

Service, Support and Success

The Direct Support Workers Newsletter

Food, Flavours & Finding Connections: Honouring Diversity in the Kitchen



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Poutine, hamburgers, fries, tofu, filed mice, kidney beans, roasted chicken, balut eggs, chocolate covered ants, spanakopita, lasagna, oxtail, roti, pulled pork, potatoes, gravy, barbeque, lamb. I could go on and on and on.

Did you see anything there that you liked and had your mouth watering? No sooner was it watering than you said, "What...is she talking about? Who eats insects?!!!" As well as, "What?Who eats animals?!!"

Basically what is absolutely mouth watering to some is completely foreign and unappealing to others.

The controversy over food is what draws together cultural, economic and religious values. Food also inspires emotional reactions that speak to who we are ethnically and culturally as people. What one eats reflects and speaks to where we were raised, and what is available to us in certain parts of the world. So what is strange to one is a delicacy to others. What one may consider "poor man's food" and turn their nose up at is another's pure delight.

So let's try an exercise; I want you to take a moment, close your eyes, imagine that you are new to our country, and you have been given a bacon double cheese burger with the works. You look at it; you may find the smell enticing, but you have no idea what it is. Knowing that you are new to the country, someone explains what it is, and you may or may not choose to taste it. If you do taste it, you may or may not like it.

Now let's try something else. Close your eyes again, same thing. Now you are in a wheel chair; you are in a group home, away from your family, your language, your culture everything you have always known. At dinner you are given a hamburger; it sits in front of you for the entire dinner hour. Staff try to encourage you to eat it, but you don't because you have no idea what it is. Eventually it is taken away from you, staff think that maybe you are not hungry because you are missing your family. Safe assumption, correct? Understandable under the circumstances, right? The idea that you have never seen or tasted a hamburger does not cross their minds. We live in a country with so many people of so many diverse cultures with so many places to go and taste the food of those cultures; we think that everyone knows each other's food. The thought of not knowing does not enter the mind.

In this day and age, and in this city of vast cultures and foods, there are people who have never tasted anything other than what they have grown up with.

Now let me take you in another direction. What if you grew up in Canada, even Ontario, but you were raised in a smaller city or maybe further north? There may not be as much food diversity available to you. Does this mean that one should not understand cultural diversity because of location? Absolutely not...we may all look the same and speak the same but that does not mean that we do not have cultural differences, or speak a different language. We need to understand and celebrate those cultures also. For instance; in many of our smaller cities or rural settings, we have people that are of German, French and Dutch decent. What about learning a little about their celebrations? We learned to eat blueberries, corn, salmon, and frybread among many other things from our forefathers; they learned to cook and eat it from our First Nations people who have a great deal of diversity steeped with culture.

We learned to drink various beers and eat bratwurst and German potato salad at **Oktoberfest**, a festival that originated to commemorate the marriage of King Ludwig I to Princess Therese of Saxony.

Quiche a classic dish of French cuisine actually originated in Germany and was called “Kuchen.” The original “quiche Lorraine” was an open-faced pie consisting of one egg, cream custard and bacon, and the crust was originally made of bread dough.

The Netherlands adore **black licorice**; it has the highest per capita consumption in the world -approximately 4½ pounds per person per year. It is not only a candy in the Netherlands; it is also used as a lozenge for sore throats. **Licorice** is believed to have anti-inflammatory properties and has been used as a type of medicine since ancient times. Did you know that they found licorice root in Tutankhamen’s tomb? Be careful with the medicinal side of Dutch licorice; it is very high in sugar, as well as a great deal of salt.

The Italian have a tiny lozenge called Golla. It is made of black licorice and, if you choose to chew it, it may pull out a filling. It is produced to help with sore throats hence the word Golla meaning throat. It is very strong and you are supposed to suck on it, and it is not as salty as the Dutch licorice. Sugar content is approximately the same.

The Dutch also make little tiny doughnuts called **Oliebollen** that are traditionally eaten New Year’s Eve, as well as at various festivals in the fall and winter. Italians call them **Bombolini**, also made in the same manner and eaten at the same time of year and at various winter festivals like Carnival.

Two different countries, yet foods that are the same, used for the same reason, and/or made at the same time of year. **Are we really that different?**

Garlic was discovered in ancient Egypt and was primarily used by humans for the treatment of disease and for maintaining good health.

Oregano was first used by the Greeks. In their myth it was the goddess Aphrodite who invented the spice. The actual word “oregano” is a derivative of the Greek phrase “joy of the mountains.”

The food we eat is what draws us together as people. Being introduced to new food introduces conversation – we talk about it, how it is made, when it is made, is it more common in one region than another. We get to know about the people we interact with; we learn where they and their families originated from. Understanding starts, prejudices start to diminish.

Food speaks to our religions, when we can or cannot eat certain foods. Understanding why we cannot eat certain foods at all opens the door to understanding each other's beliefs a bit better, and predisposed ideas of one's religious beliefs dissipate.

Food and culture opens the door to understanding economic issues in other countries, and why only certain types of food are available as a result of the economic situation. We learn that varying climate and terrain does not allow for certain foods to thrive leading to an understanding of why some foods have never been seen or tasted.

Let us look at how things are prepared. In western civilization a cook stands at a table or in front of a counter to prepare food. A knife is used to cut, dice and chop or a grater to shred, westerners also sit at a table on a chair to have their meals using forks knives and spoons. Sometimes we use our hands for those "finger foods" and, at times, we can be successful with chop sticks.

What if you came from a country or a region where food is cut, chopped and eaten on the floor? Where something called a Bonti is used? Women in the Indian subcontinent, mostly the eastern region of Bengal continue to use this. They chop, shred, peel, cut, and dice with this instrument on the floor. The family then gathers to eat their meals on the floor and use their hands to eat, utensils are used to serve.

If this is something that you grew up with, coming to this country and seeing someone stand to prepare and use various tools to do the job, and then sit on a chair at a table using utensils instead of your hands is truly bizarre.

Imagine now we are welcoming someone from another culture into a shared living environment. Here are some hints about how we could include food, culture and learning into the process:

1. Learn about cultural celebrations and find out what foods go with these celebrations. For instance Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Mexican Army's victory over France at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. It is considered a minor celebration in Mexico, but most celebrated in the state of Puebla. It is a huge celebration in the United States, especially where there is a large population of Mexican-Americans. There are mariachi performances, street festivals in cities and towns across the U.S. and Mexico. August 9th, 2014 marked the 52nd year of Jamaica, and Trinidad & Tobago's independence, resulting in many other Caribbean islands gaining their independence in rapid succession. It is a huge celebration in the West Indies with a massive parade, entertainment, and what else...food. The Fourth of July and Cinco de Mayo are both a celebration of independence. On July 1st, Canada signed its own constitution and became a new federation. It is a statutory holiday and it is celebrated with entertainment, games, fire works and of course food. **Are we really that different?**
2. Have you ever experienced a traditional pow wow with Canada's First Nations? It is full of colour and pageantry, dancers of all ages from all over Ontario. There is food, original art work, carvings, bead work and much, much more. These gatherings honour the spiritual leaders and customs of Canada's First Nations, encourage and welcome the public to join in and enjoy the fellowship, and learn about ancient rituals and beliefs. These celebrations start in August and last till September in various parts of the city and the province, as well as other provinces across Canada. It is a great experience for all and a great way to spend a day out.

3. Although the above mentioned are just a few examples of celebrations, we can take these and plan an evening around food and culture for the entire home so everyone can learn about each other's culture and foods. You can barbecue bratwurst and eat German potato salad in October, have your own Oktoberfest and talk about why it is celebrated at this time of year. In the midst of the black freedom movement in 1965, **Kwanzaa** was created as an African-American holiday. It is a week-long celebration beginning December 26th lasting until January 1st. It was created to serve as a regular communal celebration and to reinforce the Nguzo Saba (the seven principles). Each day speaks to one of the seven principles. A candle (kinaris) is lit, the dinner table has a certain dish (day 6 is typically my favourite – Jollof rice) and, on the last day, a feast (karamu) is held.
4. Involve the families of the people who live in the home in some of the menu planning. Learn about fasting and other food rituals that need to be respected. The Christians and Greek Orthodox fast for 40 days before Easter; the Muslim's fast for Ramadan; find out why these observances are held and what the meaning behind them is. Ask what is typically prepared for Eid, representing the end of Ramadan, or for Easter. Three different spiritual beliefs, but yet all celebrate and observe a fasting for an extended period of time with a celebration involving traditional food at the end. Pick a day during Kwanzaa; learn what that day means and make a traditional food. **Kwanzaa**, although not religion based, is culturally based, celebrating tradition, family, history and reaffirming ones roots. Does it sound familiar? **Are we really that different?**
5. We can actively work to be a welcoming and diverse environment. Having these little mini cultural evenings, makes for a greater understanding of where we all come from and it allows the families a chance to know and understand the people their children live with. It allows us to have fun in the homes at any time and not just because it is someone's birthday or one of the major holidays. Let's celebrate the diversities and continue to gain the realization that at the end of the day it does not matter where you come from or what ethnic background you are we are not that different from each other.

In the end, whether you boil, roast, eat raw, use a knife or a bonti, use a fork or chop sticks, the food that we eat eventually brings us all together. We can gather together for pot luck and everyone brings something traditional to the table. We talk, we taste, we learn. As you can see with the examples given, each culture has a celebration or observance. The celebrations may be held at a different time of year yet the meaning behind them is quite similar to each other. Ramadan celebrates Allah and what he did, during Lent both Christians and Greek Orthodox celebrate Christ and what he did. The 4th of July and Cinco de Mayo celebrate independence. **Are we really that different?**

Have a Mexican Cinco de Mayo Fiesta night, make homemade salsa and nachos, easy to make and easy to eat.

Celebrate Oktoberfest in July.

Bring out the foods of winter carnival and celebrate it.

Join the festivities of Eid.

Go to a pow wow, if you can't attend, have your own. Invite friends and family and make Blueberry Wojapi and Frybread.

Have a Kwanzaa party, invite friends, light a candle, find out what that colour means on that particular day, serve Jollof rice.

Whatever your adventure in culture and cuisine, enjoy it, embrace it, learn from it and what you will learn is we are really Not That Different At All.

I have included a few recipes which are really yummy and easy to make.

GOOD FRYBREAD

Tribal Affiliation: Tulalip Tribes

A recipe handed down by generations of moms and grandmas.

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 tbsp. of sugar
- 1 tsp. of salt
- 1 tsp Baking Powder
- 3 cups flour
- 1 ½ cups water

DIRECTIONS:

Making the dough:

Mix all the ingredients (except water) together. Mix well, then add water. Knead the dough and let it sit for 20-25 minutes.

Making Frybread:

Take a roll out of the dough; flatten it to about 1 ½ inches, then put a hole in the middle.

FRYING:

Add 1 ½ cups of butter with 3-5 cups of oil into a frying pan. Heat oil to boiling point. Fry dough to golden.

BLUEBERRY WOJAPI

Tribal Affiliation: Lower Brule Sioux

INGREDIENTS:

- water to mix with flour to make a gravy or sauce mixture
- 3/4 cup flour
- 3 cans water
- 1 can blueberry

DIRECTIONS:

Put the blueberries into a medium saucepan; add 3 cans of water to blueberries. Add the sugar and mash the blueberries. Heat until boiling. Slowly add the flour paste to make a gravy-like mixture.

Ready to eat with Frybread warm or cold.

CINCO DE MAYO SALSA CRUDA

INGREDIENTS:

- 2 tbsp. lime juice
- 1 ½ pounds cherry or grape tomato, diced
- ½ cup finely diced onion or to taste
- 1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and minced
- 1 serrano chili pepper, seeded and minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tbsp. minced fresh mint leaves
- ½ bunch cilantro, chopped and salt to taste
- ¼ tsp. dried oregano
- 1 pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 tsp. salt, or to taste
- 1 pinch white sugar

DIRECTIONS:

Drain tomatoes in strainer for 15 minutes. Combine tomatoes, onion, jalapeno pepper, serrano pepper, and garlic in a large bowl. Pour lime juice over the top. Stir in oregano, cayenne pepper, salt, sugar and mint. Add cilantro. Refrigerate for 1 hour add salt to taste. Serve with Nachos or on barbecued chicken/fish.

JOLLOF RICE

Prep time: 5 minutes

Cooking time: 1 hour

Author: African Bites

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 medium onion chopped
- 1 ¼ oz. can tomato sauce
- ½ cup cooking oil
- 3 cups rice (typically par boiled but Basmati can be used)
- 2 tsp. chicken bouillon
- 2 tsp. salt
- 1 tbsp. paprika
- 1 tbsp. garlic powder
- 4 cups chicken broth (vegetable can be used) or water
- 1 tsp. white pepper
- ½ tsp. dried thyme (optional)
- 1 scotch bonnet pepper or ¾ tsp hot sauce (omit if cooking for children - can be very spicy)
- 1 lb. vegetables (carrot, peas, green onion tops, etc.)
- 1 lb. chicken, beef, shrimp (optional)

DIRECTIONS:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Rinse rice with water. In baking pan, combine all ingredients. Stir until fully combined. Cover tightly with foil. Place in oven and bake for 1 hour. Remove carefully, let cool 5 minutes. Carefully remove foil. Fluff with fork and serve.

This is a quicker way of making Jollof rice. The traditional way is on top of the stove – much more time and labor intensive.

Have fun and Buon Appetito!

About the Author:

Marilena graduated as a Child and Youth worker and after several years started working in Developmental Services. After working in the field for a number of years and having two children, Marilena went back to school to study nutrition. Through the years she has worked in direct support, as a supervisor, and has worn many hats in those positions.

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