**Introduction to International Foods**

1. Ethnic and cultural background has a strong impact on family food customs. As cultures (customs, language, dress, etc. of a group of people) developed, food became an important part of each cultural group. The food customs of a particular culture started with agriculture and prevalent animal life which determined what foods were available. The skills of the people determined food preparation and preservation methods.

**World cultural traditions**are determined to a large extent by geography. It was natural, for example, that areas in Oriental countries developed a cuisine which was centered on rice which grows well there. In tropical cultures, family food patterns developed around the large amounts of fruits and vegetables which grew in abundance. The far northern peoples learned to eat larger amounts of fat and protein which come from animal sources.

**Regional cuisines**develop as groups of people cultivate habits and customs more specific to their needs and preferences. Not only is there a European cuisine, there are cuisines specific to each country in Europe. There are regional cuisines within nations. Regional foods are the typical foods prepared or grown in a specific geographic area of a country.

1. **Religious background**is an important part of ethnic tradition which influences a family's food choices. Religion and religious practices have a strong impact on many families' food traditions, which often can be traced to ancient history.

BUDDHISM

* found predominately in southeast Asia, Korea, and Japan
* people believe that they can eat fish or beef if they personally do not kill it
* most Buddhists live on cereal, fruit, vegetables, fish
* they are basically lacto-ovo-vegetarians (milk, plant, vegetable food sources)
* in some places food is offered to visitors as a sign of right living

HINDUISM

* cows are protected from harm and slaughter
* the kind of food people can eat depends on their rank (caste system)
* the highest castes, Brahmins, eat the finest, cleanest food.
* most Hindus avoid meat, onions, garlic, turnips
* some castes eat anything but beef
* some castes associate the color red with blood and won't eat beets, red dry beans, tomatoes, etc.

ISLAM/MUSLIM

* Arab countries, some parts of Africa, southeast Asia, the Middle East
* may not eat pork or pork products
* sea animals without fins are not consumed by some
* animals are slaughtered according to a ritual
* Muslims eat foods with bare fingers and right hand with shoes off
* During holy month of Ramadan, eating and drinking is forbidden from dawn until dusk—be sensitive to students and plan labs accordingly during this month

JUDAISM

* separate animal food sources into clean and unclean groups
* clean = animals with cloven and divided hooves that chew cud (cows, sheep, goat, oxen)  
  unclean = animals with cloven hooves, don't chew cud (pigs)
* meats and fish products may not be eaten together
* foods must be processed and prepared in a prescribed manner, referred to as kosher
* traditions are rooted in the Old Testament times.
* certain foods are specified as part of religious celebrations, such as the Passover meal for Jewish families, unleavened bread, etc. Check your calendar and avoid planning a unit on yeast breads during Passover. Your Jewish students won’t be able to consume the products.

CHRISTIANITY

* food habits are often determined by individual religious sects
* Roman Catholic\_\_\_no meat on Friday and during Lent (6 weeks before Easter)\_\_\_these standards have relaxed in recent years but still have influence on food choices during Lent and other special days
* Eastern Orthodox\_\_\_no animal products during fasts
* Latter-day Saints (Mormons)\_\_\_forbid tea, coffee, alcohol; suggest reduced meat consumption and emphasize grains, fruits and vegetables
* Seventh-day Adventist\_\_\_vegetarian diets are advocated

1. Each family determines its food traditions using its own ethnic background, cultural and religious customs, economic status, likes and dislikes, food availability, and family values.
2. People who are proud of their cultural heritage use food to preserve that heritage. The holiday customs and traditions that help families feel close are often focused around food. Birthdays, graduations, weddings, anniversaries, Thanksgiving, and Hanukkah are examples. Special foods are often associated with holiday customs.

**FOOD HAS ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS**  
Beginning with Marco Polo's travels to China during the Dark Ages, economic centers have grown up around the world's trade. The foods of Asia were not only different than those of Europe, but their flavor was enhanced by the use of seasonings that Europeans had never tasted before and they were much coveted. As explorers introduced new foods, and especially spices to Europe, trade with Asian nations flourished. Historically, the cities of Damascus, Rome, and Athens grew up around the spice trade. India and China are still spice centers of the world. The Americas were discovered in an attempt to facilitate the spice trade. The New World, however, proved rather disappointing in its yield of the varieties of spice Europeans were looking for.

**MARCO POLO**  
Marco Polo was born in Venice, Italy. He was the son of Nicolo Polo and the nephew of Maffeo Polo, Venetian merchants and business partners. In the course of their trading operations, Nicolo and Maffeo made an overland journey in 1260 to China. They returned to Venice in 1269 and two years later, taking Marco along with them, they began a second journey to China. Their route led from Acre in North Palestine overland to Hormuz at the mouth of the Persian Gulf; northward through Persia to the Oxus River in Central Asia; up the Oxus to the Pamirs and across the Pamirs to the region of Sinkiang, China; and finally across the Gobi Desert to the court of Kublai Khan, then at Shangru, China, which the Polos reached in 1275. The brothers and young Marco were the first Europeans to visit most of the territory they traversed in this journey, particularly the Pamirs and the Gobi Desert.

Marco Polo excelled all other known Christian travelers in his experience, in his connections to important people, and in his influence. Although Franciscan monks went to Mongolia and back in less than three years, and some stayed in a role of missionary-diplomats, Marco Polo's journey lasted twenty-four years. He reached farther than any known earlier explorers, going beyond Mongolia into the heart of Cathay. He traversed the whole of China, all the way to the Ocean, and he played a variety of roles, becoming the confidant of Kublai Khan who was the ruler, and governor of a great Chinese city. He was at home in the languages of China, and he immersed himself in the daily life and culture of Cathay.

Marco Polo entered Kublai Khan's diplomatic service, acting as his agent on missions to many parts of the Mongol empire, and he was for three years governor of the Chinese city of Yangchow. His father and uncle served as military advisers to Kublai Khan. The Polos stayed in China until 1292, when they left the country as escorts for a Mongolian princess traveling to Persia. The travelers reached that country by sea via Sumatra, southern India, the Indian Ocean, and the Persian Gulf; they then went on to Venice, proceeding overland via Tabriz in northwest Persia, the east coast of the Black Sea, and Constantinople, (Istanbul), arriving in their home city in 1295.

In 1298 Marco Polo was captain of a Venetian galley which participated in a battle between the fleets of Venice and Genoa, and he was taken prisoner. During his incarceration in Genoa, he dictated to a fellow-prisoner, Rusticiano of Pisa, the detailed account of his travels. He was released from prison in 1299 and returned to Venice.

The literary work, *The Book of Marco Polo*(first published in French), is perhaps the most famous and influential travel book in history. With a wealth of vivid detail, it gave to medieval Europe its first consequential knowledge of China, and its first information concerning other Asiatic countries, including Siam, Japan, Java, Cochin-China, Ceylon, Tibet, India, and Burma. For a long time it was the only existing source in Europe for information on the geography and life of the Far East. The book became the basis for some of the first accurate maps of Asia made in Europe; it helped to arouse in the navigator, Christopher Columbus, an interest in the Orient which culminated in his discovery of America (1492) while attempting to reach the Far East of Polo's description by sailing due west from Europe; and it suggested the all-sea route from Europe to the Far East around Africa finally accomplished by the Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama (1497-98).

As a result of explorers such as Marco Polo, Columbus and others, an exchange of food products began to take place. People in Europe coveted the foods and spices of the Orient.

There were three principal regions of the world in which food plants were domesticated. The vegetables, fruits and spices from these regions include:

ASIAN NATIVES (some imported B.C.)  
citron, apricot, peach, yam, water chestnut, bamboo, eggplant, lemon, lime, orange, melon, cardamon, ginger, cinnamon, turmeric, black pepper, clove, mace, nutmeg, tarragon

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AREA NATIVES (some used B.C.)  
mushroom, beet, radish, turnip, carrot, parsnip, asparagus, leek, onion, cabbage, lettuce, artichoke, cucumber, broad bean, pea, olive, apple, pear, cherry grape, fig, date, strawberry, basil, marjoram, oregano, mint, rosemary, sage, savory, thyme, anise, caraway, coriander, cumin, dill, parsley, fennel, bay, caper, fenugreek, garlic, mustard, poppy, sesame, saffron

NEW WORLD NATIVES (imported 15th-16th centuries)  
potato, sweet potato, pumpkin, squashes, tomato, kidney bean, lima bean, sweet pepper, avocado, pineapple, allspice, red pepper, vanilla

(Source:*ON FOOD AND COOKING: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen*, Harold McGee, Scribners Publishing, 1984)

**Spices, Herbs, Seasonings and Extracts Help Make Each Culture's Foods Unique**  
Spices, herbs and extracts have much to do with ethnic differences in food. **Herbs**are the leaves of flowers and plants whose aromas can add flavor to foods. When dried, the flavor is more concentrated than when herbs are fresh. A common herb is basil. Another is rosemary.

**Spices**are the dried seeds, berries, fruit bark, roots, or flower parts of a plant. Black pepper and sage are common spices in the culture of the United States.

**Extracts**are made by pressing the oils from aromatic plants and mixing the oils with alcohol. Vanilla is a flavoring that is familiar to most people in the United States. It is made from the bean of the vanilla plant.

Historically, spices and herbs have been used for medicine as well as for flavoring and preserving foods. Their production is of major economic importance in world trade.

Spices, herbs, flavorings, and extracts are distinguished from condiments and sauces. **Condiments**are made from a number of ingredients including spices and herbs. Catsup, mustard, relish and sauces are common condiments. Sauces include soy sauce, tabasco sauce, and Worcestershire sauce.

**Vinegar**is made from apple, grape, or other juice. Vinegars are often seasoned with spices and herbs.

Seasonings make foods distinctive and keep meals from being boring. Spices and herbs can replace salt in many foods. This helps reduce the sodium intake, which is too high in the diets of many people living in the United States.

Questions:

1. Was there anything that you didn’t know about various religions around the world?
2. Explain the interaction between exploration and food. How did each influence the other?
3. Provide 3 examples of foods that are native to Asia, Eastern Mediteranian and the New World. Are there any foods listed that you have not tried? Are there any foods listed that surprise you as being native to a particular area? Explain.
4. What is the difference between herbs, spices, extracts, condiments and vinegars?