

A bite of something new

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Close your eyes and imagine that it is almost dinnertime. The smell of oil and chicken wafts faintly from the kitchen, while lively conversation combined with the dynamic crackling of the frying process fills the atmosphere. After a few minutes pass, your whole family settles down at the table. Dinner is served. A toast is in order for a day well spent, and glasses clink followed by brief silence as you drink. While debriefing each other about the latest news and life updates, you dig into the crispy karaage and steaming hot rice in front of you.

The biggest factor that helped me in learning about different cultures is food. Most, if not everyone in the world has this in common: mealtimes are a time for nourishment and developing a deeper connection with yourself and others. Whether it be a cake covered in sprinkles to celebrate a birthday or your great-grandmother's famous casserole for Sunday dinner, every meal reveals a rich story behind its origins; it serves as the key that unlocks an intricate wealth of knowledge about regional culture and community.

Growing up in a diverse neighborhood, I often ate different global cuisines with people from all over the world. At home, my mother often made miso soup and rice for breakfast. Potluck parties at school meant each food would be accompanied by a flag of the food's origin placed beside the aluminum foil trays. There was a retail mall with a food court serving Korean and Japanese fusion a mere seven minutes away by car; another five minutes and there were Mediterranean restaurants, a Burger King, a Chinese noodle shop, and an Indian food truck that stops by the gas station on weekdays. Whenever I entered a different restaurant, there would be dazzling traditional decorations and a vastly different menu, promising a completely different experience that I could learn from.

Although I was initially uncomfortable with trying unfamiliar food, I am grateful for having frequent opportunities to explore different cuisine. At restaurants, I could sometimes see cooks preparing the food; at family-owned restaurants, the servers would explain to us the origins of the dish and the occasions associated with it. I still remember trying Thanksgiving turkey for the first time with my family on a rather chilly Thanksgiving evening in 2012. Although each following Thanksgiving looked different for my family, I had the opportunity to learn something new about its history almost every year.

Food is also an important factor connecting me to my Japanese heritage. Raised in the United States despite holding a Japanese passport, my identity felt split between the two countries. I was more used to using English and celebrating American holidays but speaking Japanese and the constant plans of moving there pulled me back to my roots. After moving to Japan last year, my mother and I explored various Japanese food, bonding over new experiences and pushing ourselves to learn more about the country we call home by eating unfamiliar recipes together and learning its backstory. My relatives in the countryside would serve us food with a distinguished sense of local pride. They answer enthusiastically when I ask about its history and significance. I would often send pictures of the food I ate to curious friends back in California through social media; sharing the unique delicacies with others filled me with a newfound sense of belonging in Japanese culture.

The cultural experience is not limited to the food itself; manners and appropriate presentation during meals varies all over the world. Some people eat with a fork and knife, others with chopsticks. Some sit on the ground while they eat, others might prefer a chair. Dinner might be four courses or just the main meal itself, happening at six or ten o'clock at night. The variety makes mealtimes all the more meaningful, as they further my understanding of what is appropriate in different cultures while eating. Learning about these different cultural aspects is a humbling experience, and sometimes it starts uncomfortable conversations. However, these conversations help me strengthen my relationships with others and embrace unfamiliar cultural elements.

I still have much to discover, and trying to expose myself to new things can be daunting at times. However, learning through food makes it exciting and accessible: it furthers culinary experiences, unlocks opportunities to learn more about diverse cultural values, and cultivates relationships with others through meaningful conversation and positive memories.

Want to develop further cross-cultural understanding in your own community? Start by searching online for a new recipe or walking into the restaurant down the street- and learn as you get a taste for the distinct cultural nuances of food, one meal at a time.