

Finding Balance in Food

Food, Balance, and Culture

Nutritionists around the world often speak about the importance of a balanced diet. A balanced diet usually means eating more fruits, vegetables, and grains and **consuming** fewer foods high in fat, sugar, and cholesterol. When comparing the food habits of different cultures, however, the definition of a "balanced diet" might also be seen differently. A person's culture can **influence** the way he tries to find balance in the foods he consumes. Cultures might view balance differently according

to the way a dish tastes, or how a meal is prepared and served. Looking at the **concept** of a "balanced diet" through the eyes of two very different cultures makes it clear that the definition can differ greatly.

France: Balancing Geography and Portions

- For the French, balance does not come only from using different kinds of ingredients; enjoying the tastes of the country's many **regions** can also make their diet feel balanced. France is divided into 22 regions.



Figure 1 France has 22 different regions.

Each region has its own local **cuisine** and food traditions, or what the French call *terroir*. The French embrace¹ all 22 regions and the cuisine produced in each. French cafés, restaurants, and food advertisements often refer to² the different regions, and to the fact that French people find pleasure in eating foods from different parts of the country in a search for balance.

- One can also see balance in the way the French serve their food. A traditional French meal can have from three to seven different courses. It might include an appetizer, a main plate, a side plate, a cheese plate, a salad, and a dessert, which makes it a well-balanced dining experience. Each dish is eaten and enjoyed separately, and **portions** are small. This **practice** has even affected the menus of fast-food chains. Many French people dislike the traditional fast-food meal because it is too simple and quick, so fast-food restaurants in France have changed their menus. Some now include an appetizer, a main dish, a dessert, and a coffee to offer diners the balance they want.

China: Balancing Yin and Yang

- Like French cuisine, traditional Chinese cooking also tries to find balance, but in a different way. In China, the concepts of *yin* and *yang* influence the way food is traditionally prepared and eaten by the Chinese. Yin and yang symbolize balance and harmony between opposing forces (Figure 2). According to traditional beliefs, some foods, like carrots, water, and tofu, have **yin properties** because they are "cool" foods, which decrease body heat. In contrast, yang foods, such as chicken, eggs, and mushrooms, are "warm" foods, which increase body heat. The **principles** of yin and yang can apply to cooking **methods** as well. Water-based cooking like boiling and steaming has yin qualities. Frying and roasting are yang methods.

- The challenge in traditional Chinese cooking is to prepare and eat meals that balance yin and yang qualities.

The Chinese believe that achieving this kind of balance can result in improved health. For instance, dishes like beef with broccoli and sweet and sour chicken are considered healthy because they have a balance of foods, colors, flavors, and textures. They believe diseases result when there is too much yin or yang in the human body. To the Chinese, food acts as medicine. A person with heartburn might have too much yang because she is eating too much spicy food. As a result, a doctor might tell her to drink iced tea, a source of yin, to balance the yang force.



Figure 2 The yin-yang symbol

Different Cultures, Shared Desire

France and China have very different cultures, and people in each culture have their own ideas of what constitutes a balanced meal, whether it is tastes, menus, ingredients, eating habits, or nutritional benefits. What connects the two, however, is a shared

desire to find some kind of balance. A look at their food preferences also suggests that culture and food are not separate from each other. They are closely related, and their connection can be observed around the world in very different and fascinating ways.

MAIN IDEAS

Circle the answer to each question.

- What is the main purpose of the article?
☐ to compare how two cultures find balance in food
☐ to explain why the French do not like fast food
☐ to describe the concepts of *yin* and *yang*
- What is the main idea of Paragraph 2?
☐ Each of the 22 regions in France has its own *terroir*.
☐ In France, balance comes from eating foods from different regions.
☐ The French find pleasure in eating at different kinds of restaurants.
- What is the main idea of Paragraph 3?
☐ Many French people do not like to eat at fast-food restaurants.
☐ The French balance their meals by serving many small courses.
☐ Some fast-food restaurants in France offer three-course meals.
- What is the main idea of Paragraph 4?
☐ Yin and yang help create balance in Chinese cooking.
☐ Yang foods are believed to increase body heat.
☐ Carrots and water are yin foods because they are cool.
- What is the main idea of Paragraph 5?
☐ Preparing balanced meals is a challenge.
☐ Too much yang can cause heartburn.
☐ Meals that balance yin and yang can improve health.

DETAILS

Read the statements. Write **T** (true) or **F** (false). Then correct each false statement to make it true.

- Terroir* means local food and traditions.
- There are no fast-food restaurants in France.
- French meals always have seven courses.
- The French prefer to eat small portions of food.
- Eggs and mushrooms are considered *yin* foods.
- Frying and roasting are *yang* cooking methods.