

CHAPTER NINE

Cultural Connection and Identity with Food: From Heart to Health

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Abstract

Food embodies a unique and powerful connection to human health, survival and happiness. Food fosters a sense of belonging within families and communities while unintentionally nurturing care and strengthening bonds, often in ways not consciously recognized at the onset. Drawing on personal narratives, this chapter explores the meanings and satisfaction derived from consuming cultural foods and traditional practices. It examines the connection between food and cultural identity through the consumption of traditional foods. The chapter further emphasizes the notion that food is a vessel for nurturing joy, compassion, social bonds and overall health across diverse populations in a global world. Despite the overshadowing effects of processed foods in Western society and the impact of globalization and migration, the powerful connections to cultural food and dietary practices persist within us as individuals. The inner desire to pass down food practices and traditions to children and future generations continues to resonate within us, especially in women and mothers. This is evident through the voices of the authors in this chapter.

Keywords: Health, happiness, culture, customs, traditions, history, fermented foods, traditional foods, multiculturalism, Indigenous peoples, colonization, marginalization, spirituality

Introduction

Going back to ancient times, food has served as a cornerstone of culture, emotion, and health. As co-author Mehdi explains, food has the capacity to bring people together and establish a strong bond of connection in us. In exploring different cuisines, we resonate with the appreciation of food by the hands that made it, the customs, traditions, history and social structures of communities and societies surrounding these special cuisines. Additionally, exploring diverse cuisines allows us to delve into these traditions, histories, and social structures, offering a deeper understanding of different cultures. The adage "tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are" coined by French gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1825), in which he was referring that it is possible to tell something about a person's character and class by what they eat, has become a talking point and holds today in France and around the world (Brighton, 2018).

Another proverbial saying, “you are what you eat,” attributed to American nutritionist Victor Lindlahr in the 1930s, continues to resonate globally today. Lindlahr was a strong believer that food shapes health (Mayes, 2019). His message underscores the emotional and cultural connections people form with food as nourishment but food also nourishes the whole-body from the inner functioning of the heart to the outward expressions of identity, health and social continuity.

In today’s world, shaped by globalization, immigration, and migration, newcomers to Western societies often encounter foods that are not staples in the home countries, such as processed and conveniently packaged cereals, waffles, pasta, sandwiches, burgers and other Western dishes. While individuals may adapt to these foods for reasons of convenience, taste, accessibility or lifestyle (Demi et al., 2021; Lane and Vatamparast, 2023), the yearning for comforting home-cooked cultural foods and traditional food practices, remain remarkably persistent. The desire to share food, preserve the tradition and pass the tradition down to future generations remains a joy and pride for newcomers as evident in the voices of the authors in this chapter, who are immigrants to Canada from different regions of the world.

In countries where the weather is warmer and farming is year-round, traditional diets typically include fresh vegetables, leafy greens, fermented foods, spices, soups, and nuts, which are widely known for their holistic benefits in supporting overall good health and well-being. Other diets rich in vegetables with essential fibre also have healthy benefits for maintaining healthy gut motility (Slavin, 2013). Researchers have also noted that fermented foods such as yogurt, pickles, sourdough bread, and buttermilk, promote beneficial gut bacteria that enhance the gut-brain axis, thereby improving mood, reducing anxiety, and increasing concentration (Mayer, 2011) while foods high in probiotics, found in fermented foods, have been associated with anti-cancer properties and other protective effects against chronic disease (Zhang et al., 2016). Koc and Welsh (2001) also emphasized that food is deeply connected to cultural practices that shape people’s well-being and identity and do not only serve as a source of nutrients. However, for many, especially newcomer immigrants, access to cultural foods in their new host country in the Western world, may be far-reaching

Immigrant countries such as Australia and Canada that rely on immigrants for their workforce development and population stability, welcome newcomers from various corners of the globe. Both nations have established multiculturalism policies to support social cohesion and population growth of newcomers. Canada, however, has historically been stronger in welcoming and encouraging of immigrants to take pride in their heritage as newcomers to Canada. In 1982, Canada introduced the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Government of Canada, 1982), alongside a formal *Multiculturalism Policy*, in support of diversity in the Canadian population. The *Multiculturalism Policy* offers newcomers the rights to participate freely in their cultural food practices, religious traditions, language and lifestyle choices as they seek to integrate in the Canadian society. Multiculturalism, however, often presented as a tool for fostering inclusion and citizenship, has been critiqued for its failure to adequately address issues of race, racism, and the ongoing effects of Indigenous colonization, often silencing these critical aspects of social justice (Bloemraad, 2007). It has also been critiqued for obscuring the issues of racial inequity, Indigenous marginalization, and reinforcing a narrative of diversity without addressing systemic inequalities (Ng & Metz, 2014), but overall, newcomers wishing to sustain their food and other cultures as newcomers to Canada, are encouraged to do so.

Drawing on personal narratives, this chapter explores the meanings and satisfaction derived from consuming cultural foods and traditional practices, particularly the connection between food

and cultural identity, and focuses on the role of food as a vessel for nurturing joy, compassion, social bonds, and overall health across diverse populations in a global context. It further emphasizes the importance of understanding food through the historical lens of Indigenous and traditional foods in Canada's history.

Historical Context of Traditional Foods

As non-Indigenous authors and people living on this land in Canada, we are mindful of the importance of approaching the cultural practices of the Indigenous peoples with respect, care, and humility. We situate ourselves in the discussion by acknowledging that Canada has been the home to diverse Indigenous nations who cultivated a rich culture, sustained deep relationship with the land and the environment, and nourished themselves with traditional foods from the land, such as bannock, game, fish, berries, and native plants (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996, Turner, 2005) for thousands of years.

Similar to many other cultures, Indigenous people's food is more than just merely nutrients for the body. It carries cultural teachings and spiritual relations with the land, water, sky, and all living beings. Indigenous culture endures symbolism of identity, belonging and cultural legacy (Grey & Newman, 2018). With the arrival of European colonizers, particularly the English and French more than four hundred years ago, their food system was profoundly disrupted. The English introduced foods such as meat, root vegetables and potatoes, while the French brought their own dishes such as meat pies and roast pork (Perrone, 2013). Colonization as a result, has gravely altered Indigenous culture, teachings, way of life, sovereignty, and access to traditional foods (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). These European foods gradually became integrated into the broader Canadian diet.

Around the mid-20th century, the diversity of Canada's food culture began to expand even further under the Multiculturalism Policy as waves of immigrants from Asia, Africa, South America, and the West Indies/Caribbean arrived. Trying to navigate the food landscape, overshadowed by Western foods that were often unfamiliar or too costly for newcomers was challenging. Finding grocery stores that carried familiar foods such as rice, chicken, vegetables and spices within their budget has been a challenge as well. Financial constraints, limited availability of culturally affordable ingredients, and the lack of affordable options further restricted their access to traditional foods (Demi et al., 2021; Lane & Vatanparast, 2023).

These barriers led newcomers to seek out ethnic food markets that offered more familiar cultural foods and spices. Because ethnic shops were initially scarce, demand for cultural foods grew steadily, eventually contributing to the wider availability in mainstream supermarkets. This increased access has been vital for ethnic minority newcomers, enabling them to cook and enjoy traditional foods, maintain cultural practices, experience both health and happiness through familiar meals, and feel a sense of belonging in their new communities. while supporting the microbiota in the gut and contributing to both physical health and emotional well-being.

Traditional foods, whether Indigenous or international, sustain physical health, support emotional well-being, and anchor individuals to cultural identity, satisfaction, and happiness. They reinforce a sense of connection to one's roots and strengthen feelings of belonging within the broader Canadian community.

Human Gastrointestinal Tract, Food Cravings and Happiness

The human gastrointestinal tract in our body is home to a diverse community of bacteria, fungi, and other microorganisms that engage in symbiotic relationships with the host, playing a crucial role in maintaining overall health. Studies show that gut microbiota in an individual stimulates the craving for certain foods and dietary practices that satisfy the digestive system's overall cravings for certain foods and our eating behaviors (Arantes et al., 2020; García-Cabrerizo et al., 2021). These gut microbiotas are powerful influencers in shaping our cravings for foods. For instance, when individuals consumed or is accustomed to a particular type of cuisine such as Indian food for example, their gut microbiota may adapt and often reinforce the desire to continue consuming that specific cuisine or taste and creating a feedback loop that perpetuates these dietary preferences.

The familiar tastes and smells of these dishes may also provide comfort and reinforce happiness to newcomers, thus prolonging the connection with their cultural food traditions through the influences of microbiota in their gut - highlighting the intricate interplay between culture, biology, and dietary habits. As first-generation immigrants, the authors experienced the complex interplay with food between integrating into the new Canadian society and access to their culinary and cultural practices. We initially faced various experiences accessing cultural foods and groceries from our home country but once we discovered the specialty shops and communities, a real sense of comfort, pride and happiness was felt.

Author Sinclair, for example, born in Guyana, quickly adapted to Western food after her arrival in Canada, primarily due to her living situation as a live-in nanny and no access to her own kitchen to prepare her traditional foods. After changing her living situation with access to her own kitchen, she was able to shop and cook her comfort food. Subsequently marrying to a Scots man, her pattern of cooking changed. Balancing meals for her spouse and three biracial children with a full-time job and little time to travel to special shops for traditional groceries, her family meals fall typically within the western culture with cereals and milk for breakfast, sandwiches and fresh fruits for lunch and spaghetti and meatballs or mince and tatties (which is a Scottish dish and quick to make) for dinner, rather than cooking the traditional Guyanese dishes she grew up with. The desire, however, for Guyanese food and the desires to share it with her family have never waned. With a less hectic lifestyle years later, cooking Guyanese food has become a cherished activity in her household, and an exciting way of sharing her cultural roots with her extended family of Scots, Guyanese, Japanese and Irish heritage. Sinclair likes to transform her kitchen into an informal classroom where she can teach her family how to cook chicken curry, dahl, roti and other traditional Indo-Guyanese dishes. This is also her way of ensuring that her Guyanese tradition and cultural foods are passed down to the next generation.

Generally, Immigrant women, particularly those of ethnic minority backgrounds, often take pride in turning their kitchen into an informal classroom to teach their children, especially daughters and daughters-in-law, how to cook and serve traditional foods as an attempt to preserve the tradition. Passing down recipes, cooking methods and food customs within families also tends to foster cultural respect and deeper bonds between generations (D'Sylva & Beagan, 2011). It goes far beyond the family home as individuals love to socialize and show off their cultural foods and traditions further into the community at cultural events, workplaces, food fairs, social festivities and religious events, that often leads to building relationships, strengthening friendships, and even breaking down barriers while unintentionally building bridges and mutual respect and appreciation across diverse communities in Canadian society.

Cultural Food Sharing, Identity, and Food Insecurity

Cooking, eating, and sharing cultural foods create powerful opportunities for connection, relationship-building, and mutual care within diverse communities. These practices help break social barriers and foster understanding as people learn about one another's histories, values, food and food traditions over food. Sharing foods brings pride and happiness to people, and manifests itself into shared values, traditions, and practices which also defines a community (Arantes et al., 2020; Novelle, 2021). With food at the heart of culture, it does not just become sustenance. It becomes an expression of caring for others, whether within our culture or outside of our cultural setting. In this context, cultural food sharing becomes a meaning response to food insecurity.

Today, food insecurity remains a significant challenge in Canada. Recent statistics show that 18% of Canadian families faced food insecurity in 2022, a rise from 16% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2023; Uppal, Sh2023), and disproportionately impacting the low-income racialized households, including Black Canadians who are facing the most severe challenges (Statistics Canada, 2023; Uppal, 2023). For many newcomers, the rising cost of healthy, culturally relevant foods intensifies this challenge if they are unfamiliar with Canadian food systems or unable to afford the staples that anchor their health and cultural identity to relevant foods (Tarraf et al., 2017). Community initiatives such as community gardens, food banks, and social programs, could help bridge the food insecurity gap and address the immediate food needs while also ensuring individuals can have access to the food they need to sustain physical and emotional health from heart to health.

Food and Communities in India

As the co-author Kaur narrates, food is at the heart of Indian culture, integral to social identity and family traditions. When Indian women immigrate to Western countries, they bring with them not only their cultural practices but also their food traditions. Indian food is central to cultural identity, offering a powerful connection to heritage and community. India's diverse geography is reflected in its rich array of regional cuisines such as fragrant Hyderabadi biryanis, spicy Kerala curries, tangy Mumbai Street foods, and rich Bengali sweets. These regional dishes, built around native ingredients and time-honored culinary practices, form a rich mosaic of flavor and texture (Jain et al., 2015). Originally from India and now residing in Canada, Kaur offers a unique perspective on how food remains a key part of cultural identity in the immigrant experience. Her personal journey reflects the challenges and resilience of preserving Indian culinary traditions in a multicultural food system. Indian food, like other immigrant cuisines, serves as a powerful reminder of cultural continuity and belonging, even in the face of challenges like food insecurity. Wheat, an essential element of Indian cuisine, is frequently used in dishes with breads such as roti and naan. From a cultural perspective, people in Southern India prefer a lot of rice-cooked dishes like dosa, idli, and biryani, along with nutritious sambars and rasams. People in Eastern India are known for sweet dishes such as rasgulla and sandesh.

In the Western part of India, people enjoy a mixture of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian foods that include Gujarat's thalis and a variety of vegetarian foods and seafood curries of Maharashtra. Indian food demonstrates the country's culture-based identity, tied to its religious

practices, festivals, daily lives, and traditions. For instance, Hindu festivals such as Diwali are marked by certain types of sweets and snacks to facilitate fasting, offerings to deities, and sharing the “blessings” from the deities through food to families and members of the society (Bagchi & Baranda, 2018). This kind of cooking, offerings and sharing of foods helps to bridge gaps, strengthen bonds and celebrate the important Diwali festival annually. Similarly, unique dishes such as biryani and sewai are mainstay dishes for Indian Muslims for the celebration of Eid (Khan, 2020). The Muslim community also take the time to share the holiday with their cultural foods with families, friends, and neighbors, while the Indian Christians celebrate Christmas with plum cakes and Christmas puddings, which they also share with the household and extended families and neighbors.

The diversity in Indian food is an example of India's unique multicultural practices, with different religious and ethnic communities living together and celebrating their connection with culinary traditions and skills that form part of the country's rich culinary heritage. Indian foods are characterized by various spices and herbs with unique health benefits aside from flavoring for the food (Kumar et al., 2016). Turmeric, ginger, garlic, and almost all types of spices in the Indian cuisine are rich in anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties, good for minimizing chronic non-communicable illnesses (Basu, 2016). Indian meals also usually contain various kinds of grains, legumes, vegetables, and milk products with high nutritional value. More recently, however, diets in India have been changing with the introduction of more processed fast foods in contemporary society (Nardocci, et al., 2020), which can introduce lifestyle changes in the Indian society and an increase of diseases such as obesity, diabetes and hypertension. Knowing this fact, efforts are being made by health professionals to return to more balanced traditional food.

Moreover, in the Indian family, the kitchen is a place to socialize, share recipes, pass down the culture of food and practices and teach the cultural values of foods to the next generation (Khan, 2020). Families give meals to the less fortunate people in the community. The act of feeding people is considered next to godliness in the Indian community and is known as "Anna daan." The Sikhs also celebrate a similar tradition called "langars," which is giving food to others for free, irrespective of the individual's social status or caste, as a way of reinforcing the principles of equality and compassion (Singh et al., 2021). Despite the rich culinary heritage and food sharing in multicultural India, millions of people suffer from malnutrition and food insecurity, and the government has been seeking to solve the problem by introducing the Public Distribution System and the Midday Meal Scheme for school-age children (Kumar & Ayyappan, 2014), but these efforts fall short in meeting the nutritional needs of the people. However, these efforts have not fully met the nutritional needs of the population. While food-related heritage and traditions continue to thrive for some, many people still face the harsh reality of food insecurity.

Food, Faith, and Spiritual Well-being

Various food choices and festivities play a central role in expressions of faith and spiritual well-being across Indigenous, Indian, Muslim, Chinese, Jewish and other communities. As Khan et al (2020) argue, religion emphasizes lawful, clean, and morally correct food for consumption. Each culture has ties to history and living legacies of heritage that are passed down from generation to generation. The preparation and sharing of traditional dishes during religious festivals and family events such as Ramadan, Diwali, Passover, Lunar New Year or Indigenous seasonal ceremonies reinforce cultural continuity and strengthen group identity. These activities bring people together in celebration, prayer, communal eating and socializing while offering comfort,

grounding and a sense of stability. It is through these shared experiences that food becomes a bridge between body, spirit, and community while nourishing the physical as well as spiritual health.

Islamic Food Practices

In the Islamic communities, food plays a deeply significant role in religious practices, often shaping how food is prepared, consumed, and appreciated. For Muslims, food is more than just nourishment; it carries religious meaning and spiritual significance. Central to Islamic food culture is the concept of "halal" food, which refers to food that is permissible under Islamic law, ensuring that it is prepared according to certain religious guidelines (Samori et al., 2014). For example, foods like pork and alcohol are forbidden in Islam, and there is a strong emphasis on spirituality, particularly during the slaughtering of livestock, which is done in the name of Allah. Eating is regarded as an act of worship in Muslim communities, and meals begin with the phrase "Bismillah" (in the name of Allah) and end with "Alhamdulillah" (glory be to Allah), cultivating mindfulness and gratitude for the food.

Another significant aspect of Islamic food practices is the month of Ramadan, during which Muslims fast from dawn until dusk. This practice of fasting is not only an exercise in self-discipline but also a way to develop empathy for the less fortunate. The fast is broken at Iftar, a meal that begins with dates and water, as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and is shared with family and friends. This communal meal fosters unity and strengthens bonds among Muslims, emphasizing food as a medium for social and spiritual connection (Ibrahim et al., 2019), while the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad also emphasize moderation in diet. One such principle is the practice of filling one-third of the stomach with food, one-third with water, and leaving one-third empty (Latif & Rahman, 2020). This balanced approach not only promotes physical health but also supports a mindful and disciplined approach to eating, encouraging a holistic view of nourishment that encompasses both the physical and spiritual aspects of life.

The Indian Muslims, on the other hand, eat diverse foods based on the different regions and cultures that constitute their culinary heritage, so long as the food follows principles of halal food. From the Mughal dishes of North India to biryani, kebabs, and nihari, moving to spicy delicacies of Hyderabad and coastal flavors, each region has a unique cuisine. These are not just meals but hold their place in the cultural identity and pride of their respective cultures (Khan et al., 2020). They often are passed down to generations of families, with recipes closely guarded and perfected over time. Therefore, the preparation and sharing of traditional dishes are ways in which many Muslim families contribute to preserving their heritage and maintaining a bond with their background. As the cultural importance accorded to food is further underpinned by festivals and celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr, the festival at the end of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha, Muslims celebrate and respectively share food with friends and family (Uzma, 2015), which in turn leads to strengthening the bonds and relationship between food, culture, spirituality and identity. Further, Muslims in India also indulged in contemporary dietary habits and lifestyle changes, which, in time, has led to increased consumption of processed foods and soft drinks, and an increase in diet-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity.

Breaking Barriers During Potluck

In this section, co-author Ahmed shares her experience about how food helps break barriers and support food preservation with a story about a potluck lunch experience by a new immigrant in Toronto, Canada. Her name is Maria. She is from Mexico. As a newcomer immigrant, Maria tried to find an activity where she could learn something and connect with the Canadian people. She eventually registered for a sewing class with the City of Toronto's Recreation Program. Sewing is one of her favorite hobbies. The course Instructor was from Jamaica.

To help everyone in the class feel welcomed she organized a potluck lunch and asked everyone to bring a cultural dish. This activity gave students the opportunity to socialize and get to know other students in the class. Maria thought this was a better way to meet each other rather than a roundtable introduction. She noticed that there were less awkward “small talks” during the lunch. Everyone became engaged and spoke passionately about the dish they prepared. She felt great comfort speaking with others as they described their cultural dish and the historical connection and personal attachment to the dish they prepared, without anybody worrying about their English fluency. They spoke freely and, in the end, everyone felt a real sense of confidence to speak freely about themselves and practice their English in class with each other without any judgment.

The students felt that adapting to a new Canadian culture while trying to maintain their own culture was difficult, but taking time to cook traditional dishes, sharing them with others at a potluck, inspired great satisfaction and a grand sense of comfort and appreciation of feeling a part of and belonging to a community. Sharing food over a potluck lunch in a school setting with newcomers was not only nourishing, it also became a means of communication, sharing, friendship and connected to individuals’ roots and culture. This cultural potluck lunch with homemade international cuisines demonstrated the ability of how food can transcend boundaries and barriers and support confidence. The sewing class was more than just learning to sew. It became a safe place for newcomer immigrants who are not as fluent in the English language and can learn from one another and share opportunities over cultural food and eating together.

Cultural food preservation is also very important for health fairness and social and environmental sustainability. Traditional diets, which are generally rich in helpful health nutrients, stand in stark contrast to the processed foods that dominate Western diets. Clinging to traditional culinary practices allows people to make mindful choices about their own and their family's health. These decisions may be about taste and gut microbiota, but they are also about living a healthy lifestyle that is consistent with cultural beliefs, reduced health risks, socializing and making connections. In the case of immigrant families with young children like author Sinclair, it can be challenging to sustain their ethnic dietary patterns (Stansbury, 2025). Children, particularly those born or nurtured in their new country, may develop a predilection for locally sourced or processed meals. Children may feel pressured to conform to their friends' eating habits, leading them to abandon traditional foods in favor of more familiar, Western-style meals. We cannot dispute the impact of social media on food habits either. Social media has become an effective instrument for introducing children to different cuisines from around the world. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube add visual enticements to foods and can be very influential, especially to the younger generations.

High-quality photographs and engaging films highlight a diverse range of meals, making many cuisines appealing and exciting to children. Many video makers, chefs, and food aficionados post simple culinary instructions for children to watch and try at home, sparking an early interest in cooking and experimenting with new foods. From Ahmed’s personal experience, both her daughters enjoy deshi foods as much as they do when they try cooking a new dish from YouTube

or wandering around a food festival, sampling diverse cuisines and celebrating the identity, heritage, and deep-rooted connections that food fosters within and between communities. Traditional meals are featured during culinary festivals, many of which are cooked using age-old recipes passed down through generations, preserving cultural identity and heritage. These events provide immigrants and Indigenous communities with a taste of home, a sense of belonging, and the opportunity to pass on their gastronomic traditions to future generations, ensuring that their cultural legacy is preserved.

Globally, festivals around the world are also frequently centered on special meals with cultural significance, such as the Chinese New Year, when families prepare and consume delightful dishes of dumplings and fish, which represent riches and success in the Chinese culture or Diwali celebration by the Indians, whereby they prepare and exchange sweets, which represent the triumph of good over evil. The Bengali New Year is another ritual event that brings communities together. It is customary at New Year to eat panta bhat (fermented rice) with freshly made bhortas (Bengali mashes), spinach or amaranth shak (stir-fried greens), and fried, fatty hilsa during this event. These foods are not just consumed for sustenance. They play a central role in rituals that unite communities, preserve cultural identities, and promote heart health.

Self-discovering through Potluck

Co-author Ahmed's story above about Maria's potluck experience with sharing cultural foods, how it can help people make new connections, build relationships, and break barriers while supporting identity, equity and well-being from the heart to health, is identifiable with many immigrants. Born in Mexico, she travelled to Canada. Her experience in Canada was fraught with cultural differences, but preparing a traditional Mexican meal and sharing it with her classmates brought her immense solace and comfort. The meal she prepared was done in celebration of her Mexican heritage. It allowed her to instill ethnic pride in herself and her family. She believed in the saying "we are what we eat." She believed that the way to a person's heart was through their stomach. By preparing and sharing traditional meals for the potluck lunch and her family, she was not only nourishing people's physical and nutritional needs. She was also nurturing their souls and instilling a strong connection to their cultural roots.

As immigrants, many of us rely on traditional foods to sustain our feelings of identity in this rapidly changing world. Our cultural foods serve as a reminder of who we are and where we came from, bringing a feeling of continuity and security into our lives. Additionally, food in our everyday meals or special grand occasions, religious ceremonies or social gatherings never ceased to play a part in our social and cultural behaviors. Food, rather, instils culinary traditions and preservation of cultural identities in our lives and society every day. As each culture has its own culinary traditions and gets passed down to the next generation, it is good to take time and reflect on society's own history, geography, and social dynamics. It is good to take time to appreciate these cultures for their authenticity.

One example of cultural authenticity is the Japanese tea ceremony. The Japanese tea ceremony is more than just drinking tea. It is a cultural practice that represents the values of harmony, respect, purity, and peace. Similarly, the Italian tradition of Sunday family dinners is more than just a meal. Food is a celebration of family relationships and legacy. It supports our health, culture, identity, religion and pride of who we are, and the road from heart to health is inextricably linked with the preservation of cultural foods and traditions while serving as a reminder of the deep bond between food and mankind.

Nourishing the Soul

Food is central to socialization and community life in all, if not most, nationalities and cultures. For Iranians, it is especially significant. The act of hospitality, or "Mehmaan Nawazi," is deeply embedded in Iranian culture and remains a cherished value even after moving to Western countries. Iranians continue to invite people into their homes, preparing their best dishes to share with friends, family, and guests. The importance of this tradition is deeply rooted in the belief that a guest (Mehman) is someone dear, almost sacred, and regarded as a friend of God. In Iranian culture, when someone enters their home, it is seen as a blessing, a gift from God. Sharing food with guests, neighbors, or even the less fortunate is considered an act of the highest nobility and spiritual significance. In addition to the warm hospitality, food in Iranian culture is believed to be most beneficial when it is fresh. Iranians strongly value fresh ingredients, and meals are often prepared daily to ensure they are wholesome and nutritious. This commitment to freshness is tied to the belief that the best meals come from the most natural and locally sourced ingredients. Moreover, Iranians traditionally follow a diet that mirrors the principles of the Mediterranean diet, rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, and lean proteins. This dietary pattern is considered not only central to maintaining good health but also reflective of a deep cultural respect for food as nourishment for both body and soul.

As co-author Nooshin narrates, sharing food is not just about sustenance; it is a way of caring for each other and bringing people closer. Food has a unique power to create connections, bridge gaps, and nurture relationships. When we share a meal, we are not only nourishing our bodies but also strengthening the bonds between us. This belief is at the heart of Iranian hospitality, where meals are not simply a time to eat, but a time to connect, share warmth, and celebrate togetherness. This cultural practice of hospitality goes beyond just providing sustenance; it fosters strong community bonds and is an expression of generosity, kindness, and respect. Despite moving to different countries and adapting to new environments, Iranians maintain this important tradition, ensuring that their homes remain a place of warmth, welcome, and love for all who enter. Even in the diaspora, the act of hosting and sharing food continues to be a deeply meaningful way of preserving cultural identity, offering a sense of continuity, and building connections in new communities (Khan et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter shows that food is far more than nourishment. It is a powerful expression of cultural identity, relationships, celebrations, rituals, and overall health, happiness and well-being. For Indigenous peoples, traditional foods embody teachings, relationships with the land, and spiritual continuity. For immigrant communities, cultural foods offer comfort, belonging, and a vital link to home in unfamiliar environments. Across all cultures, the act of growing, preparing, and sharing food strengthens social ties and preserves collective histories. As Canada continues to evolve as a multicultural society, ensuring equitable access to culturally meaningful foods remains essential for supporting both health and identity. The future of food depends on honoring cultural traditions while advancing environmental stewardship and social justice. Ultimately, food connects heart to health, reminding us that what we eat; and how we protect the systems that sustain us, shapes how we live together on this land.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Dr. Anish Aurora (PhD) in brainstorming this topic and thinking through the work.

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