*, which happens when the new majority culture is seen as complementing, rather than competing, with an individual’s ethnicity. The positive aspects of both societies are embraced and the individual develops the skills needed to operate within either culture (Brookins, 1993). Asian Indians who call themselves Indo-Americans or Asian-Americans fall into this category, eating equal amounts of Indian and American foods, thinking and reading equally in an Indian language and in English (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988).

*Assimilation* occurs when people from one cultural group shed their ethnic identity and fully merge into the majority culture. Although some first-generation immigrants strive toward assimilation due perhaps to personal determination to survive in a foreign country or to take advantage of opportunities, most often assimilation takes place in subsequent generations. Asian Indians who identify themselves as being “mostly American” do not consider Asian Indian culture superior to American culture, and they are willing to let their children date non-Indians. It is believed that ethnic pride is reawakened in some immigrants if they become disillusioned with life in America, particularly if the disappointment is attributed to prejudice by the majority society (Sodowsky & Carey, 1988). A few immigrants exist at the edges of the acculturation process, maintaining total ethnic identity, or rejecting both their culture of origin and that of the majority culture (Meleis *et al.*, 1992).

Culturally based food habits are often one of the last traditions people change through acculturation. Unlike speaking a foreign language or dressing in traditional clothing, eating is usually done in the privacy of the home, hidden from observation by majority culture members.

Adoption of new food items does not generally develop linearly as a steady progression from traditional diet to diet of the majority culture. Instead, research indicates that consumption of new items is often independent of traditional food habits (Pelto *et al.*, 1981; Dewey *et al.*, 1984; Szathmary *et al.*, 1987). The lack of available native ingredients may force immediate acculturation, or convenience or cost factors may speed change. Samoans may be unable to find the coconut cream needed to prepare favorite dishes, for instance. Foods that are tasty are easily accepted, such as pastries, candies, and soft drinks; conversely, unpopular traditional foods may be the first to go. Mexican children living in America quickly reject the variety cuts of meat, such as tripe, that their parents still enjoy. It is the foods that are most associated with ethnic identity that are most resistant to acculturation. Muslims will probably never eat pork, regardless of where they live. People from China may insist on eating rice with every meal, even if it is the only Asian food on the table.

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*The concept conservatism of cuisine suggests that most people are reluctant to try new foods. Acceptance occurs if, after introduction to the item, a person determines that they like it, that it is nontoxic and nutritive, and that it is compatible with other food habits (Rozin, 1991).*

## Factors that Influence Food Habits

There are numerous factors that affect the food habits of each person within a culture (Figure 1.2). Many operational models have been developed to describe these influences, including the lifestyle model of dietary habits (Pelto, 1981), which attempts to explain how these factors interact to result in specific food behaviors.

### *Societal Factors*

The food production and distribution system is responsible for the availability of foods, which differs from region to region and country to country. Individuals may have access only to homegrown food, or they may be able to purchase exotic products from around the world. Food availability influences, and in turn is influenced by, the socioeconomic and political systems. These serve to control the production and distribution of food in the culture. In the public sector, for example, farm subsidies both in the United States and in Europe promote the production of dairy and grain foods far in excess of what can be used by their populations, while deprivations during wartime required that food be strictly rationed. Government policy may also be involved with the purchasing power of consumers through programs such as food subsidies for the poor, as well as the oversight of food quality through safety standards, nutrition labeling requirements, and other production programs (Josling & Ritson, 1986).

In the private sector, advertising is another form of control, greatly influencing some food habits, such as cereal, snack, and beverage preferences. Research indicates that in blind taste tests, people often have difficulty discriminating between different brands of the same food item. Consumer loyalty to a particular brand is believed to be more related to the sensual and emotional appeal of the name and packaging (Lannon,

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*The governments in most developed nations often manipulate food pricing to meet agricultural objectives, but are more reluctant to use food prices to meet nutrition goals (Josling & Ritson, 1986).*