

EATING CULTURE

Janling Fu

"Food . . . is not art. . . . A good risotto is a fine thing, but it isn't going to give you insight into other people, allow you to see the world in a new way, or force you to take inventory of your soul." So William Deresciewicz, in an opinion piece for the New York Times, dismisses our society's rising fascination with food over the last few decades, from the explosion of cookbooks, food blogs, and bestselling histories of cod, salt, and sugar, to the glut of cooking shows, many featuring contestants dueling in gladiatorial kitchens. Like the ancient Romans, we have become obsessed with food. But is Deresciewicz right to say that food won't give us insight into ourselves? Is it not possible that by examining what scholars and commentators call "foodways"—the various forces involved in how different cultures produce, buy, sell, and consume food—we learn much about ourselves and the world? In this course we will be guided by the maxim of famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, "food is good to think," as we contemplate various foodways from a number of illuminating perspectives. In our first unit we delve into what makes food "disgusting" or "natural." How do we categorize edible material as polluting or pure? What even counts as food in different societies? In our second unit, we explore what we can learn about food and culture by looking at successful cooking shows produced in different countries, for instance, *Top Chef*, *Iron Chef*, and *The Great British Bake Off*. What do these shows as cultural artifacts tell us about the values that are celebrated or perpetuated through food? Our third unit will consider global trends of commodities, economics, and food ethics. For this unit students will conduct a research of food practice centered in some way on Annenberg. Can we define what a dining hall does, or should do? How has the ritual and practice of dining changed over time at Harvard? Along the way, we will read classic works, from theories of food by anthropologists Mary Douglas, Jack Goody, and Michael Dietler, to ideas about food as a medium for relationships between people, including the relationships that make up a vast food economy of farms, factories, supermarkets, and our tables, as seen in the writing of novelists, essayists, and food journalists as diverse as Marcel Proust, David Foster Wallace, Wendell Berry, M.F. K. Fisher, and Michael Pollan.