

Food and My Environment: A Personal Account

by Kimberly Trathen

Kimberly Trathen received undergraduate degrees in Anthropology and Music at Michigan State University in 2002. After her graduation, she moved to Belgium where she received her postgraduate degree in Culture and Development Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven in 2005. She has always been interested in Anthropology and has worked with a variety of organizations centered on food and environmental issues. She also worked on an organic farm outside of Leuven and a small-scale salad green farm in Portland, OR. Since January 2008, she has been teaching English as a foreign language at the English Language School of Portland to adult students from a variety of cultures.

A B S T R A C T

Food plays an integral part in linking people to their surroundings. It connects people to their culture, community, environment and their food producers, whether local farmers or corporations. This narrative tells of my personal journey towards understanding the relationship between the food I eat and my environment. It starts with my US Midwest suburban upbringing and moves on through my experience living in a foreign land, studying Anthropology, and working on an organic farm. Later it delves into my return to American culture, which has brought about further observations and realizations about food. This is a personal account of how I broke the link between food and corporations with which I was raised. As a narrative it explores how transformations in my relationship with the food I eat have changed my interactions with my physical environment, my immediate community and the cultures in which I've lived.

A R T I C L E I N F O

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As a student of Anthropology, I have learned to live my life as a participant observer. I continuously question the realities that I have created through new experiences of culture, community, and livelihood – and seek to find my place in all of these realities. Anthropology is a field of study that opens doors to other cultures and ways of thinking, but it has also opened doors into myself. It has helped me find my place in American culture and society, especially through my return from living abroad. The role of food, in particular, has helped shape my relationship with culture, community and livelihood. My journey towards understanding this relationship starts with my suburban Midwest American upbringing and moves on through my experience living in a foreign land, working on an organic farm and returning back to American culture.

Growing up in sheltered suburban cities in Midwest America, my knowledge of food was simplistic and superficial. As far as I knew vegetables came in an assortment of frozen varieties, fruit came in a can and was usually part of a cocktail, milk came in plastic jugs, and cheese came in individually wrapped slices. Looking back, what is most disturbing is not that the veggies were frozen, fruit was canned and cheese was pre-sliced, but rather that peas came from the Jolly Green Giant, bananas came from Chiquita and cheese came from Kraft. This was how I identified with and recognized my food. And I wasn't alone. For countless others who grew up, or are living, in the midst of commercial television and microwaves, food has become recognized by its corporate logo. Dole, Kraft, Dannon, Nestle, Chiquita, and many more food brands have infiltrated our kitchens, turning our cupboards and mealtimes into a display of corporate logos rather than actual food. I never questioned where food came from or how it got to grocery stores, let alone who the farmers were, how they were treated and what went into producing my food. Although I didn't understand it, I, along with the many others living in food oblivion, were at the mercy of the companies who provided our food. Where we once depended on farmers and their relationship with the ecosystem for our subsistence, we now depend on corporations to provide our food. And as I have learned, concern for the health impact of that food usually comes second to profit. Food is a commodity, as is everything that is bought and sold on a global scale. Small farmers, who perhaps spend extra money to ensure the quality of their crops, cannot compete with industrial farms that often cut corners on quality to decrease costs. I started to imagine the impact of these costs on the food I consumed, and I began to feel both angry and disturbed.

As I started seriously questioning the quality of my food, my life directed me overseas to a small country in the heart of Europe. I left the mile-long shopping aisles of American grocery stores, with a multitude of questions and a meager understanding of global food issues, and found myself a few days later trying to navigate a huge, bustling food market in Brussels, Belgium. Little did I know that I had landed in an intersection of food, culture and community that would henceforth shape my relationship to all three of these concepts.

Belgian food markets vary from small and subdued to sprawling and chaotic. The larger ones I've experienced span multiple blocks and incorporate a wider variety of food than a large-scale American grocery store – and without most of the packaging or logos.

Buying food at a market helped me connect what I ate to the people who grew it or made it. I asked questions to the farmers, butchers, bakers and other food producers directly, tasted samples and interacted with the other customers. I found out which fruits and vegetables were in season, tried new foods based on suggestions from the farmer and how the weather affected the harvest. They were proud to share these details because that is their occupation and their passion. Interacting with them put a face on the food I was consuming. I got to know Norbert, the cheese producer, Karolien, the farmer and Tom the butcher. They introduced me to foods that were specific to that region. Foods that I would have never heard of if I had only shopped at the grocery stores. They were a direct connection to Flemish culture.

A year and a half into my transplantation from the U.S to Belgium I started working on a small organic farm outside of Leuven. Two days a week, I would bike 40 minutes to start work before 7 a.m., seeding, planting, weeding and harvesting some of the most beautiful vegetables I had seen. Ever since I had learned about organic food, I had wanted to work on an organic farm. I didn't think it was fair of me to advocate eating organic if I hadn't experienced the work involved in growing these fruits and vegetables. J.P., the farmer, was reluctant to bring me on because I had no knowledge or experience growing anything, nor did I speak fluent Dutch. We communicated verbally in broken Dutch and English, and nonverbally with hand gestures. Slowly, I learned how to seed, plant, and harvest the crops and arrange them into CSA boxes for the surrounding areas. For J.P. farming was life. He worked with the utmost care because the quality of the crops represented him, and soon began to represent me as well. Though we spent long hours working together, we said very little. We communicated through the food. This experience showed me how powerful an experience growing or making your own food can be. It was more than subsistence or just livelihood. You are pouring your energy, time and soul into cultivating a product for others to enjoy. Farming also provided me with a deeper understanding and connection to the environment. Working with the natural rhythms of the land, and having to depend on them daily, solidified the fact that food comes from the land, just as we do, and that is why it sustains us. Where I once had related food with companies and logos, I could now relate food with people, culture and land. I had broken the link between food and corporations with which I was raised.

Moving to a foreign land has its challenges, but for the most part it openly provides one with the chance to see the world through a new "lens". Culture is a peculiar matter. It is omnipresent, yet for someone who has never strayed from his

or her own background or customs, it is concealed in everyday life. In my journey, it took leaving the U.S. and living in a different country to understand my own culture and my place in it. Before I had embarked on this journey, culture was just a concept I had studied. Similarly, food was just something I ate. But as I prepared to return to the Midwest I became fully aware that the previous three years had taught me a myriad of things about the interconnectedness of culture, community and food. I looked forward to returning to my country and discovering the role food played in culture there. As I reacquainted myself with American life, I sought out communities created around healthy, natural lifestyles and progressive food politics. I shopped at local markets, bought organic food and worked on a small salad green farm. But I felt that something was missing.

Food is a thread that holds the culture and community together. In Belgium, I felt that the role food played in people's lives hadn't changed much over the last century. Markets and small-scale food production still thrive because people know that it is an important part of their tradition and culture.

In the U.S., people's relationship to food has changed dramatically. Commercialism and lifestyle changes have made meals into a matter of convenience. Even the trends towards healthy eating and conscious food production, such as organic vegetables or fair trade coffee, are boxed up and packaged into quick and easy mealtime solutions, often sold now by the same familiar food brands. There are still immense changes that would need to take place before the role of food in American culture again promotes community and understanding. Many people are creating change through their eating habits, and by supporting small-scale farmers and food producers. But in general, Kraft, Nestle, Dannon, and other large companies still dominate the scene. This has been the most frustrating part of returning to the U.S. I found it difficult to seek out those small, quiet voices amidst the roar of the mega companies. The connection I had made between food, culture, and community was disappearing as I integrated back into my culture. It was tempting to simply dismiss this as ignorance and typical American consumerism or to judge the American way of life. But what I've learned is that my relationship with the food I consume has provided me with a unique insight into whatever culture I happen to be living in. Whether I shop in an open-air food market in Brussels or at a large grocery store in Michigan, I am constantly creating the connections between food, culture, and community.