

DECODING FOOD CULTURE

HOW INNOVATIONS BECOME TRADITIONS

by Christine Schäfer, Johannes C. Bauer, Jakub Samochowiec and Karin Frick

CREATING

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Decoding Food Culture: How Innovations Become Traditions

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SUMMARY

In Ethiopia, people eat from the same plate with family and friends. In Argentina, barbecues with succulent meat are part of the national identity. In France and Italy, meals are celebrated with relish, while in Switzerland and Germany, people are increasingly eating a quick bite on their own. The US population often eat directly from fast food boxes while sitting in their cars. When it comes to food, there are different cultures all over the world. These cultures develop over decades and are closely linked to a country's identity, values and lifestyle.

The food culture of a society characterises what, how, and why we eat. It plays a decisive role in determining how open we are to trying new things and how strongly we rely on familiar foods. Do new food products intrigue us or do we reject them? Do familiar foods give us a reassuring sense of stability or do they bore us? This means food manufacturers, retailers, and restaurateurs aiming to successfully introduce a food innovation to a market must have a very good understanding of these deeply rooted cultural eating habits.

This study analyses what is important and provides recommendations on what approach to adopt. What distinguishes a regional food culture? How can eating habits be changed over the long term? And which management strategies can be used to successfully market innovative food products?

GDI SURVEY ON FOOD CULTURE

In spring 2024, 2,100 consumers from Switzerland and the neighbouring regions on the other side of Swiss borders (southern Germany, western Austria, northern Italy, eastern France) were surveyed. When analysing the data, six pillars emerged that characterise food culture:

- **Enjoyment:** What makes you happy when you eat? What gives you pleasure? Which flavours, textures, aromas, and types of presentation are common?
- **Community:** How do people eat together? What role do hospitality, family, and intergenerational togetherness play?

- **Health:** Nutrition is also a factor in physical and mental wellbeing. How important is this when choosing the food to eat?
- **Control:** How do people control their eating habits? From practising mindfulness to fasting rituals and diets.
- **Rituals:** Thanksgiving, teatime, cheese fondue – what role do fixed routines or ceremonies that confer meaning to food play emotionally, socially, culturally, and religiously?
- **Rootedness:** Sushi, pasta, smoked sausage – food practices and cultural identity are shaped by geography, history, and tradition. What significance does this still have?

WHAT FOOD CULTURE REVEALS ABOUT OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Which aspects of food culture suggest the population is willing to try new things? One thing is clear – openness to culinary experimentation is greatest in regions where enjoyment plays a particularly strong role in food culture. Even in regions where food culture is shaped by community and health awareness, people are still curious. Eating cultures deeply rooted in society, on the other hand, significantly curb the willingness to try something new.

WHY EATING HABITS ARE CHANGING

Some 92% of those surveyed have changed their eating habits over the last ten years. The major drivers of this change are health, new information and financial considerations. Deep-rooted eating cultures, on the other hand, also act as a barrier to change in this respect. The more deeply people are entrenched in traditional eating habits, the less they will have changed their eating habits.

WHAT IS THE SOLUTION TO THIS? A BALANCE BETWEEN INNOVATION AND TRADITION

If you want to successfully launch a new food product on a market, you will need to take the local food culture into account. Enjoyment is a key prerequisite for the acceptance of new products and the flavour must be right. Control boosts sales, as consumers want transparent product infor-

mation. Community and rituals open the door to everyday culture. If new products can be used in rituals or group meals, acceptance increases. Respect for traditional flavours is crucial in markets with a deeply rooted food culture, and careful adaptation is essential. To adapt sensitively to different requirements in the regions, food companies must adopt a strategic approach to product marketing in each region. Here the classic 4 Ps of marketing can be used as a basis: product, price, place, and promotion.

THE PATH TO THE FUTURE: FROM A NEW PRODUCT TO INTEGRATION IN THE FOOD CULTURE

A huge amount of work needs to be done before a food innovation becomes a staple on consumers' plates. A multi-stage diffusion process is required: from the carefully managed initial contact that inspires the avant-garde to establishment in the everyday diet of a broad population, because the new product also proves competitive in terms of health, transparency and price, and to definitive integration into the local food culture. This process will only be successful if all of the parties involved – restaurants, industry, and retail – work together intelligently.

Here, the balance between tradition and innovation is crucial for all players in the food system. Only through interaction can sustainable innovation be created: deep-rooted culturally, sustainability-minded, beneficial in terms of health and financially successful.



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