



**UNIT 1:
FOOD AND CULTURE**

L.10

FOOD AND DISTINCTION

Note to Teachers

Food can be used to build communities, but it can also be used to separate groups in societies, particularly by wealth and social class. Some foods are much more expensive than others, making them prohibitive to some and a sign of wealth to others. The same foods may have shifting histories over time, however, if and when the places and ways they are produced changes, as the story of sugar—which comes later in the semester—reveals.

Spices are a good example of foods of distinction. The prevalence of artificial flavors in processed foods and the high prices of spices in our grocery stores remind us that some spices still remain out of reach of most consumers. Lesson 10 considers why and how spices historically set some eaters apart, and why spices might still have particularly prestige value today.

Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- learn the variety of plant parts that are used to flavor food, and their importance in our sensory experience of food.
- learn how some foods separated a social and economic elite, and why some of those distinctions exist today

Objectives

- Students will define the terms “herb” and “spice” and explore the sensory experience of the smell and appearance of a selection of spices.
- Students will use brief profiles of a few spices to consider what made them desirable but also expensive.
- Students will use a short research project to learn more about a particular spice and the conditions that give that spice its value.

1) National Geographic, “Food Staple” at <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/food-staple/>



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

Materials

- Spice cards
- Sample whole spices: cinnamon sticks, peppercorns, cloves, vanilla bean, nutmeg. (Aim for both familiar and unfamiliar. Many students may know the smell of cinnamon, but may never have seen a cinnamon stick, so aim for variety)

Instructions

Part I. Introducing spices

Open today's class by explaining that spices will be the subject of the lesson, as an example of a food that has traditionally been a privileged food for some and too expensive for most people.

1. Ask students: What is a spice?

A spice is a bud, flower, fruit, bark, root, rhizome (an underground stem through which a plant reproduces). . . Spices can come from most parts of a plant.

The leafy part of the plant is generally called an herb.

Spices have traditionally been used as a seasoning, but have also been used for coloring and preservative.

Many spices have anti-microbial qualities; that is, they kill or slow the growth of microbes that degrade food.

2. Pass around a series of spices. For each, ask students to write the following in their journals:

The name of the spice

A description of its appearance and smell

Any memory or association it evokes

3. Take time to let students smell and feel the spices.

4. Then ask them to share a number of their responses.

Part II: The history of spices

The Spice Trade (especially as it pertains to prompting the late 15th century voyages of exploration) is commonly taught in high school global history courses.

1. Ask students whether they remember any aspect of that history:

-Where did spices generally come from?

-Who wanted the spices?

-How did spice seekers obtain the spices?

2. The spice trade is ancient and long precedes the voyages of Columbus.

In 1492, Christopher Columbus set off for the Indies in search of a direct route to spices. Before Columbus, spices came to Europe through Muslim traders who brought them from India to European ports.



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Columbus understood that spices were expensive because of the profits and taxes that accumulated along the way:

they came from long distances

at each step along they way, merchants took a profit as they sold them at the next port

merchants were charged customs duties at each step along the way

He reasoned that revolutionize the spice trace if he were able to cut out the middlemen and go straight to the Indian ports where spices were gathered from across East Asia and India

3. Different spices have distinct histories and mythologies—here are a few examples that help to explain why they are expensive and prestigious.

PEPPER

Some spices were the subjects of stories that revealed their origins, as contemporaries imagined or understood them.

Ancient Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE) described peppercorns as coming from trees in India guarded by poisonous snakes. In order to harvest the pepper, Indians had to chase away the snakes. Setting fire to the trees drove the snakes away and gave the originally white pepper its black color.

Ask students to imagine the danger and expense of such an operation!

Native to South India, pepper is actually from a vine. Black pepper is the fruit of the pepper plant that grows on the vine. Cooked, unripe fruit turn black, while the ripe fruit is red.

Pepper was one of the least expensive of the spices until relatively recently. Yet pepper was so highly prized in medieval Europe that it was used as currency and often given as a popular gift from one member of the elite to another.

CINNAMON

Roman historian Pliny the Elder(23-79) wrote about the source of cinnamon in this way:

Birds collected cinnamon sticks from the heights of inaccessible Arabian mountains and used them to build their nests. Wily spice gatherers tempted the birds with pieces of meat large enough to collapse the nests. The sticks fell to the ground under the weight of the meat, where they could be safely collected.

Cinnamon was so expensive that Pliny described it as costing the equivalent of 10 months work by a laborer.

In another equally fantastic story, a thirteenth-century writer described cinnamon as being caught in nets from the source of the Nile river—at the very edges of the world.

Cinnamon is, in fact, the inner bark of a tree. “True” cinnamon, as it is often called, is native to Sri Lanka, although cassia, an inferior variety of the tree, grows more widely around the Indian Ocean basin.



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VANILLA

Vanilla is a pod produced by a vine orchid, the Vanilla Orchid.

Vanilla is native to Mexico and was prized by the ancient Totonaco Indians. It was one ingredient in the royal chocolate drink given to Aztec kings, xocolatl. The Spanish learned about vanilla from the Aztecs.

Vanilla was produced only in Mexico and Central America until the 19th century, since it was pollinated by only one native bee species. Cultivation spread to other tropical areas when scientists mastered the technique of artificial pollination.

Even today, cultivating vanilla is extremely labor intensive. On its own, the orchid would put its energy into growing an extremely long vine along a tree support and produce few flowers. Each flower produces only one pod, so workers often prune the plants to encourage them to flower and hand pollinate each flower during its 24-hour blooming period.

SAFFRON

Saffron has always been and remains the most expensive spice, beloved for its fragrance and color. It was prized by ancient Roman and Egyptian royalty; Cleopatra reputedly bathed in it, as did the wealthiest Romans.

Saffron threads are the dried stigmata of the saffron crocus flower.

Native to the Middle East, it was probably first cultivated in ancient Greece.

Saffron Crocus flowers bloom just once a year and can be harvested only over a period of two weeks. The threads are plucked by hand from hand-harvested flowers.

It takes 72,000 flowers to produce one pound of saffron.

Spices, in short, tend to be expensive because they come from exotic lands, travel long distances, and are often difficult to produce.

Part III: A Deeper Dive

If you have time, think about moving in one of the following directions:

1. Ask students to do some more research about one of the spices that they observed at the start of class.
 - How is it used?
 - Are other spices used particularly often in combination with it?
 - What kinds of dishes are made out of it?
 - Does it tend to be used in sweet or savory dishes? Is it associated with any particular cuisines?
 - Does it have any medicinal properties?
2. Ask students to choose a spice that they might use often at home.
 - What is its story?
 - Where does it come from (Where is it indigenous? Where is it grown?)
 - Is it difficult to grow?
 - Is it associated with any particular cooking or ethnic traditions?
 - Is it perceived to have any medicinal properties?
 - Why might we want to know about it?



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A FEW SITES THAT WILL BE INTERESTING AND USEFUL FOR RESEARCH

“Spices,” the website that accompanied an exhibit on spices at the University of California, Los Angeles

unitproj.library.ucla.edu/biomed/spice/index.cfm

The Indian spice board, which lists everything from prices to the medicinal value:

www.indianspices.com/spices-development/spice-catalogue

McCormick Spice Institute:

www.mccormickscienceinstitute.com/resources/culinary-spices/herbs-spices

Searching under individual spice names will also bring up other resources.



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CHAI TEA

From Epicurious

16 students

Multiply the recipe by two. You can split the class in half for step one of the recipe and then come back together as a group to continue the recipe in one pot. Students should be the time keepers for this recipe.

Equipment List

- 2 small to medium mixing bowls
- 2 wooden mixing spoon
- 2 medium pots, one with lid
- Burner
- Whisk
- Ladle
- Sieve
- 4-cup wet measure
- 1 cup dry measure
- 3 cutting boards
- 3 knives
- 1 teaspoon

Food Items

- 4 inches of fresh ginger
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- 4 teaspoons black peppercorns
- 20 whole cloves
- 12 cardamom pods
- 12 cups cold water
- 12 bags of black tea
- 4 cups whole milk
- 1 cup brown sugar



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CHAI TEA

From Epicurious

YIELD: 6 servings

Ingredients

- 2-inch piece fresh ginger, cut into thin rounds
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 teaspoons black peppercorns
- 10 whole cloves
- 6 cardamom pods
- 6 cups cold water
- 6 bags of black tea
- 2 cups whole milk
- ½ cup packed brown sugar

Directions

1. Combine the first 5 ingredients in a medium saucepan. Using a mallet or back of large spoon, lightly crush or bruise spices.
2. Add 6 cups of water to saucepan; bring to a boil of high heat.
3. Reduce to medium-low heat and partially cover pan. Simmer gently 10 minutes then remove from heat.
4. Add tea bags and steep 5 minutes then discard tea bags.
5. Add the milk and sugar and bring tea up to a simmer over high heat, whisking until sugar dissolves.
6. Strain chai tea and serve hot.



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Cinnamon



Cloves



Ginger



Turmeric



Peppercorns



Cardamom



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Nutmeg



Saffron



Vanilla





**UNIT 1:
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**FOOD AND
DISTINCTION:
PRICE AND
PRESTIGE**

Note to Teachers

Some foods are associated with prestige and status. Spices, as we discussed, can serve as examples of such foods, though students may not readily associate them with privilege.

“Distinction,” as the term is used by scholar Pierre Bourdieu, separates social elite from popular groups, and signals a kind of excellence. To be a “person of distinction” is to be someone with excellent taste (and the funds to prove it). This lesson conveys the relativism inherent in the idea of “distinction” – that foods of distinction vary among different places and populations. The goal of this lesson is to explore the larger phenomenon of cultures ascribing prestige to material goods, including things like fashion and accessories as well as foods.

Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- Students will understand how and why some foods convey prestige
- Students will appreciate how a graphic treatment of information can help to convey their knowledge effectively.

Objectives

- Students will briefly consider the example of champagne to model the conditions that make a food prestigious
- Students will complete a short Internet research project to discover what makes a food of their choice a mark of prestige.
- Students will prepare a thoughtful, concise and carefully crafted poster to present their findings.



FOOD AND DISTINCTION: PRICE AND PRESTIGE

Materials

- Computer cart with internet access
- Paper for posters

Instructions

Part I. Getting started

1. Ask students whether they ever shop in a supermarket, grocery store, or corner store.
(What do they know about prices of foods?)
2. Which foods do they associate with affordability? Commonness?
Why do they think some foods are so inexpensive?
(Are there ingredients common, inexpensive, or synthetic?)
Use one or two examples to test their ideas:
Soda: primarily water and sugar
Chips: potatoes, oil
(Food manufacturers, by the way, talk about their job as taking highly “marginal” foods and making them edible—more about that idea later in the semester.)
3. On the other hand, what foods do students associate with high prices?
Can they speculate on what makes them expensive?
(Ingredients are rare, come from far away, or made in a special way—organically produced or artisanally made)

Part II. Food Prices

Let’s test these ideas further:

Divide students into two groups.

Distribute the attached cards to students and ask them to put the cards in order, from least to most expensive. Ask students to work together to make the most reasoned choices.

Check their work with the attached price list and ask students what criteria prompted their thinking.

Part III. Prestige foods

1. Champagne as an example:
A few years ago, champagne was popular among hip hop artists.
Here is one story about why (from the website “first we feast,” <http://firstwefeast.com/drink/2014/12/hip-hop-champagne-history>):
“Branson Belchie—better known as Branson B.—may not be a household name like some of the New York emcees he ran with over the years, but any discussion of champagne and rap eventually winds its way back to the Harlem native and early graffiti pioneer. Dubbed “hip-hop’s unofficial sommelier” by Forbes, he is largely



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credited with introducing the drink to the likes of Notorious B.I.G. and Puff Daddy—giants whose embrace of the bubbly helped solidify its status in East Coast rap culture.”

Why? According to Branson B.,

“Growing up in the streets of Harlem, there were a lot of gentlemen—doctors, lawyers, contractors, hustlers, gamblers—who indulged in champagne as their drink of choice,” Branson says. “It was more of an aspirational thing: you want to do well, and champagne is supposed to be a high-end way to enjoy yourself when it comes to an alcoholic beverage.”

Why is champagne expensive?

Legally, what is called “champagne” can come only from the Champagne region of France, a region making wine since the days of the Roman Empire. The region has fought long and hard to keep the exclusivity of the prized name on its products.

Champagne production is a lengthy process that involves three types of fermentation and four further stages to produce a finished bottle. It is a labor-intensive product, much of which cannot be done by machine.

A bottle of champagne, therefore, costs so much because a consumer is paying for a complex production process, but also the history and respected name of the product.

Champagne serves as an example of a prestige food—a food that marks a certain status and good taste.

2. Other foods operate in the same way:

Have the class brainstorm foods that have high status in the songs, movies, and cultures around them.

(Questions that might get them started: if money were no object at all, what food might they choose to eat on a special occasion? What are the “fanciest,” coolest foods they know?)

Their list could include anything (as everything is relative): foods like caviar, steak, a fancy coffee drink, coconut water, kale, fresh fruits and vegetables are common choices.

IV. Prestige Food Poster

Ask students to choose ONE food from the brainstormed list, to research it, and to produce a poster about why and how it is a prestige food.

Please write these questions on the board to give students guidance in their research:

- Name of the food
- Description of the food and key ingredients. Are those ingredients rare? Do they come from far away? Are they uncommon for another reason?
- Description of how the food is produced: Is there anything about its production that makes it special?
- How it is prepared or eaten by the consumer? Do you need special equipment, or a difficult or lengthy process?



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Extension

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- Can you find any price information?
- With all of the above in mind, can you explain why and how your food is a prestige food?

NOTE TO THE STUDENTS: Your research and subsequent poster does not mean that this food is necessarily a prestige food for you. You may, in fact, know nothing about this food, or feel quite indifferent to it. Your job here is, rather, to understand how this food *could* serve as a prestige food.

HOMEWORK: Please encourage students to research, write, and plan the visual aspects of the poster in class. If they do, please ask a selected group to share their findings before the end of class. Remind them to cite all sources they use in their research! If they do not complete the research and writing in class, encourage them to complete it as homework.

