

Taking the biscuit: the structure of British meals

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The way in which the British eat is as formally structured as a Bach sonata. But however the composition begins, there's one coda: the biscuit.

Enormous changes have taken place in society at large in the last 50 years—two modern world wars and great technical developments in every field. One would expect food habits to have changed commensurately. But the literature of dietary inquiry and market research emphasises the very opposite. It seems to be taken as axiomatic that the British public is conservative in its food habits. The same would seem to be true of any dietary system that we care to name. Those who would promote a new food are conscious of strongly entrenched attitudes. To read the reports or a book like Elliston's *British Tastes*, one gets the impression that, though everything else changes, food systems are stable.

But the alleged conservatism may be an optical illusion, caused by a twofold observer's bias or focus. In the first place, the eye of the investigator lights on any continuity which enables him to perceive a steady pattern in the flux of material he is studying. Secondly, for their part, the housewife composing a meal, and her family sitting in gastro-nomic judgment upon it, are themselves conscious of the need for past models to guide them as to just what it is they are supposed to be serving or receiving. Parts of the meal may reflect new economies or daring experiment on her part; but usually the meal has to be recognisably a meal of a certain known kind. There may be minor changes, but everything conspires to imply that at least the frame is steady.

To find a way of identifying that frame in this country, was our task in a piece of research which we carried out for the Department of Health and Social Security. The practical use by which it was justified was the hope of finding a method for distinguishing acceptable and unacceptable innovations. We imagined a dietician in an unknown Papuan or African tribe wondering how to introduce a new, reinforcing element into tribal diet. We assumed that the dietician's first task would be to discover how the tribe "structured" their food, and to identify the more and the less highly structured parts of the food system. By the end of the research, we had formed the hypothesis that in the highly structured parts of their diet, people would be receptive to improved quality in the traditional foods. (Of course, improvements in quality have to depend on native criteria.) But in the less structured parts there would be scope for introducing completely new kinds of food, new tastes and smells, cheap substitutes. If the hypothesis is correct, it should make a difference to the fate of innovations in food. But it can only be tested by further research.

Instead of a worked-out survey, asking the public about their attitudes to food and about the contents of their most recent meal, we eschewed all interpretative and other questions completely. As researcher, Michael Nicod found four working class families where the head was engaged in un-

skilled manual labour and where there were children in the family. They lived in East Finchley, Durham, Birmingham and Coventry. Accepted as a lodger, he stayed in them for varying periods (the shortest was one month), watching every mouthful, and sharing whenever possible. A fieldwork rule of never asking questions was developed, because to the smallest inquiry the menu showed a direct response. Once he asked the north London hostess whether she liked frozen peas; next day they appeared on the table. One question about the relative merits of real cream and custard; next day real cream took the place of the latter. We reckon that after ten days of such a discreet and incurious presence, the most sensitive housewife, busy with her children, settles down to her routine menus, making special allowance for the lodger in ways that are perfectly obvious—a cooked breakfast, for instance.

Conscious that the fewness of the cases might have allowed us to imagine regularities which would disappear in a welter of new facts if the research had been more extensive or prolonged, we followed each family study by a more general street survey, to check on idiosyncrasy. Our assumptions caused us to be specially interested in the capacity of food to mark social relations and to celebrate big and small occasions. Therefore, we needed as big a gamut of celebration as could be achieved. It was necessary for the researcher to be present on feast days, Sundays, bank holidays, Christmas, weddings and christenings, whenever possible.

After some experiment, we started to fasten our attention upon certain sculptural and sensory qualities of the food most regularly polarised in the construction of menus: savoury/sweet, hot/cold, liquid/dry. Within these classes, other criteria emerged which showed that the food served on the table was correlated with various kinds of regular social event.

For the research we introduced and defined certain terms: food event, structured event, meal, snack. A "food event" is an occasion when food is eaten, without prejudice as to whether it constitutes a meal or not. A "structured event" is a social occasion, which is organised according to rules prescribing time, place and sequence of actions. If food is eaten as part of a structured event, then we have a "meal." A "snack" is an unstructured food event, in which one or more self-contained food items may be served. "Unstructured" means that there are no rules to prescribe which items should appear together, and no strict order of sequence when more than one item appears. Snacks may be sweet or savoury; separable from, but capable of accompanying, a drink. The meal, by contrast, has no self-contained food items, and is strongly rule-bound as to permitted combinations and sequences. Together with the distinction between special and common food

events, these terms were the tools of the analysis whereby we matched the structuring of social relations to the structuring of the food.

Between the week and the weekend, different kinds of meals are taken regularly at different times of the day. Ignoring the names for the meals, and concentrating only on what is served, there emerge three kinds of meals. The major hot meal is at roughly 6 pm on weekdays and early afternoon at weekends. The minor meal usually follows this, at 9 pm on weekdays and about 5 pm at weekends. A still less significant meal—a tertiary food event, consisting of a sweet biscuit and a hot drink—is available in the system to be used at different times; say, at 4 pm on the man's return from the factory on weekdays, or at bedtime at weekends. If the husband or the children were to eat at home at midday in the week, the food would be modelled on the minor meal. Breakfast does not enter into the system as a meal. If asked, our subjects said they never had breakfast, just a cup of tea, just a piece of toast, and so on. In this research, breakfast stands as a snack, according to our definition of the word.

The three-meal system is broken by a major division between *potato* and *cereal*. The important family meal is centred on hot potatoes and their accompaniments. This meal is more plentiful and more ceremonious than the other meals, which are centred on cereals. The minor meal starts with bread, and may go on to cake and biscuits accompanied by tea. The tertiary meal consists of biscuits and tea or coffee.

What is the structure of the meal system? We must start with criteria for ranking the main meal (A), the second meal (B) and the third meal (C). The criteria are complexity, copiousness and ceremoniousness. Ceremony is expressed by plate changes and extra utensils—spoons, forks as well as knives. On weekdays, this clear ranking in order of importance does not govern the times of serving. At first sight, the sequence of meals is a matter of convenience. On an ordinary weekday, when the family assemble after work, they sit down to meal c (tea and biscuits) at 4.30 pm, have their main meal soon after 6 pm and meal b (with bread and cakes) at 9 or 10 pm. On a Sunday, however, there is a match to be seen between the time sequence and the rank order. Table 1 shows how the pattern operates across the week. Table 2 shows the correspondence of time and ranking on a Sunday (or other feast day).

If the father came home on weekdays for his midday meal, it was a B meal. But whether he did or not, the family crammed the whole of the Sunday meal system into the last part of its day, after his final return from work.

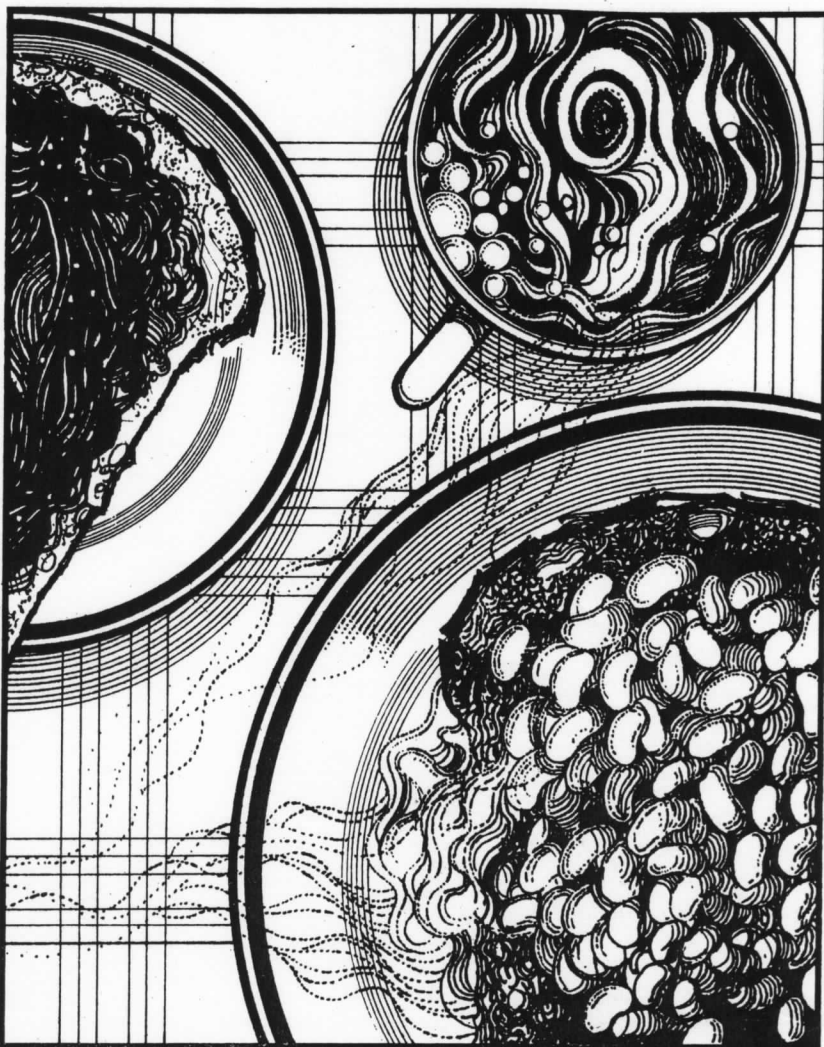
In some parts of England, it is reported that the hot potato meal (an A meal) at the works canteen is replacing the evening hot potato meal. This was not the case in our four families or on

Table 1: The meal system

weekday			
12.30 pm	4.30 pm	6.30 pm	9.30 pm
B	C	A	B
weekend			
1-2 pm	5-6 pm	9.30 pm	
A	B	C	

Table 2: First correspondence: temporal order corresponds to meal rank order on Sunday

Sunday time order	1st	2nd	3rd
meal rank order	A	B	C



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their streets. The weekday meals repeat the Sunday sequence in a modified timetable. There is a close correspondence between the structure of the Sunday dinner and that of the weekday main meal—both of which we have designated as A. Take the main course, which is generally known as the dinner proper. It always consists of a serving of potato, a “centrepiece” (which on Sundays is always meat), “trimmings” (which designates one or two green vegetables) and a sousing in rich, brown, thickened gravy (here called “liquid dressing”). The difference between this course in a special meal (say Sunday or Christmas Day), compared with a common meal (say weekday evening), is that the number of trimmings are increased.

The rules of combination are the same: one staple, one centrepiece, one liquid dressing, one trimming in all cases; but the special meal may have more than one dressing, and more than one trimming. Architecturally speaking, it is as if the difference between the doorway of a humble home and that of a grand mansion—both consisting of two uprights and a cross-beam—lay just in the decoration on this structure held in common.

The first course is the main course and it is always hot and savoury. The rules of sequence require this. In the second course, we find a repetition of the rules of combination for course one, except that everything is sweet, and there is more freedom to serve one element and omit another. The puddings (of which the three prototypes are Christmas pudding, trifle and fruit tart) vary freely on the theme of cereal, fruit and cream. On

the one hand, the fruit may be diminished to a thin layer of jam, or a streak of colour in the jelly of a trifle which consists mostly of juice-soaked cake and custard; and it may disappear completely in a rice pudding. On the other hand, the fruit may dominate over everything else, as in the fruit pie; or the cereal may be omitted, as in tinned fruit and custard. Whether the cereal is omitted on a weekday second course or not, the Christmas Day pattern is stable: centre piece (fruit) and two dressings (brandy and cream). In a common meal, the most simplified formula is centrepiece and dressing. The liquid dressing, the custard or cream, is poured over the plate in the way gravy is used in the first course. There is almost complete correspondence (see table 3).

Table 3: Second correspondence: course two repeats structure of course one in different materials

mode	structure	elements
course 1		
hot and savoury	staple	potato
	centre	meat, fish, egg
	trimming	green veg, stuffing, Yorkshire pudding
	dressing	thick brown gravy
course 2		
hot or cold sweet	staple	cereal
	centre	liquid custard
	dressing	liquid custard or cream

When this course is nearly finished, preparations are made for the third part of the meal, the hot drink and biscuits. Hitherto, only cold water has been drunk with the food. The variations of liquid and solid are carried out on the plate of food. Now, in the third course, a total segregation of liquids from solids appears: in the cup is the hot brown drink, on the plate the cold dry solid; a reversal of the hot-cold pattern of the first course, when the cold drink is in the glass and the hot food on the plate.

The rules for structuring course one of an A meal are absolutely strict. This "food event" cannot be recognised as a meal in the system unless its first course is constituted on these rules. Some elements can be duplicated, but none omitted. It is quite *impossible* to start with something sweet, say grapefruit, or with something dry, say potted shrimps.

There is more scope for fantasy in the composition of course two. It is possible to serve a sweet cake with custard, doing homely weekday service for the trifle; or to serve a tin of fruit in its syrup, with cream—in the one case leaving out the fruit, in the other leaving out the cereal. This scope for fantasy in the pudding course allows a formal pattern to be imposed on the elements before they are served on to individual plates, an option which is not necessarily taken up on weekdays. Another difference is that the second course is served at the table, whereas the first course is served straight from cooking vessels on to plates. Pattern-making is not required or appropriate for the first course. A third difference is that the liquid dressing of the second course is thicker than for the first.

These three differences between course one and course two become reinforced in course three. Their effect is of themes which extend a cover over all the courses (see table 4).

It is no surprise to the native Englishman that the distinction between hot and cold is much valued in this dietary system. For the third course, the teapot is heated before the water is poured in,

Table 4: Third correspondence: overall pattern

course 1	course 2	course 3
savoury	sweet	sweet
potato staple	cereal staple	cereal staple
no discretion to omit elements	some discretion	solid optional
liquid dressing runny	liquid dressing thick	dressing solid thicker
other sensory qualities of food dominate over visual pattern	visual pattern dominates until serving	visual pattern dominates until eating
solids not segregated from liquids		solids and liquids segregated

actually on the boil; the plates for the first course are kept stacked on the rack above the cooker, so that they are carried to the table warm. Apart from the bottled sauces, no addition of cold foods to a hot plate is permitted, nor vice versa.

Looking again at table 3, we can see that the three courses of the main meal, in their due sequence and rules of combination, present the same structure as the three meals of Sunday. This becomes clearer when we consider the rules governing meal B (see table 5).

Table 5: Fourth correspondence: meal B repeats meal A in course sequence, but keeps to the staple of course two

course 1	course 2	course 3
savoury, hot or cold	staple	bread
	centre	meat, fish or egg or baked beans
	trimmings	optional
course 2		
sweet, cold	staple	bread
	centre	jam
	trimmings	butter
course 3		
hot sweet drink	optional cake for Sundays or biscuits	

The rules which govern the main meal acquire more significance when we find them governing the second meal, and even more when some carry through systematically to cover the two meals. The regularity of the pattern is so strong that it can be made to bear some weight of explanation.

For example, before seeing the structure laid out, one could have asked reasonably why they never serve potatoes in meal B. The answer now would be that potatoes are the staple for meal A, course one. That part of the pattern would lose its distinctiveness, and the pattern would lose its shape, if potatoes were served in course two or meal two. Table 6 (opposite, above) spells out the rules controlling the relation of meal A to meal B.

On to the three courses of the main meal are mapped the sequence, ranking and rules of the three meals of Sunday. First, the potato meal; second, the main cereal meal; third the last cereal, sweet and dry. The last course of the first two meals, and the only solid of the third meal, is exactly the same item, except that it is progressively drier. The lavish liquid dressing of sweet custard has been poured over a cake, whether plum cake or jam sponge and dried in the form of icing sugar. The option to select any of the possible ingredients of a second course in the main meal, is given even more latitude in the minor meal. But working through the menus, week by week and month by month, the prototype puddings and

D. Allen Elliston, *British Tastes* (Hutchinson, 1968)

National Food Survey Committee, *Household Food Consumption and Expenditure, 1970 and 1971* (HMSO, 1973)

Michael Nicod, *A Method of Eliciting the Social Meaning of Food* (report to DHSS; unpublished MPhil thesis, London)

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