

# Is food history one's food destiny?

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**Irene Sherlock**, an adjunct professor at Western Connecticut State University, talks to an audience at her recent workshop, "**Foodchild**: How Family Eating Traditions Shape Us."

What's your food history?

Everyone has one.

We all have stories and memories about what we ate while growing up, what foods we loved and hated, and who served them to us.

We remember scenes around the family dinner table, whether there was conversation and laughter or bickering and silence.

Or perhaps there wasn't a family gathering. Many of us undoubtedly have a history of eating off a tray in front of a television.

Looking back upon my own childhood, I remember loving macaroni and cheese prepared from a box and hating – dreading – creamed chipped beef on toast.

I remember listening, like Pavlov's dog, for the bell on the Good Humor ice-cream truck each summer evening. To this day, if I hear a bell on an ice cream truck, I am almost compelled to grab some money and run toward it.

Whatever our food memories, they have a bearing upon how we feel about ourselves, **Irene Sherlock** believes.

**Sherlock**, adjunct professor of English at Western Connecticut State University in Danbury, has a degree in marriage and family therapy and is a Gestalt therapist

She recently presented a workshop, "**Foodchild**: How Family Eating Traditions Shape Us," on the college's midtown campus.

"Most of us have an emotional response to food," she told her audience. "Our personal food history influences how we relate to food and use food to relate to others."

Before her audience gathered in a meeting room in the Student Center, **Sherlock** explained that Gestalt therapy deals with the person as a whole, focusing on emotions, intellect, and the ability to deal effectively with the outside world.

"The goal is to strike a balance between all three," she said.

Talking about food leads people to relax and talk about themselves, she added.

For example, in a recent New York times piece, Victoria Clark, Tony-award winning actress in "The Light in the Piazza" on Broadway, talked about growing up in Texas and her grandmother being the cook of the family:

"From her, I learned about unconditional love. My parents worked; when I came home, my grandmother was there and I got love. It was all tied up in the kitchen. That's why I'm obsessed with kitchen stuff. The warmth and continuity of the family."

A dozen people showed up for **Sherlock's** program, although it was a springlike day when students could sit outside with laptops and lunches. Those who came to the workshop carried a bag lunch, as **Sherlock** had requested.

"What do each of you have in your lunch bags?" she asked.

Answers weren't terribly exciting:

"A tuna fish sandwich.

"Yogurt."

"An apple."

Then **Sherlock** asked, "What would be in your lunch bag if your mother had packed it?"

Answers got a little better.

"Prosciutto, meatballs," said a petite, lively woman who added, "I'm from Italy."

"My mother used to make me a sandwich of peanut butter, mayonnaise and lettuce on bread," another woman said, "I know that sounds horrible, but it was absolutely delicious."

When **Sherlock** asked the group, "What's the present food culture in this country?" most answered:

"Fast food."

"Madison Avenue has done that to us," a man in the back of the room said. "They tell us what to wear. What to drive. How to live. They tell us to eat pizza and hamburgers and fattening foods. The irony is the people they show eating them are unbelievably thin."

**Sherlock's** audience was composed of both youthful and middle-age people. Some were WestConn students; others came out of interest in food. The discussion was random and jumped from subject to subject, but most in the group were forthcoming with stories about food in their own families.

"My mother had about 10 stock meals that she rotated over and over," one woman said, "There were four children in our family and, we'd get tired of tuna fish casserole."

"We liked it, but we wanted something different. So when we were big enough to stand at the stove, we started learning to cook. We went out and ate meals in other homes and in school and other places, and we brought home new traditions. Consequently, today, all four of us love to cook and cook really well."

Another woman told how the family dinner hour was the focus of life in her family.

"I'm from a Polish-Italian background. When we gathered each day at the dinner table, we talked about our plans, what we did at work that day, what was happening in our lives. Everything happened during that dinner hour and it was the center of our lives. I don't have that in my life now and I miss it."

"We try to have a sit-down dinner on weekends," said one man, "but it's almost impossible during the week, with sports and choir practice and a million other activities."

In the 1950s, when fewer women worked, a family dinner hour was more prevalent in this

country, **Sherlock** said.

"But now, people eat in their car," said a woman in the room.

The discussion turned to who cooks in each household and how we regard that person.

"Do you look upon that person as a servant? Or if you do the cooking, do you feel like a martyr?" **Sherlock** asked.

"Well, in my house my Mom does the cooking and her word is law," said a young man.

"I love to cook," said one woman. "It's a giving of myself. But I suppose when you're washing the 40th glass and cleaning up, maybe you feel like a martyr. But I still love to cook. However, now that my children are grown and invite us for holidays, I found it delightful to be not the food server."

"I think the role of so many women – mothers – is to facilitate," another woman offered. "You are doing the nitty-gritty meal preparation, so that others can come and go and live their lives. The table gives us an opportunity to show love. To say, 'Mom, this is delicious.' "

"What are some of your personal food concerns?" **Sherlock** asked the group.

"Fritos," one woman said. "If there are Fritos in my house, I can't just let them be there. I have to go to them and eat all of them — until they are gone."

"Chocolate," a young woman said. "I have to have chocolate every day."

"Bagels," another woman said. "I eat too many bagels."

Time was running short, and **Sherlock** wanted to do a genogram, or a look into one person's food background, to see how that affected that person's present experience with food.

Helen Masterson, a third-generation Danburian who described herself as someone who loves to cook, volunteered to talk about her family's food history. As she talked, **Sherlock** sketched Masterson's family tree on a board at the front of the class.

"My mother is from Scotland and there were, of course, a lot of carbohydrates in our diet," Masterson said. "We always had potatoes – every meal. And green beans were cooked to within an inch of their life."

Masterson said her grandmother, who also lived in Scotland, was believed to have a magic cauldron boiling in her kitchen, because no matter how many people came to her house, she could whip up a meal and feed them.

"During World War II, she fed servicemen. Anyone in the armed forces could come to her door and get a meal. She did that because she had sons away from home, and hoped someone would do the same for them."

"Did she cook a lot of starches, too?" **Sherlock** asked.

"Oh, yes," Masterson replied.

When Masterson talked about her own food experience, she said she had trouble staying out of the bread aisle in the supermarket.

"I know I should eat fewer carbohydrates, but I always wind up buying hard rolls, a loaf of bread, English muffins."

"We love carbs because they stimulate us quickly. They are a comfort food," **Sherlock** told the group.

**Sherlock** said Masterson's family food history bears out the theory that eating traits may be passed on from generation to generation.

"Sometimes these traits serve us well, sometimes they do not," she added.

Whatever the effect, "We are very loyal to our families when it comes to food," she concluded.

Maybe **Sherlock** is right. Maybe we do tend to crave the same foods our parents and grandparents ate.

Talking with my daughter the other day, she confided that my grandson, who is 2½, eats nothing but macaroni and cheese – prepared from a box.