

Food, Power & Meaning In the Middle East and the Mediterranean

**International Conference
15 - 16 June 2010
Ben-Gurion University, Beer Sheva
Israel**

“Thinking about food can help to reveal the rich and messy texture of our attempts at self-understanding, as well as our interesting and problematic understanding of our relationship to social others” (Uma Narayan, 1997)

Food, like the air we breathe, is essential for our survival as biological beings. Food is therefore amongst the most prominent means of power: while regulating the food intake of others or preventing them from eating altogether is the outmost form of coercion, access to, and control over large amounts of nutritious and expensive fare are manifestations of prestige, supremacy and potency.

Food, however, is not only a means of coercion but also a means of cooperation, mutual assistance and partnership. In instances where food is distributed or handed over, power is ensued through social exchange. Food sharing is therefore highly regulated across cultures and is routinely embedded in complex sets of rules and rituals.

Yet the culinary sphere is also an arena where power is negotiated and challenged, where existing power structures are undermined and where alternative arrangements are suggested and experimented with. Indeed, as a mundane, body-oriented, non-verbal praxis centered on short-lived and hardly-defined artifacts, eating is probably one of the most taken for granted social activities and the culinary sphere is therefore among the least reflexive and self-aware cultural arenas. As such, it is a privileged space for social negotiation, subversion and resistance.

The ecologically and culturally diverse area encompassing the Middle East and the Mediterranean (Northern Africa and Southern Europe) is one where modern national boundaries, many of which imposed during colonial times, systematically transgress ethnic and religious divisions and is therefore inflicted by conflicts, violence and war. This area also features some of the world's grandest cuisines, as well as many others, which are possibly less renowned but certainly no less elaborate, rich, complex and intriguing.

Economic and political debates are only part of the complex fabric into which food and power are woven in the region: changing meal structures, gendered foodways, religious culinary innovation or conspicuous consumption of food as a means of class distinction are all daily features of life in the Middle East and the Mediterranean that involve differing measures of power and meaning.

In this workshop we wish to explore the ways in which the food and foodways partake in the production, reproduction, negotiation and subversion of power and

meaning in the Middle East and Mediterranean. We seek papers that approach the culinary sphere as an active arena of cultural production, that perceive of culinary artifacts as cultural icons that define different aspects of identity and that highlight power and power relations as tangible social forces.

The workshop will be held in Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, Israel (in the English language). The program will include ample time for discussion as well as tours to unique culinary venues in the region, where power is an important aspect of the culinary experience.

Invited keynote speakers are:

Prof. George Ritzer

Author of '*The McDonaldization of Society*' and '*Globalization: A Basic Text*'.

Prof. Carole Counihan

Author of '*Around the Tuscan Table*' and '*The Anthropology of Food and Body*'.

Submission of Paper Proposals:

Researchers (including postgraduates and early career researchers), theoreticians and scholars in the fields of anthropology, sociology, gastronomy, geography, history, cultural studies, tourism, economics and political science who deal with aspects related to food culture in the Middle East and the Mediterranean are invited to submit a paper proposal (abstract) of some 250 words to Mr. Rafi Groszlik (rafig@bgu.ac.il).

Deadline for submission of all abstracts: Monday, 1 February 2010

Organizing committee: Dr. Nir Avieli, Mr. Rafi Groszlik, Prof. Yoram Meital, Prof. Uri Ram.

For more information please contact Dr. Nir Avieli (avieli@bgu.ac.il), the workshop convener.