



**UNIT 1:
FOOD AND CULTURE**

L.5

EDIBILITY AND TABOO

Note to Teachers

Over the centuries, food classification systems have taught societies how to select what they eat. The systems also taught humans what not to eat. The forbidden foods often became taboos. Because different cultures have access to different resources, they also approach the question of what to eat differently. Foods that may be taboo to one culture may be an everyday food or delicacy to another.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas described taboo (or “abominable”) foods for the ancient Hebrews to be those that do not fit within a strict classification system. Edible land animals, for example, must have four legs, divided hooves, and chew their cud. Chewing cud—that is, regurgitating and re-chewing their food—is a process that helps ruminants break down their cellulose-heavy diets. Cattle, sheep, goats, deer and other wild animals fit these criteria, while pigs do not. Pigs have a split hoof, but are not ruminants. Animals missing any one or more of the criteria are forbidden.¹

This lesson asks students to think about the logic of a taboo while exploring the idea that we may need to revise some taboos in order to benefit from the nutritional resources they provide.

Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- address the idea that many ideas are culturally specific, and
- appreciate the potential role of taboo foods in feeding the world’s population

Objectives

- Illustrate cultural differences by using student experiences and a historical example as a starting point
- Analyze a short video to consider a commonly taboo food as a potentially invaluable source of nutrition

1) Mary Douglas, “Deciphering a Meal” in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 46-47.



EDIBILITY AND TABOO

Please use this margin to notate how to best adapt this curriculum to your students.

Materials

- Projector and computer to screen a TEDx talk

Instructions

1. Focused Free Write (5 minutes): A food is taboo when we cannot imagine eating it. This is different from a food we don't like. Eating something that is taboo seems like a crime, a real transgression. So while it may be something that we could, biologically, eat and get nourishment from, it seems inconceivable and wrong to eat it.

Is there a food that would be, for you, taboo? What might it be, and why can't you imagine ever in a million years eating it?

2. Ask about half the class to share what they have written (what and why) Then brainstorm other ideas of taboo foods on the board. Who knows what the list may include: dog or cat, insects, etc.

3. Use the material from the last class to further this conversation:

What did you learn from our last lesson about the reasons a food might become taboo?

4. Remind students that, for many societies, insects are taboo.

Jewish law, for example, tends to be very specific about what can be eaten. Many insects are taboo in this tradition because they fly but have more than two legs (a fly has six) and because many swarm (like locusts, that fly in a dense group).

These characteristics are very specific and, according to anthropologist Mary Douglas, they were intended to be strict and clear. In the ancient world where early Hebrews faced conquest and exile, Jewish culture stressed the integrity of Jews' cultural ties with each other. Strong rules helped both to represent and to forge strong ties. As a result, what Jewish peoples ate and what they avoided were key to a strong—and enduring—sense of what it meant to be a Jew.²

5. At the same time, insects are the focus of an ongoing conversation among thinkers, writers and chefs, as they think about a way to provide food for a growing world population.

Here is one chef's point of view: Megan Miller's TEDx talk on insects as the future of food. www.youtube.com/watch?v=BwC4WRKi5QY

6. Open the floor for discussion:

1. What big ideas did you hear in this short talk?
2. Do you have questions about what you heard?
3. What do you think about Megan Miller's proposal?

If you have time, consider making each of the above questions a prompt for two or three minutes of writing. Ask one question, then give students time to write, ask the second, etc. Then go back through them one by one with the students.

7. Take a moment at the end of class to emphasize big ideas from the day.

2) Mary Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal" in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 52.



EDIBILITY AND TABOO

FRIED CHAPULINES

3 *Students*

for 12 sopos

Equipment List

- Frying pan
- Wooden spoon
- 1 tablespoon
- knife
- cutting board
- juicer

Food Items

- 2 oz. chapulines
- 1 lime
- salt

SOPES DE CHAPULINES

3 *Students*

for 12 sopos

Equipment List

- Medium bowl
- 1 wooden spoon
- 1 teaspoon and 1 tablespoon measures
- 1 cup dry measure
- 2 cup liquid measure
- dish towel
- tray
- paper towels
- tortilla press
- 1 quart Ziploc bag
- griddle or skillet
- pancake turner

Food Items

- 2 cups Masa harina
- salt
- water
- vegetable oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup queso fresco
- 2 oz. chapulines
- 2 cups mixed greens
- 1 jar salsa



EDIBILITY AND TABOO

FRIED CHAPULINES

Yield: about ¼ cup

Ingredients

- 2 oz. chapulines
- 1 T. olive oil
- 1 T. lime juice
- salt to taste

Directions

1. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a frying pan over medium heat.
2. When the oil is hot, add chapulines and cook for 2-3 minutes.
3. When the chapulines are hot and crispy, turn off the heat,
4. Sprinkle with lime juice and salt.



EDIBILITY AND TABOO

SOPES DE CHAPULINES

Yield: about 12 sopes

Ingredients

SOPES

- Masa Harina - 2 Cups
- Salt - 1 Teaspoon
- Water - 1 3/4 Cups
- Vegetable Oil , as needed

Directions

1. In a medium bowl, blend the Masa harina and salt. Add the water and fold in with a rubber spatula. Then, keeping the dough in the bowl, knead the mixture until the dough becomes soft and uniform in texture, about 1-2 minutes. Dough should be similar to the texture of Playdoh--not too sticky, not to dry. Cover with a damp dish towel and allow the dough to rest 5 minutes.
2. Roll the dough into 12 equal balls. Keep covered with the damp towel.
3. Line a cookie sheet with 3-4 layers of paper towels and set aside.
4. Heat up a griddle or 12 inch skillet. Wipe griddle with a very light coating of corn oil. Cut two sides of a 1 quart ziploc bag, leaving the bottom intact.
5. Place one ball of dough inside the plastic and on the tortilla press. Gently press the dough into a 3 1/2 inch diameter circle. Sopes should be about 1/4 inch thick.
6. Place directly on hot griddle/skillet and cook on medium low until the bottom is set and begins to have brown spots. Turn them and cook until the other side begins to brown as well. Remove from griddle and quickly pinch edges to form a 1/2 inch rim around the edges. Place on a baking rack.
7. In a 12 inch skillet with straight sides, heat 2 tablespoons of oil over medium high heat. Add half the grilled sopes, flat side down, without crowding the pan. Cook until bottoms of the sopes are golden, about 2-3 minutes. Carefully turn sopes and continue to cook until the sides of the sopes are golden (center won't get much color), another 2-3 minutes. Drain on paper towel lined cookie sheet.
8. Use immediately or stack on top of one another as you remove them from the pan to keep them soft and pliable. Cover with a towel.
9. When ready to serve, spread with roughly 2 tablespoons of refried beans, and sprinkle with queso fresco, chapulines, and greens. Top with salsa to taste.

TOPPINGS

- 3/4 cup crumbled Queso fresco
- 2 oz. fried chapulines
- 2 cups shredded lettuce or mixed greens
- salsa to taste





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Extension

EDIBILITY AND TABOO

Note to Teachers

This exercise has a secret intent—to nudge students to think beyond what is “gross” to asking why someone might decide to eat something that—to our students—seems very strange and likely inedible. The project also enables students to think about the food traditions and resources of other peoples, and thereby gain new perspective on the lives of others. It echoes both the prior lesson and the first conversation of the course, “What I Eat”

Materials

- Computers and Internet access for research

Instructions

1. Review yesterday’s discussion.
2. Distribute this handout and ask students to work step by step. Encourage students to dive as deeply into the material as possible. The quality of the discussion students produce is paramount here.

If time is available to do so, please consider peer editing to get a response to a draft and then give students time to revise.
3. Encourage students to polish their final product for homework.



EDIBILITY AND TABOO DAY II

Societies around the world eat foods that are taboo for other groups. What is edible is a cultural decision, not a nutritional one. So, today, our goal is to explore why and how a food that might be repellent or wrong to eat in one society is a common or prized food for another. Our job is to explore why eating a food deemed “inedible” elsewhere makes good sense in another context.



Use the space below to note key ideas, themes, or surprising takeaways from the reading.

Horizontal lines for note-taking.

The end product of your exploration today will be the creation of a classroom resource to teach your peers about why different cultures have different ideas about what is edible. In order to do so, each of you will:

- Choose an unusual food from a list below, and a culture that eats it.
- Research that food on the Internet to compose specific answers to the questions that follow.
- Create a one-page (8 ½” x 11”), well-designed, thoughtfully written, and substantive poster that can be used as a teaching tool for future students.

I. First Step: Choose your food and a culture that eats it from the list below.

- BALUT** (duck fetus eggs) — Philippines
- BATS** — mostly southeast Asia and Pacific, including Mariana fruit bats (Guam)
- BEONDAGI** (silk worm pupae) — Korea
- BIRD’S NEST SOUP** — China or Southeast Asia
- CASU MARZU** (cheese with maggots) — Sardinia
- DOG** — Korea
- GRASSHOPPERS** — Thailand or Mexico
- GRUBS** — witchetty grubs (Australia), suri (Peru), sago worm (Malaysia), various grubs (central Africa). There is a nice article on grubs as food in the Scientific American: blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/grubs-as-grub/
- HORMIGAS CULONAS** (ants) — Columbia
- RATS** — eaten in many cultures, select one
See www.bbc.com/future/story/20151207-the-countries-where-rats-are-on-the-menu for ideas.
- RAW BLOOD** — Maasi (in Kenya)
- SNAKE WINE** — several southeast Asian cultures
- TARANTULAS** — Skuon, Cambodia

This list is by no means exhaustive. There are many, many other foods that are considered taboo in the U.S. eaten around the world.



