

Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present

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ABSTRACT

Dining around the shared table is a universal practice experienced by most people; it is socially, culturally and materially influential and therefore worthy of research. This dissertation establishes a wider understanding of the complex meanings surrounding commensality, the fundamental social practice of eating together. The research is wide in scope and begins in pre-history with the origin of Palaeolithic dining behaviours and the socio-cultural evolution of these practices across history through to the present day.

The introductory chapter outlines the foundation for the dissertation and the research design, which is a constructivist interpretative methodological approach employing a systematic thematic analysis. The research aims of the study are to investigate and confirm the power and significance of the shared dining table, justifying why this activity remains a critically important contribution to socialisation and identity construction, and determining how and why dining practices are crucial for the evolution and structure of society.

The second chapter explores multidisciplinary theoretical perspectives in depth, explaining their essential role as a framework throughout the study to identify potential concepts and strengthen the research, analysis and discussion. This is followed by three chapters of qualitative narrative history, including a chapter on the origin and development of gastronomy and what gastronomy means. The research in these three chapters is based on the theoretical perspectives and constitutes the key findings, briefly described below.

Several material concepts and socio-cultural elements involved in eating around a shared dining table were identified in the analysis. These included food incorporation and its relationship to personal identity construction and how development and primary socialisation are connected to habitual, shared dining practices. The research also indicated that commensal hospitality promotes international relations and also helps maintain national identities across a divided human world.

The risk factors surrounding commensality, including taboo, disgust and food anxiety, are examined; likewise, the symbolic charge of food and the vital importance of sacrifice across history are also reviewed. Insights into both the public and private

spheres of family dining revealed that individual experience can differ widely and foster togetherness but also involve conflict.

The implicit nature and significance of reciprocity and gift exchange customs involved with shared dining practices over the centuries was a surprising and important finding. Additionally, the ritual nature and importance of symbolic celebratory feasts and rites of passage were established. The research demonstrated how these practices are highly symbolic and create the building blocks of human experience by following traditions and creating memories. These experiences were found to confirm the linearity of time, contribute to identity construction, and influence the evolution and structure of home and society.

Gender at the shared table was highlighted across a wide range of factors, including fasting, subordination, inequality and male dominance. Religious commensality in early history qualified as the foundation for manners. Furthermore, the study considers how crucial manners are in maintaining a 'civilised' society.

Another finding showed that commensality is consistently political. The dynamic Greek and Roman public banquets and the splendid Medieval and Renaissance feasts were performative rituals and designed to communicate and formalise power. However, the study also found that power relations around the shared table could be controlled by more subtle means: the simple notion of inclusion or exclusion, seating, allocation of food, or rules of hierarchy and gender.

The closing chapter briefly addresses the societal changes of the 21st century and how they challenge the notion of the family dining table as an institution and ideological construct. Some options for progressive change are suggested here to suit current trends. Lastly, the conclusion provides a comprehensive assessment of the research findings and identifies prevalent concepts in considering the supporting questions for final discussion.

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ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signature

Jane Lyne

Date

28/07/22

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Here's the thing – all dissertations in their finished form look slick and polished. In a word they look easy. I now know that they are not! I have seen the dawn of many days during the creation of this work and the process has been challenging and rewarding in equal measure.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, my husband and adult offspring who have championed my cause at every rocky moment. Heartfelt thanks especially to my daughter Vicky who helped fine tune my rusty computer skills. My mother, sister and niece, who are all based in England, continually encouraged me along the way. They are all dedicated to cooking and serving simple, good food. I am desperate to see them again after more than two long years of separation due to Covid.

I express thanks to my late father who was the most convivial person I have ever known and who taught me a lot about Irish hospitality. It was with my parents' support that I decided against getting a degree in psychology and instead went to London and trained to be a chef. It was 1980 and I was 18, and now we are here.

This study shows that times change but it consistently demonstrates the importance of eating together around the dining table. We all need to cling to heroic ideals as we slave over a hot stove but hopefully the reader will find inspiration in this study knowing they are treading in the footsteps of history. Food is a cultural force and fosters love, connection and communication. Gathering people, especially family and friends, to eat together around the table is significant for many good reasons because, as Visser (1992) maintains, much depends on dinner.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Everybody eats, mostly with someone else and usually at a table. The ubiquitous nature of this practice provides an intrinsic justification for closer examination. However, the motivation and rationale for this research is more compelling; the endeavour is to conclusively understand why eating at the dining table is so important by examining the complex set of relationships that revolve around the consumption of food.

Aim

Themes in history have been described as ‘an archaeology of the present’ (Foucault, 1994). This was the philosophy behind studying the history of commensality: to discover patterns of thinking and behaviour around the dining table from a historical perspective. As Tosh (2006) states, the first step to understanding is comparison across time, to get a sense of the whole and throw into relief what is transient and what endures. This study employed comparative research of Western history to examine fundamental trends reflected in the social, cultural, and historical milieu that surrounded eating at the dining table across millennia. The *aim* is to interpret the complex meaning of commensal practices throughout history to produce insights demonstrating how the past becomes situated in the present.

Rationale

Initial research on the history and importance of eating at the dining table as a combined study showed that scholarship on this subject has been limited. There are numerous food studies on consumption and identity, mealtime socialisation, manners and the history of food and eating from archaeological and cultural perspectives. However, there is scant scholarship on the exclusive history of the dining table and no other studies could be found which combine the elements listed above. This study is therefore unique, providing a logical reason for undertaking the challenging scope of research required. Furthermore, this lack of research on a topic of such universal interest was perplexing and identified a gap which strengthened the rationale for the study. This study has researched ‘around the dining table’ from past to present, cognisant of the principles of gastronomy comprehensively described as “whatever can

be eaten; its direct end is the conservation of individuals; and its means of execution are the culture which produces, the commerce which exchanges, the industry which prepares, and the experience which invents means to dispose of everything to the best advantage” (Brillat-Savarin, 2009, p. 52).

Consumption practices including the everyday routines of dining at the table, the surrounding structures and ritual do have a history; they are not static but evolve slowly (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999a). Moreover, changes in society are dynamic and often symbolised by changes in food and eating; new meaning can be attributed to old dining practices and new practices may incorporate old meanings (Caplan, 1997). As explained here, when historic consumption practices are researched in an extended chronological context, interesting opportunities arise for exploring changes and continuities. The promise of the long view held great potential to discover meaning for this study, and herein lies the *rationale* as elucidated above.

Purpose and significance

The familiarity of dining practice often fails to elevate its status. This study substantiates the provenance of the dining table and examines how history illustrates the importance of the banal and mundane activity of eating at the dining table, promoting it to something centrally important. During the research it became evident that the experience of dining around the shared dining table is irrefutably significant and meaningful; it is also a repository of power confirming the thesis statement of the working title. The act of eating constitutes a “food social fact” (Poulain, 2017, p. xvi) and the shared meal at the table “elevates the sphere of social interaction into supra-personal significance” (Simmel, 1997, p. 131). Fischler (2011) describes eating in all cultures as a crucial articulation of human sociality, and Poulain (2017) maintains consumption practices play a structuring role in the social organisation of a human community. These prominent theorists all agree that the meal has immeasurable social significance. Hence, the objective of this dissertation is to examine and evaluate the significance of dining at the table and demonstrate why the dining table remains a critical institution today.

Background of study

Eating at the shared dining table is commensality

The term 'commensality' literally means eating at the same table and more broadly describes eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting which forges bonds of group identity. Kerner et al. (2015) maintain that commensality is a human social institution which expresses values of hospitality and, furthermore, that commensality is the *essence* of food. Moreover, Bourdieu (1984) claims that the continual reinforcement and creation of this act is vital for the integration of society, and Pilcher's (2017) historical perspective accords the sharing of food with great social significance, emphasising that the many and immutable *pleasures* of the shared dining table will ensure its perpetuity.

What is gastronomy?

The term 'gastronomy' is often misunderstood. It necessarily refers to food and beverages; however, the discipline incorporates a wider context. Santich's (2007) description of gastronomy as 'everything that sustains us' more precisely refers to the act of consumption. The study of the principles of gastronomy concerns the how, what, why and with whom of eating and drinking, drawing on the broad spectrum of the humanities and social science – in short, gastronomy is a philosophy, it is "An art of living ... which enhances the pleasure and enjoyment of eating and drinking" (Santich, 2004, p. 15).

Methodological approach to the research

The research takes the form of narrative history and considers the dining table from past to present. The research method, which was consistent with the interpretive paradigm and maintains congruency between relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology, used a preliminary historical narrative approach, followed by critical thematic analysis. This modality had the most appropriate relevance to the research aim, and provided rich, quality data suitable for diligent analysis (Munslow, 2006).

Booth et al. (2012) identify various approaches for a narrative review. The most appropriate method for this research was to examine the selected literature in the following contexts:

- Contribution to the understanding of the subject under review
- Identify comparative conflict and argument
- Describe how each text relates to others under consideration
- Identify new interpretation of texts
- Engage and interact with theory
- Identify a research gap

Applying a flexible, systematic 'toolkit' addressed the known deficiencies of literature reviews. This supportive framework ensured the research was critical, integrative and effective, and was completed efficiently and with the right quality. Here 'quality' means employing appropriate breadth and depth, consistency and clarity contributing to effective analysis and synthesis (Hart, 1998, as cited in Booth et al., 2012).

Furthermore, framed by historical enquiry, the narrative approach has a long pedigree as an area of academic and research endeavour (Booth et al., 2012).

Research aim and objectives

The aim of this research is to interrogate what the practice of dining means, and what it represents. Conducting narrative history research provided a systematic, chronological interpretation of the course of human development, facilitating the identification of the cultural and social implications of dining practices from Antiquity to the present.

Primary research title

Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present

Research aim

To undertake a historical and symbolic exploration of the material and social culture of the dining table in Western society.

Supporting questions

- To what extent has the dining table developed as a tool of socialisation and identity construction in Western society?
- In what ways has the dining table played a crucial socio-cultural role in the evolution and structure of Western society, and does it continue to do so?

Primary research title: Food and eating at the dining table have a significant ability to convey meaning as well as nourish the body. The meanings attached to food and dining are particularly resonant because they are immersed in an everyday, material practice, condensed into a wealth of ideological meaning which touches many people. This study outlines the notion of the power and significance of the dining table, which is confirmed in various ways throughout the narrative, ultimately supporting the research focus, the power and significance of the shared dining table.

Supporting research questions: Using the shared dining table as a 'motif' tightened the focus of the dissertation. This motif performs as a recurring element throughout the narrative history chapters, providing opportunity for deeper, targeted thematic analysis. Establishing and evaluating historical themes around deeply rooted dining practices, according to Super (2002), provides a basis for interpreting food and society. Grignon (2001) agrees, arguing that commensality is about the study of social morphology, in other words various forms of social structure and the changes that take place within them. In reference to the first supporting question, the study has considered the dining table as a tool of *socialisation* and *identity*, establishing several key areas of interest including the theory of incorporation, gender, risk, religion, manners, reciprocity and power at the shared dining table

The two supporting questions of this study extend the research scope of the dining table and commensality. A wider scope generates deeper meaning surrounding the complexities of social relationships and a new understanding of the human experience. By situating the study in history, food and dining practices move beyond "metaphor and culture to become a more complete discussion about social *structure*" (Super, 2002, p. 171). The research has indicated there are various arguments to support this dissertation. One theory situates the structure of meals as a mechanism to structure society. Ideas explored in this regard include consumption practices and structure, the structure and language of meals, and everyday dining as a 'practice' and structured activity. Examining commensality as a social institution involved looking at themes of kinship, food and evolution, hospitality, reciprocity as a key foundation of society, and religion as the origin of and the basis of the evolution of commensality and societal structure.

Dissertation structure

This study explores the origin of the dining table and how it has progressed over millennia. The dissertation utilises a theoretical framework drawing on social theory, which is essentially a scientific way of looking at social life which encompasses ideas about how society changes and develops and provides a method for explaining social behaviour (Harrington, 2005). Areas examined specifically include how the dining table contributes to construction of identity, how and why manners evolved and the key role of religion as a foundation for socio-cultural dining practices. More broadly, the inquiry addresses the power and politics of dining around the table including civilisation, modernity, power, hierarchy, inequality, gender, and risk.

The study also examines manifest changes in the last century and their effects on domestic dining. The discussion section substantiates the findings of the historical narrative and the conclusion briefly summarises the whole dissertation. The dissertation comprises eight chapters structured as follows.

Chapter One – Introduction: background, aim and scope, methodological approach, justification of research design, significance, and overview of questions.

Chapter Two – Theoretical Perspectives: explains how socio-cultural research including social anthropology and history provide meaning surrounding commensality.

Chapter Three – Methodology – Research Design: presents the theoretical framework based on a qualitative, constructivist and interpretivist historical design.

Chapter Four – Antiquity, Greek and Roman: illustrates how food is a key to understanding culture and how the foundation of commensality, namely the feast, is a central arena of social and ritual action. The chapter examines the power of food, analysing how early foodways developed, demonstrating how food can be divisive and distributed and consumed according to hierarchies and beliefs (Garnsey, 1999). Lastly, this chapter examines how feasts and banquets have had a profound impact on politics and the course of historical transformations (Dietler & Hayden, 2010).

Chapter Five – The Middle Ages and the Renaissance Period: discusses how food was a dominant theme in the Medieval world, from feast to famine and fast. Here, the banquet table demonstrates its profound power and highlights the symbolic

expression of food. Other brief topics debated include feudalism as an early foundation for the structure of society and the development of commensality as a gift exchange, incorporating the practice of giving, receiving, sharing and reciprocity.

Chapter Six – The 19th Century, Gastronomy – 21st Century, Change: firstly explores the genesis and socio-historical considerations of 19th century gastronomy. Additionally, the emergence of the theory of taste is reviewed as an axis of distinction and of pleasure. The 21st century section addresses social and economic change and how this translates to dining practices at the contemporary family dining table. Here, the analysis establishes the significance of the dining table, progress and adaptability, and looks at the future of commensality.

Chapter Seven – Discussion and Conclusions: this chapter engages with social theory (Neuman 2019) throughout and will firstly explain the findings of the research in Chapters Three, Four and Five, based on thematic analysis. This is the result of systematic identification of coded common themes and patterns developed from the narrative history chapters, researching around the dining table since pre-history. Here, the seven established concepts, namely identity, risk, gender, religion, power, reciprocity, and manners, are analysed. This is followed by reflections on the dining table's influence on the evolution and structure of society, concluding with arguments endorsing the thesis statement and hypotheses.

Chapter Eight – Conclusion: summarises the dissertation, asserting how and why the dining table is still relevant and why it continues to function as an integral part of people's lives and society today. These justifications establish the final endorsement of the working title, the '*power and significance*' of the dining table.

CHAPTER TWO – THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Introduction

This chapter examines relevant social and cultural theory, in the context of the supporting research questions, to determine the power and significance of the dining table as a tool of socialisation and identity construction and its role in the evolution and structure of Western society. The study explores how dining habits are generated, reproduced, and diffused from a socio-historical standpoint, and how tastes and cultural shifts impact dining practices. The chapter examines the role of the dining table in the evolution and in the shaping of the structural features of society, including power relations, gender inequality and also the symbolic meanings of food and how they have developed, using a variety of theoretical approaches.

Food and eating practices, including dining around the table, are shaped through social relations. To understand the interrelations between society, subjectivity and the body, and meanings, beliefs and social structures, broad awareness of the sociology of food and eating is required. Wider socio-cultural research addresses the social dimensions of food and eating, and includes anthropology, history and cultural studies (Lupton, 1996). The complex interactions between these phenomena constitute the theoretical base that this dissertation draws on to reveal insights, and this chapter reviews these perspectives.

Neuman (2019) argues that there needs to be an increased social-theoretical engagement in food studies. Social theory, broadly described, is scientific study and thought about social life, ideas about “how societies change and develop and methods of explaining social behaviour, about power and social structure, class, gender, modernity and civilization, revolutions and numerous other concepts and problems in social life” (Neuman, 2019, p. 79). The intention of social theory is to contribute generalised understandings of human activity.

Transcending biology – Commensality and the social sciences

Food, its preparation and consumption lie at the very core of society. Any discussion about food and society needs to acknowledge the importance of commensality. The following opinions consider the theoretical significance of what dining around the table means; these perspectives explain how food transcends nutrition and health and

why, in the context of culture, the physiological dimension of food is inextricably intertwined with the symbolic. As Lupton (1996) explains, food practices then become sedimented in a thick layer of meaning which this study explores. Kerner et al. (2015) believe that commensality means much more than simply eating together around the dining table. They argue commensality can provide key insights into culture and that it embodies social relations. In addition, Kerner et al. (2015) suggest that eating patterns of a given group assert collective identity and, in a wider context, the group's hierarchy and organisation. Lupton (1996) also argues for food and eating practices as forms of social embodiment, stating that from a socio-biological standpoint the human diet is culturally structured. Mennell et al. (1992) state that the rite of eating together around a table is one of incorporation and physical union and that sharing infers reciprocity and exchange, confirming a bond.

Commensality and the formation of identity and the transmission of culture from one generation to the next is also a critical process of socialisation; a process whereby the norms and values of society are internalised. This development begins in infancy, "the socialisation of an individual into the foodways of the culture into which he or she has been born starts after weaning" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 54). Eating at the table signifies togetherness and defines a group of socially similar insiders. Rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013), including new family arrivals and departures, birthdays and anniversaries, are celebrated and commemorated by enjoying special foods together around a shared table (Mennell et al., 1992). Commensality, then, is both an expression of love and care, and a way of communicating value in a relationship.

Fischler (2011) argues that eating is far more than a primitive and biological act; he believes that eating can transcend to a higher spiritual essence through sharing food around a table. Recognising this as 'a social fact', Fischler (2011) turns to Simmel (1997), a sociologist and structural theorist, to determine his point. The common meal transforms the exclusively selfish act of eating into a collective social experience and this, according to Simmel (1997), is the immeasurable sociological significance of dining at the shared table. Commensality counteracts the biologically selfish function of eating and turns it into a social experience; it is an essential dimension of the daily meal and "finds its most salient expression in that particular, daily social occurrence" (Fischler, 2011, p. 521).

Functionalist and structuralist approaches

This approach considers individuals actions, thoughts, identities and beliefs as structured through social norms and expectations, broadly linked to the structure and organisation of society. Accordingly, society is viewed as predictable and stable, governed by cultural and social systems. Functionalist and structuralist systems are mostly explored by anthropologists to address the latent meanings of food practices and their role in supporting the behaviour and structures of groups as part of social life (Lupton, 1996). Within this socio-cultural context, dining practices can illustrate the principles of cultural systems; for example, as a material and moral mediator, as a language of food identifying binary oppositions and coded structures, and also to determine the unwritten rules underlying food consumption including ritual surrounding both everyday and special commensality.

A critical structuralist approach tends to look at the macro approach, for instance this study examines how the dining table contributes to social inequality and why this illustrates the concept of power. Gender and dining practices are also analysed in this chapter, adopting the same critical stance in relation to social structure and food consumption, power and patriarchy.

Poststructuralist approach

Whilst these approaches, as outlined above, might be considered 'essentialist' and fail to acknowledge dynamic change (Lupton, 1996), this study has found to the contrary and considers them to be highly insightful and integral to the research approach. A poststructuralist view facilitates a broader critical historical, social, and political analysis, identifying how dining practices and the knowledge and meanings that surround them are reproduced through discourse. Lupton (1996) also emphasises the vital benefits of the historical, social, and political context and awareness of food practices to address cultural meanings and assimilated experiences.

Furthermore, as the chronological study unfolds, the chapter on the 21st century and change reviews the current position from a poststructuralist standpoint. The discussion chapter considers this view, addressing embodiment and subjectivity in contemporary terms. The chapter also determines that food practices do construct identities but in a more fragmented and contingent sense as opposed to a unified self.

Eating at the shared table – A practice

The three approaches discussed above all feature the term 'practice'; the following outlines how dining at the shared table, commensality, constitutes a practice and what the theoretical implications of this are.

The theories of Reckwitz (2002, as cited Warde, 2005; and in Neuman, 2019) determine a *practice* as an *entity* becoming 'Practice'; this is routine behaviour consisting of several interconnected elements including bodily and mental activity, the use of 'things', background knowledge and capability, emotion, and motivation. Practices are inculcated over time and this ensures their survival; however, they are dependent on interconnecting elements, the constant performance of individuals and doing the practice in different ways. Experimentation, resistance, and creativity can change practices and therefore individuals' actions are not irrelevant, their agency, emotions and desires are all acknowledged but socially constrained by the internal dynamics and logics of practices (Neuman, 2019). A different interpretation comes from Lupton (1996), who sees the body as a project, a dynamic entity that is in the process of 'becoming'. Lupton (1996) asserts this is achieved by conscious moulding through 'practices' or technologies of self, written on the body. In short, dining at the shared table comprises all the above determinants constituting a 'Practice'.

Neuman (2019) stresses eating food is largely ordinary and inconspicuous consumption, a routine daily activity without much thought. However, Neuman (2019) also acknowledges that practice-based theorists do study communicative functions and distinctions related to food consumption. This includes investigating the main themes surrounding food and eating, including cultural symbolism. "'Culture' refers to the rules, customs, and other shared plans and behavior that result from this interaction. The understanding of society as interaction, and of culture is the knowledge that dynamically flows from that interaction" (Anderson, 2005, p. 5). Anderson (2005) believes ideas grow out of practice, and from these interactions being repeated across time, 'foodways' become knowledge and culture. The conclusion is that "practice is structured by class, gender, ethnic and regional identities, as well as historical accident and incident" (Anderson, 2005, p. 5).

Most Practices are based on routine and habit, however this “does not mean that power, social reproduction and inequality become irrelevant” (Neuman, 2019, p. 85). Here Neuman (2019) defers to Bourdieu’s argument that routine, presupposed activities, are based on a game, one in which the rules are set up by and for the dominant group. According to Lévi-Strauss (1970, as cited in Lupton, 1996), food consumption ‘practices’ are a language which distinguishes humans as unique, and argues that these practices emphasise the binary oppositions between food and non-food, for example raw and cooked, edible and non-edible, and that these terms serve to define cultures. Furthermore, Lupton (1996) argues that food consumption practices, including dining around the shared table, determine the ritualised and fixed nature of everyday presumptive behaviour in Western cultures.

These arguments support the view that dining around the table exemplifies a ‘Practice’ and illustrates how theory provides a tool for deeper engagement with the subject and more sophisticated explanation.

Commensality and identity

Brillat-Savarin’s (1825/2009) aphorism “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are” finds relevance here. Fischler (1988) argues that food is intimately related to concepts of self and so powerfully symbolic that it is central to our identity; moreover, group eating contributes to diversity, organisation and hierarchy. The principal theory here is that individual identity is “constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to *incorporate*” (Fischler, 1988, p. 275).

Fischler (1988) critically asserts that the centrality of food to individual identity is due to ‘incorporation’, the physical act whereby food crosses the barrier between the outside/world and the inside/body and self. The food is ingested into our physical fabric and becomes part of our belief and collective representation when dining as a group. This suggests eating patterns of a given group assume *collective* identity and, broadly, the group’s wider hierarchy and organisation. In essence, people become what they eat, and in a wider context who they eat with, and this theory has become a powerful symbol of commensality.

Fischler (2011) argues that incorporating food, in both real and imaginary terms, is to incorporate some of its properties, and that this act constructs our beliefs and

collective representations. Murcott (1986) has a similar view, stating that incorporation strengthens collective identity and belonging, whereby the subject absorbs salient features of the food and those sharing the same food become more like each other.

However, Falk (1994) argues that rather than being grounded in common values, there is more a primitive origin to social solidarity which he attributes to the mouth. He emphasises that the role of the mouth has a two-way function; incorporating the community into one's body while being eaten into the community, or "the act of alimentary communion" (Durkheim, 1965, as cited in Falk, 1991, p. 778.). Lupton (1996) also sees the mouth as a potent symbol of consumption and control, describing it as a site of both sensuality and nature and rationality and culture.

Through the study of eating practices, Falk (1991) conceptually defines bodies as 'open' or 'closed'. He argues the former is more typical of pre-modern societies where ritual food consumption was more commonly an integrative mechanism for 'eating-community' and defining boundaries of inside/outside and confirming a place for the participants within it; furthermore, Falk (1991) argues, subjectivity is closely tied to the group, but a notion of a group self rather than individual self. Although Falk (1994) accepts the continued importance of shared meals with family and friends which connote a sense of collectivity, he considers the role of the meal as a collective community-constituting ritual has been marginalised. He argues the individual self today has more control over boundaries around what is taken into the body and with whom, and this judgement of taste is crucial to self-formation, and identity (Falk, 1994).

Lupton (1996) considers food, embodiment, and subjectivity as highly relevant to the sociology of food and eating. Foucault (1988, as cited in Lupton, 1996) writes of 'practices' of self, perceiving bodies as dynamic and subject to conscious moulding through internalised modes of behaviour and thoughts, a process of construction and expression of self. This view includes seeing self-regulation and comportment as culturally shaped and written on the body. Lupton (1996) uses the analogy as above and views eating habits as 'central practices of the self', aligning with Brillat-Savarin's (1825/1999) famous 19th century dictum that people become what they eat.

Mind your manners

In Western societies, the civilised body is constructed and self-contained. According to Lupton (1996), it is highly socially managed and conformed to dominant norms of behaviour and appearance; in contrast, the uncivilised grotesque body is more animalistic. This distinction emerged in the 16th century when 'self-mastery' was bound up broadly with political organisation, with the aim of disciplining and regulating social groups, and when life became increasingly ruled by reason and rationality. Elias' (1939/1978) early work *The Civilising Process* looked at strategies of conduct focused on court society and traced the developments of the construction and regulation of emotions in Western societies. Elias (1939/1978) found that, from the 16th century, Europeans became more sensitive to the cultivation and expression of emotion, developing a sense of self in the process. His analysis demonstrated that restraint and self-consciousness constituted an early form of manners which regulated human interaction (Lupton, 1996). This conduct was applied to roles in hospitality and dining as part of the civilising process (Bober, 1999). Elias (1939/1978) found expectations surrounding human behaviour became more sophisticated over time, with increased notions of shame and repugnance for unsavoury standards. This created a division between what was considered correct, 'civilised' or good behaviour, and 'barbaric' behaviour, which was regarded as bad (Ritzer & Smart, 2001). Public behaviour and ways of presenting self and evaluating others signified social standing, positioning manners and control as socially vital, according to Lupton (1996). Furthermore, and most critically, Elias (1939/1978) traced the influence of manners, inequality and power from the pre-modern court setting to the site of the family.

"The inclusion of table manners is one of the key elements in the process of transmission of culture, social skills, social ethics or social regulation of access to resources" (Fischler, 2011, p. 537). Lupton (1996) takes a different view, stating that civilised behaviour around the dining table represented a desire to assert the primacy of culture above nature and avoid the animalistic nature of humanity.

Jonsson et al. (2021) write that those respecting manners can engender a sense of belonging around the dining table. Table manners are intertwined with manners in society as a whole and are based on internal moral values and external relations with others; they are a coded norm, a way of governing behaviour and structuring social

relations (Romagnoli 1999). Visser (1992) points out an important contrast between structures for formal or casual meals and maintains that sometimes rules can be broken to enhance intimacy. However, Visser (1992) argues that some degree of formality is always required to maintain civil relationships between diners.

Good manners, however superficial, depend on a series of moral choices; whilst they cannot ensure civility, a disorderly society with no coded behaviour is not civilised. The history of good table manners is defined by more modest physicality and the gradual cessation of indiscriminate behaviour (Romagnoli, 1999). Numerous early texts devoted to good manners reached a wide audience and “played an essential role in establishing the rules of civil society; good manners became vital to the complete education of a model citizen” (Romagnoli, 1999, p. 331).

Romagnoli (1999) refers to the popular 16th century treatise on polite behaviour *Galateo*, written by Della Casa, a refined diplomat who reminded readers not to blow one’s nose at the dining table, not to spit on one’s plate, not to interrupt others and not to praise the food, and that there should be no leaning and no slouching. Della Casa also wrote that conversation at the dining table should be merry and not scandalous, respecting the sensibilities of others.

In various historical societies, oral exchange and topics of conversation at the table have been highly regulated. Subjects to avoid might include those that generated conflict, disgust, or general discomfort. In hierarchical settings, the patriarch could direct conversations and sometimes, in religious orders, talking whilst eating was strictly forbidden (Jonsson et al., 2021).

Romagnoli (1999) identified basic manners in the work of a later author, an early 19th century Italian poet, Carlo Porta, which formed part of every child’s education and primary socialisation. This text echoed norms established 500 years earlier and included the following: wait patiently to be served and keep elbows off the table. *Do Not*: be greedy, lick your lips, open your mouth wide, touch the serving dish, speak when eating, dip bread into wine, pick teeth with a knife or dry sweat with the table napkin.

The foundation for manners and table etiquette still observed today have a formidable history. “The consumption of meals is a carefully cultured phenomenon” (Visser, 1992,

p. ix), a systematic sequence of rules governing places and times to eat, specific equipment, decoration, limited movement, and physical decorum (Visser, 1992).

One of Visser's (1992) theories suggests such controls are necessary because sharing food around a dining table is potentially dangerous, and violence could erupt at any time. Visser (1992) argues that table manners are a 'social agreement' to defuse conflict; knives, for example, present a material danger so rules about cutting at the dining table and knife placement reassure diners on a deeper level that they are safe. Now the study continues by examining the wider concept of risk and the shared table.

Risks of commensality – Disgust, taboo and temptation

Foodstuffs classified as edible and good to eat, or inedible and bad, are subject to rules of propriety and intracultural context (Visser, 1992). The process of 'incorporation' is not only a site of identity but is also subjective and inextricably linked to anxiety and risk (Lupton, 1996). Fischler (1988) sees incorporation as an action sending food between the boundaries of 'inside' and 'outside' with the body 'becoming self' during the transitory liminal phase. Fischler (1998) further states that the process is closely linked to subjectivity, and as such is a source of great anxiety and risk.

The act of eating is both banal and fraught with danger (Fischler, 1998). 'Suspicious' foods can be substances that are considered impure or taboo, and are recognised through cultural identification and classification (Fischler, 2011). Lupton (1996) argues that confrontations with food at the table create tension. If someone does not know what they are eating, there is a question of subjectivity and the individual's place in culture. Eating the wrong food could lead to contamination, a transformation from within and a 'dispossession' of self, making dining at the table an uncomfortable experience. 'Consubstantiation' is another risk when the sharing of food touched by others is considered 'contaminated' or polluted. However, this practise can also indicate greater closeness and intimacy in personal relationships (Fischler, 2011).

Commensality forges bonds and strengthens sociality but is not without risk or pain, as shared occasions can foster integration yet also fragment commensal groups. Any food can be tainted, although food shared in trusted circles with family or others provides more reassurance. The risk increases the more unfamiliar or strange the participants (Fischler, 2011).

Neophobia (fear of unknown foods) has consequences at the shared table. Close examination of any suspicious food or any expression of disgust breaches rules of etiquette and is considered antagonistic but this is common behaviour. Tensions between close relatives are common and gatherings can easily erupt, due to conflict or betrayal, most famously depicted in *The Last Supper*. Consider the ubiquitous Sunday lunch, “a supposed focus of family integration and harmony can bear witness to expression of intra-familial conflicts and jealousies sometimes with violent responses” (Ellis, 1983, p. 85).

The dining table is where commensals address the eternal dietary dilemma of the ‘omnivore’s paradox’, which Fischler (1988) terms a ‘double bind’: *neophilia*, where survival depends on a predisposition to seek novelty and variety in the diet and involves risk. In contrast, *neophobia*, distrust of unfamiliar foods, which involves caution and can give rise to ‘distrustful’ behaviour, especially when dining in unknown territory.

Falk (1991) disagrees, describing “the *neophilic* search for new taste sensations ... new combinations and mixtures, as the dynamic principle of innovation – the transgressive practice located in the demarcation of pleasure and disgust” (p. 783). Falk (1985) also draws attention to the “pleasure principle” of transgression when consuming taboo foods that are feared and disgusting, arguing it is not related to dangerous boundaries, of death or psychosis, but instead functions to affirm and reproduce order. Food that is prohibited almost begs transgression, the fascinating thing about ‘forbidden fruit’, according to Falk (1991), is that it becomes particularly sweet *just because* it is forbidden. This theory recalls Adam and Eve and the theme of temptation, sin and mortality, the notion of incorporation, and various other complexities leading to the Fall of Man, which lie outside the scope of this study (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Genesis 1-3).

Disgust, a sense of revulsion and pollution, can be aroused by doubt and suspicion stemming from cultural and religious phenomena. Many foods also carry the risk of contamination and even poison. Carlin and Rosenthal (1998) write that during the Medieval reign of the French Valois kings, poison could easily be slipped into a dish or physical assassination attempted in the dining room. Likewise, in England during the Middle Ages the ‘cup bearer’ at a Medieval banquet had a perilous role; etiquette

dictated that he first tasted the King's/Lord's water or wine for poison (Hammond, 2005). Over the centuries, kings and commoners have invited guests, both friend and foe, to their table with sinister ulterior motives. Many dinner guests have been arrested, poisoned, murdered, or even eaten (Kerner et al., 2015).

Cannibalism, the consumption of human flesh, is the most dramatic example of prohibition and carries the most universal taboo. Yet, according to Beardsworth and Keil (1997), the violation of this taboo in extreme situations of food deprivation is regarded with a mixture of abhorrence and morbid curiosity.

The failure of a wife to fulfil her husband's expectations with respect to family meals could lead to violence (Murcott, 1982). In extreme circumstances, substandard quality, a limited range of meals offered or failure to observe a meal timetable were considered serious derelictions of female duty and could provoke anger, considered by Ellis (1983) as the manifestation of patriarchal domination. Disagreements about food and family meals were also cited in many divorce proceedings (Burgoyne & Clarke, 1983). These opinions perpetuate themes from a patriarchal society where masculine gender was molded by violent stereotypes and this needs to be re-examined in a more contemporary light where masculine prototypes are being challenged and de-structured. Additionally, this study acknowledges that contemporary issues around gender, family and consumption practices, including practices surrounding the dining table, are being re-evaluated in more recent scholarship which falls beyond the scope of this study.

Falk (1991) argues that one of the most fundamental distinctions made by humans is between edible and inedible foods. In this respect, Lévi-Strauss (1968/2012) attributes the role of fire and the transformation of food from the raw to the cooked state as the emergence of humanity (see also Goody, 1982). Fischler (2011) emphasises this point, arguing that raw food is fraught with danger – a 'wildness' that can be tamed by cooking and safely ingested by the body. This process of cooking, importantly, orders the place of food and its eaters in the world which inscribes food with a deeper meaning.

Leach (1964, as cited in Falk, 1991) identified three edible/inedible food distinctions: edible substances consumed in a normal diet; edible substances recognised as food

but prohibited subject to special conditions; edible substances that are determined by culture and language as not recognisably food – or consciously tabooed.

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) argue that food taboos are not merely a decision based on nutrition or metabolism but that any given culture can reject or accept nutritious food items and include those of dubious nutritional origin. In cultural and historic contexts, certain foods can carry a potent negative symbolic charge and be associated with disease, immorality and even ritual pollution. Conversely, other food items may have associations with health, moral rectitude, and spiritual purity (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) propose that when humans eat, they consume not just nutrients but experiences, meanings, and symbols. Every aliment carries a symbolic charge of meaning with such central importance that sometimes even starving is considered preferable to eating substances that are culturally prohibited. When humans eat, they eat with the mind as much as the mouth, and the symbolic associations of food are practically limitless. Some foods are associated with hedonism, carrying overtones of luxury, self-indulgence and risk. For example, chocolate is related to pleasure but may also lead to health anxieties (Beardsworth, 1990).

Dining at home – The family table, a private sphere

Wilk (2010) determines two aspects of the family meal, normative and performative, highlighting discrepancies between romanticised ideals associated with the family meal. These ideals might include intimacy, interaction, sociability, connection, foundation of society, togetherness, harmony, love and nurture. By contrast, the reality can involve conflict, subordination and coercion (Wilk, 2010).

Moreover, Wilk (2010) argues two things, that the 'nuclear' family is not the main unit of commensality, and that commensality is not the most universally preferred form of eating. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) establish that the terms 'family' and 'household' are not synonymous, arguing that there are now many types of household and that the nuclear family is but part of a wider family system. This section examines how eating at the table marks and forges links across family boundaries and differentiation.

Parts of this section are based on the nuclear family composed of parents and children, which represents a specific phase in the lifecycle of any given individual and is critical

for socialisation. However, many other types of households exist, and each combination will demonstrate a variety of consumption patterns which may not adhere to conventional assumptions. The distribution of household types has changed consistently and significantly in recent decades, including within the nuclear family (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). The challenge to the narrative and normativity of family dining is addressed in Chapter Seven, "Discussion and Conclusions".

The mammalian link is the fundamental form of food sharing, from there a child is gradually socialised into a family which can undergo a gradual process of separation and sometimes dislocation. Fischler (2011) affords commensality with the ability to preserve, revitalise, build up or revitalise kinship, stating it can even restore fractured familial relationships. Additionally, festive occasions can bring dispersed families together and restore family ties by sharing food at the table.

In her seminal essay "Deciphering a Meal", Douglas (1997) examines the grammar of food by coding the meals in her own home, and describes eating, like talking, as a patterned activity. Douglas (1997) searches for messages about degrees of family hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions and concluded that the anchorage of social lives can be determined by a syntagmatic sequence of domestic meals. Douglas (1997) analyses the structural elements of a meal, demonstrating that the food of the day comes in an ordered pattern, the food of the week comes in another pattern, as do the series of lifecycle feasts. Douglas (1997) concludes that the meaning of any meal is found in a system of repeated analogies, each building on the other. Douglas (1997) asserts that dietary rules are universal and divided between edible and inedible. They bound the area of structured relations, and within that area rules apply but outside it anything goes. In summary, the ordered systems of meals represent all the wider ordered structures around them.

Furthermore, Douglas (1997) emphasises that the repetitive, structured sequence of meals is a crucial way to express and experience family membership, and this is also suggested here, "The sharing of meals draws the boundaries of a family's symbolic and emotional existence" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 74).

Kerr and Charles' (1986) study in the north of England found the concept of a 'proper' family meal was very important, this comprised freshly prepared meat supported by

potatoes and vegetables consumed at the dining table. This everyday meal (or other elaborate festive forms) was a key indicator of a 'proper family' and was applied across class divisions. In her study, Murcott (1982) found the regular provision of a 'cooked meal' was vital for the health and welfare of family members and therefore a crucial obligation passed from generation to generation. Murcott (1982) describes this as a neat demonstration of subordination, with the imposition of culinary and nutritional responsibilities attributed to women.

However, some women disagree, since "feeding a family is a skilled practise, a craft in which many women feel pride and much satisfaction" (DeVault, 1991a, p. 196).

DeVault (1991a) states that wives care for family members because they consider the work valuable and important, not just undertaken due to coercion by despotic husbands. Pilcher (2006) has a slightly different approach, reporting that the mundane task of daily cooking and serving meals conveys a form of female power within the family, despite how devalued women's domestic work is in wider society. However, DeVault (1997) ultimately agrees with Murcott (1982), saying such work is only valued by those that do it, and it is implicated subtly and pervasively in relations of inequality between men and women. The provision of meals is a highly gendered activity, falling to the woman, which also symbolises her identity in the home as carer.

After divorce, men found great difficulty in their domestic arrangements but went to a lot of effort to maintain conventional eating patterns "in order to sustain a sense of domestic security and continuity for their children" (Burgoyne & Clark, 1983, p. 85).

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) include 'hospitality' in home commensality, which they describe as the human experience of simply eating together and taking the food someone has provided for another. Hospitality extends beyond the circle of family; this leads to patterns of the nuclear family linking to extended family and more widely into the community. Inviting a non-family person to dine on food normally eaten at one's home is the highest expression of friendship and at the minimum it is a friendly gesture (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

Hospitality is a commensal institution that assists human social evolution with events beyond the domestic sphere and can be a way to nurture a human world divided by ethnicity, nationality, religion, and class. Globalisation and global encounters have

promoted more cross-cultural and cross-national experiences in hospitality commensality, which has made this category particularly important for human interaction and socialisation (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

In summary, eating patterns reflect family processes; the day-to-day routine of commensality reinforces family relationships and boundaries yet also reflects gender inequalities and male dominance within the family.

DeVault's (1991b) study describes family work as jointly material and interpersonal. Feeding needs to integrate diverse schedules so the family can gather together, and by establishing needs and preferences this becomes a personalised family space, a place of shared understanding. DeVault (1991b) recognises this ideological component, but she argues that women have learnt about this from mothers, female friends, media and education, and they also draw from historical discourse on the concept of family. Appropriate routines are formed by blending these sources of learning, as listed above, with personal, idiosyncratic ideas to produce their own version of 'family' through day-to-day routines in a localised setting, thus forming a household life. DeVault's (1991b) study, entitled *'Feeding produces 'family'* demonstrates how women collect and tame unruly components, coaxing them into a 'family' where the concept of 'feeding' begins long before setting the dining table.

Dining at the shared table

Primary socialisation

Mealtimes around the table are described as "cultural sites for the socialisation of persons into competent and appropriate members of society" (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 35). Meals at the table are mostly conventional social practice and provide a fertile arena for understandings of the local morality, sociality, and knowledge. These meals are also a cultural vehicle for eating and reinforcing relationships that sustain or question the social order.

Ochs and Shohet (2006) identify two key elements of mealtime practices for children: cultural apprenticeship and language socialisation. They also identify how children can use food through determined refusal as a form of resistance and a form of extreme social control. Ochs and Shohet (2006) also believe everyday mealtimes involving

multigenerational commensality are the key to dynamic communication where children learn to act, think, and feel emotion whilst nourishing the body

Fischler (2011) believes babies acquire elaborate social skills very early on (at around 12 months) and that much of their socialisation process is connected to food, eating around the dining table, and behaving in an appropriate manner. Children experiencing neophobia (fear of unknown foods) and a refusal of/disgust for certain foods is most acute between ages two and five and is resolved through education at the family table and with peer groups (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997).

Eating around the table in childhood is “not always a bowl of cherries” (Smith, 2002, p. 6), Veiled threats coerce children into eating food promoted as ‘healthy’ – ‘if you don’t eat this you won’t grow big and strong’; or underpinned by guilt – ‘think of the millions of starving children’. These incentives are framed by a rigorous framework of manners, and the same basic principles survive today (Smith, 2002).

Lupton (1996) discusses how food and mealtimes may play a part in the socialisation of a child. Light discipline could control what is eaten and encourage polite mealtime behaviour and table manners. Furthermore, Birch and Fisher (1996, as cited in Smith, 2002) observed that the practice of forcing children to eat disliked foods or lying about the food consumed had consequences. Such treatment could result in associative learning by placing it in a negative social context, affecting both the relationship with the adult concerned and future taste preferences. For example, the writer had a childhood aversion to cold custard (served at school lunch every Friday) that remains to this day.

Dining at the table can establish a foundation for life-long practice. “‘Habits’, ‘behavior’ and ‘preferences’ acquired in childhood shape those of adulthood” (Mennell et al., 1992, p. 58), and create patterns that resist change. Pelto (1987) also argues that good nutrition in childhood contributes to securing a healthy adulthood.

Organisational commensality, socialisation and inequality

Elias (1939/1978) demonstrated that table manners could influence social order, whether on a small scale such as ‘civilising’ a member of court or on a larger scale by structuring the distribution of power within a nation state. Elias (1939/1978) argued that Medieval courtly etiquette manuals were essentially political agendas which

impacted individuals and society. Stricter table rules were underpinned by self-restraint, a mark of distinction and commitment to the monarch and the centralised nation state.

However, Vester (2015) suggests that the application of discipline to institute refinement of manners resulted both in increasing individualisation and hierarchic division. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) partially agree, arguing that table etiquette requires knowledge and training, confirming that manners serve a class system and reinforce snobbery.

Discussion of inequality at the dining table extends to Bourdieu's theories of 'cultural capital' and 'habitus'. According to Vester (2015), Bourdieu (1979) analysed how upper and lower-class tastes are generated and re-produced, arguing that food tastes and sustained consumption practices, including dining at the table, are vehicles for expressing social distinction and judgement which originate from habitus and class (Vester, 2015). Beardsworth and Keil (1997) emphasise that these practices do create and sustain hierarchic distinctions. There is some consensus here: "Taste is socially constructed rather than innate and the primary mechanism for its construction is social class" (Sloan, 2004, p. 20).

However, as Sloan (2004) points out, many criticise Bourdieu by arguing that social class has lost its relevance in contemporary society. Vester (2015) also has an egalitarian view; he sees food as a favoured vehicle through which to acquire significant cultural capital yet suggests only modest financial resources are required to achieve this today.

Bourdieu (1979, as cited in Vester, 2015) noted the significant space of the dining table. He identified this as a site where power relations are both negotiated and incorporated. Vester (2015) also applies the Foucauldian term 'biopolitics' to Elias' (1939/1978) work on the democracy of food. Vester (2015) argues that the regulation of populations is achieved not only through government policy but also through other more intangible yet powerful cultural sources which involve practices, including dining at the table. Fischler (2011) extends this argument, stating that one clear function of commensality, sharing food around a table with others, is to socialise individuals into

specific rules involving co-operation, confirming that dining is deeply rooted in structure and social experience.

Political commensality

Each mode of commensality features a political dimension, firstly, by encompassing the ‘gastropolitics’ of inclusion/exclusion (Pollock, 2012) in both the public and the private sector; secondly, by involving public commensality, with a socio-political motive underpinned by power plays; and thirdly, through the interest of states, past and present, in the health (and body) of their citizens.

Eating is a social act, involving rules of hierarchy, solidarity, boundary making and symbolic expression, and therefore it becomes communication with significant social relations. Chee-Beng (2015) maintains this makes commensality relevant to social organisations and, more broadly, political organisation.

The politics of commensality are important in human history. Kings, emperors, and noble families have routinely used feasting to express power and status. Today, the ‘National Feast’ is equally important when conducting foreign affairs and entertaining foreign dignitaries. Invitations to these significant events, and their strictly designated seating plans consistently confirm rank and hierarchy in the play of politics and power.

According to Albala (2007), all meals contain a script and possibly all participants are actors, summarising the idea that the meal is a highly structured and staged performance. He argues state banquets serve as propaganda by displaying the wealth and power of the host and create an image of stability, order and hierarchy. These commensal events are also a mechanism through which to introduce and promote national dishes and highlight local foods for export, which reinforces national identity and provides economic opportunity (Kerner et al., 2015).

“Diplomatic commensality is a ubiquitous tool in the art of statecraft” (Morgan, 2012, p. 146). When world leaders gather around the dining table, much more is communicated than just conversation. Such events can range from a state dinner with all the associated protocol and splendour to an informal working lunch energised with the frisson of quiet power. Negotiating the nuances of symbolic communication here is often tricky but critical in providing the practitioners of statecraft with the ability to harness and control the powers that join them at the shared table (Morgan, 2012).

Feasts and rites of passage

Feasts are important – they are a worldwide social and political practice. Feasts are events that are lived and experienced around the shared dining or banquet table, and they are often intimately embedded in rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013). These celebrations make *and* mark the passage of individuals through the life course. Such significant celebrations include birth, religious ceremonies, engagement, marriage, healing and death, as well as Western calendrical transitions such as New Year, Thanksgiving, Easter or Christmas, and other distinctive events (Hockey, 2002). Feasts are defined as sumptuous meals with many guests. They are considered pleasurable events due to the social relations they foster and express, and also the aesthetic and sensual experience they engender. Exploring feasts is a way to examine ritual and ceremony, kinship, economic transactions and social relations. However, feasts can also highlight differentiation, for example, which is a central theme of international power relations, specifically structural power (Caplan, 2021).

It seems remiss not to mention the canonical image of *The Last Supper* once again in this study of the history of the dining table, for this is the ultimate representation of a 'rite of passage' (Van Gennep, 2013). It is a meal that collapses time, a shared meal which "speaks to the porous boundary between a recollected meal, and any form of idealisation or sacralisation and the quotidian meal of the present moment" (Barkan, 2021, p. 250) and which likewise speaks of blessing, betrayal and risk. The image communicates the salience of commensality, and not only highlights the centrality of food as a nutritional source of life but also articulates intersecting causality and meaning that are deeply symbolic.

Feasts and celebratory meals have a particular potency, derived from the ritual expression and intimacy of the powerful idiom of hospitality commensality. The food and drink consumed are vitally charged symbolic media which become embedded material culture ingested into the body, described as "highly condensed social facts" (Appadurai, 1981, p. 494). This is a reminder that eating and drinking is never purely biological. Feasts signify their expression through social solidarity and similarity, defining and reaffirming togetherness (Mennell et al., 1992). Feasts are also active sites for the highly emblematic representation of social relations, expressing idealised concepts about how people believe relations exist rather than how they are

manifested in daily activity. The powerful, symbolic force of celebratory, ceremonial feasts constitutes a euphemism for broader social relations (Dietler & Hayden, 2001). Appadurai (1981) suggests marriage feasts are quintessentially gastro-political arenas, and Caplan (2012) sees feasts as economic transactions involving reciprocity. Similarly, Bourdieu (1979) argues that feasts and ceremonies require work to reproduce established relations and need an economic base, concealed in the form of labour as a gift exchange, invoking reciprocity as discussed earlier in this chapter. Dietler and Hayden (2001) agree, calling such events 'meta productions' of specialised gift exchange between host and guest.

Ritual feasts are rich cultural sites which construct moral discourse and reaffirm sentiment (Elias, 1939/1978). They are also central arenas of social action reflecting changes in culture and society which have had a profound impact on politics and the course of historical transformations. "Feasts can serve as mechanisms for the transformation of informal power into institutionalised formal political roles" (Dietler & Hayden, 2001, p. 17), and also provide a function for the manipulation of ideological and personal goals. Furthermore, Dietler and Hayden (2001) describe feasts as social institutions and consider them to be important cultural practices.

The ritual meal connotes tradition and nostalgia, it connects past events with the present and is often expressed by means of myth (Gilhus, 2006); Lévi-Strauss (1995) concurs, suggesting mythology plays a great role in all cultures. Rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013) are about generating memories, upholding tradition and nostalgia, and are inherited practises from family or community where food can be crucially significant, connoting a time that arouses emotion, evoking a 'Proustian' past that is still significant for the present. Food is a particularly powerful and diffuse locus of memory which, Holtzman (2006) also argues, is due to the sensuality of eating which transmits powerful mnemonic cues, principally through smells and tastes.

Furthermore, Holtzman (2006) asserts that the symbolic importance of food combined with the bodily experience of food are what constitute the potency of food memories.

In his discussion of *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep (2013) examined humanistic ritual for similarities of form and discovered patterns and structures surrounding various rites. Van Gennep (2013) identified a schema of ritual commonalities which he maintains is how societies manage social change, aligning rites of passage with processes of liminal,

psychological transition between states of being. Gray (2021) claims these rites “bring meaning to an otherwise arbitrary reality, laying foundations for life” (para. 4), and emphasises the need for structure and context to justify sentient existence, without which everyone would be simply marching into oblivion. Rites of passage embrace the trappings of ritual, they are ‘meaning markers’ and memory makers, they define relationships to others and to oneself. However, Visser (1992) maintains rituals and practices both construct and continue tradition and, similarly, Hockey (2002) maintains rites of passage *need* to be flexible to regenerate and stabilise the social order, although Mauss (1990) saw them more critically as ‘law’ and fixed, but this is somewhat contextual.

The most pertinent argument around rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013) is how they affect the notion of time, by creating calendrical events which create rather than mediate access to time. Also, over the passage of a human lifetime, as commensal feasts mark rituals and rites, they tick the unnoticed clock. These events build the blocks of human experience and outline identities, they confirm the linearity of time and the temporal experience of human mortality. Rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013) are acts of repetition which pattern social experience, meaning the time of the life course is experienced through spatialised reiterations. This, according to Turner (1969), governs all the matrices of human relations and structure of society; moreover, Bloch and Parry (1982) extend this argument even further by stating that social order is a product of ritual.

Rites of passage have been celebrated around shared dining tables across millennia and have a number of functions: they construct identity and are important sites of sociality. Van Gennep (2013) concludes that rites of passage have manifestly influenced the evolution and structure of society, quantifying their critical power and significance.

Dining out

Pillsbury (1990) sees restaurants as mirrors of culture and as symbols of contemporary life, arguing that the city remains the prime location for eating in the public sphere, a defining activity of cultural distinction. Bell and Valentine (1997) examine eating out as a social activity; however, they found that even democratised eating in family

restaurants was a heavily stratified activity largely due to the nature of its public location. They argue that what is eaten at home is private, but in public everything is on display.

Restaurants are entertainment and are just as concerned with mood and desire as the food. The restaurant offers a total consumption package. Eating in the public domain is a mode of communication demonstrated by standing and distinction, “with the readymade ambience of the restaurant itself” (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, pp. 142-143). How did this popular and meaningful social activity of ‘dining out’ begin? A brief synopsis of ‘eating out’ follows, but the broader social and cultural factors explaining the rise of gastronomy and the restaurant is covered in Chapter Six, “The 19th Century, Gastronomy – The 21st Century, Change”.

Pitte (1999) traces the origin of the restaurant to the dawn of recorded history. In Antiquity there were inns along major roads placed some distance from towns for eating and resting. Takeaways, street food and cookshops are nothing new – popular fish and chips shops in the United Kingdom predated McDonald’s by a century according to Mennell et al. (1992).

Inns and private hotels were close approximations to the later restaurants. 17th century coffee houses contributed significantly to the development of the public sphere as centres of gossip, political intrigue and commercial economy (Habermas, 1962, as cited in Bell & Valentine, 1997); later, taverns became notable social centres for eating and drinking. “Coffee houses, taverns and restaurants created a well-informed and knowledgeable eating *public* ... and made possible an autonomous domain of critical and political public opinion” (Mennell et al., 1992, p. 83). Spang (2000) supports this in respect of the food, stating that by the mid-19th century “public gastronomic sensibility became one of the distinctive features of modern life” (Spang, 2000, p. 7).

Warde and Martens (2000, as cited in Smith, 2002) describe eating out as a social activity done in the company of others. The very term ‘eating out’ can be misleading, since the vast proportion of meals eaten outside the home today are from takeaways and cafes, in clubs or leisure facilities, and the majority are consumed in pubs (Wood, 1992). Wilson (2012) describes the café as a site of many things including information

gathering and politicking, a sometime labour exchange, university, and even dating agency. However, dining out in a restaurant is still a special occasion marked by suitable ritual (Wood, 1992).

The public dining experience is complex. Mennell et al. (1992) discuss Finkelstein's (1989) work which critiques eating out as a social activity, arguing that it is a prescribed form of social conduct which shapes the personal desires of patrons, commodifying human emotions. Selecting a restaurant should express personal taste, yet Finkelstein (1989) argues the restaurant is an artifice where participants imitate others and follow fashion without self-awareness, resulting in an 'uncivilised' society.

Caplan (1997) points out that Finkelstein's (1989) argument sees dining out as a failed civility due to high consumerism and the modernist fragmentation of self which only places value on material objects. Caplan's (1997) opinion counters this stance by arguing that the ordinary consuming public works hard to invest food with moral, social, and aesthetic meaning, blaming intellectual tradition for desocialising the individual. Furthermore, Caplan (1997) asserts that people dining around a table develop their own taxonomies and articulate satisfaction or dissatisfaction; as such, they can have individual agency over their dining experience.

The act of eating out involves enacting a set of stylised encounters, argued by Finkelstein (1989) to be mannered and structured, with restaurants declared by Wood (1992) to be 'theatres of the absurd'. Additionally, Bell and Valentine (1997) discuss how contemporary public consumption practices are subject to socio-spatial, structured, and interactive elements. Despite these detractors, eating out is an increasingly popular leisure activity, with Wood (1992) emphasising the cultural pervasiveness of public dining. Similarly, Spang (2000) maintains that even in the mid-19th century, the word *restaurant* meant something very specific and created an aura of sophistication with a suggestion of novelty and mystery.

Erickson (2004) takes a 'performative practice' approach in her study on dining out, describing the dining table as the spotlight on a restaurant stage, a carefully managed site which features the exchange of cash for food and services where everyone has their roles and designated areas. Customers and staff jockey for position, staking their territory. The customer has the initial power, but can the restaurant satisfy their

consumer desires and meet expectations? Erickson (2004) maintains the staff have an even stronger sense of ownership and the jockeying for space and governing rules plays out in an exchange of service.

“Restaurants inhabit a peculiar space somewhere between the public world of the market and the private realm of home and family” (Erickson, 2007, p. 22). Going out to eat means entering a different world, a social world in a play of sociability where much more is taking place than just business.

Religious commensality – Eating at the Heavenly High Table

The term commensality, described by Van Esterik (2015) as the moral core of human society, originates from religious worship and the practice of eating together at a dedicated sacrifice. This act ties the worshippers or ‘commensals’ together with a bond of friendship and mutual obligation. This positions commensality beyond biological consumption.

Gilhus (2006) states that ritual meals are mythically connected to the past, present and future. In his study of sacrifice he maintains that if ancient religion is “defined as communication with culturally postulated superhuman beings” (Gilhus, 2006, p. 206) then there are three types of beings: gods, intermediary angels and demons and the dead. Communications with these types of beings turned meals into sanctified ritual, wholly or partly, and had general meanings or functions. Commensal meals could be sacrificial and based on the actual slaughter of an animal, or non-sacrificial and based on a symbolic or mythological sacrifice. Christianity rejected the animal sacrifice but adapted sacrificial discourse in their interpretation of the gospel. The promise of salvation was embodied in their ritual, the sacrificial meal of the Christian Eucharist, also known as the Lord’s Supper, and consumed by commensals at God’s table, the altar (Gilhus, 2015).

Simmel (1910, as cited in Mennell et al., 1992) asserts that the significance of social commensality originated in the ceremonial use of food in ancient religion. By imposing formality on the fluctuating personal needs of an individual, the meal became an ‘aesthetic stylisation’. He also argues that taking meals together at a fixed hour led to temporal regularity and was a conquest over the naturalness of eating.

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) agree that religious feasting is conducted to honour the gods and is also socially significant by bringing a group of kin or worshippers together and reinforcing their fellowship through commensality and symbolism.

Commensality is an essential part of most global religious celebrations; Id al-Adha (Feast of Sacrifice) is just one example among many where sacrificed food is eaten, normally mutton or beef. Fischler (2011) connects the incorporation principle as a central component of religious commensality. He maintains the rules of the *Kashrut* (diet and food rules found in the Torah) have been a critical cohesive factor in Judaism over millennia. The principle of incorporation also applies to the Christian sacrament (Fischler, 2011). Rituals around religious food consumption represents it as a dangerous act in which bodily boundaries are crossed, and participants are compelled to bless themselves at the 'opening' and 'closing' of the body, to protect themselves (Lupton, 1996).

Religious dichotomies are a means to create boundaries between different religions and religious groups. In regard to commensality and edible entities, these dichotomies include the following: "sacrifice and non-sacrifice, sacrifice and metaphorical sacrifice, meat and vegetarian diets, frugal diet and overeating; equality and hierarchy, purity and pollution and commensality and solitary eating" (Gilhus, 2015, p. 216). These symbolic alimentary distinctions create specific edible, religious identities.

Around the dining table – Material and symbolic

The word 'commensality' implies a material aspect of the dining table and includes the location of the meal, its utensils and other material infrastructure. The symbolic dimension of dining around the table imbues objects and actions with meaning and these represent ideas or qualities. For instance, in Antiquity, Romans attending the *convivium* lay on divans in a reclining pose; the divans were material, but the power this pose connoted was symbolic. Power relations are also mediated by material objects at the dining table, seating positions for example, which again are symbolic and material (Jonsson et al., 2021). Wilk (2010) provides another example by drawing attention to small material objects which reinforce hierarchies in terms of who holds the serving dish, and who serves the food from the dish. The implicit and explicit knowledge of table manners and other social codes illustrate how the materiality of

the meal and the symbolic meaning of manners convey social connotations. The *material* and *symbolic* aspects of commensality have evolved throughout history and are active parts of cultural change.

Take your seat at the table

Dining around the table is an unrivalled site for social relations, where body and soul, matter and spirit meet, governed by external etiquette and internal ethics (Romagnoli, 1999).

Not all cultures eat around a table *per se* but they all have rules and customs of regulation. Seating, sharing food and manners are all highly scripted. Techniques for eating are dictated by material surroundings; either seated at a table with cutlery or semi-reclining on rugs and cushions using only hands to eat. Complex codes governing table manners have been elaborated across centuries and handed down through generations, none of which would have developed in a fast-food culture, argues Romagnoli (1999).

Trestles were the first material tables – literally boards on trestles which were set up and taken down as required. This is the origin of the expression ‘set the table’. These basic tables had no intrinsic value and were covered with cloths – the ‘tablecloth’. The first designated dining rooms were found in Medieval monasteries, where the refectory was reserved for the monk’s meals (Romagnoli, 1999).

Commensal eating is influenced by the shape and style of the table; it is connected to the physical circumstances and relates to the interaction between participants (Visser, 1992). The long rectangular table is more adapted to vertical commensality or ‘hierarchy’ with a prominent seat at each end, with benches or seats along one side only for optimum visibility of the other ‘inferior’ diners. The attention of the participants is focused on the central principal guest or couple. This is opposed to horizontal commonality with benches or seats along both sides for more informal friendly gatherings (Visser, 1992).

Round tables are the model shape, where exchanges between participants manifest equality as no-one seated around a circular table should have precedence (Fischler, 2011). Mennell et al. (1992) maintain that the round table enhances intimacy and

encourages social bonding; by virtue of its materiality, conversation is also more conducive which can lift the weightiness of protocol.

The seating around a dining table always makes a statement, either political, social or religious. “Seating arrangements are one of the most intricate aspects of table protocol, ... seating is always a deeply political act” (Visser, 1992, p. 121). As Fischler (2011) confirms, the positioning of companions at a dining table has always been an expression of power. Seating is determined by gender, relationship, age and degree of intimacy between the company. These arrangements are governed by relationships between the participants and places them in a hierarchal structure. However, circular tables render these distinctions irrelevant (Fischler, 2011). Utensils and other accessories are required at any dining table and are subject to complex cultural rules; a brief history follows below.

The cutting edge – Knives, forks and plates

The use of the fork is an important stage in the evolution of culture. A two-pronged version supposedly originated in Byzantium, but centuries passed before it was widely accepted (Wilson, 2012). Originally, knives were the only tableware owned by individuals for their singular use, and boards or large flat breads were the first plates and commonly shared. Even by 1730, an engraving shows the court of Louis XV were all still eating with their fingers (Flandrin, 1999). The fork transitioned from being a pretentious object of ridicule to becoming an indispensable part of civilised dining, but whilst the fork is an ancient kitchen tool, its widespread use is relatively recent. Wilson (2012) describes the union of the knife and fork as a stately dance, where the aim is to slow down the unseemly business of mastication; together they are inextricably bound up with the experience of eating. Wilson (2012) argues the fork affects the entire culinary universe, changing not just the *how* of eating but the *what*. Chopsticks manage to achieve with one hand what knives and forks do with two; although all the food needs to be pre-cut, chopsticks also avoid the violent taboo of a knife.

The ‘shallow’ dish appeared in the 16th century and signalled the end of sharing utensils at the dining table; instead, a knife, spoon and cup were given to individual guests. Only serving utensils were shared, and placing these in the mouth was strictly forbidden. Food was transferred from common shared plates to the individual shallow

dishes and gradually indiscriminate table habits of the past were banished (Flandrin, 1999). Furthermore, Romagnoli (1999) attributes the proliferation of specialised tableware to the transition from moveable tables in a large communal hall to solid tables permanently placed in a designated dining room. These gradual sophistications led to an escalation of prevailing norms as etiquette became more pronounced.

Commensality – Some features and functions

Commensality means more than sharing food together and is bound by implicit instructions and codes for most human eating circumstances. Fischler (2011) attributes the following functions to commensality.

- The habitual sharing of food implies dependence or reciprocal involvement.
- Commensality creates inclusion in a group or community or exclusion for those not taking part.
- Commensality demonstrates both equality and hierarchy, who gets served first or who sits where around a dining table.

Grignon (2001) states that consuming food and drink together activates and tightens internal solidarity but also allows the limits of groups to be redrawn, internal hierarchies restored and refined if necessary. In short, commensality strengthens social bonds but also determines social demarcation and hierarchical distinction, as Fischler (2011) sets out in the list above.

Conclusion

These theoretical perspectives as outlined above provide an insight into some of the arguments and analysis included in Chapter Seven, “Discussion and Conclusions”. After Chapter Three on “Methodology – Research Design”, the following Chapters Four, Five and Six comprise the research findings: “Antiquity, Greek and Roman”; “Medieval and Renaissance”; and “The 19th Century, Gastronomy – The 21st Century, Change”.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY – RESEARCH DESIGN

This dissertation is a historical exploration of what it means to be ‘*around the dining table*’. The research involves studying the dining table as a tool of socialisation and identity construction and its socio-cultural role in the structure and evolution of society.

The aim and purpose of this study is to examine how and why the dining table is significant, and to discover the complexities of commensality, thus validating the power of dining at the shared table. Two supporting questions provide the opportunity for a more compelling study by extending the inquiry to gain a broader socio-cultural perspective and generate deeper meaning. This is a gastronomy dissertation and the rationale for an historical approach was twofold. Firstly, the dining table embodies the principles of gastronomy (see Chapter One, “What is gastronomy?”, p. 3), both have their origins in history, and it seemed logical to examine them together. Secondly, the principal endeavour was to explore the full scope of the dining table, and this required inquiry across a wider socio-cultural and historical framework. The research aim and questions that follow motivated the research design as outlined in the following paragraphs.

Working title

Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present

Research aim

To undertake a historical and symbolic exploration of the material and social culture of the dining table in Western society.

Supporting questions

- To what extent has the dining table developed as a tool of socialisation and identity construction in Western society?
- In what ways has the dining table played a crucial socio-cultural role in the evolution and structure of Western society, and does it continue to do so?

Research philosophy

The purpose of research is to discover answers to pertinent questions. This chapter reviews the research design and demonstrates which methods developed the guidelines and principles for the research in this dissertation. The research method strategy is structured into a series of paragraphs outlining what research was done, explaining how and why each approach was the most suitable method for the objectives with direct reference to the research aim and questions for justification. The topics begin by outlining *ontology*, and explains why the *relativist*, philosophical stance is chosen, followed by reasons supporting the *constructivist epistemology*. These approaches govern the methodology, which adopts an *interpretivist paradigm* utilising *qualitative* research. The merits of this method, as opposed to *quantitative* methods, are also analysed here. The final section addresses the reasoning behind the *historical narrative* approach and concludes by detailing the benefits of critical *thematic analysis* to strengthen the selected qualitative research method.

Ontology – ‘What is’

Ontology is a theoretical framework – it is the study of being, and the nature of existence. Ontology constitutes what is true, what exists and what is real in the world (Gray, 2014). There are various ontological approaches, the positivist, objective view believes the world is a fixed entity external to the individual whereas the relativist view sees multiple realities which are socially constructed, are not permanent and able to change between people and over time (Gray, 2014). The relativist view is considered the most suitable approach for studying ‘around the dining table from past to present’, for two key reasons. Firstly, relativism sees meaning in social action; this specifically relates to the practices that surround the dining table across centuries, which are entrenched with multiple and changing realities (Gray, 2014). Secondly, relativism accepts that truths are subjective and contextual (Gray, 2014). However, by undertaking a historical narrative process the scholar must guard against the belief that history repeats itself, instead accepting that historical analogy is “a habitual and an unavoidable part of human reasoning” (Tosh, 2006, p. 29) and is therefore subjective and contextual. Furthermore, relativism accepts that knowledge is ‘becoming’, by being continually created and revised (Crotty, 1998), a perspective that aligns with historical process. Relativism is also congruent with a constructivist

epistemology, which shares a similar philosophy and is covered in more depth below. Ontology sits alongside epistemology; they are interdependent constructs and both inform the theoretical framework of the study (Crotty, 1998).

Epistemology – ‘To know’

Epistemology is a research philosophy which determines the possibilities and limits of knowledge (Munslow, 2007). Epistemology is how people come to know things (Davidson & Tolich, 2003), and informs the paradigm or theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998). Two key contrasting epistemological positions are objectivism and constructivism; objectivism implies that reality is separate from social interaction and independent of human consciousness, whereas constructivism suggests that knowledge is not found but constructed, therefore rejecting the existence of an objective reality (Creswell, 2018). Social constructivists undertake research to understand the world they live in, validating this research approach as appropriate for studying widespread consumption practices that surround the universal dining table to discover and recognise meaning. Social constructivists also accept the subjective meanings of their varied and multiple life experiences on the basis that this leads to wider inquiry and the search for more complex views, rather than narrow meanings with few ideas (Creswell, 2018). Crotty (1998) addresses the issue of subjectivity; believing humans construct meaning when they engage with their research, arguing everyone is born into a world of cultural meaning which shapes historical and social perspective, and concluding that qualitative research is mostly inductive whereby the inquirer generates meaning from the data they examine.

Paradigms – Research traditions

According to Crotty (1998), the paradigm is the theoretical perspective that underpins the philosophy of the methodology, it is the researcher's view of the human world and the social life within that world. "Paradigms provide the would-be researcher with a framework for making order out of the chaos of social life" (Grant & Giddings, 2002, p. 3), and Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe them as a net to cohere philosophical approaches. The aim of this dissertation is to build a narrative socio-cultural history of the dining table and explain its power and significance based on secondary historical data. Drawing on ontological and epistemological stances, the most suitable paradigm

for this research is an interpretivist paradigm, which is described further below to justify its suitability for the study. Interpretivism “looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 68), and is an anti-positivist stance in opposition to the rigid separation of researcher and subject. In addition, interpretivism is a paradigm that finds space for the voice of the subject’s experience and the reflexivity of the researcher (Creswell, 2018). The primary goal of research for interpretivists is to understand multiple meanings of normal social reality – in this context, the variable practices that surround the dining table – as opposed to the positivist approach which attempts to generate replicable ‘facts and truths’ (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Crotty (1998) posits that constructivism is typically seen in tandem with qualitative research, and this confirms that a constructivist, interpretive approach aligns cohesively with the research design for this study. Furthermore, an interpretivist paradigm is a traditional pairing with relativism, both of which are included in the research design; as Van der Walt (2020) points out, interpretivism and constructivism are but two sides of the same coin. These combined factors all indicate a solid research design for this study. An interpretive paradigm tends towards relativism than positivism, accepting that different values and realities apply to different groups and facilitating explanation incorporating multiple perspectives (Grant & Giddings, 2002). In response to the supporting questions, a historical analysis of different societies to determine the dining table as a tool of socialisation and identity construction, and as a contributor to the socio-cultural evolution and structure of society, is guided by the acknowledgment of multiple perspectives: “there is no perfect fit between past and present ... and that a sense of the whole context must inform understanding of the parts” (Tosh, 2006, p. 29).

These various convictions justify interpretivism as the most appropriate choice when researching the complexities which surround the practice of dining at the shared table. Although interpretive research can be perceived as ‘lacking’ by pro-positivists, interpretivist criticism of positivist objective convictions is also gaining ground, with Denzin and Lincoln (2011) arguing that all research is interpretive and is guided by the researcher’s set of beliefs. Furthermore, Creswell (2018) determines constructivism as a ‘worldview’ (a basic set of beliefs that guide action) comprising understanding,

multiple meaning, social and historical construction, and theory generation. These principles align with the dining table as a site where humans construct meaning; it is a social environment where knowledge is continually created and constantly revised (Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2013). These philosophical criteria within the context of researching dining at the shared table confirm constructivism as the ideal epistemological choice for the research design.

Methodology

Methodology is the theoretical assumptions and principles that underpin research approaches (Creswell, 2008), harnessing theory and method, perspectives, and tools (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005). Methodology is the procedure used to acquire legitimate knowledge and guides the research process, including formulating the research aim and questions, the findings and analysis. Methodology also informs the way data is explored and gathered through the research using methods or practicalities by implementing the selected ontology, epistemology, and methodology consistently throughout. It is essential that the ontology and epistemology must be congruent and logically consistent at the foundational level. A relativist ontology for example requires a constructivist epistemology, whereas a realist ontology suits an objectivist epistemology (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005).

Qualitative versus quantitative

O'Leary (2004) believes that rather than considering the persistent qualitative/quantitative methodology debate, it is more useful to see the two individual terms as adjectives for types of data and modes of analysis. "Qualitative data which is represented through words, pictures or icons analysed using thematic exploration; and quantitative data – data that is represented through numbers and analysed using statistics" (O'Leary, 2004, p. 99). Furthermore, O'Leary (2004) argues that quantitative and qualitative now represent a set of assumptions that classify methods, and this limits the potential of researchers to build mythological designs. Quantitative research is defined as an objective search for singular truths relying on hypotheses and variables; it is generally large scale. The principal disadvantage of using such an approach here is that this study looks at an *historical* 'interpretation' of human development. Moreover, the central claim that the discipline of history provides socio-

cultural relevance, in this case in a study of the shared dining table, is underpinned by the multiplicity of *historical difference*, and *not the singular objective truth* (Tosh, 2006). Qualitative research is purported to be a subjective, value-laden, biased, impromptu process accepting multiple realities and generally the goal is rich understanding coming from the few rather than the many (O’Leary, 2004). The value of the qualitative research method in addressing the research aim and questions is further clarified by Tosh (2006) who claims that history is a cultural and enriching subject which constitutes a broad and valuable resource to discover social relevance, including what has been thought and done in the past. The study of history necessitates a qualitative approach accepting there is more than one way to interpret meaning and, furthermore, that history facilitates accessibility in tracing patterns of behaviour, social structures, and cultural systems over time. These are all critical areas of concern surrounding the dining table – and therefore qualitative research provides an essential research approach for this study.

Compared to the structured format of quantitative methods, qualitative research facilitates the possibility of learning more about people and meaning, one of the core aims of this study. The qualitative research approach is fluid, evolving and dynamic, combined with a natural curiosity about the world, which also provides the option to make order out of disorder whilst thinking in terms of complex relationships (Crotty, 1998). These assertions validate a qualitative method as the most appropriate approach to research the subject and direction of this dissertation.

Historical approach and philosophy

History constitutes the most important cultural resource and “Historical difference lies at the heart of the discipline’s claim to be socially relevant” (Tosh, 2006, p. 32). Miller and Deutsch (2009) also argue that historical research is important because it tells us how we got to where we are today and that everything we do in everyday life is grounded in the past. These opinions, and Tosh’s (2006) claim that historical study is of intrinsic interest and lasting value, establish the reasons why this dissertation, *Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present*, is mostly situated within a historical narrative research context.

There is considerable unresolved debate about whether history is a branch of constructivist social sciences or has its own methodology; irrespective of this, historical inquiry comprises a spectrum of multiple approaches. The constructivist approach holds the middle ground in historical inquiry, facilitating the application of generalised social theory to historical research. A combination of deductive and inductive constructs with applied theory or a framework of data “does not diminish human agency or choices in the past but rather enriches our understanding of it” (Munslow, 2006, p. 25). According to Tosh (2006), it is history and the humanities fundamental premise to uncover what humankind has thought and done, which contributes valuable insights into the human condition. Furthermore, Tosh (2006) argues that the point of history is not to find a precedent but to be alert to other possibilities. Tosh (2006) describes history as an inventory of alternatives, and the facilitator of comparisons across time. This juxtaposition, Tosh (2006) argues, gives an important historical perspective with direct claims upon social, cultural, and political relevance today. The purpose of this study is to analyse the circuitous revolutions of what surrounds the dining table across time, a further endorsement for the implementation of an historical approach for this dissertation.

Research methods and analysis

Historical narrative approach

This dissertation relies on seminal theorists and secondary resources throughout including historical data. A wide range of academic literature was reviewed for this dissertation. A substantial number of books and journals were consulted, and the references used in this dissertation were carefully selected to provide the best scholarly representation across the multidisciplinary field of humanities and gastronomy. Additionally, the research was shaped by the supporting research questions to focus the process, as proposed by Schensul and LeCompte (2012), an approach that looked for prevalence across the data set to identify solid meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research findings from this extensive inquiry comprise Chapters Four to Six of this dissertation, “Antiquity, Greek and Roman”; “Medieval and Renaissance”; and “The 19th Century, Gastronomy – The 21st Century, Change”. There are benefits to a traditional narrative approach which has evolved as a less formalised method for summarising information where the output can be conceived as a ‘mosaic’,

which was entirely the case with the initial manual coding of this studies' research findings. This approach can provide deep and rich information (Light & Pillemer, 1984), and has particular value for qualitative research where context is important and where common lines of argument can be woven together (Hammersley, 2001). While this approach offers the researcher a reflexive and critical approach, this is also perceived as a weakness, including being open to bias and misinterpretation (Hart, 2018). This study addressed these issues by offering the middle ground, a narrative synthesis to address variables of the same phenomenon to build up a bigger picture, as suggested by Booth et al. (2012). Narrative synthesis is described as "a method that primarily uses words and text to summarize the findings of multiple studies" (Booth et al., 2012, p. 346). However, Popay et al. (2006) see the narrative synthesis as a preliminary process and they recommend reverting to the SALSA framework to test its rigour, "namely the Search, the Appraisal, the Synthesis and the Analysis" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 95) and this identified that a further stage in the research design was required, thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis outlines a method to identify, analyse and report patterns within data. This is relevant to this dissertation as it provides a theoretically flexible approach to the analysis. As explained above, extensive research was undertaken and the findings comprise Chapters Four, Five and Six, as noted above. Coloured codes were marked throughout the text in these three chapters on commonly used words and phrases. This manual coding generated clear patterns of repetition which were then grouped into wider concepts. This data was organised in a methodical manner into descriptive themes, and this process revealed a patterned response. The table outlining the results, the key concepts and the numerical presentation is found in the Appendix. This information was systematically developed into eight key analytical themes which were used to identify meaning (Booth et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006), and which support the theoretical framework adopted in the discussion chapter in moving towards a critical, evaluative analysis. The constructivist method was the ideal approach here as it "examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating within society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

Summary

To conclude the chapter, the research aim is abbreviated once more here: the aim is to undertake a historical exploration of the material and social culture of the dining table. The first objective is to establish the critical role of the shared dining table in the evolution and structure of Western society and the second is to verify the contribution of the shared dining table as a tool of socialisation and identity construction, ultimately confirming the power and significance of the dining table from past to present.

In sum, as discussed above, the research design for this dissertation, comprising ontology (relativism) (Gray, 2010), epistemology (constructivism) (Cresswell, 2018), paradigm (interpretivism) (Crotty, 1998), methodology (qualitative historical narrative) (Light & Pillemar, 1984), and analysis (narrative approach and thematic) (Braun & Clarke, 2006), is the most comprehensive and appropriate methodological approach for the research aims and questions, as confirmed throughout this chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR – ANTIQUITY, GREEK AND ROMAN

Introduction, An invitation to the feast

Dining around the first commensal tables

To commence this journey documenting the dining table, it must start at the beginning, with the evolution of the dining table in pre-history and the earliest civilisations. Flandrin (1999) traces early social organisation to around 500,000 BCE, suggesting the use of a common fire encouraged common cooking and dining. The spoils of the hunt were shared with kin after forces combined to hunt and kill large animals; these groups gathered for a 'festive' meal around the fire to consume the kill. Flandrin (1999) argues that this was the function leading to the development of conviviality, adding that conviviality was conceived as the first cornerstone of civilisation. This behaviour designated human identity; furthermore, conviviality was the first thing to distinguish civilised people from beasts and barbarians. The Palaeolithic groups gathered around a fire gradually became groups around a common table and were symbolically unified through commensality.

The Palaeolithic period also witnessed the emergence of cultural preferences around food and eating; these preferences were demonstrably connected to the origins of food, group commensality, power, and hierarchy. According to Perlès (1999), 'wild' deer became the ideological food and was likely the origin of cultural preference and taste. Here was the first evidence of social inequality and the emergence of elites: "food and eating at first based on individual need gradually became a key element of group structure, a mark of identity and symbolic means of expressing thought" (Perlès, 1999, p. 29).

Ceremonial group eating and drinking were a conspicuous feature of pre-history and ancient societies (Garnsey, 1999). Furthermore, Halstead (2012) explores the value of commensality, also identifying a hierarchy during the Neolithic period in respect of low to high-value foods, as "formal commensality shaped inequalities of status between participants" (p. 21). Halstead (2012) also argues that this distinctive commensality was more apparent in the Bronze Age and became part of a broad political strategy, connected to an emergent elite society which distinguished social behaviour.

Banqueting and feasting traditions of the Romans were adopted from those of the Greeks and before them the ancient birthplace of civilisation, the world's first empire, Akkadia, in the Near East (Strong, 2002). By the late Bronze Age, in the 2nd millennium BC, there were well established traditions and customs around foodways in the Near East region. The monarchs in Mesopotamia staged extraordinary, regular banquets for important occasions such as military victories, the arrival of a foreign delegation or the inauguration of a new temple or palace (Strong, 2002).

Joannes (1999) states that Mesopotamian society was aligned with the gods. Sumerian mythology describes banquets where the main deities also had a seat at the table, and where important decisions were made. These early banquets were ostentatious displays of wealth involving elaborate dining rituals to celebrate solidarity. Strict protocol was observed with precise hierarchy; the king would be served first at his divan in a reclining position apart from other guests, with his queen seated at his feet. Guests were grouped according to status, profession, or country of origin. Ritualistic handwashing and the anointing of guests with perfumed oil preceded dinner which was accompanied by entertainment. The male 'cup bearer' performed a complex and important ritual, where seated groups of guests ritually drank from the same sacred cup. Gifts were exchanged between the king and his guests; the elite guests were honoured by donating food to the various deities. Regular feasts promoted the pleasures of divine life and maintained royal relationships with the gods, strengthening the foundation of royal ideology.

Early feasts took place on a large scale. Assurbanipal II (883-859 BC) celebrated completing his new palace with a ten-day feast for 69,574 guests and such events played a major role in dynastic politics (Fernández-Armesto, 2001; Joannes, 1999; Strong, 2002). The dramaturgical nature of feasting – dancing, singing or inebriation – underlined the ritual characteristics and created intensified meaning (Dietler & Hayden, 2001). The food and drink consumed was a material expression of the king's power and additionally demonstrated how a ruler could command tributes from across his vast Persian kingdom including remote areas. This emphasised the government's dominance and made the close alliance between monarchy and aristocratic families more apparent (Joannes, 1999; Strong, 2002).

The phenomenon of using rare and specialised ingredients to create *haute cuisine* established a hierarchy of consumption and alimentary provisioning for socio-political aim in the very earliest ancient civilisations. Strong (2002) maintains this practice is an important aspect of the historical power of the dining table, laying the foundation of provisioning as a determinant of privilege and status.

Formal agreements including marriage or treaties were sealed by a shared meal; dinner was symbolic of the accord, and the sharing component was the material counterpart of the written contract (Strong, 2002). Early Near Eastern banquets were staged forums for citizens to swear allegiance and demonstrate other customs; drinking from the same cup represented a fraternity and sharing salt signified a bond. Royal feasts became a tradition of the Near East and are mentioned in the Bible, including Balthazar's feast in Babylon (Joannes, 1999).

In summary, Mesopotamian banquets were principally characterised by power, under the guise of celebrating solidarity, and political goals were aligned to elaborate dining ritual and coded hierarchy. These ostentatious displays of wealth and ceremony, governed by strict protocol, were the precedent for criteria applied to banquets and feasts for millennia. The Ancient Greeks inherited the foundations of commensality from pre-history, as noted above, and it is to this period that the study now turns.

Greek banquets

The Heavenly High Table – Mortals, immortals and ambrosia

The principal elements and customs of the Greek ceremonial feast were established in the Near East where the production and consumption of food and drink were both symbolic and involved multiple commensal rituals (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999). However, the Greeks developed a more complex culinary culture. The mythical relationship of humans to the gods was marked by the early Greek banquet, and at the beginning humans and immortals ate together at the "Heavenly High Table" (Garnsey, 1999, p. 6). According to Greek mythology, the final argument of Prometheus and Zeus over stolen fire decreed the ultimate separation between gods and mortals, including the practice of dining together. From that time, they dined separately. The immortal gods' carefree existence, endlessly feasting on ambrosia and nectar contrasted starkly to the

human banquet; a symbol of the mortal human condition, whereby humans were forced to work to eat (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999).

Human banquets invited imaginary gods to their table where they were served ceremonial dishes of sacrificed meat and grains that had been consecrated. Staple Greek foods like grains were cultivated in the field and imbued with sacred power. Their consumption was considered the most abject form of worship as the gods of creation, for example Demeter, goddess of the harvest, or Persephone, goddess of agriculture and fertility, sacrificed themselves in the mouth of man who was assured of imminent salvation. This Ancient Greek belief was the earliest concept of the Eucharist, establishing the rule that only pure wheat is acceptable as the sacramental bread (Fernández-Armesto, 2001). The continued practice of ritual sacrifice facilitated ongoing communication with the divine and served to define what it meant to be human (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999).

Food and commensality, eating and drinking with fellow citizens, the gods, long-departed heroes or ancestors and visitors were central to the Greek's personal, religious, and political identity. In private or public, the sharing of sustenance and sacrifice appears as the socialising bond of civic organisation, a collective ceremony of dining that defined heritage and civilisation against barbarians (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999). Garnsey (1999) agrees, describing Greek commensality as a demonstration of membership, solidarity and group identity where, together, the participants paraded their joint status against outsiders. This set out hierarchies within both the group and society at large. However, Murray (1990) disagrees, claiming that early Greek society had a homogenous social structure with no centralised power. Murray (1990) emphasises the importance of ritual consumption and commensality as expressions of equality and describes Greek banquets as a mechanism for the reinforcement of community values towards the creation of a civic order.

Private banquets and the Greek symposion

The *symposion* is defined as “a social ritual with a specific shape and specific function, ... a phenomenon central to understanding Greek art, literature, religion and history” (Murray, 1990, p. 7). A poem, *The Banquet*, by Philoxenias, dated to the late 5th to early 4th century BCE, describes the Greek *symposion* as an elaborate affair with only

men present, each reclining on a divan, with small adjacent tables to hand (Strong, 2002). Dining whilst lying in the reclining position originated in the Near East and was practiced by kings. This posture marked a greater degree of social privilege and autonomy, and was closely linked to the principle of pleasure, *otium*, sometimes categorised as conviviality (Roller, 2003).

This was above all a patriarchal society; formal Greek eating was the preserve of men only, and women and children were excluded. The main meal of the day, eaten in the early evening, was the *deipnon*. The banquet began with ritual handwashing, a menu of bread rolls and a variety of fish and meat, concluding with the presentation of violets and scented myrtle wreaths. The distinctly separate 'second table' followed, where a variety of sweet pasties, nuts and cheeses was offered. This was the private *symposion* which was, in fact, dedicated to communal drinking: a world apart, a man's world (Strong, 2002).

Wecowski (2014) states the uniqueness of the Greek *symposion* has long interested modern historians due to its ceremonial form and the view that a comparison between the Greek *symposion* and commensal customs of other societies can reveal historical links. The cultural and literary aspects of the *symposion* were its primary defining characteristics, with active participation by the guests in the form of various poetic recitations and intellectual competitions with singing and dancing (Wecowski, 2014). Garnsey (1999) attests to the social and political power of the *symposion* as one of the organising principles of Greek life and Murray (1990) likens the *symposion* to a private club held in private premises.

Ceremony governed the *symposion* both physically, through the order of service, and materially by way of the objects used. The private *symposion* was an intimate, exclusively male drinking event conducted using specialised or stylised language. The *symposiarch* determined the proceedings; the ratio of wine to water, the music played and the subjects of discourse. Wine was always mixed with water, and this practice distinguished the civilised man from a barbarian who would drink wine undiluted. The *kratar* (wine cup) was passed from left to right and tributes were made to gods and war heroes (Vetta, 1999). Various liturgical elements preceded the entertainment; the great epics were initially sung to music and poetry, and popular songs gradually developed from there. Other ingredients of the *symposion* included games, courtship

and education. The reason for holding a *symposion* ranged from celebrating a wedding, a family event, a games victory or a political appointment to simply socialising (Vetta, 1999).

Strong (2002) argues that the *symposion* remains culturally significant today as the foundation for debating the intellectual and philosophical arts. Vetta (1999) agrees, stating that the *symposion* was the most significant social formation of classical Greek culture. Aristocratic membership was based on common intellectual and poetic cultures with shared political visions. The *symposion* endured due to the private, elite nature of the gatherings, a combination of harmonious socialising with religious gravitas, practical function, and pleasure. In addition, the serving of wine connected with Dionysus in a ritual, sacred manner. Bober (1999) references Xenophanes for his evocative philosophical musings on the underlying sacred aura, the purity of ritual, fragrant incense and godly virtue of the *symposion*. The ideal was to create a supreme emotional state through togetherness. As the wine took effect there was euphoria, lucidity and then oblivion as the *symposion* evolved from seriousness to recreation (Vetta, 1999) ... “And no doubt aphrodisia” (Garnsey, 1999, p. 131).

The *symposion* was a place apart from the normal rules of society and was instead governed by *sympotic* laws. There were strict codes of behaviour and the established conventions were opposed to those of the *polis*. However, Murray (1990) claims the communal activities of a small group in an intimate space ‘apart’ created aspects of separation. Murray (1990) continues to argue that the *symposion* encouraged licentious behaviour; it manipulated Greek sexuality, encouraged homosexual bonding and promoted a type of ‘free love’ atmosphere with *hetaira* and other attendants and entertainers. Furthermore, Murray (1990) states the *symposion* developed forms of ritual exhibitionism and violence during the *komos*, the concluding procession (Murray, 1990).

The Greek *symposion* was designed for guests to partake in a formal ceremony but Vetta (1999) also argues that, over time, the reality was one of continuous transgression. He maintains the wine ritual often resulted in excess and a lack of restraint, endorsed by the debauchery and violence surrounding the *symposion* as depicted in myth and epic. Murray (1990) also perceives the world of the *symposion* as an alien world of licentious behaviour, far removed from its original vision of decorous,

religious, and philosophical intention. Strong (2002) disagrees, contending that they were drinking parties but not debauched affairs; wine was central to Greek society and enjoyed divine status, being attributed with God-like powers. However, Murray (1990) posits that the *symposion* was a mechanism through which a group of men could express identity through drinking. Similar fraternal and ritualistic drinking behaviour is seen throughout history and continues today.

Bober (1999) suggests a stronger political influence, stating that the *symposion* represented the origin of the subordination of the individual to the state. Initially a display of aristocratic privilege and dominance, Bober (1999) describes the *symposion* as developing from “an archaic prerogative of social status, and as regalement of bodily self to become a classical feast of reason” (p. 102). Bober (1999) maintains that the *symposion* is one of the Greek institutions that is celebrated today as a cornerstone of Western democracy. Today, the *symposion* provides an opportunity for philosophical debate, literary discourse, and scholarly interchange, but sadly without the consortial pleasure of reclining.

Civic (public) banquets of the Greeks

The role of the public sacrificial meal in wider Greek society had a profound meaning and was fundamental to the operation of the *polis*. Members of distinct groups who shared political power and values ate and drank together as an expression of equality and solidarity. The civic banquet was a communal expression of city unity heralded by a blood sacrifice made to the gods, divided equally between guests, and cooked and eaten together. Banquets were deemed a necessity; they assumed a “liturgy of state” (Strong, 2002, p. 14), by confirming citizenship and sustaining political order.

Major banquets were held on civic holidays and were organised by the city. In Athens, important guests were housed inside the *pompeion*, although additional guests dined in temporary structures outside, imposing a segregated, hierarchic division (Bober 1999). The *tholos* was a distinctive circular monument and overt political statement. It was a highly visible building dedicated to a democratised system of communal eating. Every day of the year, 50 *prytaneis* (rotating members of the elected city council) dined together at table. These headquarters, operating 24 hours a day, metaphorically

represented the heart of democracy and Athenian power anchored by commensality (Bober, 1999; Garnsey, 1999).

Wealthy citizens sometimes donated funds to support civic banquets; this 'public work' or charitable contribution was considered a great honour. The aristocracy also took turns to host their own banquets, forging elite solidarity and strengthening beneficiary support for their political aims (Bober, 1999). However, this practice was also seen as a threat to democracy (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999).

Greek public banquets were large, structured ceremonial events that were hugely significant. These events were well documented at the time by Aristotle, Plato and other Greek writers. The written records demonstrate how such events provided opportunities for announcing new civic policies and establishing new laws.

Furthermore, there is a consensus in the writing that the rituals of banquets and sacrifice were effective ways to strengthen communal bonds.

In summary, Greek banquets were significant features of Greek social life highlighting the concept of the banquet as a powerful and important aspect of cultural history. Their establishment was parallel to the development of both a political Greek identity and the evolution of communal and civic institutions (Schmitt-Pantel, 1999).

When in Rome...

The study now transitions to the Roman Empire where feasts became even more significant, serving as "mechanisms for the transformation of informal power into institutionalised formal political roles" (Dietler & Hayden, 2001, p. 17). The Roman emperors staged spectacular banquets which are part of culinary legend and brought people together in their thousands (Strong, 2002), but there are critical considerations when examining the wider context and framework of the ancient dining table.

The construction of hierarchies and differentiation between peoples is a social and political function of food and power; some examples are outlined below. Compared to the Greek period, the Roman Empire developed a more sophisticated agriculture and considered the cultivation and preparation of food as a mark of their civilised status, distinguishing them from the barbarians (Pilcher, 2006). However, Goody (1982) argues that the advanced Roman agricultural system which provided the food was underpinned by the exploitation of slaves. Additionally, Garnsey (1999) argues, goods

that flow into any city will not be equal, leading to unequal consumption between the 'haves' and 'have nots', as attested by the introduction of various Roman sumptuary laws to control excess. Furthermore, Pilcher (2006) claims that the commercial exchange of food products and the construction of mercantile social identities in opposition to nomadic outsiders were core markers of the great empire of Rome.

The Romans inherited the ceremony, spectacle, and hierarchic structure of the Greek banquet, although differences emerged. As the republic of Rome became a mighty empire, food represented an increasing duality of two ideals (Pilcher, 2006). Garnsey (1999) supports this view, arguing that the concept of the Roman Empire built on poverty and frugality was a moralist myth and that instead the Romans contradicted this ideal with a decadent society from top to bottom. Pilcher (2006) states that the noble frugality of times past, the epitome of Roman virtues, was typified by 'everyday' frugality. A modest lunch, *prandium*, was commonly consumed prior to attending to business, *negotium*. The *cena* was the main meal of the day and was served during the leisure period, *otium*, and taken for pleasure. There were also myriad opportunities for *cena publica*, for example to commemorate the dedication of a statue, yet *cena publica* were also held regularly to celebrate routine public occasions. Despite thwarting the ideals of a frugality, these occasions functioned as regular, political opportunities to reinforce and promote the communal *cena*'s popularity (Donahue, 2017).

Private dining – The Roman Convivium

Frugality was put aside for the grand *convivium*, a substantial and lavish Roman dinner party, the genesis of which lay with the Greek *symposion* (Pilcher, 2006). Although Cicero describes the communal enjoyment of the *convivium* as the heart of Roman life, the *convivium* was nonetheless criticised by moralists of the time who saw hedonistic, excessive luxury as a sign of social decay (Strong, 2002). In the absence of an Imperial court, the *convivium* was considered an elegant ceremony of civility and an expression of elite society (Garnsey, 1999). Strong (2002) states that these events were a potent social mechanism and were as important to the Romans as the artistic salons of 18th century France or the dinner party in Victorian England. The Imperial period suggested notions of equality at the *convivium*. However, the reality was different, instead the Romans were obsessed with class and patrician virtues. Social and political hierarchic

divisions continued to be applied, and this included the quality and quantity of food allocated to guests (Pilcher, 2006).

The *triclinium* was the setting for the private *convivium*, and these rooms survive in the ruins of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Naturally, the *convivium* was a place of ‘convivial’ scenes, where dishes were served sprinkled liberally with silphium, an aphrodisiac, and males reclined alongside companions or courtesans and patrons to “enjoy a nexus of pleasures: wine, food companionship and the prospect (at least) of sex” (Roller, 2003, p. 53).

Guests entered upon a signal and ritualistic foot washing ensued. The *convivium* was an inner sanctum, ambiently lit by candelabras and lamps, with aromatic foliage covering the floors, and perfumed oils distributed to guests. Food was cut into small, pieces and delicately consumed using the fingertips of the right hand or using the tip of a knife in a refined manner (Strong, 2002; Tannahill, 2002). Plates and serving dishes were costly and luxurious and made of silver; cups could be crystal, gold, or stone. The most important dish was a large silver platter for the sacrificial meat (Strong, 2002).

Drinking that followed the *convivium* did not have the complexities of the Greek *symposion*; however, there was ritual formality. A master of ceremonies, the *rex convivii*, who took the place of the Greek *symposiarch*, decided the proportion of wine to water. This person decreed the focus of discussion, generally domestic matters, politics, art, philosophy and science, followed by entertainment and recitations. “Food and wine may not belong at the table with high culture, but curious things happen when they are admitted there” (Barkan, 2021, p. 144). The *convivium* was ‘dinner-theatre’ and generally ordered with a sense of style, ceremony and culinary excellence with all the trappings of civilised living: conversation, music, prose and poetry. However, this modernity was only possible due to a vast substructure of slavery based upon a perverse power where brutality, violence and cruel subjection reigned. According to Strong (2002) the elitist Roman *convivium* concealed a startling polarity and inequality that stands out in the history of eating.

Public and Imperial banquets; Religion and sacrifice

This was excessive entertaining on a grand scale (Strong, 2002). The Roman banquet was ubiquitous and diverse. It was a highly evolved social practice considered equal in

stature to traditional public games and religious sacrifices. The Roman banquet sacrifice is described as having the following impulses: “an interplay of complex and often contradictory human motivations and desires – self-aggrandisement and altruism, social control and convivial licence, communality and exclusivity” (Donahue, 2017, p. 93).

Whilst Roman banquets were about the necessity of eating, they were equally concerned with rank and status. City councillors, aristocracy and priests were common sponsors of feasts; accordingly, they were also served better meals at table than the *populus*, the ordinary residents, reaffirming social distinctions. This pattern was prevalent during the Imperial era and illustrates that “food and drink as culturally defined commodities were shaped by culture and were critical in forming social identity. Hence the communal feast was the most visible way of defining power and status and hierarchy in the ancient community” (Donahue, 2017, p. xxiv).

Public banquets were as important to the Romans as they were to the Greeks, both in secular and sacred terms (Donahue, 2017). From the earliest times, commensality and group feasting was closely linked to state religion in Greek and Roman society. Donahue (2017) also maintains that feasting was an integral part of ancient religion through community participation in the sacred rites. The sacrificial element of the civic banquet was quintessential. A sacrificial banquet is one of the last acts of blood sacrifice; the meat is divided equally, and through its physical incorporation symbolically connoted civic equality (Fischler, 1988). Participation at the sacrificial banquet table was considered a weapon by Roman elites to solidify triumphant ideologies of war and as a mechanism to harness unstable groups. Caesar engaged in this practice and these feasts rose to new levels of splendour to rally public support (Donahue, 2017).

As the republican world shifted, the emperor became central to large public sacrificial feasts, embodying the Imperial capital at the table. Rome became the emperor’s court, established as such by freely distributing largesse to secure the emperor’s political position. Private banquets were perceived as a threat to the emperor’s power and either banned or controlled by the state by imposing strict sumptuary restrictions (Donahue, 2017).

Furthermore, Donahue (2017) argues that the use of dedicated venues for Roman communal feasting was a 'framing' construct, conceived to create and reinforce the expectation of a certain behaviours in a temporary 'ritual frame' officially controlled by the *polis* for escapist celebration distinct from the everyday. The venue also created a 'corralled' social cohesion; attendees were seated side by side yet separated distinctly by social rank, confirming the importance of hierarchical structure in Roman society. The Romans, according to Donahue (2017), were a collectivist society who enjoyed group interaction across a range of leisure and entertainment activities. However, the feast had a more specific purpose, to clearly illuminate and confirm rank and status. Monumental banquet spaces were manipulated and regulated to reinforce the prevailing social hierarchy and legitimise social order. The fundamental Roman values of equality were at odds with Roman commensality (Donahue, 2017), demonstrating how food and eating were key elements of group structure and a mark of identity (Perlès, 1999).

In ancient societies, 'euergetism' was a system whereby the ruler and elites provided benefactions for a public feast. A generous (*philanthropos*) ruler was desirable, and a sumptuous feast was one of many benefactions the king could supply that transcended time and place. The citizens could be granted the honour of consuming sacrificial meat, and this created a symbolic communal bond through shared incorporation, whilst also fulfilling an immediate biological need. The public feast provided an opportunity to balance social appeasement with political force. However, evidence demonstrates feasts were not always egalitarian; the quality of food distributed could be linked to the social rank of the recipient and certain classes could be excluded from feasts altogether, again confirming hierarchic relationships (Donahue, 2017).

Zuiderhoek (2007) argues that donations of food were both customary and necessary, and that ordinary citizens could be hostile towards a rich man who did not share. Yet Zuiderhoek (2007) describes the moral unease surrounding munificence. Contributions towards civic improvements were acceptable, but food distributions were considered 'bad', raising concerns about morals and political virtue. Zuiderhoek (2007) alludes to the 'priceless return' of euergetism, calling it "a symbolic statement affirming the legitimacy and naturalness of the existing socio-political order" (p. 9), arguing that euergetism was vital to the continued oligarchic dominance of the Roman world.

Nonetheless, the positive monetary value of a feast to beneficiaries has been largely overlooked. For example, in Pompeii, a banquet meal was valued at double the cost of daily living for the lower orders. With a minimum average of one major banquet a month (and possibly many smaller events), there is good reason to believe the opportunity for a free meal was taken very seriously indeed by the general populace (Donahue, 2017). Feasts were held regularly throughout the year and could be dedicated to the gods or public celebrations as designated, for example, for the birth of a child, a coming of age, death, or marriage. Such events were all considered the very fabric of Roman life. Furthermore, feasts could be free for all citizens including slaves (Strong, 2002). Roman religion particularly was more concerned with integrating rituals within the broader patterns and structures of everyday life than spiritual fulfillment (Donahue, 2003). In addition, various banquet celebrations anchored the calendar which provided structure and routine in Roman society (Strong, 2002).

During this period, 'segregative' commensality facilitated the gathering of marginalised people into groups of limited membership. These groups were entitled to share a communal, festal meal. This forum promoted both collective and self-identity yet also strengthened the 'them and us' by excluding others when sharing food (Grignon, 2001). The many *collegia* of the Roman world were an example; members were free men and/or slaves, and their groups were centred around trades or deities. These groups met the demand of the lower orders of Roman society for fellowship and exclusivity, but they also adopted a distinct hierarchic framework. This suggests that there was more equal representation of the lower orders than is often reported. However, the emergence of these fringe groups was perceived as a threat to social order and declared illegal by the state (Donahue, 2003).

Conclusion

Ritual feasts represent idealised concepts of social order and offer an opportunity for manipulation by individuals or groups wanting to alter their position. Furthermore, food and drink, as highly charged and symbolic media, are "embodied material culture" (Dietler, 2001, p. 72), specifically for human ingestion. Drinking and eating are not simply biological acts, they are patterned, potent techniques of learned identity and difference, and by extension, inequality.

Dietler (2001) maintains that feasts commonly serve crucial structural roles in expressing the political economy of various societies. He argues that beyond the symbolic nature of feasting ritual lies its role in creating, defining and transforming structures of power. Many meals in Antiquity excluded women, there were divisions between people at the table, and between those who were reclining, sitting or standing, and also between couches/divans positioned by rank (D. Smith, 2003).

Gilhus (2015) states that commensality in Antiquity did not imply equality, in fact it countered that ideal. He argues that the foundation of Roman society was structured by hierarchy at every level, and this was directly reflected in commensality.

Commensality in Antiquity was used as a social tool but there was more emphasis on political motivation. Halstead (2012) agrees, stating that social strategies and the cultural values of eating and drinking were partially situated within economic practicalities but more largely determined by political ambitions.

In the next chapter the research progresses to Medieval and Renaissance banquets, which continued to express power and status but were becoming 'good to think' (Lévi-Strauss, 1968/2012) as domains providing the scope to examine a range of developing consumption practices more closely.

CHAPTER FIVE – THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD

General introduction

Chapter Five begins with this brief general introduction and divides into two major parts covering separate historical periods. Firstly, the part on the Middle Ages, also known as the Medieval period, comprises an introduction and five sections. The Renaissance period follows and this part includes an introduction and four sections. A short, joint conclusion closes the chapter.

The realm of Medieval and Renaissance feasts needs to be examined not just in terms of consumption at the banquet table, but as figurative and symbolic representations of material and human culture. This extended period from approximately the 5th to the 16th century was framed by an incomparable duality in human affairs, no more clearly demonstrated than at the dining table (Bober, 1999). During the Middle Ages, the wealthy and the poor ate widely different foods. This polarity is encapsulated in the following quote: “food can represent the basest of human necessities yet ascend to the very height of arcane ritual and pageantry” (Tomasik & Vitullo, p. xi).

The Middle Ages

Introduction

Various subjects are examined in the following sections on the Middle Ages. These include how differences in diet had broad philosophical and moral implications, and in what way food and eating affected patterns of behaviour and thought, constructing communities of power, or inclusion and exclusion. The study also looks at why feasting rituals created a paradox between the desire for conviviality and the requirement to adhere to strict social hierarchies and, in addition, how the banquet was a site for initiation into the norms of behaviour, the precursor to modern-day manners. Furthermore, the extent to which the material components of the table construct cultural identity and political power are examined. The study also explains The Great Chain of Being, and how this universal belief was an inflexible food classification system which reinforced inequality.

Analysis of the extraordinary dishes on the medieval dining table demonstrates just how the language of food and other elements combined towards a construction of

taste and identity and as a possible antecedent of European gastronomic culture. Further investigation highlights the importance of medieval feudalism as an evolutionary stratified social framework which was routinely reinforced at the medieval dining table. Additionally, the politics of gift exchange and reciprocity are explored. Rich insights into religious commensality are revealed, including the spectres of gluttony and fasting, sacrifice and sin, and the bounds of sumptuary laws as a form of control and power.

The following paragraphs provide a comprehensive overview of the socio-political complexities of food around the shared dining table which evolved over centuries. The resulting changes critically influenced the power dynamics of society.

This extended period of history was characterised by ruling elites in an evolving society that was changing demographically, politically, socially and culturally (Albala, 2007). Princes, the church, and nobility all held advantage in a play of forces manoeuvring for the control of land and produce throughout the entire Middle Ages (Elias, 1939/1978). Montanari (1996) writes about the dispossession of the peasantry across Europe, when access to forest and pasturing resources was reserved exclusively for the more powerful social strata and the expropriation of lands from peasants was brutal and detrimental. The control of designated pasturing and hunting areas was enforced with severe punishment for transgression and trespass. Consequently, peasants were no longer able to supplement their diet by freely exploiting common land. It is claimed that when food was scarce and supply insecure in the late Middle Ages, “the powerful distinguished themselves from their inferiors by the sheer quantities they ate” (Mennell, 1996, p. 324). Additionally, the increasing distinction between rural and urban cultures and the social distribution of food as a marker of class status added to social tensions (Montanari, 1996).

The consequences of these struggles were reflected in the cultural products of society, including how and what people ate. Attitudes towards food were shaped by religious and social ideas of the period, and food was a potent factor in health and a symbol of social and ideological understanding (Mennell, 1996). This was a decisive period in social and economic history as diet became more socially divided. Foods at the tables of the lower classes were primarily vegetable products, grains and greens, whereas wild game and different types of meat were a privilege and gradually emerged as a

status symbol of the elite. As diets became more socially differentiated, “the new language of food was spoken with increasing clarity and self-consciousness” (Montanari, 1996, p. 46).

Montanari (1996) builds on this argument, stating that since its inception European social history has been marked by competing models of consumption and dietary behaviour. In the Middle Ages, previous differences between ‘Roman’ and ‘barbarian’ were replaced by those between ‘monastic’ and ‘aristocratic’. This was described by Albala (2007) as an intersection of two cultural ideals that Scholliers (2001) argues were diametrically opposed. This contest pitted social ethics against religious morality and poverty against power (Montanari 1996). Although Mennell (1996) agrees that Medieval dining practices were socially shaped by religion, class, and nation, he argues that the influence of religion was weaker and that class was overwhelmingly the strongest factor.

The communal, monastic meal represented one of two archetypal meals during the Middle Ages, the other being the secular feast. Both were “quintessential expressions of two great forces shaping Western civilization, the institutions of Christianity and the traditions of the conquering tribes that replaced the Roman Empire” (Strong, 2002, p. 47). Two conflicting visions of the dining table emerged, one to nourish the spirit and the other which focused on the deployment of power. This revealed signs of tension around food and feasting which frustrated early ambitions for cultural hegemony (Montanari, 1996). The secular dining table had comparatively limitless potential as an instrument for displays of pomp, power and magnificence (Strong 2002). Yet the monastic table remained relatively static, as it was highly structured and bound by ecclesiastical rules. The study now transitions to the main sections on the Middle Ages, beginning with the Christian dining table.

Feast and fast – Body and soul

Fast – Spiritual sustenance at the Christian table

Conversion to Christianity resulted from the barbarian invaders’ fascination with Roman traditions, although Montanari (1999a) asserts that the invaders were absorbed readily by the civilisations they conquered.

Christian doctrine and ritual both emphasise the value of diet as a sign of religious and cultural identity, frequently expressed by means of food and behaviour at the table (Montanari, 1999a). However, during the Medieval period, religious commensality, promoting brotherhood (in the context of, for example, the all-male society of a monastery) and conviviality, was shadowed by fasting, a form of Christian asceticism where starvation was one pathway to perfection (Strong, 2002).

Walker Bynum (1985/1997) states that whilst food symbolised many things in the Middle Ages, the most important Medieval Christian food practices were fasting and the Eucharist, practices both admired and abhorred. Food was a significant religious symbol for Medieval Christians who described “gluttony as the major form of lust, of fasting as the most painful renunciation, and of eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God” (Walker Bynum, 1997, p. 138).

Albala (2002) explains how eating practises of the Medieval elite were widely condemned by Christian moralists who rejected gluttony, arguing it was a path straight to hell. Furthermore, Rawson (2007) draws attention to the long Christian tradition of attacking pagan immorality or corruption, embodied (literally) by gluttony. Bendiner (2004) emphasises the enormous importance of gluttony in early Western culture, arguing it’s centrality in human life as a vision of sin was open to manipulation, “since the fall of man [sic] came of eating, the consumption of food could be a metaphor of the acquisition of forbidden knowledge” (Bendiner, 2004, p. 12). Gluttony as a sin could also be manipulated as a form of control by the church or conversely used as a form of resistance against religion. This interpretation of gluttony highlights the notion of risk, the pleasure of taste and the paradoxical appeal of sumptuary transgression. Christian traditions promoted asceticism believing that the rigorous denial of sustenance would purify the spirit, the highest sacred goal (Albala, 2007). These ideals were at variance with courtly values and made some monastic banqueting practices appear sacrilegious. Platina (as cited in Santich, 1996) spearheaded the humanist commensal debate with his first cookbook *Honesta Voluptas*, written at the beginning of the Renaissance in 1470, and ‘legitimised’ the ‘measured pleasure’ of shared eating and drinking.

The Eucharist was established after Antiquity, during the transition from making sacrifices to a god or gods to commemorating the sacrifice of the Son of God. All other

sacrifices become redundant, and Christianity made a break with the concept of physical sacrifice (Poulain, 2017). The Eucharist became a metaphorical sacrifice, the central ritual act of the church, “a sacrifice of praise and a memorial of redemption” (Walker Bynum, 1997, p. 48) where God was symbolically received most intimately in the meal of bread and wine. Walker Bynum (1997) argues that from the beginning, the Eucharist, an instrument of divine providence, stood “for human beings being bound into the community by commensality” (Walker Bynum, 1997, p. 48.). Anderson (2005) has a different perspective, viewing food as a daily reverence where everyone joins for a ritual repast, stating it is not solely dogma and creed that unites a belief, it is the sharing of food. Anderson (2005) also cites Isaac’s (1978) origin myth as the most powerful religion of all; it is centred around the evolutionary belief that the hunter gatherer ‘home base’ encouraged sharing food and labour which made us human.

Ecclesiastical rules required Medieval society to abstain from meat for around 150 days per year, a renunciation which opposed the centrality of meat in Medieval diets. Montanari (1999a) cites complex reasons, stating these justifications were all inherited from Greek moral philosophy. Tomasik and Vitullo (2007) argue that vegetarianism aligned with late Medieval notions of the humanist intellectual ideal, and in addition Bendiner (2004) states that meat represents temptations of the flesh and is therefore sinful and represents indulgence. Fasting became systemised under the aegis of the Church in Medieval society. Lenten fasts and weekly fasts (Wednesdays, Friday, and Saturdays) remained basic markers of the Medieval Christian (Hammond, 2005). However, Fletcher (2004) claims that fasting also played an integral and oppositional role in the story of feasting and argues fasting was a cultural imposition introduced to fairly distribute scant and precarious food resources.

Eventually, the great early fasts which once “bound the church into a community, became matters for attenuation and dispensation” (Walker Bynum, 1997, p. 32). The ideals of fasting slowly diminished, and the adherence to moral law rather than personal religious faith encouraged transgression (Walker Bynum, 1997). As a result, food in monasteries became rather lavish, described as not frugal but “decadent, exploitative” (Strong, 2002, p. 46). The metaphors in which the words feast and fast were hymned and preached changed, and throughout the early to late high Middle Ages, food and eating were becoming contentious issues (Walker Bynum, 1997). Whilst

the Eucharist developed into a popular ritual, a ceremonial rite with an aura of majesty, the characteristic Medieval meal was the feast, more focused on entertainment and aesthetics than gastronomy, a banquet for all the senses. As the centuries passed the ritual stateliness of the Medieval secular ceremonial meal more strongly resembled the liturgy of the Christian mass (Montanari, 1999b; Strong, 2002). The Reformation ended the ecclesiastical regulation of food (Flandrin, 1999), and the religious significance of food for Christians subsequently changed (Walker Bynum, 1997).

Feast – Food as power

During Antiquity, banquets reinforced group hierarchy and power; what people ate, how they ate and whether they could eat was always dependent upon their position in society, according to Montanari (1999b). This emphasis continued during the Middle Ages; food became closely connected to rank and was expressed at the dining table with increased force and formality (Strong, 2002). Albala (2002) also identifies rigid alimentary symbols of class with an increasing stratification of Medieval society.

Hierarchy at the dinner table is usually enforced when accommodating guests from a mixture of backgrounds, and Visser (1992) noted the “outrageously discriminatory practices at Medieval banquets” (p. 122). Status was communicated through precise ritual and ceremony, and the observance of strict protocol at the dining table. Hosts and special guests were seated on elevated ‘high tables’, the magnificent silver salt cellar was also displayed here. This symbolically separated the lord or king from his fellow diners. Sitting above the salt indicated importance, seated below, well, not so much. Ranking was further reinforced by seating in strict order of precedence, as were ceremonial processions (Visser, 1992).

Fletcher (2004) writes that Medieval meals embodied a pattern of social standing within the manorial household and, in turn, the wider social world; contending that “the fundamental inequality of people and their places in multiple hierarchies both sacred and profane were made tangible at the dining table” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 25), and most obviously by the seat they occupied. Societal differences during the Medieval period were paramount. Towards the late Middle Ages, royalty and aristocrats reduced

public dining appearances and moved to separate dedicated private rooms, reinforcing hierarchy through separation (Montenari, 1999b).

Historic dining practices always privilege the elite due to their meticulous record keeping (Mennell, 1996; Pinkard, 2009; Visser, 1992). The late Medieval banquet table was well documented with an abundance of reference material; menus, accounts, and household regulations (royal and noble) which all laid down the ceremony of the table. Montanari (1999a) describes the dining table as one of the ultimate expressions of ritual and the Medieval banquet encapsulates this sentiment. The Medieval courts were spaces of consumption and excess, their banquets were complex and extraordinary. *Entremets*, a series of spectacles, were designed to punctuate a feast followed by staggering quantities of ostentatious, elaborate food, which entered the dining halls in triumphant procession. In addition, the lavish displays of material gold and silver plate in combination with dramatic spectacles were designed to evoke an ideal of a rich, powerful, and stable society (Strong, 2002).

Whole courses were gilded with gold or sculpted in sugar, and food was endowed with striking colour. Strong (2002) describes this period as one of the great revolutions of food history where “the physical side of eating is displaced by the aesthetic pleasure of looking ... where emphasis migrated from the mouth to the eye” (p. 85). Furthermore, Strong (2002) claims this period was when food became more distinctly an indicator of status, as the dining table became driven towards increased ostentation and elaboration.

The vast Carolingian court of the Emperor King Charlemagne (768-814) established a structured form of early Medieval eating, constituting a dietary system for his realm. This structure led to a Medieval quest for ordered systems, including the social hierarchy of diet and other aspects of alimentary culture bringing a certain logic to Medieval menus (Bober, 1999). Joint Christian worship, hunting and feasting bound Charlemagne to his magnates by continuously forging and expressing feudal ties. Long into the 12th century, the periodic feast was essential “to the fabric of feudalism, ... celebrating the relationship between a lord and his vassals, and the power this relationship engendered” (Strong, 2002, p. 66).

Feudalism and manorism

The Middle Ages from the 5th to the 14th century laid the foundations for many aspects of the modern world through changes in the economic and social structures. Feudalism became widespread during the Medieval period across Western Europe as landowners became more powerful by gradually divesting administrative and judicial powers from centralised authorities (Boyne, 1991). Riera-Melis (1999) describes feudalism as detrimental to rural peasant groups, affecting juridical and economic inequality, and transforming family structures, food consumption practices and production systems. The Medieval feudal dining table was witness to a person's function and place in society and became a powerful indicator of collective identity (Riera-Melis, 1999).

Feudalism progressed to become the Medieval manorial system which governed the lives of most of the inhabitants of Medieval England. Lords of the manor continued to increase their profits whilst taking advantage of peasants who were obligated to them economically, politically, and socially (Anderson, 2005). The system was a set of reciprocal exchanges and customary obligations between the lord and his vassals, bound by contracts and sworn pacts of homage and fealty. Feudalism established a structured social class-based economic 'system' which persisted for several centuries until Europe transitioned towards a money-based transactional exchange (Anderson, 2005). It was a contentious system. Giddens (1984) and Harman (1989) describe feudalism as a structured form of controlled social order and part of the evolution of Western society.

Mauss' (1925/1990) study, *The Gift*, viewed the Medieval manor structure as a group system that did not exclusively exchange goods of economic value, arguing instead they exchanged 'courtesies' including dancing, feasting at the banquet table and all manner of consumables that the peasants produced. This practice, argues Walter (2007), naturalised inequality. Each party was obligated to make a return gift for the gift received, namely reciprocity, and this obligation was expressed and demonstrated through hierarchical social organisation (Mauss, 1990).

Gift exchange, including the giving of alms, was an act of duty and mercy. Food sharing in the Medieval period indicated generosity and signified a 'saintly' resolution as the elite aimed to ease their passage to heaven with good works. "Food, as a practise and

symbol were crucial to medieval spirituality” (Walker Bynum, 1997, p. 246), although she also acknowledges an element of self-aggrandisement.

Public food distribution or ‘alms’ for the poor certainly had practical benefits but continually reinforced hierarchic structure. Alms were aligned to aristocratic privilege and conspicuous consumption, and a form of discrimination for the poor (Walker Bynum, 1997). Alms demonstrated the power of Medieval dining tables as “formidable instruments of political, social, and financial control of both the plebians and the elite” (Montenari, 1996, pp. 76-77).

Hierarchic structure and diet

Food supplies in the Middle Ages were not reliable and often precarious, causing famine and death, maintains Paston-Williams (1993). Yet Super (2002) points out the worst famine was short lived (1315-18). Moreover, Super (2002) makes distinctions between rich and poor Medieval peasants, suggesting those with pensions or who had access to land to cultivate food were able to put food on their table. Montanari (1996) also argues that people of the lower orders developed ways of coping with hunger and a limited, insecure food supply, and “even used a dining table” (Montanari, 1996, p. 4).

Tannahill (2002) takes a more positive stance on social affairs, stating that servants in Medieval castles and fortified houses were well catered for and, moreover, leftovers from the lord’s table were only distributed to the lower orders at the gate outside the estates. Hammond (2005) disagrees, stating servants at the manor were not fed regularly and had to rely on the ‘reversion’ (rejection) of food initially given to others. Despite these dissentient voices, charity at the Medieval dining table was an essential and integral feature of food practices in the Middle Ages.

Within the manorial system, clan commensality took the form of ordinary daily mundane meals and special feasts, both were structured by strict ceremony and ritual. Medieval dining halls were the heart of the manor. Here, twice a day, the lord presided at meals served to every member of his household – the whole ‘family’; those in his employ were expected to attend, and not doing so was considered an offence (Paston Williams, 1993). Large-scale feasts and banquets were not commonplace, but both these and smaller events were more than celebrations, they asserted rank and status and also contributed to the process of internal pacification. These occasions provided

an attractive opportunity for lords to establish control over their fellow nobles without resorting to warfare (Mennell, 1996), and were additionally an early demonstration of courtly 'manners'. In theory, the feudal feast was the epitome of love and fellowship but, as Hennisch (1976) reiterates, they functioned as a visible demonstration of ties to power, dependence and mutual obligation.

Large Medieval manor houses had comprehensive domestic and administrative management systems. This was a strict hierarchy where the established order of society was routinely demonstrated (Brears, 2008). It was a prescribed system, each household was structured by ascending rank, and those in the top tier, mostly noblemen, were provided with various benefits including superior food and a seat at the table closer to the lord. The higher the position at the dining table, the closer to the venerated lord, the more prestigious the food. In addition, the placing of superior tableware traced the lines of rank (Fletcher, 2004). Provision of breakfast was a visible social distinction in the noble household; it was only available for the aristocracy and high-ranking male administrators of the estate (Brears, 2008). Banquet food was also graded for distribution, with the best cuts of meat shared amongst the lord and his most important guests.

Food at the Medieval dining table was regulated by a dietary regime conceived in Antiquity by Galen, the traditions on which Brillat-Savarin (1825/2009) also based his 'scientific' understanding of diet and digestion. The 'doctrine of humours' was based upon each person having a particular temperament based on four elements: air, warm and moist; earth, cold and dry; fire, hot and dry, and water, cold and wet. In addition, food was correspondingly characterised as warm, cold, dry or wet (Bendiner, 2004). Medieval medics adopted this regime, arguing that good diets could prevent an individual's temperament from becoming unbalanced (Hammond, 2005). Medieval banquets were expected to feature many diverse dishes to cater for various humoral temperaments (Kaufman, 2002), and the success of any banquet featured numerous extraordinary concoctions of food based on a thorough mixing of elemental opposites (Bendiner, 2004). This explains both the abundant offerings and the bewildering and unusual combinations served at the Medieval table. These were, in fact, highly scripted dishes, created from carefully constructed orderly recipes based on a universal belief system reflected in a hierarchic dietary order. Furthermore, foods were defined as

crude or more genteel and distributed in accordance with the perceived constitutions of diners; accordingly, aristocrats were served more refined foods and peasants a more earthy variety. The study now explains in more detail the belief system governing dietary rules during the Middle Ages.

The Great Chain of Being was believed to be God's creation, it was disseminated through pictorial images showing a layered structure of nature which divided foods into four segments proceeding from high to low, and incorporated the classical elements; fire, air, water and earth. Greico (1999) explains this was a universal code and belief system shared by Medieval society, which communicated and reinforced social differences. Contemporary Medieval beliefs determined "that God had created the world and the laws that governed human society, both structured by a vertical and horizontal principle" (Greico, 1999, pp. 307-308). The food at each level was ranked by properties appropriate for different social groups. For example, the highest food status was given to small songbirds and waterfowl, which were destined only for the tables of the Medieval aristocracy; the lowest in the designated food order were underground roots and bulbs, for example carrots and onions, which were deemed more suited to tables for the lower orders (Greico, 1999).

This ordered system was accepted at the time as a perfect hierarchical structure aligning nature and society, establishing a plausible form of social order by determining who ate what. Yet this was a diet that was invested with a strong class bias and applied universally to the Medieval dining table (Greico, 1999). Montanari (1999b) writes that across all historic literature, the greatest basic characteristic is the topic of food and dietary habits in the context of social categories and groups. This suggests that assumptions, such as those set out above, about diet being determined by personal qualities, progressively became more about social connotation and 'personal quality'. The dominant classes became characteristically immutable, and this 'quality' developed into a superior personal definition, related to the social order (Montanari, 1999b).

The material table – Setting the scene

Dining at the Medieval manor house required elaborate organisation. The setting of the table itself involved reverential ceremony; the attendant servants were

predominantly male and often noble. Their procedures were governed by strict coded behaviour – it is at this point that manners are beginning to develop. The lord was seated first, then ceremonial handwashing followed. This preceded any meal and was followed by grace. During table service for any great lords' banquet, the bread, salt, knife, and napkin were ritually 'assayed' (tested for poison). Once the lord had begun his meal other guests could follow; no food could be touched with the right hand, only the left. Napkins were important and were changed frequently due to the lack of cutlery. Bread served at the table was hierarchical; the lord had new best matchet bread, while other guests and servants were given older bread. Wine was also served amidst much ceremony (Hammond, 2005), and apparently designated for the male elite and clergy only.

The dedicated meat carver, also male, was a prestigious and esteemed position held only by noblemen. Carving was considered an art and was a very important ritual component of the banquet ceremony (Hammond, 2005). The meat was selectively distributed according to rank (Strong, 2002). Meat, previously exclusive to barbarians, was viewed as essential to physical strength and was adopted by the warring nobility in the later Middle Ages. Furthermore, meat consumption became a potent symbol of aristocratic male primacy, it "was a sign of power, a source of physical energy and sexual potency, and was one of the medieval manifestations of *joie de vivre*" (Riera-Melis, 1996, p. 260).

Albala (2002) describes 'food prejudice', including sumptuary laws, as a barometer of social differentiation when food is used to reinforce control, especially within shifting shapes of social structure when social mobility is threatened. Strong (2002) agrees, arguing that food was increasingly tied to rank as Medieval feudalism assumed its pyramidal structure and divergence between elite and popular dietary practices became more pronounced (Pinkard, 2009).

Medieval administrative practices on large estates detailed the staff structure, job descriptions, rewards, and perquisites of every servant. This model of domestic hierarchy was utilised by the English royal household as a foundation for a series of written regulations or ordinances. Great houses across Britain followed suit. The significance of the manor house model is hard to comprehend today, as most of their functions have been assumed by the state. The inference here is that these household

rules evolved into law. Effectively, these estates were social and political power houses, yet they retained the primary image of a 'family firm', all of which was designed to fulfil the personal and political needs of the hereditary lord (Brears, 2008).

The analysis of the manorial system and its unilateral endorsement in various guises across Medieval Europe demonstrates how the structure surrounding the dining table contributed to the evolution and structure of Western society, politically, socially, and culturally. The lower orders, the peasants and servants, are the unsung heroes of the noble Medieval dining table. They gave the manor the benefit of their knowledge and creativity, pouring their labour into the most important aspects of everyday activities amidst oppression and exploitation. In homage, the most poignant of all food metaphors seems appropriate here: "Ye are the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5: 13), as the benefits of their toils and farming capabilities are still manifest today (Anderson, 2005). In short, the Medieval dining table at the manor was a physical manifestation of inequality and food injustice, where participants enjoyed commensality, but it came at a cost.

As courtly cuisine began to develop alongside court society, more sophisticated manners began to emerge into the 13th century (Mennell, 1996; Strong, 2002). Still, the development of courtly and urban manners was defined by exclusion and discrimination, including a rejection of anything rustic, as social ideals in the Middle Ages gradually became influenced by more enlightened cultural changes (Montanari, 1996).

Manners maketh the meal

From the 5th to the 14th century, the Middle Ages set the foundation for what are still considered acceptable modes of behaviour today, particularly relating to conduct while eating and drinking. New modes of characteristic behaviour beyond courtesy and civility were developing. These practices, now known as manners, occupied a central position in late Middle Age society (Mennell, 1996).

Etiquette governing the complex staging and structure of Medieval secular meals was regarded as critically important. This was documented in early written manuals for behavioural guidance, evolving into early treatises on table manners. According to Elias (1939/1978), the concept of *civilité* emerged after the feudal and manorial society and

in tandem with the disintegration of the Catholic church and chivalrous society.

“Civility is the incarnation of a society, a stage in the formation of western manners or civilization. It is an expression and symbol of a social formation” (Elias, 1978, p. 55), and the precursor of manners. Erasmus’ (1530) treatise on human conduct gave an insight into a society where behaviour was remote, indelicate, and barbaric, according to Elias (1978). Tannahill (2002) agrees, stating that Medieval etiquette books indirectly gave a hair-raising picture of table manners at the time, confirming widespread undesirable habits, including a distinct lack of concern over bodily functions...

Elias (1978) describes the various treatises on manners as “direct instruments of conditioning or fashioning ... of individual adaptation to those modes of behavior which the structure and situation of [a person’s] society make necessary” (Elias, 1978, p. 84). Learning to eat meant learning to live peaceably together. Tomasik and Vitullo (2007) also posit that imposing rules and rituals at the Medieval table tamed passions and animalistic behaviour which represented a crucial aspect of the civilising process in early modern culture.

In his study “On the Civilising of Appetite”, Mennell (1987) begins by stating the capacity for food was more notable than refined taste in the late Middle Ages. Gluttony, an act of eating that, ‘unchecked,’ can appear repulsive (Bendiner, 2004), was becoming more shameful and its abhorrence was gradually exchanged for more self-restraint with what Mennell (1996) describes as a ‘civilising of appetite’, most discernible in France. There was a variety of reasons for this change; the increased security, reliability and variety of food and improved table manners were all interconnected parts of a civilising process influencing social conformity. These improvements all led to a normalisation of late Medieval dietary practices (Mennell, 1996). Furthermore, Mennell (1996) argues that the introduction of sumptuary laws was an attempt to thwart these changes in structural process, as “the longer chains of social interdependence produced by state formation and the division of labour tended to tilt the balance of power” (Mennell, 1996, p. 326).

The combination of improved culinary skills and dining practices adopted by court society was one discernable and significant aspect of the civilising process for the Medieval bourgeoisie to imitate as the incomes, political power and social functions of

the nobility declined (Mennell, 1996). One material consequence of the gradual refinement in manners and civilised behaviour was the adoption of the individual dining fork (Elias, 1978). Brown (2002) credits Charles II's exposure to sophisticated European practices for introducing the fork to his court and the increasing number of 'treatises on instruction' in circulation, both of which ritualised and refined "so-called 'principles of politeness' ... fleshing out new codified behaviour patterns" (Brown, 2002, p. 61). Finkelstein (1989) draws an interesting and credible analogy between food and manners, stating that Medieval cuisine was dominated by artifice, whereby the natural origin of foods served was deliberately concealed. Finkelstein (1989) argues that this 'subterfuge' was replicated by "changes in human commerce, in particular, an increase in 'artificial' restraint which was demonstrated in the courtly manners of consumption" (Finkelstein, 1989, pp. 32-33).

Strong (2002) argues it was the Christian table which witnessed the birth of manners both before and during the early Medieval period. Strong (2002) cites The Rule of St Benedict (530) as the dominant system of Western monasticism until the 12th century, and these precepts determined how monks should behave at the monastic dining table. The 'refectory' was the first dedicated room for dining where monks gathered for their modest communal repast, and it was here that liturgical ceremony and ritual first structured the meal. The first material dining tables originated here; they were modest, rectangular, wooden trestles, a spare design reflecting humble piety which permeated Christian Europe. This unimpressive centrepiece, a wooden trestle table, was at the genesis of a dining culture that persists today (Griffin, 2021).

Monastic commensality involved ritual handwashing followed by prayers performed in unison by the monks which announced the commencement of two daily meals. These were eaten in strict silence using sign language or gestures to communicate, representing a specific coded, commensal language. Strong (2002) asserts that these monastic rules were the roots of good behaviour and constituted table manners in the making, adding that the secular world owed much to the tradition of courtesy which was also grounded in religion. Courtesy comprised "a series of ideals ... including chivalry and its expression of courtly love, benevolence, kindness, and cheerfulness of disposition" (Strong, 2002, p. 69). The ordered, respectful ceremonial choreography of

the monastic meal, according to Strong (2002), was subsequently borrowed and developed by the secular world.

Banquet splendour

Medieval secular banquet meals, by comparison, were spectacular and framed with the magnificence that both tradition and popular opinion demanded of a Medieval ruler (Strong, 2002). These banquets were critical to maintaining royal splendour. Carlin and Rosenthal (1998) agree that the Medieval banquet meals served as a binding social function and were sites both for the display and the propagation of power.

Luxury and extravagance were features of the great Medieval feast. The prevailing impression of Medieval food is one of complexity and high cost; the ambition was to disguise nature in both taste and form, using a significant amount of expensive, luxury spices, also a sign of status (Hammond, 2005). Carlin and Rosenthal (1998) write that the extravagant use of spices was a blessing for the purposes of conspicuous consumption. Even if the spices did not yield particularly delicious results, liberal use was a sign of prosperity and encouraged. The feasts were astonishingly varied and could comprise twenty dishes per course, and there might be three main courses with elaborate sculptures of sugar and almonds (a 'sotelte' or subtlety) at the end of each.

Towards the latter Medieval period the regular tables of secular lords, and the church orders too, served increasingly excessive, extravagant, and luxurious foods. This led to the introduction of sumptuary laws by Edward III to regulate private consumption and excessive behaviour, and to prevent waste and ostentation. Described by Weber (1998) as central indicators of social status, sumptuary laws had certain functions: to foster religious, political, and judicial temperance and practice good judgment around famine.

Additionally, sumptuary laws forced the lower orders to dress their tables according to their social class; they were also a mechanism preventing nobles from outdoing the king lavishly or liberally at the feast (Weber, 1998). This was a serious affront considering one's banquet table was "a transparent allegory of both one's social rank and political or military power" (Weber, 1998, p. 155). As such, sumptuary laws regulated the dining table as a political event. Montanari (1999b) is in support here,

arguing these laws were not aligned to moral considerations and were in fact issues of social and political control, intended to “guarantee and maintain the institutional order, preventing too rapid a rise in prestige of certain social groups which might otherwise threaten the existing equilibrium” (Montanari, 1999b, p. 82).

The Great Chain of Being, previously explained on pages 68–69, attributed value to food. This was a highly codified alimentary system that also gave sumptuary laws some degree of specificity for legal enforcement and these laws consequently attributed value and status to food. However, Greico (1999) maintains that there was widespread transgression by those at the secular banqueting table. Additionally, monks also enjoyed sacrilegious feasting, evidence that adherence to the sumptuary laws was anything but guaranteed.

Towards the late Middle Ages there were signs of diffusion around courtly cuisine in an attempt by the aristocracy to retain social and cultural superiority. As the Renaissance fluttered in the wings, princely courts became firmly established style-setting centres in matters of food and dining practices (Mennell, 1996). The ensuing sections of this chapter consider the Renaissance banquet, which could be described as a more intense version of its Medieval predecessor.

Renaissance period

Introduction

From the 14th to the 17th century the Renaissance banquet was a triumph of conspicuous consumption, characterised by undiluted ostentation and elaboration where food as an indicator of status was on full display (Strong, 2002). These banquets were considered an essential element of statecraft, smoothing relations, cementing alliances, and flattering potential protectors. Renaissance banquets were critically important institutions which showcased wealth and power and served as an explicit form of political propaganda conveying messages of order and stability. The nature of banquets was highly politicised. Carefully encoded messages were symbolically conveyed through the ingredients, preparation, food, modes of service and glorification of the hosts (Albala, 2007).

Strong (1984) describes Renaissance fetes as a world of fantastic allegory, “drawing on a rich tradition that included not only the classicism of Roman antiquity and Augustan

imperial rhetoric but also the chivalrous sagas of northern Europe” (Strong, 1984, p. 65). The Renaissance meal was an early form of theatre which presented a desirable ideal, a representation which suggested one could become a courtier but only through conspicuous ways of eating, dressing, and behaving (Albala, 2007). The “social connotations of food became far more important in the 16th century and by the 17th century constituted an obsession” (Albala, 2002, p. 190).

The Renaissance festival was distinguished from its Medieval inheritance as ideological pageantry became increasingly less religious and more secular. Renaissance ideals were reflected at the dining table, where groups joined together to celebrate the power and dignity of humanity amidst growing secularism and the confidence of humanism (Montanari, 1996). The effects of a more inclusive humanist philosophy, unifying humanity in nature, words and things, were all progressive thoughts which were in opposition to the established Medieval belief, the Great Chain of Being. Allegory was revitalised to promote universal harmony and order with “iconographic entertainment programmes devised by humanists” (Strong, 1984, p. 61). Classical influences added further intensity to the Renaissance festival sphere, demonstrating regal magnificence, although deeper allegorical intent could allude to issues regarding politics and power (Albala, 2007). Dietler and Hayden (2001) also emphasise the power of hidden meanings. They maintain that the most emotionally compelling and effective political symbols displayed at the Renaissance dining tables were not politically overt but instead had an ambiguous bivocality which condensed meaning.

The art of the table

Renaissance banquets were a spectacular feast for the eyes and the palate, with dazzling displays of valuable gold and silver plate adorning the table (Strong, 2002). Gold was the colour of paradise and symbolic of longevity and wealth. A profusion of edible gilding and liberal use of spices were still key indicators of wealth and prestige for Renaissance courts and the aristocratic elite. This was culinary art and sophistication which far exceeded the Medieval feast, demonstrating a more refined material culture, reflective of the changing times and external influences from other European courts. Complex, imaginative constructions and dishes with vibrant contrasting flavours were prevalent features of early Renaissance banquet culture (Albala, 2007). The scale of entertainment could be astonishing. Strong (2002)

recounts a great French feast held in the early Renaissance over two days; supplies included 6,000 eggs per day, 25 pounds of saffron and 18 pounds of gold leaf. Extraordinary mechanical devices and figurative sculptures conveyed “political messages; of congratulation, of threat, of gratitude or of self-aggrandisement” (Fletcher, 2004, p. 139). Often the Renaissance feast was a palatable means of making a contentious point.

Dissemination and change

This was a dynamic, progressive era which witnessed the breakdown of the old Medieval world picture, the shattering of the church by the Reformation and the discovery of the New World (Strong, 1984). Food and the art of eating became matters of fashion, luxury and aesthetics, gradually freeing themselves from tradition, beliefs, and ancient ritual (Braudel, 1973). Eating at the dining table was formerly a community activity, a means of intercourse between people, society, and the supernatural universe. As this study attests, it is well documented that the tomb and the altar were the first commensal tables laden with food and drink (Braudel, 1973).

Discourses surrounding food and feasting were increasingly mobilised, directly influencing changes at the Renaissance dining table (Tomasik & Vitullo, 2007). According to Montanari (1999b), the most tangible sign of a discernable interest in the pleasure of food and the stirrings of early gastronomy in the Renaissance was the re-discovery of Apicius’ Roman handbook of food. Fletcher (2004) argues that this renewed interest in classical purity also questioned religious dogmas, citing Platina’s philosophy of eating which renounced gluttony as a sin and emphasised the glory of eating. However, there were still signs of tension around the table; during the same period, humanists continued to emphasise dietary restraint and moderation, warning that classical excess led to a path of ruin (Albala, 2002).

Fletcher (2004) notes that other influences produced change. The reliance on oral traditions waned with the invention of printing, accelerating the dissemination of ideas about cuisine and dining. New World foods (especially sugar and spices) expanded culinary repertoires and the emphasis on cuisine transitioned from quantity to quality (Fletcher, 2004). The long series of Last Suppers reveal an unchanging scene over centuries, a sparse still life of bread, salt, wine, and dishes of fish (Strong, 2002).

Braudel (1973) specifically noted that across these images there was never a fork in sight. However, the secular Renaissance table took a very different direction from this dominant religious iconography. Food assumed a grand role, lords at the high table took on a more 'king-like' aura aligning their power with the divine, and elaborate meals became increasingly more secular versions of the Christian mass. Tables were laid like altars, complete with knives, forks and drinking cups. This was combined with ritual hand-washing, reverent kissing of material objects akin to religious relics, and performing genuflections. Combined with a curated processional order carrying all the food, the experience symbolically alluded to the feast as an act of state (Strong 2002).

The Renaissance witnessed a transitional culinary phase between the heavily spiced and richly coloured cuisine of the Middle Ages and classical French *haute cuisine*. Albala (2007) found changes towards a more refined culinary aesthetic positioned Renaissance dining as a critical and resplendent art form of the period reflected in late Renaissance styles found in other arts. Renaissance banquets became more logical and structured, courses were less monotonous and repetitive, and dishes were simpler and smaller. These meals were complex narratives with layered meaning. If abundance was waning then it was dispelled by "culinary virtuosity, wit and illusion" (Albala, 2007, p. 12).

Treatises detailing Renaissance fetes became "a widespread form of propaganda extolling the taste and refinement of court as models of sophistication and refined taste" (Albala, 2007, p. 34) promoting courts as paragons of refined culture. These banquets and the treatises documenting them were artistic advocacy, designed as diplomatic and political tools for European courts and nobles competing for superiority when the foundations of states were being threatened (Albala, 2007). Patronage networks were silently acted out around the dining table and any insubordination or coded affront threatened social harmony and stability. Throwing the perfect banquet was akin to waging a battle, as courts fought with their forks for competitive political advantage (Albala, 2007). Renaissance festivals were therefore allegories for the social stratification of the times. According to Strong (1984), the Renaissance banquet embodied the unique alliance of art, power and inequality in the creation of the modern State.

France was increasingly the homeland of fine fare, the place where the presentation and ceremonial of profane festivals, gourmandising and *bon ton* (fashionable style) were perfected (Braudel, 1973). As the 18th century progressed, life for the French nobility at court “was centered on social display, elaborate ceremonial and exceptional consumption” (Mennell, 1996, p. 111), and the structure of court society and its ethos of rank was reflected in the cookery books of the time. Tomasik and Vitullo (2007) argue Platina’s 15th century writings were a critical culinary influence affecting food practices and the emergence of tastes in Early Modern Europe. Discrimination and refinement in culinary matters became an essential attribute in fashionable circles as these ideals spread to the dining rooms of the *monde*. The idea of good taste had migrated from the banquet and transformed the noble French dining room into a school of civility, social display and competition as the culinary arts became more dignified (Mennell, 1996).

It was New World foods that played a starring role on the elite banquet tables of the Renaissance. The Columbian Exchange described the trade between Europe and the New World, a period that changed the course of human history as two worlds, biological and environmental, collided, resulting in disease, human misery, and death (Crosby, 2003). These were not just innocent exotic edible luxuries from distant lands but products laden with meaning, consumed at the shameful cost of the colonial slave economy (Albala, 2007).

Food, diet and conduct

Modes of consumption increasingly contributed further to cultural stratification (Jarness, 2015). As noted earlier, small, delicate portions with an emphasis on quality and more natural flavours became fashionable during the Renaissance. A refined appetite, founded upon a more elegant, ritual conviviality, reflecting aspiration and status became an initiation into courtly life (Pinkard, 2009).

A ‘courtly’ ideology of food was introduced, and certain foods became signs of social identity maintaining the proper social equilibrium and hierarchy. Quality was paramount and equalled power; expensive, elaborate and refined foods were intended for nobles whilst coarse and common foods were for peasants. As previously discussed, the lower orders, the poor, had to content themselves with charity, and

those who did not follow these class differences violated social order. However, the relationship between quality of person and quality of food was not just about wealth or need but was directly linked to nutritional ideologies which stemmed from Medieval beliefs (Montanari, 1999b). Based on the Great Chain of Being (see pp. 68-69), dietary rules were adapted with increased systematic rigour as a form of control between the 14th and 16th centuries, during a period of social and economic mobility. The elite aristocracy pursued a profound dominance of society and culture by excluding certain people (the other) from the more tasteful, refined pleasures of the table. The symbolic exclusion allowed the powerful to represent themselves in the most concrete manner through social discrimination (Montanari, 1999b).

Montanari (1999b) draws parallels between food and society, arguing hierarchies in food and people are firmly rooted in the culture and image of power. During the Renaissance, class differences in eating were measured even more acutely than they had been in the Medieval period. As Albala (2007) points out, the Renaissance courtier was not just a Medieval warrior but now required a more holistic qualification: he must also be a scholar, art collector and man of taste. Manners were of prime importance and increasingly functioned as signs of social differentiation. Everything, including food, was becoming more nuanced and delicate. The concept of taste was on the horizon (Montanari, 1996).

Ostentation was the principal element and underlying motivation of the aristocratic Renaissance table, performing as a sign of socio-political and cultural modification (Taylor, 2005). A new style of cooking, *haute cuisine*, was traceable in the upper and middle classes which Mennell (1996) attributes to Catherine de' Medici, who he argues presided over the emerging sophistication of Renaissance culture. This signified a gradual break from the Medieval style of cookery, as the Renaissance table was "rapidly raised to new heights of elegance, establishing a culinary hegemony of Europe" (Mennell, 1996, p. 63).

Dining tables to admire

Gold and silver banquet plates were a key feature of the Renaissance banquet, communicating pomp and lofty status and providing aesthetic and intellectual pleasure. Objects crafted in gold, silver and precious stones transformed meals into

extravaganzas. The plate dazzled amongst all the combined elements of the banquet designed to evoke a rich ambience, engaging the five senses of the body. The beauty and costliness of the objects also lent a certain gravitas and celebratory momentum to the choreography of the Renaissance banquet (Strong, 2002).

The key rituals of the Renaissance banquet service were enhanced versions of the Medieval equivalent, and included cup bearing, symbolic finger rinsing and carving, again all conducted by male attendants. These were prestigious executions conducted by individuals who were accorded a greater level of trust and privilege, reinforcing the hierarchal power structure of household operations (Taylor, 2005). Carving skills were elevated to a ritual art, a figurative display to denote chivalric culture, executed by an important noble who held a chief position at court (Albala 2007). Table attendants (key personnel were again mostly male) conformed to a highly regulated hierarchy and their conduct was dictated by strict protocol. The ceremony was imbued with almost religious reverence, involving curtsying, bowing and light kissing (Paston-Williams, 1993).

During the Renaissance period, an increasing array of table furnishings and objects became available, influenced by “changing attitudes towards gastronomy, dining etiquette and table service protocol” (Taylor, 2005, p. 622). Precious cutlery and fragile glassware needed careful, delicate handling and this demonstrated mastery of courtly manners and delicacy. These objects also implied financial security and declared a patron’s taste, and they were often stamped with coats of arms or emblems adding to the visual indoctrination. Resplendent tableware embodied the material culture of the Renaissance dining table, it was “the supporting cast in the smoothly choreographed performance” (Taylor, 2005, p. 625) moving towards the climactic service of the food. These specific objects and their functions helped maintain and extend strict codes of behaviour and the highest level of decorum and protocol, providing further insights into the elite dining practices and codified duties which the hierarchic serving structure around the dining table supported.

Gold and silver plate played a significant part in the banquet in artistic, theatrical, and social terms. These precious objects were not just practical, they were “effective cultural agents in a context where precise, codified human gestures and performances shaped the rituals of Renaissance dining” (Taylor, 2005, p. 633). The dining table was

no longer a space of Medieval social cohesion centred on a leader, but one of separation and exclusion where very few were invited to pull up a seat at the increasingly ostentatious table. Images of splendour, designed with formal and aesthetic conditions, were intrinsic to the gastronomic art of these centuries, creating an “explosion of fantasy and creativity” (Montanari, 1999b, p. 93).

An even more precise arrangement of courtly dining protocol was gradually assumed in the Renaissance following the example of the court of Louis XIV at Versailles with strictly defined food service rules. The Medieval buffet style, the ‘*grand couvert*’ was modified, and the new method of *service à la française* was espoused by every other European court. Two courses, each with a wide array of dishes, concluded with a third course, dessert or cheese laid out on a separate table. Described as “grotesquely diverse” (Bendiner, 2004, p. 142), *service à la française* was visually splendid but wasteful. This method was gradually replaced by the more refined style of *service à la russe* towards the early 19th century (Brown, 2002), which consisted of sequential courses, with smaller portions elegantly served on individual plates to each person. Bendiner (2004) attributes this to papal and Medici influences, creating a fashionable new taste for ‘spiceless’ foods. This trend aligns with Mennell’s (1996) discussion of the civilising of appetite, as the selection of quality foods rather than quantity was becoming more of a sign of status as the 18th century came to a close.

Conclusion: The Middle Ages and the Renaissance period

The Medieval and Renaissance dining tables carry the spirit of ancient history, but the ethos of dining practices was progressively adapting to cultural changes as the 19th century beckoned. A new element was emerging in food history, the field of gastronomy, where the dining table begins to find its true essence. It is to this subject that the study now turns its attention.

CHAPTER SIX – THE 19th CENTURY, GASTRONOMY – THE 21st CENTURY, CHANGE

Introduction

Part one of this chapter builds on the previous analysis of four key periods, Greek, Roman, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period, by examining the associated historical, social, cultural, and political developments surrounding the dining table. Over time, collective influences contributed to the genesis of gastronomy in France. Gastronomy is the nexus of food and taste which has been variously expressed as the ‘art of good living’ (Santich, 2007). Firstly, this chapter pursues the essence of gastronomy and examines how it contributes to our lived experience and the pleasures of the dining table. Secondly the focus transitions to the 21st century and economic and socio-cultural change, specifically more dynamic eating practices which challenge the contemporary domestic dining table. The chapter concludes with suggested ways to adapt but, overall, finds dining around a shared table today continues to be a significant and resonant space.

The 19th Century, Gastronomy

A new field – Gastronomy

The various opinions on gastronomy set out below allay the common misconception about gastronomy being a subject solely about fine dining when it actually encompasses so much more. Gastronomy is considered by Spang (2000) as simply the art of good eating. This includes maintaining the combined elements of food, people, places, attitudes, and ideas assembled around the dining table. These components are collectively translated into the experience that qualifies as gastronomy. According to Ferguson (1998), “Gastronomy is taken as the systematic, socially valorised pursuit of culinary creativity” (p. 118). Schehr and Weiss (2001) believe these ‘material pleasures’ of appetite were the foundation for gastronomy, a new cultural field which evolved in the mid-19th century and is described by them as a “total social phenomenon” (pp. 6-7). Additionally, Ferguson (1998) reported that, “like any new social practice, gastronomy drew on a nexus of social, economic, and cultural conditions” (p. 6).

There is a consensus that the heritage of the French gastronomic tradition is unique (Elias, 1939/1978; Mennell, 1987; Simmel, 1997). Poulain (2017) states gastronomy is

upheld by French culture irrespective of social status and Pitte (2002) believes that, of all countries, France grants gastronomy the most importance. Poulain (2017) recognises French gastronomy as sophisticated and identifiable by two features which distinguish it as a phenomenon. First, its level of complexity, and second, how successfully the model translates across different groups and cultural spaces. Furthermore, Poulain (2017) defines French gastronomy as an aesthetic cuisine characterised by a proliferation of recipes which are rigorously encoded with specific methods, precise rules, and a specific language with the capability to be precisely disseminated through written texts.

The rise of the restaurant

The court of Versailles was once a sparkling symbol of absolute monarchy. Its prestige extended the influence of gastronomy across Europe where, Poulain (2017) argues, the art of French living served as a model for elite groups in the Western world. As the demise of the monarchy ended the court at Versailles, many courtiers moved to Paris and the population there gradually doubled in size. This expansion was critical for the growing field of gastronomy and for the modern development of the restaurant, which has always depended on a game of numbers and scale for survival. Former chefs of the French aristocracy opened notable restaurants, described as ‘temples of gastronomy’ servicing a generally elite public with their culinary talents (Spang, 2002). However, although Poulain (2017) argues that gourmet experiences were theoretically then available to a greater percentage of the population, Ferguson (1998) disagrees, arguing that the sheer range of restaurants only served to solidify economic, social, and culinary stratification.

Culinary journalism provided manuals on how to be a proper guest at the French 19th century table; particularly the works by Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin (Gigante, 2005). The aristocratic culture of the ancient regime was swiftly transferred into the public culinary arena, and restaurants became the ‘parliaments of the people’ (Pilcher, 2006). The participatory aspect of the public, yet intimate restaurant contrasted sharply with the spectacular, communal Renaissance banquet. Ferguson (1998) explains the implementation of new conceptions for dining at the public restaurant table. *Service à la française*, as previously outlined, describes the method of food service characteristic of Renaissance banquets, when all the dishes were served

simultaneously at the table. This was replaced with a different system, *service à la russe*. Meals comprised of one dish per course, per diner, served in a sequential manner. This was a simpler style more suited to restaurant service and easily adapted to serving individual restaurant diners and, most importantly, all diners became equal on their plate (Kaufman, 2002). This change directly represented a more egalitarian, post-revolutionary movement where restaurant dishes reflected changes in social structure. Ferguson (1998) argues this new mode of restaurant service and private seating also contrasted with the previous hierarchical service arrangements of the royal and noble courts, where the placement of one's seat at the table also largely determined what one ate. The early restaurant was different and distinctive; Shore (2007) describes them as public, yet at the same time specifically 'created' private spheres which involved innovative protocols of serving and eating.

Earlier 17th century coffee houses had already contributed significantly to the development of the public sphere as centres of gossip, political intrigue, and commercial economy (Habermas, 1962, as cited in Bell & Valentine, 1997). Spang (2000) expands on this evolution, attributing political import to the 18th century restaurant dining table. Spang (2000) argues that any conversation around equality, money, fraternity, or French identity could be, and was, mapped out around the dining table. Issues including the new sociability of the table, and debates about taste as a virtue, appetite, and social cohesion, "all marked a profound interrogation of the meaning, function, and status of the shared meal, ... [and] the table became an important material and symbolic battleground" (Spang, 2000, p. 91). In the highly charged political arena of the Revolution, the ideal dining table was a space of solidarity and uniformity, promising equality not distinction. The modes of the Old Regime, observing social and cultural differentiation, were replaced with commensal meals focusing on table-based sociality (Spang, 2000).

Spang (2000) also posits that early French restaurants were a physical manifestation of gastronomy, stating that the post-revolutionary epoch was a definitive period where history intersected with consumption and sensibility. The restaurant gradually became more focused as a site for gourmandising, where "elite clientele shaped new attitudes towards the body and pleasure" (Sprang, 2000). Ferguson's (1998) sentiments are commensurate with this, arguing for the public restaurant as a site of display and

status and as the primary vehicle which institutionalised gastronomy, establishing it as a social and cultural practice. Ferguson (1998) also identifies the shift in restaurants towards the end of the 19th century from a semi-public to semi-private space as a key movement of socio-political significance. These consumption practices were key shifts in the changing structure of society. Furthermore, fraternal feasting, infused with the sweet smell of sedition, was a commonplace political event during the French revolutionary period. These events promoted the dining table as a place of unity that was open to all, giving the public meal a new significance. However, after the Revolution, Ferguson (1998) maintains the restaurant was slowly depoliticised.

Early gastronomic literature of the period was becoming more influential and had a significant effect on the culture of food, helping to bring the restaurant and the public dining table into the realm of pleasure. Mennell (1996) argues that the romanticism of the genre shaped the emerging restaurant scene, educating a wider audience in the pleasures of sensory imagination, aesthetic *sensibilité* and culinary artistry. Hence the dining table was placed firmly in the domain of artistic and literary debate (Spang, 2002). Grimod de la Reynière made the restaurant experience an affair of 'taste', with his enthusiastic, aesthetic style of gastronomic discourse. Brillat-Savarin (1825/2009), the renowned 'gastro-libertarian', believed people should ignore their mere desires, and instead turn them into reality by dining in a restaurant where the delights on offer could immediately satisfy their taste and appetite (Spang, 2000). The emerging restaurant scene was instrumental in changing sensibilities and influencing pleasure; it also played a part in the democratisation of luxury and dissemination of trends. The restaurant became a symbol of civility and, according to Mennell (1996), also a mechanism for the expansion of the civilising process.

Finkelstein (2003) describes the contemporary restaurant as a diorama which accentuates the fashionable and desirable, where the material ambience creates an environment for patrons to pursue their desires. Success, extravagance, or importance are all momentarily on offer, and objects and practices meld towards a realm of fantasy around the restaurant dining table (Finkelstein, 2003). Various elements of the 19th century restaurant remain today, the anticipation of convivial pleasures, the satisfaction of gastronomic desires, the postprandial content, only to reach that inevitable and enduring moment ... who gets the bill? (Spang, 2000).

Gastronomic taste – The model of social distinction

Brillat-Savarin (2009) writes enthusiastically about the cultivation and refinement of taste, which “invites us, by arousing our pleasure, to repair the constant losses which we suffer through our physical existence” (Brillat-Savarin, 2009, p. 45).

The vogue for gastronomy and more delicate foods was closely interwoven with pressures of self-control (Elias, 1978), as eating in the 19th century inclined towards a more refined manner, becoming entangled with bodily restraint. Delicacy in matters of food and self-restraint implies discrimination and selection, which Mennell (1987) argues guided social proprieties and dietary choice. The most notable food theorists, Grimod de la Reynière and Brillat-Savarin, also emphasised the need for a discriminating palate, citing the display of substantial amounts of food as coarse and vulgar.

As previously discussed, the concept of civility (Elias, 1978) was a set of instructions directing a person’s demeanour, the external appearance of the individual. These principles of etiquette were prescribed codes of behaviour which defined the conditions for the incorporation of food. The focus of these regulations were table manners, which were intended to reflect social distinction (Mennell, 1987).

Simmel (1997) posits that eating, a basic physiological activity shared by all humans paradoxically creates extraordinary social differentiation. Ferguson (1998) argues this is exacerbated by gastronomy, which enriches the social order. This distinction was exemplified at the court of Versailles, which had instituted decisive social and political changes governed by meticulous rules over a century. Courtly etiquette and strict hierarchy were the foundation for sophisticated court practices including gastronomy, a distinctive system where social and political differentiation was routinely expressed and recognised (Ferguson, 1998).

The increasingly affluent bourgeoisie increasingly and determinedly emulated the manners of the aristocracy during the early 19th century in a dynamic system of recognition and distinction, imitated and imitator. Culinary literature was at the heart of this social mechanism. One of the main functions of gastronomic literature was to initiate the aspiring middle class, the bourgeoisie, into the principles of good taste (Ferguson, 1998), although Poulain (2017), in accordance with his earlier stance,

argues that, over time, through the construction of a national French identity, the model of gastronomy has transcended social differentiation.

By the mid-18th century, *taste* became an axis of development transitioning from traditional dietetic influences to becoming a metaphor for beauty and refinement; cuisine became more artistic, which became the basis for gastronomy according to Flandrin (1999). Ferguson (1998) stresses this emerging culinary aesthetic created order from the disorder of Medieval and Renaissance cuisine, and determined which culinary creations were delicate or vulgar amidst a growing sense of good taste.

Gastronomy, Poulain (2017) argues, emphasised the natural taste and appearance of foods, unmasking the main elements in a quest for harmony and flavour. He believed the alchemy of cooking was not limited to the quest for a perfect cuisine, but also included the self-improvement of the creator and, by extension, an ambition for the whole of all mankind. What elevated French gastronomy, Poulain (2017) claimed, were the sensual qualities of French food, “a philosophical and spiritual context that would enhance the sensation of pleasure” (Poulain, 2017, p. 190) which, he further argued, like Strong (2002), took its cue from the Catholic religion.

The role of the 19th century gastronome

The literary genre of gastronomy announced itself as a determinedly philosophical effort, adopting a lively tone underpinned by moral and dietary principles which defined a new cultural arena for aesthetic practice (Gigante, 2005). 19th century gastronomy liberated the gourmet and was the domain of a male-dominated aesthetic. ‘Gastronome’ is a distinctive term describing someone eloquent in self-expression who cultivates their own ‘refined taste for the pleasures of the table’, and who writes about it to educate others. More than a gourmet, the gastronome “is also a theorist and propagandist about culinary taste” (Korsmeyer, 2005, p. 240). Mennell et al. (1992) states that the restaurant market was largely fostered by the invention of the 19th century gastronome, who developed ‘gastronomic theorising’ and whose role was the most decisive contribution to eating as a social activity.

As noted above, two distinctly high bourgeoisie gentlemen outlined the principles of gastronomy in their writing: Brillat-Savarin (1755-1826) and Grimod de la Reynière (1758-1837) (Mennell, 1996). Each had an individual style but shared certain

characteristics, establishing 'correct' practice, dietetics, a mixture of history, myth and nostalgic recollections of memorable meals (Korsmeyer, 2005). The new gastronome adapted swiftly to designate a popular cultural practice – they were “key agents in the socialisation of individual desire and the redefinition of appetite” (Ferguson, 1998, p. 4). The 19th century gastronome was inevitably male, and they needed to be wealthy because *haute cuisine* was a very expensive pursuit. During this period the culinary sphere was mostly inhospitable to women, and all chefs were male (Ferguson, 1998).

Gastronomic literature established a *code gourmand* interspersing anecdotes and hints, restaurant reviews and recipes. Brillat-Savarin's (2009) seminal book, *The Physiology of Taste* remains a culinary classic, serving as a lasting foundation for the science of gastronomy (Buford, 2009). Brillat-Savarin's (2009) writing had a philosophical tone, he reshaped the joy of dining as an amusing, pleasurable pastime. Combining his moralistic anecdotes with reflections on other social virtues, he created a lifestyle in an obsessive pursuit of fine food (Spang, 2002). Korsmeyer (2005) contends that the 19th century gastronomes fulfilled a 'democratising function' in shaping taste, as their knowledge of elite standards was disseminated beyond the elite. These texts contributed to the increasing codification of everyday practices and influenced the development of restaurants, which became cultural and social institutions. Once a space of scandal, the restaurant was conferred with a new respectability, as gastronomic literature focused exclusively on promoting food and dining (Mennell, 1996). The gastronome/guide distinguished the dining table as an independent realm, one unstructured by rules and outside any overt political interference, “with the development of gastronomy the restaurant table became significant, independent of the Court of Versailles and the Revolution's fraternal repast” (Spang, 2002, p. 151).

The 19th century gastronomes espoused a certain aestheticism, paving the way for a fertile, idiosyncratic literary path (Gigante, 2005). Moreover, the philosophical framework of these texts reveals the original culture and theory behind gastronomy and, as a result, food and its consumption became a matter for serious thought (Mennell, 1996).

Gastronomy – Food trends at the table

Ferguson (1998) maintains that the post-revolutionary period in France was the perfect catalyst for gastronomy; its modernity was gradually constructed through widespread culinary discourse and texts establishing a wider diffusion of social and cultural practices. Cooks and cooking were passing from craft to a more prestigious domain, towards a trend in individual taste as part of a more general transformation of art and consciousness which began during the Renaissance (Mennell, 1996).

Mennell (1996) states that the aristocratic and bourgeois *haute cuisine* of the 18th and 19th centuries separated it from the abundance, opulence, and aesthetic weightiness of the Medieval and Renaissance culinary style. This was the first culinary revolution, breaking tradition with Medieval foods in the later 17th century. Lightness and delicate elegance became the vogue, epitomised by great dishes from La Varenne and Careme through to Escoffier which were more technically complex as nuances of flavour were becoming more understood and tastes were changing. “A process of ‘the civilising of appetite’ took place alongside ‘a civilising of appetite’” (Mennell, 1996, p. 165).

Scher and Weiss (2001) argue this period represented the summit of culinary art, and Spang (2000) agrees, referring to the 19th century’s apotheosis of French cuisine. By the end of the 19th century, the sophisticated culinary hegemony of France had been adopted across Western Europe (Mennell et al., 1992). This section closes by acknowledging the importance of French gastronomy and its contribution towards shaping contemporary food and consumption practices. However, there has been a slow yet revolutionary change over the last century surrounding foodways (Mennell, 1991), and the resulting impacts and corresponding debates are examined in the next section.

The 21st Century – Commensality, challenges and change

Introduction

This study has established the history and meaning of ‘around the dining table’ in its research findings and now advances to critically evaluate contemporary dining practices. The section initially examines changes in the social and cultural patterns that contribute towards the erosion of traditional food practices. The analysis summarises these insights and redresses the widely purported notion that family dining is under

threat. This section is an important contribution to the study because it clarifies what lies behind recent food consumption changes and demonstrates how society refashions dining practices as part of evolution and progress, a perpetual cycle in which people reinterpret meaning around the axis of the shared dining table.

The roots of change

The scope of this dissertation limits the options for studying the intervening years and now moves forward from the turn of the 20th century to the present. During the last century, eating habits in the Western world have changed towards a more individualised and less structured pattern of eating. This section examines some key reasons for change and the effects on dining at the table.

The historical nature of globalisation is evident in any historical narrative and has been occurring for centuries in culinary forms. Pilcher (2006) argues that contemporary novelties such as fast food and fusion trends are simply representations of historical trends. However, it is the industrial era that represents a new phenomenon in the history of food. Innovations in the production and processing of food have created a globalised marketplace dominated by large corporations and multinationals widely described as 'Big Food' (Williams & Nestle, 2016). Many foods are industrially processed, evolving into high-tech products with an emphasis on shelf life and consumer convenience. Culinary effort has been re-directed from the kitchen to the factory and people have become more disconnected from the source of their food. The labour-saving food-service industry has exploded with 'value-added' products. Production methods have become more sophisticated, and quality has improved; consequently, food choices are now effectively limitless, putting eating habits and dining around the table under new pressures as people's relationship to food changes (Mennell et al., 1992).

Eclipse of the dining table – A moral panic

Despite scant investigation, Mennell et al. (1992) claimed that family meals, the very "stuff of sociality" (p. 116) were in danger of disappearing. Although the authors themselves later stated that this issue was incompletely investigated, Murcott (2012) maintains that, ever since these claims there has been frequent lament over the 'supposed decline' of the family meal, resulting in a 'moral panic'. The statement was

originally made during a convention focused on changes in eating patterns and commensality. Despite Fischler (2011) also describing these discussions as scientifically without foundation, the subject is still constantly debated. One perspective from Julier (2013) suggests the heightened interest is because family commensality is widely considered to promote social solidarity and provide reassurance in a modern industrial world sated with moral apprehension. As a result, people find the prospect of the family meal being in decline concerning. Fischler (2011) agrees that some issues raised at the convention in 1992 had an ideological or moral bias, but this study argues that today, in 2022, these concerns arguably have more basis and involve a more acute social significance. The sections below address some of the issues posing a perceived threat to the family dining table.

Stable and reassuring food ideologies are being challenged, a phenomenon described by Fischler (1980) as 'gastro-anomie', a crisis in gastronomy, where former norms have become destructured, impacting the tradition of dining around the table. Beardsworth (1995) argues Fischler's (1980) theory takes its cue from Durkheim's (1952) concept of anomie, regarding food-related anxieties as an inevitable feature of the individualistic modern urban society, a theory proposed 70 years ago. However, Fischler (1980) agrees that the cultural devices that sustain traditional foodways do appear to be seriously compromised, creating persistent unresolved conflict over the beliefs, norms and rules that constitute the food ideologies which shape food and dining practices.

Various material and cultural factors have, according to Beardsworth (1995), "contributed to the erosion of traditional foodways by providing a plethora of novel ideas, food items, dishes, flavor principles and nutritional opportunities" (p. 127), which he claims is causing the decline of customary dining practices and traditional beliefs. This, Beardsworth (1995) maintains, is associated with the processes of secularisation and rationalisation as part of the development of modernity.

Additionally, Beardsworth (1995) also argues that industrial food processing is contaminating flavour principles, giving rise to anxiety about diet, disease and other pathologies resulting from processed foods, citing many examples of food-related panics. Warde (1997) affirms that there are competing forces pulling in contradictory directions which are driving eating choice and consumption patterns, for example tensions around obesity and dilemmas concerning the desire to eat lots of nice things

against the desire to be thin. A classic omnivore's paradox (Fischler, 1988). These combined factors are leading to a pursuit of style and expressions of social difference which characterise "a mire of uncertainty and discomfort" (Warde, 1997, p. 32) mirrored in contemporary dining practices. In sum, this closing comment seems logical: "dietary obsession is a fluctuation of cultural history, a modern disease of which no food can cure" (Fernández-Armesto, 2001, p. 62).

The increase in consumption of pre-prepared food both inside and outside the home is also having a profoundly negative effect on human lives, according to Mintz (1979-1980/2018). Mintz (2018) considers such forms of eating as the ultimate freedom of individual choice but argues that the act of eating is becoming de-socialised without the structure of a proper meal. Furthermore, Mintz (2018) remains pessimistic about modern foods habits, claiming that without correction they could foster alienation.

Grignon (2001) has a different perspective, stating that globalisation has resulted in the disappearance of seasonal variation, ruining traditional annual rhythms of eating. These opinions all align with Fischler's (1980) gastro-anomie theory, and the growing disconnect people now have with their food. The term 'gastro-anomie' also refers to societal change whereby "codes or structures governing eating habits have been undergoing a process of 'destructuration'" (Mennell, 1996, p. 334). Poulain (2017) posits that this is associated with informalisation and deregulation, which in turn is affecting the psychosociology of structure and organisation.

In the same vein, the omnivore's paradox (Fischler, 1988) now presents a seemingly eternal culinary dilemma, due to the overwhelming variety of foods available. Neophilia is a preference for novelty and change, the attitude of those who embrace food innovation and variety in their diet. Neophobia is the mistrust of unfamiliar food and perceived risk to the omnivore who is focused on careful, conservative eating. The tension and contradiction between the two characteristics generate food ambivalence and food-related anxiety, thus constituting the paradox. Fischler (1990) argues these issues can be broadly alleviated through beliefs – the customs and rituals laid down over many generations at the dining table. He believes the dining table provides a stable frame of reference which neutralises anxieties and can even render them irrelevant. Mennell (1996) also acknowledges the ambivalent nature of the omnivore's paradox as a powerful force for creating diet-related identities, arguing it is also

responsible for many diverse food systems and culinary rules over time. These changes include changes in current dining practices. The following two sections establish the continuing and fundamental importance of the shared dining table, with a focus on the family meal.

The significance of the domestic table

The key elements of the human condition are explored in the domestic sphere, where family, gender and the nature of the individual are understood. “It is where public and private realms are forged, nature/culture boundaries are created and negotiated, and it is where power and family are enacted and most intimately felt” (Buchli, 2010, p. 503).

According to Gillespie (2000), Lévi-Strauss’ (1982) describes the domestic unit as a social unit and a social structure, calling it ‘a metaphor for the body’, and ‘cooking a metaphor for culture’. The dining table is the nexus of the ‘house society’ (Gillespie, 2000); its material, social and cultural roles are fundamental. Around the dining table is where identity and personhood are shaped, experienced, and contested. As the symbolic heart and soul of the home, could the domestic dining table be considered a ‘*metaphor for living*’? The house and the dining table are social institutions, they are how we come to know the world and what it means to be human (Buchli, 2010).

The new postmodern cultural form has meant the modern household is now more flexible and eating has become a more individualised and loosely organised activity. Tightly structured meal patterns and habitual household commonality are becoming more unusual. These are comprehensive reasons for the decline of traditional foodways including dining at the table (Beardsworth, 1995).

What’s for dinner? – The family table, an institution

The quotidian family meal is considered the cornerstone of family viability and a symbol of social coherence. Fischler (2011) argues the mammalian link is the fundamental form of food sharing and from there the child is gradually socialised at the family table. Fischler (2011) affords commensality with the ability to preserve, build up or revitalise kinship, stating it can even restore fractured familial relationships. Furthermore, “the sharing of meals draws the boundaries of a family’s symbolic and emotional existence” (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 74). The family meal involves

sharing food in comfort and confidence, as food consumed amongst kin is largely safe from risk (Fischler, 2011). The ritual part of the shared meal is important because it imparts meaning, and without ritual the value of the experience diminishes (Fischler, 2011). Rites of passage (Van Gennep, 2013) celebrated with kin and structured by ceremonial ritual are highly symbolic and carry greater emotional weight (Pilcher, 2006), and this is covered in Chapter Two – Theoretical Perspectives. Commensality also involves certain rituals of hospitality, as the host and cook give something of themselves to guests eating their food, in an almost spiritual Eucharistic manner implying a feeling of communion at the table (Fischler, 2015). What is more, inviting non-kin friends to join a family meal is a generous, intimate gesture, engendering a special kind of commensal hospitality extending friendship and solidarity (Chee-Beng, 2015).

According to McIntosh (1999), the family meal is a base model which also fulfils several functions for society by demonstrating integration, including group identification. The sharing of meals is further reinforced by communal seating and shared utensils contributing greatly to a shared fate and history. Solidarity provides motivation towards community responsibilities and also the fulfillment of family goals. This mental and physical energy is sustained in a shared setting when the family is present and exchanging information during mealtimes. Socialisation that occurs at family meals inculcates general knowledge and eases the negotiation of children's preferences around food. Neophobia, eating only limited foods and the widespread refusal of food by children are mediated at the family table, these tendencies generally decline around the age of five, but family guidance on such issues can still be needed for a longer time (Fischler, 1988). The dining table is also where manners, the societal norms that govern human behaviour in society, are introduced and adopted while eating and drinking. Commensality and the formation of identity and transmission of culture from one generation to the next is a critical process of socialisation (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). McIntosh (1999) maintains it is also around the dining table that children learn emotion, develop personality and concepts of self.

“Domestic hospitality has positive and attractive features in a context of enduring relationships” (Warde et al., 2020, p. 394). Family meals are social, enjoyable, and safe; they have definite positive effects of bonding and solidarity. De Vault (1997) argues

that women see caring for a family as valuable and important, “feeding a family is a skilled practice, a craft in which many women feel pride and much satisfaction” (p. 196). However, there are concerns of gender equality surrounding domestic commensality; women still do most of the work and shoulder more responsibility than the men in the household. Despite this, in their recent study, Warde et al. (2020) agree that domestic hospitality practices are based on mutuality, generosity, and kindness; furthermore, they incorporate social interaction and gift exchange, both central features of social institutions.

Additionally, McIntosh (1999) posits that the family meal satisfies human needs and drives in an orderly fashion, providing social stability. The argument here suggests that without the family meal there would be no social order, implying this potentially affects social structure. Douglas (1997) maintained that ordered patterns of the domestic meal represent much more than themselves; concluding that they inform all the wider ordered structures surrounding the meal. Murray (1990) expresses the same view, arguing that eating and drinking reinforces the social system in a variety of complex ways and maintains cultural values in modern societies. There is a mixture of strong positive and negative opinions concerning the family meal; the former have been addressed, and the latter are now reviewed below.

The family meal – An ideological construct

“Family meals represent an unusual nexus of local and national politics, family and individual power and the forces of ideologies practices, of gender, age and cultural identity” (Wilk, 2010, p. 434). Wilk (2010) accepts the universal need to eat but argues the nuclear family is not universal. Le Moal et al. (2021) also question the normative convivial representations of the ideological family meal, arguing that they can be challenging events.

In addition, Wilk (2010) highlights the moral rhetoric which has obscured meals behind a rosy set of ideals, instead describing family meals as a political construct, which foster performative scenes of power and conflict confronting the narrative of the cultural ideal, the ‘good’ and the ‘happy’ meal. Wilk (2010) states it is hard to imagine a negative emotion or experience which has not been reflected at the shared dining table.

The idealised family meal endures as a cultural icon, and although it is under threat as a daily occurrence it retains an untarnished, aspirational image. Wilk (2010) also argues that the functionalist Durkheimian perspective always puts a positive slant on creating group identity through the magic of shared emotion. Furthermore, most research into the positive “benefits of family meals are correlational, meaning a causal relationship cannot be determined” (Le Moal et al., 2021, p. 6). Wilk (2010) is equally sceptical about the widely purported ability of the dining table to address social problems.

According to Fischler (2011) much discourse surrounds the decline in the importance of dining at the table. Kaplan (2021), for example, suggests one contributing factor is the modernisation of religion and other centrally held beliefs which eclipse the centrality of food. Murcott (2012) takes a serious analogous stance, arguing the family meal stands as a metaphor for the family and its ‘decline’ is a public commentary on the nature of family life, inferring food habits symbolise shifts in society.

These are all debatable points which highlight change in family dining practices. Now the study explores how these sentiments are addressed by looking at the demands surrounding the contemporary dining table.

Challenges facing the family dining table

Fernández-Armesto (2001) argues convenience foods today are more highly prioritised than pleasure, nourishment, or enlightened eating around a dining table and describes consuming industrialised food products as corrosive for both society and the traditional pattern of family life in the modern West. Describing family meals as ‘atomised’, Fernandez-Armesto (2001) also calls the microwave the enemy of civilisation, arguing it is responsible for the destruction of the communion of eating together, giving primacy to the solitary eater and individualisation. The qualities of the family meal which relays notions of well-being, safety and certainty are potentially quashed when food is ‘nuked’ instead of being cooked. Furthermore, Ritzer’s (2009) treatise on McDonaldisation criticises convenience foods, arguing that ‘value-added’ products change the meaning of food.

Fischler (2011) argues that individualisation has affected mealtimes and social motivation. The most apparent features of individualisation are concerns relating to

body, health, and care, all connected to the central domain of food, which shapes issues about the body. More widely, dietary concerns have significantly altered people's relationship to food, reforming dining practices and identity construction. Falk (1994) has a different, more positive interpretation. Falk (1994) accepts the continued importance of sharing meals with family and friends but overall, he considers group commensality has been marginalised. Falk (1994) believes the individual self today has more control over boundaries around what is taken into the body and with whom, and this judgment of taste is crucial to self-formation and identity.

Fischler (2011) outlines numerous other factors affecting dining around the contemporary table; people today are time-poor; they spend less time eating, and meals are also simplified. In Fischler's (2011) world, the fast-food industry has few obstacles and presents the biggest challenge to cooking and dining practices. Take-out foods are increasingly popular, and the growth in the sector is facilitated by widespread food delivery services like Deliveroo or Uber Eats. Be honest, who hasn't been attracted to the seduction of the 'drive thru' on occasion...?

Furthermore, eating is not so closely connected to domesticity and there is increased eating outside the home. Super (2002) emphasises the growing number of non-traditional families is changing family meal dynamics and the social relationships on which dining at the table depends. The ubiquity of the car has expanded leisure opportunities; there is more travel generally and people take more vacations. It would be a reductive approach to attribute the decline of the family meal largely to the changed lives of women – as this section outlines there are various contributing factors. However, many mothers are now working full-time, and children's extracurricular activities and flexible working hours are all eroding opportunities for shared family meals.

Whilst gastronomy is an increasingly popular spectator sport according to Pollan (2009), he remains perplexed as to why this voyeurism fails to inspire the family dining table. 'Grazing' also creates irregular eating habits contributing towards diminishing structured family meal patterns (Fischler, 2011), although Smith (2002) blames "widespread disintegration of the traditional rules and norms governing social life" (Smith, 2002, p. 40) and an increase in individualisation for the grazing habit.

Individual dining is based on implicit assumptions, according to Fischler (2011), who also insists that individualisation, the privatisation of eating, has significant drawbacks. He contemplates a stage in society and civilisation where, due to increasing individualisation, the rules of sociality and sharing could become obsolete, resulting in alienation. Ultimately, Fischler (2011), after much analysis, concludes that commensality is here to stay, despite disruption and new, evolving forms. Fischler (2011) argues that eating at the dining table is still endemic, and meals around the world are mostly conducted in a shared situation with its many benefits. As such, Fischler (2011) concludes that commensality is fundamental to life and remains the basis for social organisation and structure in human societies (Fischler, 2011). On this positive note the chapter now summarises how the challenges facing contemporary domestic commensality are being resolved.

The meal in transformation – Adaptability, agency, and intentionality

Now the study contemplates changes in eating practices that, as this study has demonstrated, took millennia to develop. Various opinions attest to the enduring significance of commensality, and some insist “it is too hasty to declare traditional dining patterns dead and buried” (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999b, p. 551). They argue that, in Europe, regular meals are still the norm, and claim dining patterns are still rigid. Bell and Valentine (1997) emphasise that routine food practices and habits continue to be critical in maintaining community identity. Moreover, they argue that diasporic communities still consider maintaining a sense of identity and history through commensality a vital practice. Caplan (1997) agrees, referring to domestic meals as the ‘template’ of the household, emphasising that the family meal continues to retain its symbolic significance. Additionally, Caplan (1997) suggests less frequent family dining might add to the importance of a ‘proper meal’.

Le Moal et al. (2021) also conclude from their study that domestic commensality is still highly valued by families, evidenced by the fact that many households still subscribe to regular meals despite the contradictory belief. They maintain families do eat together but do so in more improper, relaxed forms including allowing the presence of technical devices, such as television and phones. Furthermore, the increasing assertion of nutritional demands indicates an evolutionary aspect of social interaction, in that sharing and commensality must somehow adapt and become more tailored to

individual dietary requirements (Fischler, 2011). Similarly, Meiselman (2008) illustrates the inevitability of change by comparing the structured meals of recent generations with those of the present but remains confident about the long-term future of the shared table and commensality. Meiselman (2008) is assured it will be a long time before shared meals are replaced by eating a pill, and after reviewing the research this study concurs. Pilcher (2017) suggests that historical change is important and needs to be appreciated but also accepts social relationships centring on food are changing, possibly at the expense of family unity. However, Pilcher (2017) questions whether “social media, manufactured consumer preferences or Instagram can provide the emotional satisfaction of traditional social ties” (Pilcher, 2017, p. 7) enjoyed at the shared dining table.

One perspective on future dining sees the adaptation of technology to transform future commensality. However, Wills (2011) argues technology *is* shaping the meaning of food, reflecting multiple aspects of social change, but concludes this repositioning simply creates new logics of practice that are rarely tacit undertakings. Spence et al. (2019) accept that the use of mobile devices can be disruptive at mealtimes, but they also have a vision, suggesting digital technology can provide food-related interaction, facilitating cyber commensality, a mode of dining across the technological divide. Spence et al (2019) also propose a form of ‘Tinder dining’, where Uber Eats (or equivalent) could connect solo diners to join with others, enhancing their dining experience at a social ‘tech table’.

DeVault (1991a) maintains that feeding produces family, emphasising that women collect and tame unruly components, coaxing them into a ‘family’ where the concept of ‘feeding’ a family begins long before setting the dining table. DeVault (1991a) describes family work as jointly material and adaptable, arguing that feeding requirements need to pivot and adapt, by integrating diverse schedules so busy families can gather together. By establishing the needs and preferences of individuals, the dining table becomes a personalised family space, a place of shared understanding. DeVault (1991a) recognises this ideology but maintains that women have learnt about this from mothers, female friends, media and education, and that they also draw from historical discourse on the concept of family and hospitality. Appropriate routines are

formed by blending these with their own idiosyncratic ideas to produce their own version of 'family' through day-to-day routines which form household life.

Julier (2013) contends that, despite the lamented demise of family meals, domestic kitchens have not disappeared and, furthermore, argues that the active rhetoric around domestic mealtimes and their social benefits remains constant. The social function of dining in Europe is still of paramount importance, where the physical need to eat is greatly enhanced by the pleasure of dining with family and friends (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999b). Conviviality, the pleasure of eating food, unites food, family, and sociability together and is seen as the cornerstone of food culture (Phull et al., 2015). Commensality is a time for social exchange and communication, it is an affirmation of the family group or community identity, and it is a pleasure – a pleasure that is generated from *sharing* food around the table (Kerner et al., 2015). These opinions deliberate on the many positive benefits of commensality, including the mystique that qualifies commensality with an intangible yet enduring and powerful appeal.

Further positive support for commensality stems from a resistance movement opposing the modern food system and a revival in regional cuisines and traditions – part of national and generational attempts to preserve cultural heritage and identity. “Long traditions, the results of complex historical process, still exert a powerful influence. Food and gastronomy are crucial elements in defining historical identity” (Flandrin & Montanari, 1999b, p. 551). Foods practices are important, they have significant histories, but it is important to accept that change brings new meanings which can be assigned to old practices, and new practises like dining out might also assimilate new meanings of sociality (Caplan, 1997). Fernández-Armesto (2001) argues that there is an artisanal revival of traditional cuisines and food identity is being re-established. In addition, the damage of the industrial era is also being subverted by an increased awareness of organic products. Cultural resistance to processed food is also motivating consumer demand to become more selective. These revolutionary elements, including promoting natural, quality food products are spearheading a return to the appealing repertoire of healthier and more meaningful home cooking.

Combined with an increasingly educated approach to food and dining, these are exciting signs for the future of the dining table. Home-cooked food is becoming more valorised and dining around the table is being treated with renewed status. Yet new

trends in food procurement cannot be entirely ignored; Lebesco and Naccarato (2012) argue that despite decades of women's liberation, there is Faustian bargain attached to the dominant ideologies of the home-cooked meal. They apply Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital theory towards middle class food-related practices, including services like 'Dinner by Design' and e-grocers, which connote power and status yet are effectively staffed by the invisible other, which is akin, they maintain, to employing domestic help.

Conclusion

The dining table has developed from a long tradition, and as such it is resonant with meaning. There is a social sophistication which is inherent in the actions performed during even the simplest dinner eaten with family or friends (Visser, 1992). This is particularly relevant in a 'covid world' where dining at the table is a symbolic anchor, a form of spiritual ballast. Cooking and consuming meals has become a way to hold onto something purposeful, providing comfort and structure in seamless days and weeks spent in isolation for many people. Consequently, the domestic dining table has experienced an intense 21st century Renaissance, becoming a vital touchstone for humanity during very challenging times.

This study accepts there is an ideology applied to commensality and acknowledges that eating practices, particularly in the domestic sphere, are increasingly dynamic. During the last century, lives have become more disrupted, making structured mealtimes more difficult (Fischler, 2011). The recent scholarship analysed here cannot dismiss the decline in family eating because of alienation or anomie. Meals around the dining table still structure social time but in a far more flexible way. Furthermore, cultural identity is still intimately linked to culinary traditions, and whilst contemporary commensality might incorporate a reconfiguration of food-sharing norms, as Le Moel et al. (2021) state, conviviality is not socially static but an ongoing and fluid process. Change is progress, and the virtues of commensality demand regular re-evaluation and recognition about the value and significance of domestic dining practices.

Citavello (2004) maintains food is seen as the most socialising proclivity of human beings and one by which they privately and publicly define themselves. This supports one of the main statements of this paper, which suggests that the shared dining table

is where one learns to become oneself. The implicit rules, regulations and motivations around consumption practices continue to apply but do appear to be less certain. Now is a critical time for people to construct new personal meanings around the food they consume, to develop their own unique taxonomies of food, and become active agents around the dining table.

The final discussion chapter which follows analyses the key concepts determined from the research findings, and these discoveries confirm that dining at the shared table is a critically important aspect of human experience. This dissertation has shown that dining at the shared table not only connects past events with the present but just as importantly, points towards an assured future for commensality.

CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction – Turning the tables

This chapter examines the results of the research findings which are structured into a series of discussions. The chapter begins by reminding the reader of the research aim and questions which direct the study. The discussion will firstly respond directly to the two supporting research questions and the main research aim, followed by the synopsis which will confirm the working title.

Working title

Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present

Research aim

To undertake a historical and symbolic exploration of the material and social culture of the dining table in Western society

Supporting questions

- To what extent has the dining table developed as a tool of socialisation and identity construction in Western society?
- In what ways has the dining table played a crucial socio-cultural role in the evolution and structure of Western society, and does it continue to do so?

The synthesis of the narrative history chapters, Chapter Four – Antiquity, Greek and Roman, Chapter Five – Medieval and Renaissance, and Chapter Six – The 19th Century, Gastronomy – The 21st Century, Change, constitute ‘*a historical exploration of the material and social culture of the dining table*’. These three chapters establish what the literature *says* (the findings), and the data analysis discussed here focuses on what this *means*. Thematic analysis of the findings in these chapters has discovered certain dominant themes and categories, which were carefully coded. This definitive evidence became threads of ideas or *concepts* (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The use of *concept* as a unit of analysis is helpful here as it can constitute variables; these are characteristic of historical narratives and lead “towards more latent than manifest content” (Berg, 2009, p. 313).

This discussion engages with social theory and history to identify and explain these concepts, some of which are specifically correlated to chapters and pages within the narrative text to affirm the research outcomes. Social theory is the scientific study of “how societies change and develop and methods of explaining social behavior, about power and structure, class, gender, modernity and civilization and other concepts and issues in social life” (Neuman, 2019, p. 79). This quote explains how social theory contributes to a better understanding of human activity, in this context around the shared dining table, and encapsulates the objectives set out in the research aim and questions. Furthermore, the historical narrative format has helped shape larger themes in cultural history including ideas about politics, class, identity, the self, ‘other’ and more, supporting the research questions and confirming significant meaning surrounding the practice of eating at the shared dining table.

A key feature of the study was the transdisciplinary approach which fostered more sophisticated thinking. Furthermore, the research findings are characterised by intersection and interdependence between the concepts and themes. This intersection is reflected in some of the discussion sections, so consequently the concepts are mostly but not always firmly demarcated. This dissertation has interpreted foodways in a chronological and thematic historical context, providing interesting opportunity to explore changes and continuities. Considering the *longue durée* (Braudel, 1973) (i.e., taking a ‘long-term’ perspective) has enriched the search for slowly evolving structures consistent with cultural patterns around the dining table and its influence on the human experience.

In context of the supporting questions, several key concepts were identified: identity, risk, gender, religion, power, hierarchy and inequality, gift exchange and reciprocity. The chapter first discusses how the key concept of *identity* is intimately connected to commensality. Next, the study examines various perspectives on *gender* around the shared dining table. Group identity and the incorporation principle are then closely analysed and the impact of religious commensality on the history of society is also addressed.

Three subsections follow, discussing the concept of power at the dining table and the key findings of *hierarchy* and *inequality*. The implications of commensality, hospitality, and *reciprocity* feature next. Another key concept, the importance of *manners*, follows,

and organisational socialisation is also considered. These concepts jointly establish the crucial and unequivocal importance of *'the dining table's socio-cultural role in the structure and evolution of society and its ongoing contribution'*.

Finally, the summary will pull together the matrix of findings confirming the power and significance of the dining table from past to present, the working title of the dissertation.

Identity

Foodways and commensality are also powerful markers of difference and referents of identity; they unite people as much as they create divisions, borders, and boundaries (Kerner et al., 2015). The way any human group eats asserts diversity, including classic sociological variables such as gender, class, hierarchy, and organisation, with boundaries of 'one' and 'other' depending on different foods consumed. Food and consumption practices matter, they express who people are, where they belong and who they are connected to (Wills, 2011). Here the study examines how.

Identity and socialisation at the family dining table

Firstly, to understand the origin of identity, this section starts at the beginning of evolution. Darwin's (1871) theories fall beyond the scope of this study, but how humans developed to share with one another and care about each other stems from the Palaeolithic hunt (Chapter Four, p. 45), the campfire and evolution, moral virtue, and the preference for sharing with relatives or 'kin.' Silvertown (2017) proposes the widely accepted view that kinship is confirmed by anthropologists as one of the central organisations of human society and a key component for socialisation.

Socialisation is a process which introduces people to social norms and customs; it is a fundamental function of society. In simple terms, it is a form of social control and helps society operate smoothly (Cole, 2020). There are two critical processes of socialisation, primary socialisation, which occurs largely at the family dining table, and organisational socialisation or, effectively, manners, which is considered later in the chapter.

'Social coherence' (Chapter Six, p. 94-95) as a symbol of the family meal positions domestic commensality as an important process of socialisation. Dining around a

shared table is where the norms and values of society are internalised, and the transmission of culture occurs from one generation to the next. This development begins in infancy, as Fischler (2011) establishes (Chapter Six, p. 94-95), positioning commensal relations as a special kind of evolutionary consumption, involving intimacy and nurturance. Fischler (2011) believes babies acquire elaborate social skills very early on (around 12 months) and that much of their socialisation process is connected to food, eating around the dining table, and behaving in an appropriate manner. "The socialisation of an individual ... starts after weaning" (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997, p. 54), this establishes the primary significance of commensality and socialisation.

Chapter Six outlines the importance of the family dining table as a fundamental 'agent of socialisation'. Mealtimes around the table are designed as "cultural sites for the socialisation of persons into competent and appropriate members of society" (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 35). Meals at the table are mostly a conventional social practice providing a fertile arena for understanding the world, including the production of morality, sociality, and knowledge. The dining table is also a cultural vehicle for eating and reinforcing relationships that sustain or modify the social order (Ochs & Shohet, 2006). This opinion also reinforces the thesis that the dining table has a definitive role in the structure of society.

The family dining table is an institution which fulfills several societal functions (Chapter Six, pp. 94–96) and is re-confirmed as a tool for socialisation and intergenerational transmission of knowledge in Chapter Six, p. 95. However, the critical function of the family dining table as a site for *primary socialisation* is explained here. Two key elements of meal time practices are identified for children: *cultural apprenticeship*, "embedded in and organized by community ideologies and social arrangements for learning" (Ochs & Shohet, 2006, p. 36) and the process of *language socialisation*, which is how children and others use language acquired at the dining table to achieve social competence (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1985). The authors cited here believe that through a collaborative narrative around the dining table, everyday commensality is the key to dynamic communication. This, they claim, is how children learn to give shape to language, act, think, and feel emotion whilst nourishing the body. The critical role of the dining table as a contribution to the development of children's social and emotional existence in a comfortable safe setting is discussed in Chapter Six, p. 95.

Dining at the family table also establishes a foundation for lifelong practice. “Habits, behavior and preferences acquired in childhood shape those of adulthood” (Mennell et al., 1992, p. 58), creating socio-cultural patterns that resist change. Mennell et al.’s (1992) view implies that these patterns established at the family dining table are embedded in daily practice and ordered; this study therefore argues this behaviour correlates to the structure of society and the concept of manners, considered later in this chapter. Neuman (2019) suggests that the search for self-identity is not the driver of activities but, rather, identity is the outcome of recruitment to a practice, and that routine consumption practices form identities over time. Ochs and Shohet (2006) propose the notion of the dining table “as a cultural site for the socialisation of persons into competent and appropriate members of society” (p. 35). Van Esterik (2015) also proposes commensality as the moral core of society; both these opinions indicate that socialisation and manners are mutually inclusive. Meiselman (2008) also claims that shared family meals are essential for family unity, and furthermore that these occasions are also important for socialisation. This section has answered the first supporting question directly and demonstrates the family dining table is a critical component in the socialisation process and, furthermore, that it also contributes to the structure of society.

Identity construction at the dining table

Food is a key component of identity. The way any given community eats is a public manifestation of its history, tradition, diversity, organisation and uniqueness. Food is closely connected to territory, language and belonging (Fischler, 1988). Individual and group identity are both fundamentally formed through commensality. The following sections firstly determine the theories concerning individual identity and the wider concepts of risk and gender around the shared table; secondly, group identity theory and the nexus link to the dining table are covered, and lastly the socio-cultural impact of religion at the dining table follows.

Individual identity, the shared dining table and incorporation

Dining at the table demands reflexive analysis; this is where objectivity and subjectivity merge. Caplan (1997) argues that who people ‘are’ is contingent upon their consumption of food and this becomes a metaphor for self. Food and foodways,

including dining at the shared table, reveal who we are, our origins and aspirations (Kerner et al., 2015). The dining table as a site vital to identity development is established in Chapter Six, p. 94, this is where identity is 'shaped, experienced and contested'. This chapter also claims that the dining table is where children learn the concept of self. The research also reveals that both the 'nature of the individual is understood' (Chapter Six, p. 94), and identity and personhood are shaped (Chapter Six, p. 94) around the shared dining table. This is also the arena where hosts nurture their own identity and symbolically give of themselves (Chapter Six, p. 95).

Food is central to the formation of individual and group identity, Brillat-Savarin's (1825/2009) famous dictum 'you are what you eat' has a necessary corollary, "you are who you eat with" (Rosenblum, 2015, p. 189). Fischler (1988) describes the incorporation principle as the basis for self-identity, emphasising how a human is "constructed biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate" (Fischler, 1988, p. 171). Here the study examines the shaping of the body by social science, namely through incorporation. This constitutes the biological, cultural and symbolic function of food, its connection to individual identity and, more widely, collective identity, and the psychology of social group identity. In theory, "If one does not know what one eats, how can one know oneself" (Fischler, 1988, p. 282).

Identity and risk; The omnivore's paradox, food selection and identification

The process of incorporation is not only a site of identity but also subjectively and inextricably linked to anxiety and risk (Lupton, 1996). Fischler (1988) determines incorporation as the key aspect of people's relationship to food, which is closely related to other elements surrounding consumption – the omnivorous nature of humans, and food selection and identification. The concept of the 'omnivore's paradox' (Rozin, 1976, as cited in Fischler, 1988) is ambivalent in nature, comprising *neophobia*, a distrust of unfamiliar foods, and *neophilia*, the search for new taste sensations and combinations. This concept is described in Chapter Six, p. 93-94, and is dependent on the process of incorporation, where food crosses the crucial frontier of the body between inside and out.

Fischler (1988) maintains incorporation is a consubstantial act, both secular and sacred, and is latent with meaning for the following reasons: to incorporate food

means incorporating its biological properties but also symbolically ingesting human beliefs and representations. Incorporation underlines control over the body and self and therefore identity. Furthermore, according to Fischler (2011), the selection and identification of foods is also critical for identity construction. Fischler (2011) asserts that if someone does not know what they are eating, there is a question of subjectivity and the individual's place in culture, stating that eating the wrong foods can lead to 'contamination', a transformation from within and a 'dispossession' of self.

However, although incorporation offers a chance, a hope of becoming more of what one would like to be, it can present risk. The "eater's life and health are at stake, but so too are his place in the universe, his essence, his nature and in short his identity" (Fischler, 1988, p. 281). Within this context, the study looks at contemporary issues driving food anxiety and leading to a rise in *neophobia* and associated risks surrounding incorporation (Chapter Two, p. 17). Lupton (1996) claims that rationality and asceticism generally prevail as control strategies around food intake, in a continual cycle of tension concerning hedonism and release. A fear of processed foods, described as 'corrosive' in Chapter Six, p. 97, is linked to identification difficulties, increased concerns about food poisoning and various food-related panics, all creating increased consumer anxiety. A general disconnect concerning food has created 'gastro-anomie' (Fischler, 1980) at the dining table surrounding changed perceptions of identity. The phenomenal range of foods now available has contributed to selection and choice issues. This directs conflicting dietary concerns around obesity and a converse desire to be thin (Chapter Six, p. 92-93), a classic example of the omnivore's paradox (Fischler, 1988), creating disquiet and challenging notions of identity. However, Falk's (1994) argument in Chapter Six, p. 98, is to the contrary, saying individuals today have more agency over their decision-making in respect of incorporation, thus safeguarding and strengthening their identity. Bell and Valentine (1997) extend this theory, arguing the scope of children's agency today, and by extension their identity, has increased. Consequently, they now hold "the power to 're' negotiate the consumption practices and identity of the entire household, for example, persuading the whole family to become vegetarian" (Bell & Valentine, 1997, p. 85). Caplan (1997) also notes the power of diet, not just over appetite but over social relationships, especially those with family at the family dining table.

Risk at the dining table

Caplan (1997) draws attention to risk perception, stating that confidence in the physical world is increasingly doubtful and socially determined, and food hazards can create 'reflexive modernity', where people judge risk in accordance with experience and awareness. Fischler (2011) argues that raw food is fraught with danger – inferring a wildness that can be tamed by cooking and then safely ingested by the body. This process importantly orders food and its eaters in the world and inscribes food with a deeper meaning. Foods comprising risk can be those whose substance is impure or taboo, and this includes sacrifice (Fischler, 2011), although as Visser (1991) points out 'bad' foods are subject to intracultural context. Douglas' (2003) taxonomy of foods is "based on pure and edible or unclean and polluting" (p. 62), and is not restricted to cultural knowledge but included human subjectivity. Individuals cannot take the risk of consuming unclean foods or crossing cultural barriers by tasting novel foods because they risk incorporating the 'foreign' into the human body. Douglas (1970) argues this would expose them to attacks on their vital essence. These various opinions are all good examples demonstrating how food condenses a variety of meanings that extend its social value beyond the immediately obvious (Finkelstein, 2012).

According to Rozin and Fallon (1987), disgust has been recognised as a human emotion since Darwin's work in the 19th century. Most objects of disgust are animal in origin, giving rise to oral incorporation and contamination issues (Rozin & Fallon, 1987). The notion of 'blood taboo' was an historic social and religious prohibition and meant humans were forbidden from eating living creatures. This prohibition, over time, evolved into eating meat but strictly in a ritual manner. This study therefore suggests whilst animal sacrifice is 'forbidden' on a basic psychological level it also involves ingesting risk which could promote 'transgressive' excitement. Incorporation theory includes transgressive risk, the incorporation of a bad object which may contaminate but also transform from within to possess or dispossess one of oneself, the chance of becoming more of what one is (Falk, 1991).

Food and drink that is prohibited almost begs transgression and this also presents risk to the consumer. Falk's (1991) observations point to the ritual sacrifice, witness to intense emotions, energy, and thrall, adroitly harnessed and channelled to political advantage by ruling powers at sacrificial banquets in Antiquity (Chapter Four, pp. 55–

57). Falk's (1991) theory also relates directly to the consistently transgressive, licentious behaviour at the Greek *symposion* (Chapter Four, p. 50), attributable to excess alcohol, with participants showing little restraint irrespective of risk. The same 'particularly sweet', but perverse temptation applies to the consumption of other illicit substances like *silphium*, an ancient narcotic substance served at the Roman *convivium* (Chapter Four, pp. 54). *Silphium* was determined to be hedonistic and a 'sign of social decay' (Strong, 2002; see also Chapter Four, p. 54) but despite the associated risks remained an omnipresent feature of the *convivium*.

Gluttony also presents as risk, in the form of sin. During the Medieval period the Christian church condemned gluttony as a sin, introducing sumptuary laws to control excessive consumption. However, the text at Chapter Five, p. 62, alludes to the paradoxical nature of sumptuary transgression as a rejection of Christianity. Furthermore, despite sumptuary laws forbidding excess consumption, there was serial transgression both on the secular banquet table and in the monasteries (Chapter Five, p. 63), particularly as moral law began to supersede religious faith towards the end of the Medieval period (Chapter Five, p. 63).

Risk was a distinct feature of the Medieval and Renaissance banquet table. Commensality forges bonds and strengthens solidarity, but it is not without risk or pain, as shared occasions at the table can integrate and disintegrate. Throughout history, kings and commoners alike have invited company to their dining table with sinister ulterior motives. Dinner guests have been arrested, poisoned, and murdered, according to Kerner et al. (2015). Carlin and Rosenthal (1998) also describe that during the reign of the French Valois kings, poison posed a very real threat and could easily be slipped into a dish, or murder could be attempted in the dining room. As previously covered in the section on taboo (Chapter Two, p. 16-17), the Medieval banquet was a ceremonial event with strict protocols. To begin, the lord's 'cupbearer' performed ritual testing (assay) of the lord's food, including bread and salt, and his knives and napkins, for poison (Hammond, 2005). Whilst there was an obvious risk for the cupbearer, the ritual illustrated the level of threat and also reinforced the power of the lord.

Furthermore, food can be tainted by various means, although food shared in trusted circles has less associated risk (Fischler, 2011). Children's experience of neophobia is

most acute between the ages of two and five and is resolved through education at the family table (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). The family dining table is mostly a site of safety (Chapter Six, p. 95) with limited risks surrounding incorporation. However, the ideology of the family meal is challenged and reinterpreted as site of potential risk with scenes of conflict and tension by Wilk (2010) in Chapter Six, p. 96. Pollock (2012) argues that whilst family meals remain a critical element of social reproduction, food safety at the dining table is the main carer's responsibility and it is to the subject of gender that the discussion turns.

Gender at the dining table in Antiquity

Whilst gender per se was not the focus of the research here, the topic of women and inequality is evident throughout the research. The subject of gender is vast and complex and falls outside the scope of this work, but it is important to address this issue in the frame of the shared dining table, and some wider context is needed. Lerner (1993) states that patriarchy was created prior to the formation of Western society, emerging as the dominant form of social order. Lerner (1993) argues patriarchy established and reinforced systems and ideas incorporating assumptions about gender which were a powerful influence on the development of history and human thought. These systems and ideas are manifest at the dining table, where gender inequality and male dominance are reproduced through implicit rules and expectations, as demonstrated throughout the historical narrative chapters and discussed below.

The subordination of women at the dining table in various ways has a long history traceable to banquet feasting in Mesopotamia, when the queen kneeled subserviently at the feet of the king (Chapter Four, p. 46). The prestigious ritual role of the Mesopotamian king's 'cup bearer' at the banquet was a position only held by men (Chapter Four, p. 46). These two examples illustrate how archaic states developed a kingship, privileging male dominance over women (Lerner, 1993).

The Greeks inherited the same ethos, and above all Ancient Greek society was patriarchal. Formal public eating and the intimate *symposion* were men-only affairs; however, *hetaira* (women of the night) (Murray, 1990) were permitted (Chapter Four, p. 50). Nevertheless, Greek goddesses like *Demeter*, goddess of the harvest, and

Persephone (Chapter Four, p. 48) were powerful icons, integral to life and ritual celebration in Ancient Greece. This study assumes these female goddesses would have been a fixture at the 'heavenly high table' when mythical Gods dined with mortals (Chapter Four, p. 47). The Roman *convivium* was again an exclusively male domain, although courtesans were welcome (Chapter Four, p. 54); however, as Smith (2003) attests, many meals across Antiquity excluded women (Chapter Four, p. 58).

Antiquity, followed by the Medieval and Renaissance periods, laid the foundation for gendered performances, very clearly evidenced at the dining table. The Renaissance creation of Leonardo da Vinci (c.1498), *The Last Supper*, the most enduring, dominant image of the dining table, is an all-male domain. The one-sex model was centred on the telos of perfect maleness, and women and children as undeveloped men (Glenn, 1997), and this placed women outside the polity (Lerner, 1993). In short, rational man ordered the world and the less rational (and implicitly inferior) woman's nurturant function was focused within the domestic environs to sustain daily life.

According to Lerner (1993), the development of gender concepts in history are critical. Lerner (1993) argues that women had a different historical process from that of men and furthermore maintains historical interpretation is a cultural product in which events of the past are selected, ordered, and interpreted. Lerner (1993) maintains it is in recorded history that women have been obliterated or marginalised. This is reflected in the research findings of this study, where information on women around the dining table in Antiquity, Medieval and Renaissance is minimal. Women were, however, recognised in a structured system of oppression signifying inequality which included exclusion and gender division at the dining table (Chapter Four, p. 58). As women were otherwise excluded from the exclusively male Roman *convivium*, this study argues they were therefore repressed and marginalised by being denied access to the pleasure of commensality, classical education, philosophical thinking and empowering intellectual and political debate (Chapter Four, p. 54), all elements which underpinned the socio-cultural ethos of these male-only commensal gatherings.

Gender at the Medieval and Renaissance dining tables

Food and foodways endlessly enact gender (Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997). The Medieval banquet operated under a strict hierarchic staff system, with dominant

patriarchal values at its core (Chapter Five, p. 67) and where the top tier of servants were exclusively noblemen. The men enjoyed various exclusive benefits aligned to their status, comprising superior food, including meat, which was highly esteemed, also carved and distributed according to rank by the male carver (Chapter Five, p. 70). Additionally fresher bread and preferential seating closer to the lord were part of the elite package, all demonstrating blatant inequality at the table.

Religion, food and *gender* is addressed in more depth shortly, where Walker Bynum (1997) provides a unique and interesting perspective on gender and religion. Walker Bynum (1997) considers the food and consumption practices of Medieval women, giving them a historical voice through which 'inedia' (non-eating) becomes a locus of identity, empowerment, and possibility, in a world in which they were otherwise powerless.

Renaissance banquets employed the same Medieval patriarchal principles. Male attendants only were exclusively responsible for the important ritual elements of the banquet including cup bearing, finger rinsing and carving, which was considered a form of art at the Renaissance banquet table (Chapter Five, p. 81). However, Lerner (1993) posits that attitudes towards the gendering of tradition began to change during the Enlightenment.

Gastronomes and gender

One key observation from 19th century France, the birthplace of gastronomy, was the dominance of the male gastronome (Chapter Six, p. 89), and a generally inhospitable environment for women in the upper echelons of French restaurants, the stirrings of gender bias which still exists today (Ferguson, 1998; Mennell, 1996). Fast forward a century and things have changed. Female writers began to explore and reclaim the aesthetic pleasure of food, from a domain of gastronomy previously reserved for men. M. F. K. Fisher (1942/1988), Alice Toklas (1954) and Elizabeth David (1950/1991) articulated a language through which female desire expanded food writing beyond the domestic sphere, transgressing conventional gender ideologies in the socio-cultural realm of food.

Changing perceptions of gender around the dining table

Chapter Six, in the section on 21st Century and Commensality, Challenges and Change, is where recent changes at the family dining table are analysed. The concept of a proper meal, fresh meat and vegetables served by a woman, to a man at the table (Kerr & Charles, 1986) is described by Murcott (1982) as a neat demonstration of female subordination. Furthermore, Murcott (1982) argues that the imposition of culinary and nutritional responsibilities was largely attributed to women. Wilk (2010) continues to write of female subordination (Chapter Six, p. 96) at the contemporary dining table. This illustrates that despite movements in the right direction, women still do most of the work around family meals (Warde et al, 2020).

One alternative perspective sees both cooking for and feeding a family as forms of empowerment (Chapter Two, p. 21) (DeVault, 1991a; Pilcher, 2006). However, Murcott (1982) continues to argue that this is a female standpoint, held by those who perform the work (Chapter Two, p. 21). In Chapter Six, p. 100, the narrative looks to DeVault's (1991a) study, which demonstrates women's capability to pivot around the dining table and just make family meals happen irrespective of contemporary obstacles.

Art and gender at the dining table

The dining table is discussed here in the context of a contemporary cultural symbol of female empowerment. Feminist artist Judy Chicago felt that even though women were seated at the dining table they did not have a voice, and she was motivated to make a statement. The result was her groundbreaking art installation *The Dinner Party* (1974), an important icon of feminist art. The exhibit, today a permanent exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in New York, takes the form of a large-scale triangular table depicting a ceremonial banquet and signifies equality for each symbolic participant. Each wing of the table seats thirteen female icons in direct reference to the thirteen men present at the Last Supper. The symbolic women are depicted free from male restraint and repression. Handcrafted individual table settings portray each representative woman, in historical, sequential order beginning with a primordial goddess and ending with Georgia O'Keefe, a foremost contemporary feminist artist.

In sum, contemporary commensality at the family table reflects gender inequalities and male dominance within the family (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). According to Bell

and Valentine (1997), the family meal perpetuates and reinforces patriarchal societies, but times are changing.

Group identity and the shared dining table

The original *identity* of humans as distinct from beasts was established in pre-history (Chapter Four, p. 45), and the first commensal groups identified were hunters at the campfire which progressed into dining around the table in a gradual process of evolution (Chapter Four, p. 45) (Flandrin, 1999).

The incorporation of food in a group is the basis of collective identity. Food is ingested into people's physical fabric and becomes part of their belief and collective representation; furthermore, unique commensal characteristics are established when dining as a group (Fischler, 2011). Murcott (1986) agrees, stating that incorporation strengthens collective identity and belonging, the subject absorbs salient features of the food or drink and those sharing the same consumables become more like each other. Poulain (2017) adopts a psycho-sociological stance, suggesting that since food is culturally determined, eating incorporates humans into a cultural system and a social domain. Mesopotamian banquets (Chapter Four, p. 46) involved the custom of guests drinking from the same cup to solidify the fraternal bond, the genesis of a tradition practiced in the Greek *symposion* using the *kratar* (drinking vessel), as described in Chapter Four, p. 49, and later at the Roman *convivium*. The shared *kratar* was symbolic of group identity, 'All One', and employed a tacit understanding to abide by the rules of the event. Commensality, feasting with imaginary gods, ancestors and heroes, was also integral to Greek identity (Chapter Four, p. 48). Furthermore, Greek political groups used commensality as an expression of unity and solidarity (Chapter Four, p. 48). Donahue (2017) states that food and drink in Antiquity became socio-cultural commodities which were critical in forming identity. In theory, one becomes what one eats and, more widely, who one eats with.

Falk (1994) argues that the conceptual body being 'open' or 'closed' is typical of pre-modern societies (Chapter Two, p. 13), where ritual food consumption was more commonly an integrative mechanism for the whole community. Falk (1994) suggests that, as opposed to simply sharing common values, incorporation and social solidarity has a more primitive origin. Furthermore, Falk (1994) attributes this to the mouth and

its two-way function; incorporating the community into one's body while being eaten into the community, citing Durkheim (1965) who describes this as "the act of alimentary communion" (Falk, 1991, p. 778). The ritual Greek sacrifice aligns with Falk's (1994) concept of identity, and the word 'communion' has religious connotations; both indicate where the discussion is heading next.

At God's table – Meals and morality, religious commensality

The classics, the Bible, and the history of human experience communicate to us that breaking bread together has always been an important and even sacred part of human life. Leonardo da Vinci's (c.1498) *The Last Supper*, painted at the apogee of the Renaissance, portrays a simple image of men eating bread and fish together, yet it is an image more celebrated than any other. This dining table is where heaven and earth, the material and the spiritual worlds collide, and is laden with meaning that cannot easily be explained. *The Last Supper* is an image of spiritual revelation; it is also the primary icon of commensality.

The term 'commensality', described by Van Esterik (2015) as the moral core of human society, originates from religious worship and the practice of eating together at a sacrifice. Since pre-history, food has been the focus of sacrality, all functions of religious worship are tied to the hallowed sacrificial meal, and it is the only form of ordinary intercourse between humans and God (Chapter Four, p. 48). The significance of a sacrificial meal was its perception as a social act, tying participants who ate and drank together by bond and mutual obligation. The sacrificial meal's dual objective was to communicate with the gods and bond participants to group identity and, more widely, to civic organisation. This was evidenced by the quintessential Greek sacrificial banquet dedicated to the gods and consumed equally (Chapter Four, p. 48). Freud (1919/2013) also posits that the meaning of the sacrificial rite is determined by incorporation, the act of eating, but emphasises the power to convey solidarity and group identity depends on joint consumption by all the participants.

Mesopotamian banquets hosted the first commensal banquets of the gods (Chapter Four, p. 46) (Joannes, 1999), and this custom became very much part of the Greek inheritance where gods and mortals dined together at God's Heavenly High Table (Chapter Four, p. 47) (Garnsey, 1999). Ritual sacrifices are polysemous, they bring gods

to the mortal table (Chapter Four, p. 47), but also have an undeniable seductive play of influence, both as a form of empowerment and community motivation (Fernández-Armesto, 2001). Commensal religious sacrifice encapsulates Fischler's (2011) belief that food transcends biology to achieve a higher spiritual essence through the sharing of food, which creates and reinforces group solidarity. Murray (1990) builds on this claim and credits the power of ceremonial and ritual sacrifice with the evolution of social and civic institutions (Chapter Four, p. 48).

Beyond ancestor worship in Antiquity, various foods like grains were offered to other supernatural agencies, invisible agents such as spirits, gods, saints, or Jesus, which Goody (1982) also believe links directly to forms of social organisation. Kaplan (2021) agrees, arguing that all types of foods can play religious roles by embodying spirits and transcendental beings or as figurative symbolism, as vectors of communication to various divinities. Religious commensality, Kaplan (2021) suggests, began with Greek and Roman mythology, acting as a fundamental basis for the origins of society. Here are three strong arguments confirming how commensality functions as a foundation for and contribution to, the evolution and structure of society.

Food was the dominant theme for much of the Medieval world. This period highlighted food as a mediating agency between the sacred and the profane, an interaction which dominated eating practices at the Medieval dining table. During the Medieval period, the institution of the church became a powerful force, and the intersection of food and religion emphasised diet as a form of religious identity. Religious commensality at God's table involved two key practices, the Christian *Eucharist* (Chapter Four, pp. 62–63) and *fasting* (Chapter Four, p. 63).

Eucharist – The powerful sphere of the sacred, including the *Eucharist* (Chapter Four, pp. 62–63) involves substances with the power to make the consumer holy or intimate with the gods, a metaphoric act where bread and wine is transubstantiated into the blood and body of Jesus (Kaplan, 2021; Poulain, 2017). This is associated with the 'magical dimension' of incorporation (Poulain, 2017). The *Eucharist* is described "as undoubtedly the most significance-charged dinner ritual ever devised, as contact is made with past, present and future" (Visser, 1992, p. 36). This ritual re-enacts the conclusive sacrifice, where Christ, both God and human, enters the minds and bodies of the congregation, all equal as one as they literally eat their God directly. The

Christian communion is possibly the most extensive and profoundly powerful act of group commensality.

Fasting – There are divergent symbolic, moral and associated meanings associated with food. The emotional weight of food positions it as a vehicle for resistance and social control. Personal abstention from food today continues for political and religious reasons and can also be interpreted as a pursuit for power and control. Bordo (2012) examines a contemporary epidemic of anorexia nervosa and bulimia, attributing this behaviour both to historical disdain for the body and additionally the anxiety and control surrounding modern consumption habits (Fischler, 2011).

Fasting was part of church doctrine and was widespread throughout Medieval society. The Christian tradition promoted ascetism, this was a rigorous denial of nutritional sustenance and considered the highest goal a holy person could achieve; by denying the body of food, one could purify one's spirit (Albala, 2007). Caplan (2021) agrees and suggests that fasting can also be a way to confer spiritual merit, a spiritual victory against the material needs of hunger. Fasting involves notions of power and powerlessness and may be a sign of subordination for females who served themselves least and last, or as an act of resistance. Walker Bynum (1997), in her essay "Fast, Feast and Flesh", was one of the first to provide Medieval women with a place in the unfolding of history and the intersection of food with religion (Kaplan, 2021). Extreme fasting, described by Walker Bynum (1987) as 'inedia', or not eating, was mostly practiced by women. The objective was to survive simply through a fusion with Christ's body, the ultimate form of food symbolism at God's unique table. Medieval women became food themselves by becoming the suffering of the body on the cross and the feeding of humanity, the food on the altar (Walker Bynum, 1987). The 'paramystical' experience of extreme fasting is a key example of food and the sway of magical thinking. Extreme fasting was a way for women to leverage food into an extraordinary form of power, in a male-dominated world in which they were otherwise more or less powerless. This was a form of control, resistance, and pain, yet for practitioners the suffering promised redemption and often martyrdom.

Gluttony was the original and first of the Seven Deadly Sins. In the 14th century, gluttony fell outside the boundaries of fit and proper behaviour (Chapter Four, p. 62). However, the real sin gluttony represented was disrespect towards God and a loss of

self-control which could threaten the established order and church supremacy, and this concern led to the introduction of sumptuary laws. Gluttony was considered one of the vanities of the world, overeating and drinking predisposed humans towards lust. The church considered gluttony an obstacle to Christian salvation (Dunn-Lardeau, 2004), diverting people from a path to heaven and leading to damnation (Chapter Four, p. 62) (Santich, 2007). Gradually, gluttony became more open to interpretation. The oppressive religious ideals of the Medieval period became more at odds with courtly society inviting increasing transgression (Chapter Four, p. 75) (Santich, 2007). As the humanistic revival took hold towards the beginning of the 15th century, Dunn-Lardeau (2004) argues that the rejection of the hegemonic church discourse led to the Renaissance becoming a period for recovering both bodily pleasure and the pleasures of the table (Chapter Four, p. 77). In time the Renaissance banquet fully rejected church doctrine and, accordingly, banquets increased in popularity. Renaissance banquets openly flouted religion – they were excessive, celebratory occasions, as examined in Chapter Four, pp. 80–82, becoming the most extraordinary events in the history of commensality.

Religious commensality also creates boundaries between different religions and religious groups, thereby affecting commensal practices. Gilhus (2015) argues these dietary distinctions and eating behaviours create specific religious identities. In the next section this claim leads the discussion to briefly consider the role of the ‘otherness’ in the context of power, inequality and the hierarchy of foods, sometimes determined through religious practice or beliefs.

To summarise, religious commensality, the ritual and supernatural aspects of consumption, are surviving elements of times past and yet are still practised today across a wide range of societies (Goody, 1982). Religion, food and commensality are intimately connected across millennia and, as reported in this chapter are generally agreed to be a foundation for identity and civic solidarity. This discussion therefore proposes a confirmed nexus between the framework of religion, food and commensality and its fundamental and influential role in the evolution and structure of Western society, in direct reference to the second supporting research question.

Power and food – Hierarchy and food inequality around the dining table

This section explores the concept of power surrounding food and commensality. As Montanari (1999b) states, thinking about food as a physical property and social symbol both divides and unifies. Eating forms a basis for collective identity including the principles of identification, differentiation and ‘otherness’. Acts of eating can be perceived as signals, signs or symbols which integrate and maintain the eater within a system of meanings, and this is how a feeling of belonging or of social difference is constructed (Poulain, 2017). As Dietler and Hayden (2001) emphasise, eating and drinking are potent with meaning. These practices are learned as *technique du corps* (Mauss, 1925/1990), culturally patterned techniques of bodily comportment that express identity and differentiation.

Sharing food is a human activity, but this does not mean everyone has equal access, considering food is entangled with social relations. Perlès (1999) identified wild deer as the first high value food in the Palaeolithic period (Chapter Four, p. 45), creating social inequality and establishing food as a status object amongst elite groups, and conferring power and identity. High-value and low-value foods continued to create a hierarchy and shaped inequalities in the Neolithic period (Chapter Four, p. 45). Over time, these early foundations became inherent in future behaviours for commensal groups and societies, resulting in widespread indications of food inequality associated with class hierarchy. Food discourse and the immutable power relations surrounding it construct who we are; as Lupton (1996) argues, food is embedded in who we become. This study demonstrates that, across the millennia, not everyone was equal before the plate.

This section explains how power relations are mediated beyond the edible and onto material objects, and analyses how commensality is influenced by the shape of the material dining table, and in what ways it relates to the interaction between participants. As previously described in Chapter Two, pp. 33-34, the shape of a dining table influences the experience of participation and can foster inequality. In medieval monasteries abbots and senior monks were seated on one side of a rectangular table on a raised dais, and were also served superior foods, conferring superior status. ‘High’ tables, generally elevated, are seen across centuries as a mark of separation, superiority, and distinction (Romanagnoli, 1999) and this practice continues today.

In comparison circular tables offer the optimum experience for communication and intimacy where all diners are equal (Mennell et al, 1992). 'Dining in the Round' enhances conviviality and originated in pre-history around the Palaeolithic campfire (Chapter Four, p. 45). Additionally, this study found that seating positions are of prime importance. Positions at the table connote power and are determined by age, gender and existing relationships placing them in a hierarchical structure (Fischler, 2011).

Despite Greek banquets purporting to manifest equality (Chapter Four, p. 48) (Murray, 1990), Garnsey (1999) has a different interpretation, arguing Greek commensality demarcated hierarchies (Chapter Four, p. 51-52), both within Greek society and among the barbarians at large. Following the Greek example, the Roman banquet evolved more distinctly into political commensality where hierarchical distinction was even more pronounced, and sacrificial feasting was becoming more connected to 'state' religion (Chapter Four, p. 55-56). At this point, ritual banquets were more about political organisation than spiritual fulfillment (Chapter Four, p. 57-58). Appadurai's (1981) phrase 'gastropolitics' seems prescient here, situating food as a medium for defining power and status. Sacrificial meat at the communal banquets of Antiquity was a potent and highly visible representation of inequality – it was distributed in order of rank or status and graded by quality and quantity. Kerner et al. (2015) draw attention to the politics of inclusion and exclusion, also citing the 'gastropolitics' which function as a central but often occluded role in commensality and are critically important in structuring past as well as the present societies.

The Imperial period professed equality at the private *convivium* when in fact this system operated on a strictly hierarchical basis. Roman society was obsessed with status (Chapter Four, p. 55), and the public banquets were the most effective way to symbolically connote power and, accordingly, status. Grignon (2001) states that consuming food and drink together activates and tightens internal solidarity but also allows the limits of groups to be redrawn and new internal hierarchies established seems appropriate here.

When discussing what and how people eat, it is essential to acknowledge how food gets to the table. For it is at the dining table that class lines are re-inscribed, and across history it was the invisible labour of the lower orders who grew and prepared the food, created the comfort and served the meals. The agricultural system and the structure of

the Roman Empire was developed with slave labour. Strong (2002) is swift with such criticism, condemning the exploitation of the slaves (Chapter Four, p. 54) who used to work at the Roman banquet and the *convivium*, a shameful period which Strong (2002) stresses stands out in the history of eating. For more contemporary context here, Mintz's (1979-1980/2018) study "Time, Sugar and Sweetness" also questions the moral implications of food production, colonial slavery, power and the moral boundaries of food consumption.

Seating protocol at the Medieval banquet was a rigorous form of discrimination (Chapter Five, p. 64). The Medieval lords and important guests were seated at an elevated table; each position determined by status. These elite guests also received superior food, both in quality and quantity (Chapter Five, p. 70). The Medieval Great Chain of Being (Chapter Five, pp. 68–69) determined a hierarchy of low or high status (Chapter Five, pp. 68–69). Foods were allocated to different social groups accordingly, demarcating who ate what (Super, 2002). The system "provided a social value for all the foodstuffs used by man [sic]" (Greico, 1999, p. 312), effectively communicating highly visible social regimentation and reflecting inequality on every diner's plate. In effect, this study argues every aspect of Medieval dining practices promoted hierarchy and inequality, which were reinforced on a continual daily basis.

The stirrings of Medieval feudal and manorial systems most likely began with Charlemagne in the 12th century (Chapter Five, p. 65). From the outset, feasting performed a critical and integral part of these social systems, binding participants through the power of group commensality (Chapter Five, p. 64-65). Moreover, as previously noted, Mauss (1990) argues, the manorial system and its commensal banquets developed the basic tenets of hospitality and rules of friendship which connoted trust and ensured peace. However, these banquet practices also became the key indicator of class inequality (Chapter Five, p. 66), they were highly constructed and based on reciprocity (Chapter Five, p. 66). The section below looks briefly at the theory of gifts and obligation, examining how reciprocity engenders inequality which can translate as power, and why this is such an important aspect of hospitality and commensality.

Since Antiquity the provisioning of rare and specialised ingredients to establish culinary superiority (Chapter Four, p. 47) has been responsible for a hierarchy of consumption.

This is described by Strong (2002), as a significant factor in the socio-cultural history of the dining table. Simmel (1997) agrees (Chapter Six, p. 87) determining that food creates social inequality, a sentiment also echoed by Julier (2013), who argues contemporary consumption practices are influenced by socio-cultural elements creating a political economy which stratifies society. Ferguson (1998) takes a different view, stating that food inequality is intensified by gastronomy which enriches the social order. Vester (2015) is in agreement with Ferguson (1998), suggesting that regulation of populations is not only achieved through government policy but through other more intangible yet powerful sources involving cultural practices including dining at the table.

The family meal is also concerned with the social distribution of food, both an implicit and visual hierarchy at the core of the family relations (Chapter Six, p. 94). Furthermore, routine provision of food for another can express inequality in the form of dominance and subordination; these observations assert that the family table is a symbolic resource illustrating patterns of differentiation.

This section provides conclusive analysis establishing how inequality is associated with the power of the dining table, and more extensively the structure of society.

The gift and reciprocity – No free lunch

The theory of gift exchange and reciprocity is intimately connected to food practices, especially commensality, which functions as a critical component in the structure of society; here the study explains how and why. Douglas (1990) states that the idea of a free gift is based on a misunderstanding; the donor always expects a return gift from the recipient. Mauss (1925/1990) declares a gift purporting to enhance solidarity is therefore a contradiction, arguing that essentially there is no free gift. In the history of civilisation, shared consumption is entwined with reciprocity, with Douglas (1990) suggesting reciprocity is so important that the cyclical characteristic of gift-giving *becomes* society. This is evidenced in the feudal Medieval manor structure (Chapter Five, pp. 65–66), where participants at the banquet literally embodied or incorporated a gift *and* the social debt that it engendered. There was a powerful symbolic dimension to this practice because, unlike durable objects, the food consumed could not be reticulated or reinvested in other gift exchange relationships. Instead, “more food

must be produced anew using the agricultural and culinary labor of the same banquet guests to fulfill their reciprocal obligations” (Dietler & Hayden, 2001, p. 74).

Roman society, according to Mauss’ (1925/1990) gift theory, was based on perpetual gift cycles which articulated dominant institutions. A clear illustration can be found in Chapter Five, p. 52, outlining how city councillors, aristocracy and priests donated to public sacrificial banquets. The widespread system of donations from rulers and elites to the public feasts in Antiquity was called ‘euergetism’. This practice demonstrates the significance of donations framed by the Vedic principle, “banquet sacrifice is a gift that compels the deity to make a return: *Do ut des*; I give so you may give” (Douglas, 1990, p. xii). Van Esterik (2015) and Goody (1982) both expand on this premise linking the sacrifice banquet with a bonded mutual obligation not just between worshippers and gods but also between commoners and the elite. The wider argument here is that the system of gift exchange and reciprocity was the basis for social structures of early communities and, although it was underpinned by the powerful sway of religious beliefs and ceremony, gift exchange was more about politics and economics (Mauss, 1990).

The basis of gift theory is that it is a theory of human solidarity. Although the power of the Greek and Roman public banquet sacrifice was based on collective representations which connoted ideas of solidarity, in reality they promoted inequality. The sacrificial gift may have appeared voluntary, but it was a symbolic obligation to the state (Fischler, 2011). Such visible public drama positioned gifting as an open system curated for public esteem and honour, sanctioned by ritual, the sacred ceremony effectively sacralised the giving institution (Douglas, 1990). A solid example of this is found in Chapter Five, p. 55, describing how sacrificial feasts legitimised the Imperial emperor. In sum, the exchanges of archaic societies functioned to articulate social order. Mauss (1990) feels these ancient principles are still apparent in the rigours, abstractions, and inhumanity of today’s social codes.

Reciprocity also has a close underlying relationship to hospitality. It is based on a moral relationship of solidarity with an inferred obligation, which puts it in the gift exchange category. Sutton (2005) believes food is integrally constituted through its open sharing, through ritual, feast or reciprocal exchange, or a context in which it is bought and sold.

Furthermore, Sutton (2005) argues these unique movements, ranging from intimate to public exchanges, strengthen food's symbolic power and make it more significant.

Commensal hospitality can range from being largely altruistic to highly competitive, whereby gifting becomes connected to social status and inequality. Guests receive commensal hospitality from the host and are expected to return it in the future; however, reciprocity is far more complicated. Fischler (2011) asserts that reciprocity also involves the relationship between guests who receive hospitality, but who also give something of themselves; they make a 'gift' to the host, in the same way that the host gives a gift by receiving the guests. However, the code of reciprocity is underpinned by an implied obligation to return something bigger or more costly (Mauss, 1990), as stated here. "Hospitality is a prototypical Maussian gift" (Pollock, 2012, p. 10), and interpreted as a fundamental foundation of superior and inferior hierarchical relations. Furthermore, the refusal of reciprocity can also be perceived as an offence. Fischler (2011) maintains this causes tensions; claiming excessive reciprocity produces inequality, and inadequate reciprocity can lead to open disagreements and even volatile situations. However, conflict can often be resolved through respectful, polite negotiation, an implicit reminder of the ethical codes and civic virtues that govern social behaviour. Manners, including table manners, are vitally important, and they are the subject of the next section.

In review, reciprocity often causes social inequality and in addition the ubiquitous nature of gift exchange underpins most commensal food practices. These are both integral behaviours aligned to commensality which validates them as jointly significant factors in the evolution and structure of Western society.

Mind your manners

Manners are important; they seem invisible until they are breached, states Finkelstein (1989). Throughout history, table manners are one of the key elements in the process of the transmission of culture, social skills, social ethics and social regulation (Fischler, 2011). "Manners impose a veneer of virtue" (Finkelstein, 1989, p. 131) and are a vehicle for negotiating social prestige and power. Finkelstein (1989) also argues that manners reflect what is acceptable and what is not permissible, and that their strength lies in their universal recognition. Finkelstein (1989) believes that manners integrate

people into society, and this becomes an instrument to create a foundation for society; stating the following: “Manners are thought to signify our transformation from the human herd into society” (Finkelstein, 1978, p. 127). Here Finkelstein (1978) is suggesting manners (and by extension table manners) are linked to socio-cultural evolution and structure.

As described in Chapter Two, dining around the table is an unrivaled site for social relations, where all cultures eat according to different rules and customs of regulation which are highly scripted (Visser, 1992). As Visser (1992) claims, the subtext of all table manners is the concern, originating in the Medieval period, that the person next to you may pull his knife... Poulain (2017) puts forward the view that manners, cooking, and table manners are how the most basic social training takes place. Daily eating practices governed by manners are internalised, providing the mechanism through which a society transmits its values, and forges and maintains social links (Poulain, 2017). Mealtimes around the table are described by Ochs and Shohet (2006) as cultural sites for socialisation (Chapter Two, p. 22) and learning manners, but they state mealtimes are also a cultural vehicle for eating and reinforcing relationships that sustain or question the social order and, by extension, the structure of society.

Manners are active parts of socio-cultural change and can denote inequality. As Vester (2015) suggests, the refinement of manners has resulted in increasing individualisation and hierarchic division. Fischler (2011) agrees, stating that the implicit and explicit knowledge of table manners and other social codes illustrates how the materiality of the meal and the symbolic meaning of manners convey social connotations including power and inequality. Beardsworth and Keil (1997) partially agree, arguing that table etiquette requires knowledge and training, confirming that manners serve a class system and reinforce snobbery.

The study has previously cited Elias’ (1938/1978) seminal work, *The Civilising Process*, which revealed how earlier concepts of courtesy gave way to civility and these extended to the expression of a new form of self-consciousness, the concept of civilisation. Over time, these expressions evolved into manners which, as explained above, intersect closely with organisational socialisation.

This section has summarised how table manners are a key tool of socialisation and self-identity. Furthermore, the notions of civility, social order and regulation situate table manners firmly in the context of the *evolution* and *structure* of society. The key findings of the dissertation have now been deliberated, and the final discussion section now validates the responses to the research aim and questions.

Conclusions – The dining table, evolution and the structure of society

This final section of this chapter summarises the discussion and answers the dissertation's questions; it will attest to the socio-cultural role of the dining table in the process of evolution and in establishing the structure of Western society and also affirm the role of the dining table as a tool of socialisation and identity construction. The section concludes by confirming the definitive working title of the dissertation: *Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present*.

The proposition that meals and dining at the table are integral parts of *evolutionary* socio-cultural *structure* is explored below, where the study considers various theories.

Evolution

The section on *evolution* starts at the very beginning of a human life with a profound proposition from Van Esterik (2015), who situates meals, sex and reproduction together with commensality, suggesting they come together as the nucleus of *evolutionary* life in utero, followed by breastfeeding. Fischler (2011) also refers to breastfeeding as the most fundamental commensality (Chapter Six, p. 94), and Chee-Beng (2015) argues that eating at the same family table (Chapter Six, p. 95), is an important adaptation of human *evolution*, beginning with the primary bond as discussed above by Van Esterik (2015) and continuing with parents providing food for their children.

The genesis of the symbolic dining table (Chapter Four, p. 45) is traced to *evolution* in pre-history. Silvertown (2017) asserts that hunting large prey in the Palaeolithic period “had stupendous consequences for the *evolution* of human society” (Silvertown, 2017, p. 170). The hunt and kill required co-operation, and the spoils were distributed with kin after cooking around a campfire. Palaeolithic ‘dining in the round’ became not just the first symbolic dining table, but positioned kin, campfire and therefore family together as the *evolutionary* basis for the family dining table. By extension, this also

places the dining table as a key intersecting component in the foundation of the *structure* of society.

Silvertown (2017) establishes an anthropological link between consistent patterns and societal *structure*, stating that “preferential food sharing with relatives is one of the central organising features of human society” (p. 173). Falk (1991) states that one of the most fundamental distinctions in the process of *evolution* is between edible and inedible foods; Lévi-Strauss (1970) concurs, attributing the practice of cooking (transforming raw food into cooked) to the *evolution* of humanity. In the same vein, Caplan (2021) describes this distinction between nature and culture as a crucial factor in human thought. These behavioural practices also demonstrate that food procurement, eating and kinship are primary social functions which are essential to social organisation (Chapter Four, p. 45). What’s more, Fischler (2011) argues these *evolutionary* operations also imply *reciprocity* and redistribution – see comments on “The Gift” (Chapter Seven, pp. 125–127). These conclusive opinions all link commensality to *evolution* dating from pre-history.

Advancing to the Middle Ages, Lévi-Strauss (1987, as cited in Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995) described the Medieval manor houses (Chapter Five, pp. 66–67) as ‘social institutions’ which played a key role in developing kinship, asserting these ‘house societies’ and their commensal practices were inherently part of the *evolution* of society. Additionally, Mauss (1925/1990) positions the British manorial system (Chapter Five, p. 66) as a basis of moral action, describing it as an institution common to the highest degree of *evolution* in early societies. Religious commensality, where the ritual and supernatural aspects of consumption transcend time and readily disseminate across societies, is one further explanation for the *evolution* of social institutions, according to Goody (1982). Religious commensality was established in Mesopotamia, fulfilling an *evolutionary* function of society where important decision-making relied on consultation with deities at the banquet table (Chapter Four, p. 46). This custom established a precedent worshippers adopted through historical *evolution*, as detailed in this study, one which continues today.

Beardsworth and Keil (1997) assert that hospitality is a commensal institution that has many positive benefits including assisting in human *evolution*. Furthermore, *evolution* is a necessary requisite of change illustrated by a need to adapt and pivot to more

dynamic dietary and dining requirements in the 21st century (Chapter Six, p. 95). The research reviewed in this section has established that eating at the shared table has contributed to the evolution of society and that, furthermore, commensality remains an integral aspect of evolutionary changes surrounding consumption practices.

Structure

This discussion analyses the principal concepts and patterns discovered in the findings, when in fact the most significant ‘patterns’ are the micro and macro levels of *structure* that eating a meal around the dining table provides. Super (2002) concedes that the history of food begins with biology but argues it continues with *social structure*. Super (2002) also emphasises the need in food studies to move food beyond metaphor and cultural symbol to discussions around the power of food and its contribution to *social structure*.

Scholarship on the Neolithic period claimed that “eating gradually became a key element of group *structure*” (Perlès, 1999, p. 29). This also intersected with food and social inequality (Chapter Four, p. 45). The Greek ritual sacrifices, which were considered ‘fundamental’ to the organisational *structure* of the *polis*, were held on civic holidays punctuating the calendar with fixed, structured events (Chapter Four, p. 51). Simmel (1910, as cited in Mennell et al., 1992) also looks to history, asserting that it was the ancient ritual and ceremonial use of food, as discussed in Chapter Four, p. 55, eaten at a fixed hour which led to both secular and church temporal regularity (Chapter Five, p. 73) concluding that these fixtures evolved into *structured* eating patterns.

Another perspective about *structure* and food originates from Douglas (1997), who looked at the language of food and eating. She discovered that dietary rules bound the area of *structured* relations, and that the ordered system of a meal represents much more than itself, claiming it informs all the wider *structures* around it. Whilst this study notes changes from tightly structured dining formats (Chapter Six, pp. 91–92) to more unstructured eating arrangements (Chapter Six, p. 94), the research also argues for the continuation of the domestic unit as a *social structure* (Chapter Six, p. 94). Caplan (2021) also argues that meals are integral to the *structure* of society. Nordstrum (1988,

cited in Meiselman, 2008) maintains that meals *are structure* and organise the temporal patterns of the day, the year and our daily rhythms.

Recent observations surrounding changes in meal structures are implicated in the adjustment of societal *structure* according to some, as covered in Chapter Six, in the section on the 21st Century and Change. 'Gastro-anomie' (Chapter Six, p. 92), Fischler's (2011) 21st century lament over rapid changes in eating habits, has a direct correlation to changing *structures* governing eating habits, which are currently undergoing a process of '*destruction*' (Mennell, 1996) (Chapter Six, p. 93). Nordstrom (1988) accepts that work and leisure time has changed, influencing modern eating styles, stating that meal patterns are now simpler and shorter. Meiselman (2008) and Fischler (2011) concur; they believe the role and structure of meals are being modified to meet current needs by becoming more flexible.

There are numerous referrals throughout this study that situate commensality within the framework of structuring society. McIntosh (1999) argues there would be no social order without the family meal (Chapter Six, p. 96) and Chee-Beng (2015) claims commensality involves significant social relations which influence social organisation, and claims all commensality is political on some level, which more broadly includes political organisation. Furthermore, Poulain (2017) situates food and consumption practices as a 'total food space' which, he argues, becomes the basis of structuring social organisation.

Commensality is one of the most striking manifestations of human sociality; moreover, "the sharing of food involves the very structure of society" (Fischler, 2011, p. 529). In conclusion, these opinions strengthen the argument that commensality influences the structure of society.

Practice

Practice is closely linked to transforming structure (Dietler & Hayden, 2010), an idea echoed by Neuman (2019) who argues that theories of practice can identify food-related social change, and also the orthodoxy of individual behaviour change, as this study has shown. Neuman (2019) maintains practices are resilient to change but argues they do evolve. The 'praxis' of commensality, Kerner et al. (2015) believe, is understood through the sharing of everyday meals, as discussed in Chapter Six, in the

section on the “21st Century – Commensality, Challenges and Change”. Moreover, Giddens’ (1984) theory of *structuration* constitutes *practice* as an embedded, recursive and routine social behaviour based on coded knowledge. *Practice* involves action which maintains and recreates social codes and norms in a process of *structuration*, which has its origins in temporality and, in a sense, history. “*Structure*, ... comes into being and is sustained through the continuity generated by the social practices of human actors” (Giddens, 1984, p. 119). This study posits that the theory of practice supporting the structure of society can also apply to the practice of eating around the dining table, which employs the same methods of recurring execution. Building on this concept, Anderson (2005) also believes ideas grow from practice and, from the constant repetitions of these interactions, foodways become knowledge and culture. Moreover Anderson (2005) argues commensal acts are an integral part of sociality that must be reinforced through practice to survive, and that the dining table as a site of practice does not pre-determine social and cultural ideologies but that they continue to evolve. Furthermore, Anderson (2005) concludes that practice is a *structured* activity connected to historical accident and incident. In short, dining around the table as a *practice* substantiates the connection between commensality and the critical and continual *evolution and structure* of Western society.

Power

Bourdieu (1984) was one theorist who noted the dining table as a *significant* space, as a site where power relations are both negotiated and incorporated. The historical and developmental nature of this study has illustrated changing social structures and power balances across society within the cultural domain of the dining table. It is evident the relationship around the dining table between food and power has been identified as a dominant theme throughout this paper. As Harris (1998) succinctly states, “food is often a source of wealth and power for the few, as well as nourishment for the many” (Harris, 1998, p. 17). Examples of food and power include the distribution of food leading to inequality. Also, tastes and choices surrounding food are visible markers which can be revealing and could connote power, class and social status. Additionally, sumptuary laws introduced by church or state are a form of power and control – just to highlight some notions of food and power cited across this study.

Furthermore, food has an extraordinary ability to convey meaning as well as nourish bodies, and this constitutes just one source of its power (Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997). A different perspective sees the dining table as implicated in balances of power when people are bound together through interdependence. Pressure can be exerted depending on unequal or balanced relationships. According to Donahue (2003), it is precisely such hierarchy around the table that creates power. These various opinions set out above attest to the meaning of power and significance at the shared dining table.

CHAPTER EIGHT – CONCLUSION

Food habits and practices, including dining at the shared table, have histories and establish conventions that support the creation of human societies. Any changes to these practises can symbolise powerful shifts in society as a whole and, as this study demonstrates, this has been occurring over millennia and quite significantly during the last century.

This study has followed the whole cycle of the socio-cultural life of the dining table (Appadurai, 1988) and has observed the sphere of its influence by examining how the dining table has been used both routinely and conspicuously. The study has engaged with theory throughout to determine understanding around eating at the shared dining table. This approach produced key concepts from the research findings which are tied together in a nexus of meaning as analysed in the previous discussion chapter and tabled in the Appendix. This dissertation investigated the chronological evolution of the dining table and consumption practices from pre-history to the current dining table, including spectacular feasts and religious fasts. The study concludes with an analysis of the contemporary table, describing how its materiality becomes a nodal point in the organisation of everyday life. Goody (1982) argues that the study of food and eating must involve political economy at both the micro-level within households and the macro-level such as states and their formation and structure. Neuman (2019) similarly suggests that food and dining practices are part of the special *and* the mundane, the conspicuous and the ordinary. Neuman (2019) also argues it is the little things can answer the big questions, “for it is through the ordinary that we understand the spectacular” (p. 91) and herein lies the strength of this study’s analysis.

The opinions of prominent social theorists supported by specific in-text examples from the study findings make a clear and distinct concluding argument for the dining table as a determining and continuing factor in the *socio-cultural evolution and structure of society* and substantiates its *vital role as a tool of socialisation and identity*.

Furthermore, the word ‘power’ is prevalent throughout the discussion and, as such, this study presents a comprehensive argument that *the dining table also constitutes power, and accordingly significance*.

Contribution

The principles of gastronomy (Brillat-Savarin, 2009, Santich, 2007) are broadly reflected in commensal practices and, as such, the contribution of this research is integral to the field. The shared dining table is the central axis of the dissertation, and this chronological history functions to lift gastronomy from the page and into the collective human experience. The commonality and ubiquitous nature of the shared dining table and commensality transcend time and culture, positioning this study as both accessible and relatable and therefore a valuable and beneficial contribution towards a wider understanding of gastronomy. The essence of gastronomy is manifested at the dining table whether sharing a simple repast or a spectacular feast qualifying this study, *Around the Dining Table: Power and Significance from Past to Present*, as an important contribution to the field.

Limitations and areas of future research

The breadth of the study revealed further scope to continue. There are several recommendations for further research that would provide an extended understanding of different contexts surrounding the contemporary shared dining table. This could include an investigation on gender, feminism and the deconstructing of masculinity, and the effects on experiences around the dining table. The influence of social media at the 'technically shared' dining table could be a focus of study, and more research is needed to provide an in-depth analysis of the dining table in the public sphere; restaurants, cafes and bars. A study on literary and artistic discourse featuring the dining table across history could provide deeper insights into ideologies surrounding commensality. Lastly, an investigation of social food enterprises, now recognised globally as crucial institutions, could serve as a focus for a study of food inequality and explore the complexity and benefits of what it means to those who eat and share food at the dining table in this context.

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APPENDIX

Thematic analysis chart: Identifiable, clear reference to key concepts within the narrative history chapters.

Key words/phrases used to identify concepts	Number of times each word/phrase was found across the 6 chapters						Total
	Greek	Roman	Medieval	Renaissance	19 th Century Gastronomy	21 st Century change	
Hierarchy	17	19	52	17	18	3	106
Structure	20	14	26	10	0	15	85
Power	3	14	45	17	2	2	83
Inequality	1	7	34	16	15	3	76
Identity	9	7	12	7	23	16	74
Pleasure/Aesthetics	10	6	17	17	5	5	55
Religion	12	6	28	5	0	0	51
Risk	10	0	3	0	0	3	16
Gender	5	0	2	2	2	5	16
Gift Exchange/Reciprocity	2	5	5	1	1	1	14
Evolution	1	0	0	0	0	4	5
Socialisation	0	0	0	0	0	4	4

Thematic analysis

For clarification, thematic analysis was achieved by marking commonly used words and phrases throughout the narrative texts. This manual coding generated clear patterns of repetition which were then grouped into wider concepts. This data was organised in a methodical manner into descriptive themes and this process revealed a patterned response. The table above lists the key words/phrases used in the left column, and the total number of times these words appeared in each chapter. This information was systematically developed into eight key analytical themes which were used to identify meaning (Booth et al., 2012; Braun & Clarke, 2006), and which support the theoretical framework adopted in the discussion chapter in moving towards a critical, evaluative analysis.