

Sociology of Food

Lecturer: Ewa Grigar, Ph.D.

Course Description:

This course examines food and eating from sociological, cultural, historical, and semiotic perspectives. Students will explore how food functions not only as a biological necessity but also as a powerful social institution that shapes identities, relationships, communities, and systems of power. Through interdisciplinary engagement with contemporary scholarship, historical case studies, and practical experiences, such as a field trip to a local brewery, a visit to a community garden, and hands-on cooking workshops, students will investigate food as both an embodied experience and a symbolic system that reflects broader social, cultural, political, economic, and environmental processes. Particular attention will be given to Czech and Central European food cultures, their historical development, and their relationship to socio-political change in the region. The course will also introduce students to contemporary debates and innovations in food systems, including sustainability, alternative proteins, and emerging food technologies.

Learning Outcomes:

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Define and explain the social, cultural, historical, and symbolic significance of food and eating practices in diverse societies;
- Describe how food functions as a marker of social class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and personal identity;
- Define and apply key sociological concepts and theories related to food, consumption, culture, and everyday life;
- Understand the origins and cultural significance of selected Czech and Central European dishes and food practices through historical analysis and practical engagement with local food traditions; explain how local cuisines, beverages, and culinary traditions reflect broader social, political, and economic transformations;
- Evaluate major contemporary issues, trends, and innovations in food systems—including health, obesity, eating disorders, food inequality, sustainability, organic agriculture, environmental challenges, plant-based foods, cultured meat, precision fermentation, alternative proteins, and other novel food technologies—and assess their social, ethical, cultural, and environmental implications.

Course Requirements:

Students are required to submit all assignments and take a mid-term exam. Failure to complete any mandatory assignment as outlined in the grading policy will result in an incomplete grade for the course. Late assignments, submitted without a valid excuse or teacher's approval (up to five days after the due date), will result in a one full-grade deduction.

All course readings are accessible through the program's Moodle platform and should be completed before each scheduled class session.

Formative assessment of learning will be provided through the following:

1. **In-class Group Presentation:** Students will form small groups of two to deliver a brief presentation on a selected course topic. Topics will be selected at the beginning of the course. The presentation should provide a focused and critical examination of the topic by offering a concise summary and critique of the assigned reading, while also expanding on the subject through additional examples, perspectives, or research. Presentations should be limited to a maximum of 10 slides.
2. **Food Journal Project:** Throughout the semester, students will create a Food Journal consisting of a minimum of seven entries documenting their experiences with Czech food culture. Each entry should include critical reflection on ingredients, methods of preparation, and cultural significance, as well as general comparative observations relating Czech food practices to their home contexts. Every entry must be at least 400 words and incorporate at least two diverse visual materials (e.g., photographs, maps, graphs, charts, or sketches), each clearly labeled. One mandatory entry must focus specifically on the consumption of sweet products and examine their cultural and/or social contexts. The completed journal will be submitted toward the end of the semester.
3. **Food Research Report:** Students will complete a sociological field research report based on observations conducted in a food-related setting, such as a restaurant, cafe, brewery, supermarket, or farmers' market. The report must be a minimum of four full double-spaced pages (excluding visuals and bibliography) and follow APA or MLA formatting guidelines. The report should present a clear research question, apply at least two research methods, and critically analyze findings using concepts from the course. Students must meaningfully engage with at least two course authors or theoretical perspectives and incorporate relevant visual materials (e.g., maps, photographs, graphs, drawings, or charts) that are clearly labeled and integrated into the analysis. Reports that do not meet the minimum length requirement will receive a grade reduction. The due date is listed in the course syllabus.

4. **Examinations:** There will be a midterm examination (covering the first half of the course) and a final examination (covering the second half of the course), both of which focus on the assigned readings and learning experiences from the semester.

5. **Class Participation:** This part of the evaluation includes participation and discussions/debates. Active, constructive participation is required, and suggested readings will be a required and important part of the course.

6. **Absences:** Students must attend all classes. Excused medical absences require a written document the day of return to class. AEP program allows only one unexcused absence. Tardiness of more than 20 minutes without a reasonable excuse will be regarded as an absence.

The summative evaluation, in the form of a letter grade, will be based on the formative assessment, class participation, the research paper, and the results of the examinations. In regard to the latter, the students will be responsible for all the topics covered in class as well as the assigned readings and class presentations. Please be aware that the use of laptops and mobile phones during class sessions is strictly prohibited! This includes message texting!

GRADING METHOD:

The evaluation will be based on a final grade scale of 100% in the following as they relate to the course's objectives and outcomes:

In-class Group Presentation (on the selected class topic)	10%
Food Journal Project	20%
Food Research Report	20%
Mid-term Exam	20%
Final Exam	20%
Class participation	<u>10%</u>
	100%

Mandatory Completion Policy

Note that all mandatory assignments and exams must be completed to the best of your ability in order for your final grade to be issued. Failure to complete a mandatory assignment or exam may result in a failing grade.

Letter Grade	Percentage	Description
A+	97-100	Excellent Work
A	93-97	Outstanding Work
A-	90-92	
B+	87-89	Good work
B	83-86	
B-	80-82	
C+	77-79	Acceptable Work
C	73-76	
C-	70-72	
D+	67-69	Work that is significantly below average
D	63-66	
D-	60-62	
F	0-59	Work that does not meet the minimum standards for passing the course

AEP Academic Integrity Policy

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are not tolerated. The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the development of knowledge and learning is encouraged at many stages of the learning process. While we value technology for educational purposes, we also value originality and the retainment of knowledge, and thus using AI for assignments and examinations, even if rephrased, is strictly prohibited and considered an academic integrity violation, unless the instructor explicitly allows for it in the context of evaluated work

AEP Non-Discrimination/Harassment Policy

The AEP program in Prague promotes a diverse learning environment where the dignity, worth, and differences of each individual are valued and respected. Discrimination and harassment, whether based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, or other legally protected characteristics, are repugnant and completely inconsistent with our objectives. Retaliation against individuals for raising good faith claims of harassment and/or discrimination is prohibited.

AEP Diversity Policy

AEP is committed to fostering an inclusive and welcoming community that values diversity in all its forms. We believe that one of the most meaningful lessons of studying abroad is learning to navigate and appreciate differences with curiosity and an open mind. While engaging across differences can sometimes be challenging or uncomfortable, these moments are essential for growth and learning. We recognize that every member of our community, even with the best intentions, may occasionally make missteps. Our commitment is to provide a supportive environment where respectful and honest dialogue helps us learn from these experiences, ensuring that every student has the opportunity to thrive and broaden their perspective.

Weekly Schedule

Week 1

CEE Introductory Lecture Series

AEP Introductory Lecture Series

Week 2: Course Introduction

Class Topic 1: Introduction to the course. Theorizing food. Czech society in the 20th century and the major events that influenced food consumption and preparation. Food as a reflection of political and social transformations in Europe.

- **In-class reading** (provided by the instructor)

Class Topic 2: Introduction to Research Methods and Visual Sociology.

Workshop: Spices in the East and the West

Required reading:

- Power, Elaine M. "De-Centering the Text: Exploring the Potential for Visual Methods in the Sociology of Food."
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Week 3: Food from a Historical Perspective: European Influences

Class Topic 1: Food from a Historical Perspective I.

The formation of Czech cuisine and its European roots. From the working class towards aristocratic meals. The socio-cultural meaning of bread.

Required reading:

- Cowan, Brian: "New Worlds and New Tastes: Early Modern Europe."

Class Topic 2: Food from a Historical Perspective (cont.):

Austro-Hungarian cuisine. The rise of the First Democratic Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 and the formation of Czech national cuisine.

In-class Food Tasting

Required reading:

- Franc, Martin: "Czech chocolate is the best!" Nationalism in the Food Industry in the Czech Lands around the Year 1900."

Week 4: Contemporary Czech Food Culture

Class Topic 1: Czech Cuisine: Regional, Seasonal, and Socialist-Era Traditions.

Required reading:

- Velinger, Jan: Interview with Martin Franc "Historian Franc – The Czechs changed goulash forever."

Class Topic 2: Contemporary Czech Food Culture.

Focus on contemporary trends in local food culture, including the growth of farmers' markets, food nostalgia, culinary traditionalism; the role of media in shaping gastronomy under different political systems and the transformation of food practices after 1989.

Video screening:

- Czech Dream (Czech: Český sen) 2004

Required reading:

- Smith, Elizabeth: The Communist Cookbook that Defined Prague's Cuisine

Week 5: Fermentation Workshop. Food and Nationalism

Class Topic 1: Cooking Workshop: Fermentation.

Required reading:

- Katz, Sandor Ellix: "The Art of Fermentation" (excerpt)

Class Topic 2: Food and Nationalism – you are what you eat.

Nation-states and national identity. What makes food authentic? The case of foie gras. Authenticity politics and labeling in the EU.

Required reading:

- DeSoucey, Michaela: “Gastronationalism. Food traditions and authenticity politics in the European Union.”
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Week 6: Field Trip. Food and Religion

Class Topic 1: *Field trip to Prague’s community gardens.*

Class Topic 2: Food and Religion.

The symbolic and ritual significance of food in religious traditions. The social, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of fasting and feasting. How food practices are connected to beliefs about purity, transcendence, self-control, and the relationship between body and spirit. Controversial breatharianism.

Required readings:

- Bynum. C. W. “Fast, Feast, and Flesh: The Religious Significance of Food for Medieval Women.”
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Week 7: Midterm exam. Cooking Workshop

Class Topic 1: *Mid-term exam (movie screening)*

Class Topic 2: *Cooking Workshop: Potato Pancakes.*

Week 8: Food and Gender

Class Topic 1: Food and Gender.

Is there masculine and feminine food and/or food practice? Distribution of roles based on gender at home, food business, and culture. Gender and Food Television.

Required reading:

- Leer, Jonathan. "Gender and Food Television: A Transnational Perspective on the Gendered Identities of Televised Celebrity."

Class Topic 2: Food and Gender (cont.). Sociology of the Body: Dieting and Eating Disorders.

Required reading:

- Parasecoli, Fabio. "Feeding Hard Bodies: Food and Masculinities in Men`s Fitness Magazines."

Week 9: Field trip to Brevnov Brewery

Address: Markétská 1/28, 169 00 Praha 6, tram stop (tram 22): Břevnovský klášter.

Food Research Report is Due!

Class Topic 2: Nutritional aspects of food. The case of sugar.

Required reading:

- Mintz, Sidney. "Time, Sugar, and Sweetness."

In-class Food Tasting

Week 10: Food, Social Class, and the Social Meanings of Consumption

Class Topic 1: Food and Social Class.

Required readings:

- Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption."

Class Topic 2: Alternative Food Systems: Organic and Slow Food.

In-class Food Tasting

Required readings:

- Pollan, Michael. "Big Organic" chapter from The Omnivore's Dilemma.
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Week 11: Global Food Politics and Ethical Food Futures

Class Topic 1: From Consumption to Compassion: Vegetarianism and Animal Rights. Cultured meat.

Required readings:

- <https://www.eufic.org/en/food-production/article/lab-grown-meat-how-it-is-made-and-what-are-the-pros-and-cons>

Class Topic 2: Global Food Politics: Globalization and McDonaldization.

Examination of global food systems and their social, economic, and health implications; the globalization of food consumption and the McDonaldization of society.

Required readings:

- Ritzer, George. "Globalization Theory: Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption."
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Week 12: Food Health

Class Topic 1: The Obesity–Hunger Paradox

Discussion of the social, economic, and political factors contributing to both obesity and hunger; the relationship between health, nutrition, and diet; the socio-political dimensions of the food industry; food security and inequality; and GMOs.

Food Journals are due!

Class Topic 2: Food Health. Food and Fear: Allergies, fashionable food, the nutritional aspect of food. Food risks and anxieties. Food intolerance, allergies. Governmental rules regarding food allergies.

Required reading:

- Beardsworth, A., Keil, T. “Food Risks, Anxieties and Scares.”

Week 13: Final Exam Week

Class Topic 1: Final Exam

Class Topic 2: Cooking Workshop