



A Smorgasbord of Friends and Food

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EXPLORE THE UNKNOWN

As children we eat and often complain about the foods that are set in front of us. The types of food that we usually like are influenced by the foods that our parents and grandparents have prepared for us. Those foods are often what connect us to our heritage, as some of these foods are the same foods that our ancestors were eating more than two hundred years ago. As we move into our teenage years, we develop our own particular likes and dislikes for the foods we eat. Our tastes are influenced by our families, cultural and ethnic groups, religious beliefs, and personal tastes.

Food is a central focus and common link among teenagers. As a teenage student in an urban high school, I've noticed that this influence towards certain foods is visible among my friends. While we eat the same lunch at school every day, our dinners differ greatly. My family has a traditional American background, so foods served at my house include hamburgers, macaroni and cheese, and corn dogs. My friend, Maricela, comes from a Hispanic background and speaks of her family eating tacos, enchiladas, and chorizo. Katie, who is from an Italian background, often speaks of her family eating pasta, alfredo sauces, and white chili. Ilesha, who is African-American, talks about eating fried chicken and collard greens.

Even though we were raised eating different foods, we have never been afraid to venture into the cultures of our friends during the meals that we share outside of school. As my friends and I are all active FFA members, we often find ourselves eating together after long days in competition or even longer nights in conferences. Each time we eat together we spend more time arguing over where to eat than we spend actually eating. As with any group, there are members that have strong likes and dislikes, and it can be challenging to accommodate everyone's individual tastes.

Recently, we sat down to eat in an authentic Mexican restaurant. Maricela began to list off the things that she liked, as the rest of us sat skimming the menu that had a mix of English and Spanish words. Not even the combination of pictures and two years of Spanish in middle school assisted us in what foods to order. As our plates arrived, Maricela watched the reaction of our faces as the waiter placed our meals in front of us. Most of us had looks of delight, as we tasted the succulent morsels on our overflowing

plates. Our advisor reminded us of the mandatory two-bite rule (which means you must try two bites of something before you decide if you like it or not). Only a couple of people stopped devouring their meals after the first two bites, but those are the "regular" picky eaters. Maricela was our guide through the meal, as she explained what we had just eaten and how it was made, continuing to introduce even more Spanish words than the menu.

My FFA chapter and my immediate circle of friends are just a small representation of the diverse tastes and foods eaten by the approximately one thousand students at my school. While we have all been raised in the same neighborhoods and gone to the same schools since kindergarten, there are still major differences in the foods we eat. Even fifty years ago, most of this country ate traditional American food: fried chicken, meat and potatoes, hot dogs, and apple pie. Today, we are not so much a "melting pots" but more like a smorgasbord, especially in the urban setting where I live. Cultural groups are maintaining their traditions, especially when it comes to food. In my community you can eat anything from Thai, Chinese, Mexican, Indian, to German food on a different night every week. As friends, we encourage one another to try something different and to broaden our understanding of the global world that we live in today. Food is universal; everyone has to eat! Even if I don't care for the spicy hot chorizo or sauerkraut, I have tried it and my friends appreciate my willingness to embrace their traditions. They also enjoy making fun of me and the faces I make when I try something new that tastes unlike anything I have ever eaten.

While our families seem to be the biggest factor in determining what foods we eat, our friends and communities provide opportunities for us to explore the unknown. Gathering around a table with good food and good friends is universal. Our families shape us, but our friends open the doors to a world that we might never have explored. Food, the nourishment for our bodies, becomes the catalyst for our life experiences and builds strong bonds and understanding between cultures. Now, please pass the empanadas and guacamole. GRACIAS!