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Around the College

Studying the humanities gives us opportunities to learn about cultures near and far, familiar and foreign. Some of the best of these opportunities, especially in the realm of food, take place right at home in the College.

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AT FIRST GLANCE you might think the humanities and the culinary world do not seem to overlap much—except perhaps in still life art. While food meets physiological needs, studying the humanities meets cultural, artistic, and intellectual needs. Study of the humanities likely evokes memories of poring over manuscripts in diligent study, formulating arguments, analyzing cultural artifacts, and practicing language skills—far from the hands-on experience of preparing and eating food.

Yet food is more than a physiological need; it is a rich and varied part of the human experience. There is much more to food. All food has a cultural component; it helps us discover and develop a deeper understanding of the lives and traditions of others. It also helps us deepen our understanding of self, allowing us to reflect on our own beliefs, traditions, and values through a culinary lens. But for all the exploration and discovery that food offers us, we tend to circle back to a simple assertion. From the most exotic foreign dishes to the most familiar snacks, food connects us.

Food Introduces Us to Other Cultures

Food is a simple and convenient way to be introduced to a culture. Take the German Club's Oktoberfest, an inclusive, fun-filled event which, yearly until COVID-19 hit in 2020 and 2021, brought a little slice of Bavaria to campus. Participants celebrated German culture while dining on traditional German fare: bratwursts, pretzels, and streusel bars. And of course, no Oktoberfest celebration would be complete without mugs and mugs of . . . *Apfelschorle*. (It is a mixture of apple juice and sparkling water, by the way—a nice substitute for German beer for our non-alcohol-drinking student body.)

The French Club hosts a similarly popular event, its cheese and jazz night, where attendees sample cheese from all over the world while listening to French jazz and Louisianan folk music. The event featured cheeses not only from France but also from the many countries under its influence. This year nearly 250 people came—not as many as pre-COVID highs of roughly 500, but still a great turnout.

The Spanish Resource Center helps students of the Spanish language and native Spanish speakers alike develop a better understanding of the diversity of the Hispanic diaspora. Each week during winter semester 2022, the SRC held several events focused on a specific Spanish-speaking country, including a lecture or presentation, a movie, and a

dish representative of that country. It is an inclusive approach to the culture of these countries that melds food with other cultural features.

The dishes this semester were as varied as the countries: from Colombia, *arepas* (cornmeal patties stuffed with cheese or cut in half and made into sandwiches); from the Dominican Republic, *morir soñando* (a drink composed of orange juice and milk, sweetened with cane sugar and served over chopped ice); from Mexico, *Carlota de limón* (cake made of layers of Marie biscuits inundated with sweetened condensed milk, lime juice, and cream cheese); from Spain, *pan tumaca* (toast rubbed with garlic and topped with shredded tomato and olive oil). The mouthwatering list goes on, as does the cultural and culinary diversity of worldwide Spanish-speaking communities.

Events like these, always occurring around the College, offer students the unique chance to explore foreign dietary and cultural traditions.

Food Can Enrich Cultural Connections

When we move beyond the initial delight of discovering a new culture through food, food accompanies us in our deeper cultural study. We develop likes and dislikes and a strong preference for the food of cultures we come to know well. With a developing pride and identity, we uncover



Photos: Left by David John Arnett (Advertising '25); right courtesy of Sandy Hatchett



rivalries and friendly contention. In the case of the French and Italian Cook-off, two legendary culinary traditions face off against each other in a yearly competition. In 2022, students from each club made dishes authentic to their countries that fit into one of three categories—appetizer, entrée, and dessert—everything from homemade caprese salad and *arancini* to *boeuf bourguignon* and *crème brûlée*.

Once the dishes were prepared, representatives from each club chose the best dishes from each category to present to the judges (impartial faculty members from other departments and the dean’s office in the College of Humanities). The judges tasted dish after dish before deciding the winner. The ninth annual cook-off held in 2022 proved a neck-and-neck matchup; despite the exquisiteness of the Italian Club’s winning pistachio lemon cake, a *Gruyère* puff pastry appetizer and *boeuf bourguignon* entrée tipped the French Club over the edge and into the first place spot. Competition can be fierce, but over the years the event has brought the French and Italian Department’s faculty and students closer.

At the Language Immersion Student Residence (LISR, formerly the Foreign Language Student Residence, or FLSR), food has long been a cornerstone of the immersion experience: four nights a week, the students in each language “house” cook and dine together while only speaking the target language.

The learning curve for both novice cooks and language learners can be steep. Communicating about cooking concepts and methods can be hard in one’s native tongue, but doing so in a foreign language poses a new challenge. (This recipe says to julienne the carrots. How do you say “julienne” in Spanish? What does “julienne” even mean?) Despite the gaps in both culinary knowledge and communicative ability, meals come together. As students navigate the

difficult culinary and linguistic territory together, they learn together. In trying to tell their roommate to pass the spatula without knowing how to say the word, in guessing and getting it right just by chance (*pásame la . . . ¿espátula?*), they find themselves in a culinary crucible perfect for developing language skills.

Or take the South Asia Student Association’s curry night on April 7: this smaller-scale event gave students with interest in South Asia and South Asian backgrounds the opportunity to bond over a shared meal. The vegetable curry you can get in Provo might not be as authentic as what you might find in India or Pakistan, but members in attendance enjoyed it all the same—sometimes the authenticity of food itself is not as important as the opportunity that it offers to connect.

Food Teaches Us about Ourselves

Examining our own traditions through a culinary lens can also yield fascinating insights. Eric Eliason, English professor and Utah folklorist, became an expert on Utah’s food scene as he cowrote and coedited *This Is the Plate: Utah Food Traditions*. Utah’s culinary traditions go way beyond Jell-O and fry sauce; the book, which spans 450 pages, sheds light on Utah’s unique culinary landscape, such as how Utah’s food scene has been affected by immigrant populations. For example, you can find *gyros* and *baklava* at local burger joints thanks to influence from Utah’s Greek population; and school lunch staple Hawaiian Haystacks were introduced by Pacific Islanders, catching on with finicky kids because they can choose their own toppings.

Some food can be an avenue through which we discover other ways of thinking and different areas of study. Take the hot dogs at the Philosophy Department opening social, which were served with an eternal question for philosophical debate: are hot dogs sandwiches? It seems a frivolous distinction, but it is a real pathway to philosophical thought. A logician might craft a syllogistic argument to support one side: *Major premise: if a dish consists of meat between bread, it is a sandwich. Minor premise: a hot dog is meat between bread. Conclusion: a hot dog is a sandwich.* A relativist might offer a rebuttal: *A sandwich is whatever one thinks it is, and I say no way to the major premise of your syllogism.* And then an ethicist might interject to shift the debate: *Who cares if it is a sandwich or not? The question is if eating it is ethical.*

This processed sausage in a bun helped students see that philosophy is inherent in everything—even in how we view food, including hot dogs.



Food Connects Us

Let us take a step back for a moment, though. With all the philosophizing we tend toward when talking about food, we can sometimes forget how simple food can really be. More often than not, food is simply nourishment. It might not always bear the important distinction of teaching us about culture or fostering analytical thought, but it can still serve as a catalyst for connection. Whether it is the pizza at a Christmas party, the catered lunches at the Humanities Center colloquia, or the Digital Media and Communications team handing out cookies during finals, food brings us together.

For hungry, stressed-out college students, free food can be an especially meaningful gesture. Troy Cox (associate professor of linguistics) believes deeply in the power of food to support and create connection. He says, “While I often don’t know the burdens my students are bearing, I do believe in ministering through food.” He keeps a drawer in his office stocked with snacks, which he offers to students who stop by. “It doesn’t cost me much—typically whatever is on sale at Costco—and I hope by that small act they will leave my office with their burden feeling lighter,” he says.

The connecting power of shared food also extends to the most mundane of snacks. Consider the inconspicuous bowl of Smarties in the Linguistics Department office—a simple, cellophane-wrapped invitation to greet and chat with the office staff. “You’d be surprised how many people come in and get



some, then visit with us,” says Mary Beth Wald, Linguistics Department office manager. Originally, they kept chocolates in the little glass bowl on the counter, but they replaced them with Smarties, a more allergen-friendly candy, to accommodate people who cannot have chocolate. Offering Smarties to passersby and colleagues is the simplest

gesture—maybe in a different realm than feasting on exotic cuisine with foreigners halfway around the world—but it certainly connects us.

Whether we are sharing a roll of Smarties with a colleague or attending cultural events with foreign foods galore, food plays a significant role in the College of Humanities. Every time we lift a morsel to our mouths, we participate in cultural traditions, we learn about ourselves, and we form connections with others. It becomes increasingly apparent: food and the humanities go hand in hand. So next time you dig in, do not rule out the foreign, but also recognize the importance of the familiar; all food offers the opportunity for reflection, for contemplation, and for exploration. ■

Photo: Joshua J. Perhey

A Few College Food Highlights

We could not cover it all in a single article; even a full book probably would not be enough to describe what food means to us in the College of Humanities. So here are a few more tasty eats from around the College—a small selection of many.

- 1. Reyes Magos.** The Spanish and Portuguese Department holds a potluck gathering in celebration of Three King’s Day. Faculty members bring in traditional dishes which are prepared in their particular country.



- 2. Soupinar.** The English Language Center has a monthly “Soup and Seminar” lunch for current TESOL MA students, former teachers, practicum teachers, internship students, and some undergraduate students. Some call it Friday “Soupinar.”

- 3. Schnitzel & Spaetzle.** German-language students in 100-level classes learn how to make traditional German dumplings made of egg, flour, salt, and milk.



- 4. French and Italian Cook-off.**

The nine times it has been hosted, the Italians have won the French and Italian Cook-off five times, the French four times.



Italian



French

- 5. Borscht.** Dr. Jennifer Bown shows her second-year Russian students how to make this red beetroot soup.

- 6. ELC Thanksgiving Dinner.**

The English Language Center hosts a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, full of American favorites, to introduce foreign students to the origins and traditions of this uniquely American holiday.



- 7. Catered Colloquia.** The Humanities Center pairs catered dishes and meals with the topics, fields, and backgrounds of its colloquium presenters, choosing from a growing list of over fifty local restaurants and caterers.