How Our Friends Affect Our Food

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In 2013, Jon Stewart, then the host of *The Daily Show*, set aside the program's usual focus on politics to talk about something more important: pizza, specifically Chicago-style deep-dish pizza. "Deep-dish pizza is not only not better than New York pizza," Stewart explained. "It's not pizza." Then, after several more minutes railing against the dish, he concluded, "Here's how I know I'm right: You call it 'Chicago-style pizza,' 'deep-dish pizza,' 'stuffed pizza.'" The New York City–born comedian pulled a thin slice of pizza from under his desk. "You know what we call this? Pizza."

Taste is an interesting thing. We might like to think that our own tastes are uniquely ours, and that they are somehow more "correct" than others'. When it comes to the "right" way to prepare our favorite dishes, people revel in what distinguishes us from the next town over, no matter how slight the differences might seem from a distance. Beyond pizza, Americans are happy to praise local styles of barbecue, hot dogs, chili, or cheesesteak. These differences are often attributed to regional pride, but the reality is more complicated, and they are deeply informed by our relationships with others.

That there is a link between the foods people eat and their identities is hardly a novel idea, and many people define themselves in terms of the sustenance they prefer: vegans, paleos, "meat lovers." But the ways we seek nourishment not only say something about who we are as people, they also reveal how our identities work.

As social psychologists, we know that people possess a variety of identity-related motives. They are attracted to high-status groups. They want to belong and fit in. And, paradoxically, they also want to be distinct (hence the endless arguments about pizza preferences). As the status-conferring properties of different foods change with time, for instance, so do people's culinary preferences.

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