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ARTS & CULTURE FOOD & COOKING TABLE TALK

The Grammar of Food

Fish and pickles for breakfast? Starting dinner with fruit? Every cuisine has its own rules about the structure of meals.

By Bee Wilson

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On my first-ever trip to Japan this summer, I ate one of the best and most startling meals I’ve ever had. We were in a tiny restaurant in Kyoto called Pontocho Sushi Ishiya, tucked away at the end of a narrow alley near the Kamo river. Their menu is “omakase,” which literally means “I’ll leave it up to you”: The chefs serve you whatever they think best on that particular day.

After a succession of extraordinary delights—including an appetizer of incredible, citrusy, slimy green seaweed (I never tasted slime so good!) and melting-soft sashimi, accompanied by leaves and flowers I had never tasted before—came the final course before dessert: a bowl of deeply savory miso soup. As a Westerner, having soup at the end of a meal rather than the beginning felt surprising. But why not? Once I got over the newness of it, I saw that the miso was actually a perfect savory note to punctuate what had gone before, like a sliver of cheese before dessert in France.

It isn’t just the ingredients of Japanese cuisine that make it so distinctive. It is also the whole structure of a meal and the sense of what goes with what. Eating a Japanese breakfast one morning, some English friends struggled to adjust to the fish and rice and pickles and soup. It wasn’t that they disliked fish and rice per se, they said. It just felt unusual to have them in the morning rather than the evening.

Eating in Japan reminded me of a brilliant talk I heard a few years ago by Héctor Abad Faciolince, a Colombian writer. He pointed out that every cuisine has its own distinct “grammar,” a set of deeply-held rules about how and what to eat at

different times of day. “There are things that are good for dessert that would kill you for breakfast!” he commented with a dash of irony. Abad observed how strange he found the grammar of food in Italy when he first traveled there. He was pleased that Italians shared the Colombian passion for fruit, but shocked to realize that they ate it at the end of the meal, as if it were dessert. “In Colombia, fruit is what you start the meal with,” he said.



Traditional Turkish breakfast PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

So much of our pleasure in eating is a question of expectation. As the psychologist Paul Rozin once wrote, to say you like lobster “does not mean that [you] like it for breakfast or smothered in whipped cream.” Different contexts and different times of day can make the exact same food or drink seem appetizing or not.

Take olives. These might seem like the wrong food to eat at breakfast, if your concept of breakfast is a latte and a sweet pastry. But in Turkey, black and green olives are a crucial part of the grammar of morning eating, combined with simit, a bagel-like sesame bread, along with feta cheese, raw cucumber and tomatoes, preserves and Turkish tea.

Table manners are another important element in any food grammar. Every culture has its own ideas about how to be clean and polite while eating, but the details vary drastically. In Ethiopia, eating with your hands and using pieces of injera bread to scoop up the food is polite, whereas Chileans are so attached to cutlery that even a sandwich may demand a knife and fork. In France it is polite to use a napkin, whereas in Japan it is more polite not to use one, to display how

meticulously clean one can remain while eating. (In this matter of not splattering myself, I spectacularly failed to be Japanese.)

On the other hand, Japanese table manners not only allow but encourage the loud slurping of food, especially soup noodles. One night in a soba restaurant in Tokyo, a chef rushed out of the kitchen to tell us how Japanese we sounded as we noisily gulped every drop of noodles in broth topped with sea urchin. It was the first time I have been complimented on the volume of my eating.

Food grammars are not fixed once and for all. They change and evolve. As the historians Benjamin Wurgaft and Merry White, a mother and son duo, write in their book “Ways of Eating,” there was a seismic shift in the grammar of French cuisine in the 17th century. Where previously it had been normal for French cooks to intermingle sweet and savory, now they were separated, with sweet things relegated to the dessert course rather than being combined with meat. The French cuisine that emerged over the next couple of centuries developed the most codified and strict food grammar that has ever existed.



Miso soup served at the end of the meal, not the beginning, can come a surprise to Western palates.
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

There can be a sinister side to all of this. In his 1990 novel “The Trotter-Nana,” the Indian novelist I. Allan Sealey satirized the snobbish food rules imposed on Indians by British colonials. “That spices in the morning were offensive...That eggs were eggs on weekdays but on Sundays became omelets. That fruit in the morning was gold, in the afternoon silver, but at night lead.”

No wonder some of us chafe under arbitrary rules and enjoy the freedom of making up our own food languages. The DoorDash economy, in which foods from multiple cuisines can be ordered at the same time and consumed at random, is a way of ignoring the old rulebooks.

But something is lost when we abandon our traditional grammars of eating. To return to Japan, the very structure of a meal makes it relatively easy to eat in a way that is nutritious as well as pleasurable. In “Magic Pill,” a book about new weight-loss drugs like Ozempic, Johann Hari argues that many aspects of Japan’s food culture—from its excellent school lunches to its love of fish—have protected the country against the high rates of obesity seen elsewhere.

A Japanese culinary instructor taught Hari that every Japanese meal should ideally contain five tastes (sweet, sour, salty, bitter and umami) and five colors (black, white, green, yellow and red). This is a way to consume modestly portioned, balanced and varied meals without resorting to the restriction of diets or the expense and side effects of medicines. Who wouldn’t want to learn this language?

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