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FOOD, BODY AND HEALTH

A cross-cultural approach

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FOOD, BODY AND HEALTH
Results of a cross-cultural research programme conducted
by Ocha/Congrilait among 7,000 consumers

Excerpt from the synopsis by Claude Fischler, Director of Research at France's national scientific research agency CNRS

Background to the research programme

“In recent years, in all so-called societies of abundance, food habits have changed significantly. In all these countries, which long ago overcame food shortage problems, food is nevertheless increasingly considered as a public health issue and controlling what we eat is a key issue. Unhealthy eating is said to be the cause of the increase in obesity and in the growing incidence of diseases that are the principal cause of death in these countries, namely cardiovascular disease and certain types of cancer. Public awareness and educational campaigns are being stepped up. Governments and the healthcare profession are seeking to drive home two central messages to consumers: first, that what we eat and our state of health are intrinsically linked; and second, our individual responsibility regarding our own health and that of our children and family in our care.

The food industry – from producers to processors and retailers – also faces these health issues. It sees them more as constraints (due, for example, to regulations). Certain professionals, on the other hand, see them as business opportunities: given the public's growing interest in, and concern about, nutrition and healthy eating (which is clearly the case in societies with aging populations and which place ever more importance on people's physical appearance), it is likely that consumers will be increasingly receptive to sales pitches that focus on health, well-being and beauty when choosing food items (which are becoming more refined and processed).

Today, it is thus increasingly important for both public healthcare authorities and the food industry to identify and understand consumer eating habits. This means identifying changes and motives in habits, knowing what consumers think, what they know and what they believe, pinpointing attitudes and impressions and better understanding and – they hope – predicting consumers' actual behaviour.

This must be seen against the backdrop of globalisation of trade and consumption. Can it be assumed that eating habits, consumer habits and health and safety issues will also become “global”? Are the issues the same everywhere across the planet? Can we identify universal concerns and perceptions among the world's consumers?

In response to this question, food manufacturers and healthcare professionals alike are tempted to say “yes”: warnings about the spiralling increase in obesity are widespread, as are growing concerns about food health and safety. It appears to be taken for granted that all countries with similar standards of living will respond equally positively to “global”, standardised products – whether it’s a hamburger or nutraceuticals/functional food ingredients.

And yet a brief review of available data shows that there is clearly a genuine disparity in consumer habits and perceptions and, more generally, in people’s relationship to their body and health, especially regarding food (Rozin, Fischler et al, 1999). For human science researchers, this is a fundamental question, since it embraces the issue of the relationship between culture and society. When making international comparisons, it must be determined whether any disparities observed between countries are an actual indication of national characteristics common to all those who share the same culture or whether they can be attributed to groups, categories or classes within a given society. Is there really such a thing as “national cultures”? And if they do exist, how do they fit with the notion of “globalisation”?

Current data, especially for marketing research, tend to reveal a gulf between attitudes in Anglo-Saxon countries and Latin countries or, in Europe, between the North and the South. Anglo-Saxons tend to focus more on healthy eating, with strong demand for nutritional information on product contents. In contrast, southern, Latin consumers place more importance on eating for pleasure at social gatherings and are more concerned with where products originate from rather than only nutritional labelling or (relatively) quantified recipes. Medical customs and preferences also vary between countries to surprising degrees: certain diseases are only recognised and identified in certain countries (only French people, for example, suffer from “liver attacks”); treatments vary considerably; doctors’ attitudes and even behaviour vary. National “medical cultures” are a reality.

These considerations prompted demand for a closer examination of disparities in consumer eating habits and consumers’ perceived relationship between food and the body and between food and good health. The cross-cultural research programmed pursued by Ocha from 2000 to 2002 in six countries (five in Europe, plus the United States) and partially in a seventh country, India, has made a valuable contribution to these efforts. Conducted with an associated researcher in each country¹, the programme used qualitative and quantitative methods. Following an initial qualitative phase in 2000 and 2001 (focus groups), the second phase in September/October 2001 involved 1,032 people in six countries (consumers, teachers and doctors), who were asked to complete a questionnaire comprising numerous open-ended questions. In the final phase, 6,023 people in the same countries (900 people in each European country and 1,500 in the USA) filled in another questionnaire in February/March 2002 comprising only close-ended, multiple choice questions.

¹ The six countries and associated researchers: France (Mohamed Merdji), Germany (Eva Barlösius), Italy (Nicoletta Cavazza), UK (Alan Beardsworth), USA (Paul Rozin), Switzerland (Laurence Ossipow). India (Jyoti Verma) was associated for the first phase. In addition to Claude Fischler, the programme’s scientific director, the project leaders and coordinators were Christy Shields (USA/France) and Estelle Masson (France).

Research results

Some of the results confirmed what was expected or what was already known. Responses to certain questions by Anglo-Saxons, for example, come as no surprise. It is often said, for instance, that Americans have a purely functional relationship with food, seeing it as “fuel for the body”. In the third phase of the cross-cultural research programme involving 6,023 people, respondents were asked to choose from among four metaphors (generated spontaneously in the focus groups of the first phase) the one that best describes their body vis-à-vis food. Mechanical metaphors (factory and car) were chosen by a significantly larger number of British and American respondents than by other groups, although more than one in two Americans chose the metaphors of a tree or temple. Subjects who relate to these mechanical or functional representations tend to agree much less with the idea that one needs only apply a “few basic, general” rules to ensure a healthy, balanced diet, which on the contrary is the case of the Italians and French.

In the six countries, a very large majority of respondents said that they were convinced of the importance of food to health. Attitudes to modern eating habits raise problems universally, but in different ways. The French, Italians and, to a certain extent, the Swiss are mainly dissatisfied with taste and quality (while the British and Americans find that things have improved in this area...). In the United States, the finger is pointed more at “eating habits” than anything else, which amounts to questioning individual behaviour rather than product quality. Among all respondents, there is a nostalgic preference for “natural” products and opposition to genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), which is widespread regarding the use of GMOs in food (even in the USA), but less widespread (though still accounting for the majority) when it comes to research into GMOs in general.

The relationship between food and medicine appears to constitute a vital dimension in people’s perception of the relationship between food and health. Is there a form of continuity between food and medicine in the minds of respondents or, on the contrary, is it possible to identify a discontinuity and even a radical opposition between these two categories? The border between the two is most clear-cut in Switzerland and Germany and most blurred in the United States and the UK. In certain cultures, the vision and definition of what is “natural” appear to be linked to this perception, and these can vary significantly. The Americans for example are alone in believing that milk that contains added Vitamin D is more natural than skimmed milk and Vitamin C in powder or tablet form. The grades given to “natural” in the four continental European countries yield the same ranking of the three products (from the most natural to the least natural): skimmed milk, milk that contains added vitamins and Vitamin C). The British, meanwhile, give a significantly higher grade to skimmed milk but consider that Vitamin C is more natural than milk with added Vitamin D...

What varies most sharply is the way that people perceive their approach to food, the role and concept of health and the level of individual responsibility and, in some cases, guilt that this approach arouses. For instance, 55% of Americans identify with the image of what can summarily be described as a “tormented eater”: “Eater C would like to improve control of their appetite, cravings and weight. They intend to change their eating habits and to do more sport. They think that they are too weak-willed to achieve this and sometimes feel a sense of failure.” Only 36% of Italians, 40% of Swiss and 42% of French gave the same reply. The eater’s inability to resist temptation is all the more understandable given the abundance of

choice in the United States, which, for the Americans in our sample, is of great importance – unlike in Europe. Faced with choice of an ice-cream seller offering 50 different flavours and another who offers just 10, 56% of Americans prefer the former – while Europeans prefer the latter (except Italian men...).

Faced with this individualistic approach to food, the Europeans – and the French in particular – attach cardinal importance to the collective, social, congenial and, it could be said, “communion” aspects of eating. This is illustrated by their responses to the open-ended questions in the second research phase (“eating well” for the French often means having “friends over for dinner”, “a family meal”, “sharing some good food”, etc). Indirectly, in responses to questions in the third phase, it is the profile of the “social eater” — “eater B who enjoys sitting down to lunch with colleagues and with the family in the evening and who hates nothing more than missing a meal or being obliged to eat quickly” — that corresponds most to the French: 67% identify with this profile and 35% identify completely with this profile (the highest score).

Similarly, more French (77%) identify with the “gourmet eater” profile – “Eater D who considers eating to be one of the greatest pleasures in life, who often talks about cooking and pays careful attention to the quality of the food they eat”. As many as 41% say that they identify completely with this profile. The French are the most intolerant of guests who dislike a particular type of food (probably because of the social connotations of meals). It is also the French – along with Italians – who are most opposed to people paying “only for what they have eaten” when it comes to settling the bill in a restaurant (rather than this totally individualistic attitude, they prefer to split the cost evenly and thus show that they are paying for their part in a shared experience, or alternatively have one person assume the entire cost (either “because it’s their turn” or because of their particular status in the group).

Two conclusions – and the additional questions they raise

First and foremost, the standard “global eater” does not exist (yet?). Regardless of the features these consumers have in common, significant local features are very much in evidence. Even despite the influence of globalisation, individuals appear to foster their own perception of eating and their relationship with food. Is it possible to offer these eaters the same products, give them the same advice and “feed” them the same information? This seems unlikely. Indeed, in each culture, each household adjusts new food to suit its personal tastes. True, global uniformity exists; but so too does global diversity.

Secondly, the research raises a fascinating question. Consumers everywhere are subjected to the same pressure: control what you eat and eat “properly” (in the medical sense). Implicitly or explicitly, this incitement calls upon to individual responsibility, which implies making the right choices, controlling one’s desires and appetite. This pressure comes as much from the food industry (which offer “tempting morsels” of varying degrees of quality, but also make nutritional claims and promises) as from healthcare professionals and governments (instructions to eat more “healthy” food, such as fruit and vegetables, and less of other types). Again, this implies assuming one’s individual responsibility. In both cases, what is implied is an individual and proactive attitude to food, which is supposed to replace the collective, culturally determined “scripts” of the past. And yet, the country in which this individualistic, proactive concept of “food control” is most widely accepted – as illustrated

by the Ocha research programme and long demonstrated by history – is the United States. Yet the USA does not particularly appear to shine in the area of good nutrition.

*It seems reasonable to assume that the rise in this individualistic approach to food is linked to wider changes in Western society and lifestyles. **The response to today's food issues therefore probably lies in areas other than food, namely in policies to enhance lifestyles and quality of life.***

Source: Claude Fischler, Ocha Symposium/Congrilait

THE COST OF FREEDOM

Tormented with choice and the weight of responsibility

Eating healthily is harder for the Americans and British than it is for the Germans, French, Swiss and Italians. This is the conclusion of the third phase of the cross-cultural research programme conducted among 6,023 people in six countries by Ocha/Congrilait, led by Claude Fischler, Director of Research at France's scientific research agency CNRS. In the United States, only 2 in 10 people and between 2 and 3 in 10 in the United Kingdom say that they "*easily manage*" to achieve this goal, compared with 3 in 10 in Italy and 4 in 10 in Germany, France and Switzerland.

The basic principles

What are the main principles applied by consumers in these countries to ensure a healthy diet? In almost all cases, it is clear that the average figures conceal a division between the USA and the UK on the one hand, where people tend to agree less on the basic principles proposed, and the four European countries, on the other hand. The French, who are often close to the Italians but also the Swiss and the Germans, stand out from their continental neighbours – and even more from the British and Americans – by the importance they attach to the principle of "three square meals per day" and "no snacking in between meals".

- ***Eat in moderation***: this principle is adhered to strongly by 6 to 7 people in 10 in Italy, Switzerland, Germany and France and by only 4 in 10 people in the United States and less than 4 in 10 in the UK.
- ***Eat a varied diet***: this principle is judged important by 7 to 8 people in 10 in Switzerland, France, Germany and Italy but by less than 4 in 10 people in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- ***Eat fresh produce***: this is another principle that is strongly adhered to by 7 to 8 people in 10 in Switzerland, Germany, France and Italy, 6 in 10 people in the United Kingdom and barely 5 in 10 in the United States.
- ***Rely on tradition***: 3 in 10 people in Italy and between 2 and 3 in France and Switzerland agree entirely with this principle, compared with just 1 in 10 in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- ***Eat three meals a day and don't snack in between meals***. The French stand out for their very strong attachment to this principle: in France, 6 in 10 people consider it to be very important, compared with 4 in 10 in Italy, 3 in 10 in Switzerland, 2 in 10 in the United Kingdom and 1 in 10 in the United States.

Consumers do not share the same principles

The degree to which respondents in the six countries identify with the five “eater profiles” proposed sheds light on the above responses.

- ◆ ***The “tormented eater”*** – described as someone who “wants to control their appetite, cravings and weight, who intends to change their eating habits and to do more sport, but thinks that they are too weak-willed to achieve this”. Between 5 and 6 Americans identify *completely* with this profile and 2 in 10 *not at all*. In Italy, France and Switzerland, the “tormented eater” remains the exception: between 3 and 4 people in 10 do not identify *at all* with this profile.
- ◆ ***“Trusting in science”*** – defined as someone who “thinks that, by following the nutritionists’ advice, they can avoid or keep at bay certain diseases and stay in good physical shape to a ripe age”. This conviction is shared (*entirely* or *to a large degree*) by slightly more than 5 in 10 people in all countries except Germany, but much more in the United States: close to 7 in 10 people. The French identify the least with this profile: 1 in 4 people do not identify with it *at all*.
- ◆ ***The “social eater”*** – the French identify the most and the British the least with this profile, which is presented as someone who “enjoys sitting down to lunch with colleagues and with the family in the evening and who hates nothing more than missing a meal or being obliged to eat quickly”. Between 6 and 7 of French respondents identify with this profile *completely* or *to a large degree*, while more than half of British respondents do not identify with it.
- ◆ ***The “gourmet” eater*** is someone who “considers eating to be one of the greatest pleasures in life, who often talks about cooking and pays careful attention to the quality of the food they eat”. Once again, the French and British reveal totally opposing attitudes: close to 8 in 10 French identify *completely* or *to a large degree*, while nearly 5 in 10 British do not identify with this profile.
- ◆ ***The “organic-eater”*** is described as someone who “believes that it is important to protect one’s health and the environment against pollution and to eat organic or natural foods”. This profile does not receive a strong response among British consumers: the UK is the only country where 5 to 6 people in 10 do not identify with this profile (neither *not at all* or *not very much*). Switzerland comes out on top, with 6 in 10 people identifying themselves *completely* or *to a large degree*.

Paradoxically, while the Americans count a large percentage of “tormented eaters”, who feel guilty because they are unable to control what they eat or their weight and who find it difficult to eat a balanced diet, it is also in the United States that eating healthily is seen as both a moral obligation and a health requirement. This trend is starting to spread to Europe, especially in Germany, as pointed out by Berlin sociology professor, Eva Barlösius. Nevertheless, in countries such as France, Italy, Switzerland and Germany, consumers still manage to apply the basic principles (eat

a varied diet, eat in moderation and eat three meals a day) in order to control their eating, despite the emergence of concerns regarding “modern eating habits”.

Europeans remain attached to a traditional food culture that frees them from a number of choices. In contrast, Americans are clearly attached to individual choice and food freedom. Anthropology researcher Christy Shields compared the French and the Americans and concluded that the French feel vulnerable as a “people” in the face of modern eating habits (symbolised by American-style eating), while the Americans feel vulnerable as individuals: in the USA, “we” as a people have the choice and the freedom of choice, but it is “I” as an individual who must make the right choice. And this is a heavy burden to bear.

**ALL-NATURAL FOOD:
NEW WISDOM OR PASSING FAD ?
Between a glorification of the past
and a rejection of genetically modified food**

Natural this, natural that – it seems that everyone everywhere is demanding only all-natural food! This is the conclusion of the Ocha Symposium at Congrilait on 25 September 2002 in Paris, chaired by Claude Fischler, Director of Research at France’s scientific research agency CNRS. But do we actually buy natural products when they are available? This is another matter altogether! Are the food crises to blame? Is it because today’s food consists of highly refined, processed and ready-to-eat products? Is it because some people long for the days when everyone farmed their own patch of land? Or even nostalgia for the more distant original gardens of Eden? Could it be a combination of all these reasons?

Shiny red tomatoes and strawberries – too beautiful to be true

Nevertheless, right from the first phase of the Ocha research programme, at the consumer focus group meetings held in 2000 and 2001 in the six countries, it could have been concluded that participants had all agreed on the same slogan: nothing beats natural products for taste and healthy eating. And yet, leaving aside organic produce, which remains beyond most household budgets, there are fewer and fewer “natural” products available on the market. The classic examples given are strawberries and tomatoes: too beautiful, too uniform and they keep for a suspiciously long time. And they just don’t taste the same any more! Consumers everywhere express a sense of loss with regard to the fact that fruit and vegetables are now available all year round, regardless of the season and irrespective of local crops. The following phase of the research programme involving 1,032 people in 2001 and 6,023 people in 2002 confirmed this universal nostalgia, including in the United States.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) – the worst violation of the natural order

Criticism levelled at *artificial, supermarket* fruit and vegetables fades in comparison with consumer fears of genetically modified organisms. GMOs originated in a laboratory and rely even less on contact with the four elements (soil, air, water and sun), and which respect even less the natural cycle of seasons and biological rhythms. Many people claim that “*GMOs can’t get rotten*”. GMOs represent scientific engineering that *goes against nature; it is the technology of the devil, man’s demiurgic temptation to want to know everything and control everything, conflicting with nature’s innate wisdom*. Mohamed Merdji, professor at Audencia Nantes, quotes a woman who argues that “*the moral principle that instructs us, as consumers, to reject genetically modified fruit and vegetables is the same as that which prevents us, as parents, from wanting to choose the sex of our children or the colour of their eyes.*”

The detailed facts and figures gathered from the 6,023 people involved in the six-country survey confirm this fear of GMOs. Regarding the use of GMOs in food, an average of 82% people say that they *totally disagree* or *mainly disagree*, led by Switzerland, Germany and France (88 to 87%), followed by Italy (84%), the United Kingdom (78%) and the United States and Germany (73%). The countries where most people *totally disagree* are Switzerland (68%), France and Italy (65 to 63%).

Research into GMOs is, to a certain extent, better accepted: only an average of 62% of respondents said that they *totally disagree* or *mainly disagree*. Consumers in Switzerland, Germany and France are the most hostile to such research (between 72% and 70%), followed by Italy (62%), the United Kingdom (55%) and the United States (51%). The main countries where consumers *totally disagree* are France (46%), Switzerland (44%), Italy (42%) and Germany (38%).

Universal longing for the “taste of the good old days”

The notion of *eating well* essentially evokes a romantic glorification of the past and long-lost flavours, according to Eva Barlösius, professor of sociology in Berlin. Remarkable as it might seem, she reports that consumers share such a deep longing for *the good old days* that, in a group conversation, a sentence begun by one person can be finished by any of the others and that all negative connotations are quite simply blotted out. Bread and milk are among the favourite topics of such conversations among German consumers. *In the past, people made fermented milk at home*, said someone in East Berlin... adding that she never buys fresh full-fat or organic milk. *Milk used to turn sour and so our grand-mothers would make pickled cucumbers, for example, or the milk would be used for something else*, said a consumer in West Berlin... *Oh, it was so delicious!* Said everyone in chorus. Another participant sings the praises of organic milk – *with its lovely layer of cream that goes really sour too* – and even brought along a sample, but no one wanted to try it... Eva Barlösius argues that this is the telling of collective history in order to keep alive memories of bygone days, probably never actually experienced by some of the participants and which have no link with the present day. Irregardless of whether these memories are real, the important thing is to show a joint longing for a time when we ate *naturally*.

So what is “natural”?

Paul Rozin (University of Philadelphia, USA), analysed all of the data gathered by the Ocha programme on “natural” foods. He summarises two main hypotheses that lie behind the notion of “natural eating”. On the one hand, there are instrumental reasons, that is to say the favourable effects attributed to “natural food” (mainly in terms of health benefits, for the Americans, but also regarding taste and the environment) – even if these effects are far from proven. On the other, there are reasons that lie in the idea, or more often the belief, that “natural” is better *by definition*, or is better because it’s *purer*. As sociology professor Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney explains, this notion of purity in Japan represents the height of “natural” eating and is embodied in new rice. New rice that cannot be imported as it would be impure, since the notion of purity is associated with the representation for the Japanese of their soil, their past and their “collective self”... even if this romantic image of an immutable,

untouched Japan – immortalised by engravers – bears no resemblance to the ultra-urban, post-industrial Japan of the 21st century.

The success of protected designation of origin products is understandable since their specifications guarantee both the product's origin and the respect of traditional methods, and thus fit with consumers' perceptions of "natural food". The data collected by the Ocha research programme on the degrees of "natural" and expectations of "natural products" in the different countries can help the food industry to better meet the expectations of consumers in diverse cultures. As for people whose notion of "natural" is based on an idealistic vision of nature – one that is always pure and never harmful – can they ever be convinced by scientific argument, education and even their own personal observation of nature?

EATING OUT AROUND THE WORLD

Tips and pointers for travellers and their rhots

Inviting a foreigner over for dinner is not as easy as it may seem. In trying to please them, you might just as easily offend them. Even at a restaurant, just because everyone can choose their own menu does not mean the meal is guaranteed to be free from blunders. Besides what's on their plate, they may be offended by your table manners and habits. Other people's manners can shock and offend – they are not “correct”. In other words, it is not how “I” would behave!

Significant differences in this area were illustrated by the results of an Ocha research programme conducted for Congrilait which were recently presented in Paris at an international symposium chaired by Claude Fischler, Director of Research at France's scientific research agency CNRS. The programme involved close to 7,000 people in six countries. And these differences persist even today, when attention is focused on the risks of creating standardised food and cultures as a result of globalisation.

Estelle Masson, a lecturer in social psychology, has put together a list of the main pitfalls to avoid if you are planning to invite people from other cultures for dinner at home or at a restaurant.

You can't or you don't want to *eat everything*?

Is it alright to say this and how should you say it without causing offence? In the six countries studied (France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the United States and the United Kingdom), it is accepted for you – as a guest – to express your reluctance to eat certain types of food. But how well your hosts respond to your reasoning depends on the country.

A salt-free diet – You can say this to your host anywhere except in Germany: 44% of German respondents find it unacceptable for guests to express their preferences on health grounds. Telling someone in France that you are on a diet for health reasons is largely accepted.

Vegetarian – Your hosts will find this perfectly acceptable in the United States and the United Kingdom (95% find it perfectly normal if their guests say this), and also in Switzerland. But avoid saying it in France and Italy!

There are some things you don't like (such as chicken) – personal preferences are another matter altogether, especially in France! The best advice to foreigners invited for dinner in French homes is to say nothing and to try to understand that the notions of giving and sharing and even communion around the table are the mainstays of French meals.

How can I please my guests?

For lunch or dinner, you can never go wrong with fish. As for red meat, you should be aware that some people avoid it for health reasons (Americans) and others (Italians and French) because they are afraid of being disappointed. Offering superior-quality meat to a French or Italian guest is a sure winner. Everyone enjoys fruit and vegetables. Unpasteurised cheese is a firm favourite of the Swiss, Germans and French. And if your guests are around for breakfast,

you'll appease the health conscience of an American guest by offering milk with added vitamins but you might offend your German guest...

Where should I take them for an ice-cream? What type of restaurant should I choose?

If your guests are American, you're sure to get it right by taking them somewhere that offers maximum choice – this is what they believe in. It is then up to them to make a reasoned choice as to what is best for their health. Faced with choice of an ice-cream seller who offers fifty different flavours and another who offers just ten, the vast majority of Americans prefer the former – the exact opposite of Europeans. The same applies if you ask an American to choose between two distinguished restaurants, the first offering a very wide choice and the second offering just a selection of the chef's recommendations. Be careful, however, if you're dealing with learned Americans: they may share similar tastes to Europeans.

Settling the bill

When the bill arrives at the end of a meal in a restaurant with acquaintances rather than close friends, it can cause some embarrassment. Suggesting to split the total among the number of guests is not necessarily the most acceptable solution in every country. If you are dining with Americans or Germans, the chances are that they will prefer to pay for precisely what they have eaten (6.5 in 10 Germans). In contrast, 6 to 7 times out of 10 the Italians, British, French and Swiss prefer to split the bill equally. And what if one guest offers to settle the entire bill? It is mainly the French who find this solution acceptable, but only 1 in 4. Religious factors can also come into play. Jews and Catholics, for example, prefer to share the cost equally, while Protestants prefer to pay for what they have eaten and Muslims prefer for one person to settle the entire bill.

And don't forget that food can also be a good topic of conversation. If your guests are American, talk about health aspects; if they are German or Swiss, raise the notion of natural eating; and if they are British, wine is a sure winner! The Italians get very enthusiastic about product quality and origins: give them the details of your favourite suppliers and they'll put you down as the best-informed host...