

CHAPTER VIII

PHILOSOPHY OF EATING

A REPAST that delights the eye and whose delectable aroma and flavor tantalizes the palate and calls for more, a repast served with quiet smoothness amid pleasant surroundings and congenial companions is one of the oldest and most universal pleasures of civilization. All of us enjoy good food when we get it. Some of us frankly so; others only secretly for we either confuse—and quite naturally—asceticism with aestheticism or delicious food with rich, highly seasoned food. Such an attitude is probably a “puritanical” survival of the old pioneer days in America when food was scarce and facilities for preserving and preparing food sadly lacking. I say “puritanical” rather than Puritan, for I believe that there is plenty of documentary evidence that our ancestors knew how to prepare and eat tasty dishes when food was abundant. But if, deep down in our hearts—rather I should say, stomachs—we don’t feel a well-prepared meal tasty and have no appetite, there is something wrong and we should find out what it is at once. Most likely the disturbance lies somewhere along the alimentary canal and can be treated at home. A poorly functioning colon, for example, may cause digestive disturbances accompanied by a heavily coated tongue, an unpleas-

ant taste in the mouth, headache, nervousness, general lassitude and consequent loss of appetite.

The effect of appetizing food is not merely a transitory one limited to the indulgence of the senses of taste and smell. We all know from experience that a satisfying meal is conducive to a sense of relaxation and well-being and a mood of contentment and generosity towards one's fellow-beings. The business executive, therefore, feasts his prospective out-of-town client before he broaches the subject of the terms of the contract; the younger generation restrains himself until the master of the house has finished his dinner before asking him for the loan of his new car to make an impression on his pretty new neighbor; and the charming bride learns all too soon to wait until her husband has pushed back his coffee cup and pulled out his favorite pipe before she shows him that simply adorable little hat she got at a perfectly wonderful bargain.

Nevertheless, while we all realize that nothing puts us so quickly in a happy frame of mind as flavorful food served in pleasant surroundings and eaten slowly, few understand why and how this is true, or realize how absolutely essential it is to easy and thorough digestion and general good health. Yet these factors are so important that scientists have devoted years to their study. The great Russian scientist, Pavlov, for example, has proved by his experiments with dogs that the mere presence of food is not sufficient to cause the flow of digestive juices—the "appetite juice" is the term he gives to gastric juice—a desire for food must be present. The surest way to arouse a desire for food is by dishes that look and smell and taste de-

lectable. And in order to get the full benefit of taste and smell, the food must be eaten slowly, be well chewed and not washed down with water. The economic adviser of the International Labor Office at Geneva has recently published a long-looked for report on "the worker's nutrition and social policy". According to this report, a half-hour for lunch is detrimental to the worker's capacity to produce. It results in bad digestion, nervous fatigue and increased morbidity. A full hour for lunch is advised.

Let us illustrate the effect of good food on the system with a simple example, soup. We select soup for it is the food the entire world knows, and rather than bread, should be called the "staff of life". Every country has its national soup: Russia has her borsch, Scotland her barley soup, France her onion soup and Italy her minestrone. Kings, diplomats, statesmen and maitres de cuisine are all proud of the soups that bear their names and doubly proud of those they have originated. No formal dinner is complete without a soup that tantalizes the palate. It sounds the keynote of the dinner, connoisseurs tell us, and creates the right atmosphere not only by foretelling the good things to come, but by relaxing high-strung nerves and stimulating the flow of digestive juices. Moreover, as a source of nutrition, soup has been the mainstay of peasants for centuries. Indeed, even the savage loves his soup. It is one of baby's first dishes after he has been weaned and is a source of comfort to the sick and the old and the feeble; family meals are planned around it. It has nursed many a nation through war and plague and it has been the object of many a

humanitarian foundation such as the soup kitchens that have been in existence since the Middle Ages.

Imagine, then, that you have just sat down to your evening meal. You're tired and nervous and inclined to be irritable. You don't know whether you're hungry or not. A bowl of steaming soup is set before you. You glance at it idly. It's just the color that particular soup should be. Unobtrusively you take a long sniff. It smells delicious—in fact, it actually makes your mouth water. You wish you could forego the formality of waiting for the rest to be served. Perhaps you do. You take a spoonful. The warmth is very pleasant in your mouth and you gently roll the soup over your tongue and palate, chewing the solid parts if there are any and deeply inhaling and exhaling. By doing so the flavor is sensed, for we exhale the flavor through the nose while eating, and by eating slowly the enjoyment of flavor is heightened. In the meantime the saliva which began to flow abundantly at the sight and smell of the soup is increased and the digestion of the carbohydrate portion is begun. At the same time by means of messages conveyed along the telegraphic nervous system, the stomach juices begin to flow and are ready to continue the digestion which was begun in the mouth. By the time you have finished eating the soup, all nervousness and irritability have vanished and a feeling of good-fellowship takes their place. You feel hungry, to be sure, but not in the same way you did two or three hours ago when the contractions of the stomach muscles were making you feel nervous and irritable, whether you actually felt hunger pangs or not. What has really happened is that your "hunger" has been transformed into "appetite", a pleasant,

anticipatory sensation that makes you wonder what the next course will bring forth and hope that it will be as good as the soup.

While the subject will be treated fully later, we should pause here for a moment to point out the difference between hunger and appetite. Hunger is a purely physical phenomenon caused by the contraction of the musculature of the stomach, while appetite is psychological. It is created by the reaction of the senses of sight, touch, taste and smell. Indeed, even the sense of sound may be involved. The purr of the tea-kettle, the gentle crackling of fat cooking, the musical tinkle of silver and glasses on the dining room table may send thoughts stomachward.

Soup, or the first course, is not the only course which stimulated the flow of the digestive juices. Any dish which delights the eye and the palate will do the same, although to a lesser degree as the meal progresses and the need for food is satisfied. And so, by the time the meal is over, you are bathed in a glow of content and you remain in it for the remainder of the evening. There is no heavy feeling in your lower regions, no regurgitation from the intestines to the stomach, no burning feeling; in short you feel at peace with the world and with yourself.

This is the ideal, of course, but it is an ideal within the reach of all of us. There is another picture, however, a picture that is seen all too often. It is noon in a crowded cafeteria. You grab a tray and take your place in line with a rushing, pushing, shoving mob. The clatter of dishes, banging of trays and babble of voices makes such a din that you can't make your order heard and in desperation you point to the nearest

dish. Then by a remarkable feat of juggling you manage to put the tray down on a table and, propping a newspaper before you, you sink into an uncomfortable seat and proceed to gulp chunks of food without chewing. You stop now and then to grope for a glass of water or a cup of coffee. Then you jump up and dash to an appointment which could just as well have been a half hour later.

What is the result? The food leaves the mouth before the starch or sugar has been acted upon by the saliva and what is more important, the dry, unpalatable mass enters the stomach in which the "appetite" gastric juice has not begun to flow abundantly. Now this psychic flow is conducive to putting the whole gastro-intestinal tract in fit condition to act on the ingested food. Partly due to the absence of this flow and partly to the unrelaxed state of your nerves, the food lies like a lump of lead in your stomach. Hence that all too prevalent American complaint—dyspepsia!

But the result is more far-reaching than that. You go about all afternoon feeling nervous and irritable and long before dinner you have a sensation of hunger which gives way to an increased irritability and fatigue, and probably a headache. Your whole digestive system is thrown out of order. Sour stomach, constipation and subsequently a poor appetite result. Such eating is false economy. Your work is slowed up when you do work, and forced vacations and doctor bills follow. The moral is—eat slowly, masticate your food well, eat food that you enjoy—and be sure you enjoy it.

Of all the factors which we have mentioned as being

conducive to good digestion, the most important one is flavor. Flavor is absolutely essential for the stimulation of the appetite juices and the appetite as well as for nerve relaxation. Its rôle in both physical and mental well-being is therefore obvious. Flavor is a subtle combination which results from the reaction of two of our senses—the sense of smell and the sense of taste. The former is probably more significant than the latter since our sense of taste is limited to sweet, sour, salt and bitter, and possibly alkaline and metal.

Many persons have the erroneous idea that flavorful food is rich food or that it is the result of mysterious concoctions whose formulæ are jealously guarded by professional cooks. This is far from the truth—flavorful food need be neither rich nor elaborate. Corned beef and cabbage can be just as delectable as a filet mignon with a mushroom and wine sauce; a cornstarch pudding can be as delicately tantalizing as a lemon chiffon pie, and probably more so. All that is necessary is absolute freshness of the raw ingredients and a little care in cooking and a little thought in flavors. This last, of course, requires a bit of experimenting if you're going in for cooking, and if you're not, the thing to do is to find a cook who suits your palate. It is essential, too, that just as much consideration be given to the combination and balance of flavors as to the balance of carbohydrates, proteins and fats. One wouldn't serve a canned pineapple salad with spaghetti with a meat sauce that is fragrant with tomatoes, mushroom, and garlic any more than one would serve a piece of snappy cheese with a custard delicately flavored with vanilla. It is interesting to observe that very often if one is careful about the

palatability of various food combinations, the proportion of the various nutritive elements will be correct. For example, few people like the combination of mashed potatoes and boiled rice, although each in itself is delicious. They look too much alike, taste too much alike and feel almost the same in the mouth. Likewise, from a scientific point of view, they should not be served together for they are both high in carbohydrates and deficient in protein.

Before leaving the subject of how to eat, the reader should be reminded of the fact that eventually poor eating habits and constipation make a vicious circle. Just as improper eating will cause constipation, so constipation will cause loss of appetite, indigestion and general ill health. Therefore, if you wish to get the full value of your food, you must be sure that your colon is functioning properly.

WHEN TO EAT

Before you read this section, pause for a moment to think over the eating habits of your family or friends and their opinion on the subject of when to eat. You'll probably remember such phrases as these: Eat when you're hungry, that's my motto: Three meals a day for me; One good meal at night, that's all I need; I don't feel good unless I have a big breakfast—plenty of bacon and eggs; I simply can't sleep if I'm hungry. . . .

So you come to the conclusion that the question of meals is a matter of individual preference, based on personal experience and somewhat influenced by the other habits of daily living. You probably have a sneaking suspicion, too, that to eat when you're hungry

is the best rule to follow. You are partially right in your first surmise, but only partially. As eating is a natural function absolutely necessary for life you should not regulate it to suit the man-made functions or occupation but suit the latter to the former. In your second surmise, you would be entirely correct, provided it was possible for an adult to know when he is really hungry. Unfortunately this is not the case with civilized man.

In the preceding section, you will recall that we hinted that appetite and hunger are very different phenomena and should not be confused. Appetite, we learned, is a purely psychological phenomenon as far as its origin is concerned. It is a pleasurable sensation arising from the memory, sight, taste or smell of food which cause the flow of "appetite juices".

Hunger, on the other hand, is a physical or physiological phenomenon that has nothing to do with appetite. It is a disagreeable sensation arising from the contractions of the stomach muscles. As the stomach becomes empty—and this somewhat contradicts the old idea that the stomach needs a rest—the muscular walls contract from ten to twenty-five times. Then it is quiet for a while—from about ten minutes to one hour in a child, and from one to three hours in an adult. Following this quiet period, the contractions start up again. The cycle of contractions and quiet periods is repeated with increasingly vigorous contractions, as the length of time without taking food becomes longer and longer.

Vigorous hunger contractions are associated with a disagreeable and even painful sensation in the region of the stomach. The contractions are so vigorous in the

infant that they frequently wake the child and cause it to cry, as many a fond father can testify. In the adult, however, they are weaker and less persistent. Even after several hours have elapsed since the last meal, they may not be recognized as such. However, they are causing serious trouble in the form of what a famous physiologist, A. J. Carlson, calls the "accessory phenomena of hunger", that is, weakness, fatigue, irritability, inability to concentrate, or disinclination to work steadily.

These symptoms can only be relieved by one thing, not rest, but food. Ask any wife what restores her husband to his cheerful self when he comes home tired and irritable after a day's work. Without hesitation she would reply Food. Would she suggest that he rest a little while before eating? No, indeed! She'd rather go without a permanent than do that.

Now there is another curious fact about hunger which you have probably already guessed. It does not depend upon the supply of nutrition in the blood stream. We shall see in a later chapter that after the food mass passes from the stomach—where only a small part was digested—it is further digested in the intestines and then absorbed. This takes a long time, and since the hunger contractions begin with the emptying of the stomach, sometimes before the digested food is absorbed, hunger or the symptoms of hunger, does not necessarily mean that the body is crying out for food. This is important for it shows that it is not necessary—in fact, it may prove unhealthful—to eat a full meal every time you eat or to adhere to the old rule of three meals a day.

The three-meals-a-day rule, so convenient for the

modern factory system, is undoubtedly a heritage from our pioneer forefathers with whom it was a question of saving time, energy and food itself, and quite without physiological foundation. Even if such a rule has scientific foundation—and many eminent authorities believe that it has—it would be absurd to compare ourselves with our ancestors. The noise, dirt, bustle and other over-refinements of our modern life would kill them off as quickly as the Indians, rustic cabins without telephone and plumbing and bitter cold would kill us.

Seriously considering, then, the various aspects of hunger, we would like to suggest, that instead of eating only three times a day, you eat five or even six times. We honestly believe that you will feel much better since by doing so you avoid the headaches, fatigue, irritability and all the other phenomena which torture your mind and body when your stomach is empty.

But don't misunderstand us. We don't want you to become a nibbler. Constant nibbling is even worse than eating only one meal a day. You're bound to either undereat or to overeat, and in any case, it's more than probable that you won't get a balanced diet. We aren't rabbits, so our nibbling doesn't consist of nibbling carrots and lettuce that are full of vitamins and minerals and other nutritive elements; it usually means candy and cookies and other foods rich in carbohydrates that spoil our appetites for other foods and certainly aren't balanced in themselves.

On the other hand, we don't mean that you should sit down to five formally served meals. That would be

impossible for the average person and usually would signify overeating.

What we do mean is that you should take a snack between meals—at least between luncheon and dinner, for there is usually a longer time between them than between breakfast and luncheon, and besides, you're not quite as fresh as you are in the morning—and before you retire.

These snacks should be nutritious, easy to digest and not likely to spoil your appetite for your principal meals. A glass of milk, a cup of soup or a piece of fruit is good. If you feel more fatigued than usual, eat a piece of chocolate, or better still a piece of candy made of dextrose (corn sugar), as it is quickly digested and assimilated and will give you "quick energy".

Of course, whether speaking of the principal meals or the snacks, the rules we laid down in our discussion of how to eat, hold true. Pleasant surroundings, proper mastication and all the other laws of good eating must be observed.

We trust that the reader realizes that all we have said on the subject of eating pertains principally to the persons who are enjoying average health. Some of them apply to the sick, as well, but not all. A sick person, naturally, needs pleasant surroundings, appetizing dishes and the other things we talked about in the philosophy of eating. But an invalid, a convalescent or one in the throes of a disease requires a special diet. He also may need nutrition as often as every half hour. Generally speaking his meals should be light, nutritious in quality and small in quantity, so as not to impose a too great burden at one time on the weakened digestive apparatus.

But in its essentials our message is the same to the vigorously healthy, the middling healthy and the sick: eat a diet balanced according to your needs, eat food that you enjoy, eat in pleasant surroundings, eat often enough and keep your digestive tract and your bowels in good order. Then it will be yours to keep your good health or improve your not-so-good health.