

## Food in Literature and Film, Five Meals: Lessons in Cultural Communication

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### Abstract

In the Spring of 2016, English Professor Thomas Fox Averill, who teaches a course in Food in Literature and Film, decided to do an exercise in cultural communication. Joined by Social Work Professor Bassima Schbley, they taught a Food in Literature and Film: Five Meals, urging students to understand the relationship between food and the cultures they are part of (family, regional, ethnic, religious, class and nation). From this initial preparation, students and professors watched films, read literature, and cooked together four more meals--Lebanese, Persian/Middle East, Chinese, and Japanese. Students were fascinated to truly experience, with all their senses, the taste as well as the cultures studied, and felt almost as though they had traveled. This essay reflects on the process, and hopefully urges others to taste as well as study the world's diversity of peoples and cultures.

**Keywords:** Film, Literature, Japan, China, Lebanon, Orta Doğu, Food, Diversity, Education, Washburn University

### Edebiyatta Filmlerde Yemek, Beş Yemek: Kültürlerarası İletişim Dersleri

#### Özet

Profesör Thomas Fox Averill "Food in Literature and Film" (Edebiyatta ve Filmlerde Yemek) dersinin 2016 Bahar döneminde kültür iletişimi alıştırmaları ( egzersizi) yapmaya karar verdi. Sosyal Hizmet Profesörü Bassima Schbley'in de katılımı ile öğrencileri yiyecek ile kültür (içinde buldukları aile, yöre, ırk, din, sınıf ve ülke) arasındaki ilişkiyi anlamaya teşvik etmek, isteklendirmek için "Food in Literature and Film: Five Meals" (Edebiyat ve Sinemada Yiyecek: Beş Çeşit) dersini birlikte yürüttüler. Başlangıç hazırlığının ardından, öğrenciler ve profesörler filmler izlediler, ilgili yayınları okudular, birlikte dört çeşit daha yemek--Lübnan, İran/Ortadoğu, Çin ve Japon yemekleri-- pişirdiler. Öğrenciler duyumlarıyla gerçekleştirdikleri deneyden son derece etkilendiler, tadın yanı sıra kültürleri de incelediler ve kendilerini yolculuk yapmış gibi hissettiler. Bu süreci yansıtan bu deneme başkalarını da, tatmanın yanı sıra, dünyadaki insanların ve kültürlerin çeşitliliğini incelemeye de isteklendirir umuduyla kaleme alındı.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Film, Edebiyat, Japon, Çin, Lübnan, Orta Doğu, Yemek, Çeşitlilik, Eğitim, Washburn Üniversitesi

#### Introduction

**Tom:** I have taught food in literature and film courses on several occasions at Washburn University of Topeka (Kansas). Occasionally, I would ask students to bring food to class. For example, when we read Pat Willard's *The Secrets of Saffron: The Vagabond Life of the World's Most Seductive Spice*, I asked students to bring a dish that used saffron as

an ingredient. They talked about their experience with the spice, and we ate the results of their experiments. Recently, Washburn University has been attracting more and more International students, and emphasizing the important of diversity and cultural tolerance. Our International House has international talent shows, and supports people from all over the world. Our International House Society features a culture each year, and sponsors a Scottish Night, or an Indian Night, so that people can experience the food, music, dance and other cultural attributes of the chosen culture. In light of these events, and these students on our campus, I had the idea to focus my food in literature and film class on specific cultures, to go around the globe instead of sticking close to home.

I am the author of a culinary novel, *Secrets of the Tsil Café*, and for that book I did deep research on foods of the Western Hemisphere before 1492 and the Columbus voyage. I was familiar with Native American, Southwestern American, and Mexican food. I had also researched ancient food traditions in those places where agriculture arose in the Western Hemisphere—Peru and Aztec/Mayan areas. For a new course, I wanted to learn what I didn't know. I wanted to put myself in the same position as my students—opening myself to new cultures, foods, literature, customs, and traditions. And I wanted help. I reached out to Bassima Schbley, Professor of Social Work, and a native of Lebanon.

We started our fifteen-week course with three weeks of film, literature and eating that gave students a foundation to see the relationship between food and culture. We talked about how many cultures we all come from: family, age group/generational, regional, religious, national, social and economic class, racial and ethnic, and sometimes the cultures built from gender or political preferences such as vegetarianism or veganism. We watched *The Hundred Food Journey*, about the clash of cultures an Indian family experiences in France. We read about food and culture, and we had a pot luck, each student bringing a dish that expressed one of the cultures they were a part of. Then, we moved to Lebanese culture, and Professor Schbley's expertise.

**Bassima:** One of my favorite quotes is by Gibran Khalil Gibran: "Of the good in you I can speak but not of the evil. For what is evil but good tortured by its own hunger and thirst? Verily when good is hungry it seeks food even in dark caves, and when it thirsts it drinks even of dead water."

My maternal grandmother, Bassima, for whom I was named, used to repeatedly tell me, "The way to any man's heart is through his stomach." I recall hating to hear this statement over and over. I did not know it back then, but I was a very young feminist in the making. I thought how unfair it would be for a woman to cook for her husband so she could keep him; I wanted the husband to cook for his wife. Better yet, I wanted the two to cook together. Growing up in Beirut, Lebanon, in a purely Muslim neighborhood, right in the midst of a civil war only allowed me to observe and learn how a good Muslim woman should look like, act like, and that she should cook for her husband. I always knew that I wanted a lot more than that, but I was extremely limited; I was unable to leave my neighborhood on my own. I felt guilty for wanting to leave, as I really loved everyone around me. I worshiped my dad, loved my mom, protected all my siblings (I am the eldest of twelve); I also loved the food. We were very poor but I did not know that there was hope to break out of poverty, to obtain a higher education, and to end up in the United States of America. How lucky I was to do all of these!

Luckily, I brought with me to America the memories of every single dish I experienced in Lebanon. Each dish reminded me of my mom, dad, grandmother, grandfather, siblings, aunts, and uncles. For example, whenever I make rice pudding, I picture the image of my now deceased maternal grandfather, Ahmad Joubaili. He loved rice pudding, and my grandmother made the best rice pudding for him. My grandfather, Ahmad, was known for strength as a man,

generosity and good taste in food. No one could bring home better beef and lamb than my grandfather, Ahmad. He was a butcher by trade. Eating raw meat (Kibbeh) at my maternal grandparents' house was the safest and most delicious.

My maternal grandmother, Bassima, considered me to be sloppy and preferred that I not help her in the kitchen, especially when she worked the dough. She would call my sister, Nora, to help her instead, and tell me that I was not good at it. Every time I work with dough my grandmother's words come to mind. I simply smile and wish that she could see me now.

My mom, Safia (Sophia), was the best cook on this planet. She was known for being the cleanest woman in the neighborhood; she washed the vegetables at least a dozen times; she soaked them with vinegar and salt and rinsed them repeatedly. Everything my mom cooked was the best, and she cooked everything. Since we were poor, we ate a lot of lentils, rice, and bulghur wheat. My mom was a seamstress by trade. Somehow her artistic abilities helped make her a great cook. She always told me, "Sweetheart, God is in the details." I reflect in amazement how my mom, the mother of twelve children, managed to keep everything so beautiful and spotless.

When Professor Averill asked me to co-teach Food in Literature and Film: Five Meals with him, I was thrilled. I was so glad that I would have an opportunity to be myself and practice some hands-on cooking with students.

**Tom:** Perhaps one way to a student's heart is through the stomach, at least that was our premise in the class. We worked hard to recruit students from a variety of backgrounds and nations/cultures. Our roster ended up the most diverse I have ever taught: two African-American students, two Saudi students, one young man from Mexico, a Japanese student and a Chinese student. Our over 60 audit program allows anyone from the community to come to a Washburn class, and we were lucky to have a warm, generous, extremely well-traveled woman join us. We had a nontraditional student from Kansas, a military veteran who fought in Iraq. We had, in short 20 students from diverse and interesting backgrounds, all willing to experiment in a new course. After the potluck, and the amazing Lebanese eating experience (first, of course, we watched the film *Caramel*, and read widely from Gibran and others), we moved on to a Persian/Middle Eastern New Year's meal, complete with a Haft Sin table, and its seven S's good luck items: Sib (apple), Sabze (grass), Senjed (sea-buckthorn), Serkeh (vinegar), Samanu (wheat paste), Somaq (sumac), and Seer (garlic). We also had on the table a fish, caught in the small pond in front of the International House at Washburn, with some real effort, by me, and released after dinner. Our films were about Saudi Arabia, and our two Saudi students participated in educating our group. We read Rumi, and food passages from the Quran. I even made a "fake" dish featuring the twelve favorite foods of the prophet Muhammad: melon, pomegranate, garlic, vinegar, water, milk, olive oil, grapes, dates, figs, honey, and barley. For our last two meals, we watched films from, read literature of, and cooked Chinese and Japanese. For a final exam, we had another pot luck. When someone does well, we in the U.S. say they "passed with flying colors." In this case, the whole class "repass with flying colors."

**Bassima:** I expected to face some challenges after reviewing the class roster. The class enrollment consisted of students from various countries, backgrounds, and ages. Some students proudly displayed their religion or religious views while others were less religious or not religious at all. I believe Professor Averill and I were able to be extremely successful in creating cultural tolerance due to many reasons. One of the most important reasons was to set class rules from day one. We made it clear that respecting each other's views was not an option but a requirement. For example, since we had a few Muslim students in the class, we said that no one should bring alcohol or pork.

We showed a couple controversial films without offending our Muslim students, including *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, set in Taiwan/The Republic of China, and *Tampopo*, set in Tokyo, Japan. I believe it was very important to prepare our students for the films. By the time we showed these films, our Muslim students already knew that the purpose of this class was to explore a variety of cultures, religions and foods, even if that meant reading, watching, and trying foods not normal to their own cultures. After all, that's what all the students were doing.

The written assignments—each student wrote a reflection paper that accompanied each of the films and food regions—were a delight to read. Some of these papers were extremely honest in what they revealed, with some students able to discuss their preconceived notions about certain cultures and religions and how this class changed their views. Students also wrote a longer research paper on an important meal in a culture, their own or another, and they watched yet another food film and wrote an analysis. Occasionally they were responsible for bringing recipes with statements about the importance of the dish.

An extremely impressive observation was to see one of our students change. At the beginning of the class he asserted that he "would not" try all the food associated with the cultures we had on our list. He tried every single item and discovered his palate. This student absolutely loved more than 90 percent of the food.

Touching and smelling so many different spices caused a number of students in the class to go out and buy the spices, and begin using them at home. These spices included sumac, black seed, cumin, zatar, saffron, kishek and so many more. Students experienced different types of tea. Many tried Turkish coffee and loved it.

This class dispelled so many misconceptions students had about religions and cultures. Toward the middle and definitely by the end of this class, students demonstrated an understanding toward the human race. People in the class became friends; some made plans to cook together; some promised to visit students in their native countries.

I truly believe food has the power to bring peace and harmony to humans and animals. Food can certainly do more than just break the ice; it can cause people to start real conversations, and ask questions and learn about each other.

I personally have learned so much not only from Professor Averill but also from most of the class. One particular student touched my heart. Her mother died not too long ago. She was so brave to bring her mother's recipes to class, and to speak openly about how food brings memories, happy and sad, but it nurtures the heart and soul as well as the body.

I am always willing to share my wonderful Lebanese heritage with all my students and the world. I would be glad to make Tabouli anytime, anywhere. Cooking is a way to show love and care to the people around us. The whole process of cooking is universally therapeutic.

**Tom:** Final comments from students showed a real appreciation of the class and our approach. We were learning together. We were all trying to cook new and different things, without knowing how things "should" look like or taste. Students liked that their professors were experiencing the same things they were—reading new literature, studying

and cooking new foods, eating with chopsticks or on the floor (in the Middle Eastern style). Sometimes, as we ate our dinners together at the International House, we invited guests from those other cultures to eat with us and speak about their countries and tell us how authentic the food tasted. We are lucky, in Topeka, Kansas, to have people from Iran, Lebanon, China, Japan, from all over the world, and we incorporated those local citizens when we could. Hospitality is infectious, as learning is infectious, especially when done in the right spirit. Perhaps one student said it best: "Every class should be like this on."

Bassima and I hope to teach the class again, studying other foods and cultures with students in what can be a fine mind and body experience that has the potential to change people's attitudes and lives.