Food, Culture and Identity
Tuesdays 2-2:50, Public Policy 2319

A hundred years ago, the U.S. government’s “food pyramid” contained 12 items; now there are just 4. How did this change come about? How do ideas about food differ from one era to the next and from one culture to the next? How does food serve as both an integrative and divisive social category? In this course, we’ll use readings and discussion to look at the social construction of food categories, cuisine, and the politics of food to understand the role of food in creating and maintaining culture.

As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has written, “food is a constant need but a perishable good.” The study of food has many components that affect our social lives just as much as our biological needs. People must eat multiple times in a day, and often do so in a setting that reinforces their social perceptions of group and self. Through readings and discussion, this course will examine how food systems are created, how cultural ideas of food vary from one group to the next, and how people use food to proclaim ethnic and cultural identities.

The required readings are available at Westwood Copies (1001 Gayley, near the corner of Gayley and Weyburn).

Course grading: Grading for this course is P/NP, and is based on participation and attendance. In addition to preparing for the class by doing the readings, you must attend at least 8 of the 10 course sessions to achieve a passing grade.

Readings (in order):

Yan, Yunxiang

Bestor, Thomas C.

Diner, Hasia R.

Diamond, Jared

Schlosser, Eric

Bentley, Amy

Lindenbaum, Shirley

Bentley, Amy

Mintz, Sidney W.