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THE STATE UNIVERSITY  
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# Psychology of Food Risks

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# Risk communication

- Theories and principles of risk perception and risk communication are applicable to many different risks:
  - Climate change
  - Cancer
  - Storms
  - Etc.



Food Risks are Different



# You Are What You Eat

- We literally (and figuratively) internalize the risks (and benefits) we perceive related to food and drink.





<https://www.mla.com.au/marketing-beef-and-lamb/>



# You Are What You Eat



**Did you know?**

# 93%

**of pregnant women have genetically engineered DNA in their blood, and 80% of their babies also have the same genetically engineered DNA in their blood**

**It's time to label GMOs**

[organicconsumers.org](http://organicconsumers.org)

# You Are What You Eat

From Rutgers 2013 survey:

*By eating a genetically modified fruit, a person's genes could also become modified.*

- 13% of Americans think this is true.
- 33% are not sure if it's true or false.





Organic regulations prohibit the use of GE feed for organic meat, eggs, or milk.





# You Are What You Eat



- Potential food hazards are often seen as objects of disgust
  - Revulsion at the prospect of incorporating an offensive and contaminating object.
  - Consuming impure foods may results in an “unclean body” and/or an “unclean spirit.”
  - Disgust is a universal emotion.



<http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2014/03/31/295769683/how-your-face-shows-happy-disgust>



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Disgust may be universal, but...

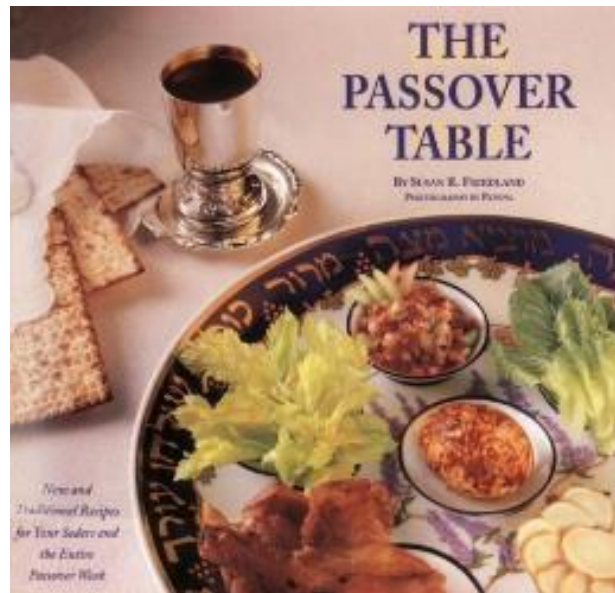
...the object of disgust can very greatly.

- What's considered a delicacy in one culture can be an object of disgust in another.



# Food Carries Cultural Meaning

- Food carries distinct religious, symbolic, and cultural meanings that set it apart from other concerns.



# Food Choices Signify Identity

- People often use their food choices to represent and communicate:
  - Who they are as individuals
  - Their political or ideological beliefs
  - Their roles and status in society





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NPR

1 hr · 🌐



What memories does your favorite food stir up? The Spanish inspired dish, picadillo, is popular in the Philippines, where chef and journalist Wilma Consul grew up. It is her go-to comfort food and reminds her of her childhood. In this first Hot Pot video, Consul shows us how to make a healthy version of this dish.

 431

68 Comments 131 Shares 95K Views





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- Making or sharing food with others is symbolically, psychologically, and emotionally linked with **love, nurturing and intimacy**, and is considered crucial to creating and maintaining bonds between people.



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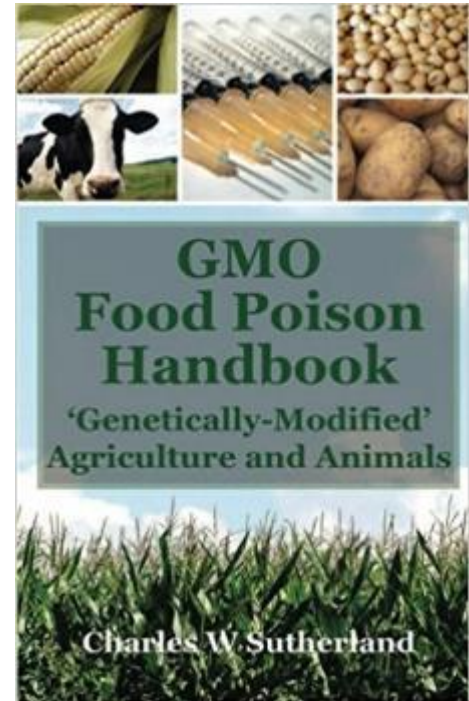
- Making or sharing food with others is symbolically, psychologically, and emotionally linked with **love, nurturing and intimacy**, and is considered crucial to creating and maintaining bonds between people.



- The adulteration of food and drink is seen as a violation of the trust and bonds between people..
- The worst kind of adulteration would be intentional poisoning.



# GMOs are sometimes portrayed as poison



# Food Carries Symbolic Meaning

- Some foods have more than nutritional value, they have symbolic value.



Self-Identity Does not Change Simply  
Because Contrary Scientific Evidence  
Becomes Available





Messages about Food Can be Complex

# Communicating Risks and Benefits

- Often involves communicating about both *risks* and *benefits* associated with particular food choices.



Most of the Food Risks We Worry About,  
And the Benefits We Desire

Are  
Invisible



# Invisibility = Loss of control

- When something is out of our control, it feels more risky.

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**GO**CLEAN**LABEL™**



## **WHAT IS “CLEAN LABEL”?**

“Clean label is a consumer driven movement, demanding a return to ‘real food’ and transparency through authenticity. Food products containing natural, familiar, simple ingredients that are easy to recognize, understand, and pronounce. No artificial ingredients or synthetic chemicals.” — *Go Clean Label™*

# Law of Contagion

- Persistent, found across cultures.
- Once in contact, always in contact.
  - Belief in a permanent transfer of properties from one object (usually animate) to another by brief contact

## The Cellophane Effect



# The Law of Contagion may also apply to genes



<https://media2.fdncms.com/inlander/imager/syringes-gas-masks-and-frankenfood-visuals-of-the-gmo-debate/u/original/2201632/tomatofish.jpg>

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One in ten (10%) Americans believe that tomatoes modified with genes from a catfish would probably taste fishy, and 1 in 3 (35%) were not sure.



People learn about many food “risks” through advertising claims and implicit comparisons

# What is “Free” is Best







# What is “Free” is Best



People are susceptible to the placebo effect.





People are susceptible to the nocebo effect





<https://cdn.globalhealingcenter.com/am/a/en/gmo-detox-kit-gdk-300x250.gif>



<http://www.extremenaturalhealth.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2014/07/GMOs-400x200.jpg>



<https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/0d/a6/b7/0da6b74a7f8e11701badf9b584f6a0c1.jpg>

## In conclusion

- Because we all have to eat
- Because we aren't always in control of what we eat
- Because we often have biases at play in our decision making about food

## Food risks are different.

- Because food plays a role in so many elements of our lives:
  - Culture
  - Religion
  - Social status
  - Values
  - Identity

A perceived threat to our food can be  
perceived threat to who we are.

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Note. This presentation was adapted from a similar presentation by William Hallman.