

# Eating What We Are, Being What We Eat

## Visualisations of Food Regulations in Europe through Time

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### 1. Fat and doomed?

A long roasting pole is ready, on which poultry has been skewered. A large hare hangs in front of the window. A huge fish lies on the counter, behind it a few more in a casserole. The kitchen is well equipped with plates, cooking utensils and vessels, with onion braids and spices. A large pot hangs over the fire, likely with a fat soup simmering in it. The sight of these gastronomic delicacies is, however, severely disturbed by a tangible confrontation between two figures: it is Death, in the form of a scrawny man draped in a shroud, who has come to take the cook in the middle of his work. The fat man turns away to continue gazing at the food, especially the hare, in a vain attempt to resist the creepy embrace (fig. 1).

The dialogue accompanying the print sheds light on the events. Talking to himself the chef says that he has cooked from morning till night for rich guests and has successfully fattened them and himself up with ever new treats. Promoting the desire to eat was his business, from which he earned good money. He would gladly continue to live his »fat life« in this way for much longer.<sup>1</sup> Death, however, replies that, with his fat belly, the cook has

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1 »Der Koch zu sich selbst/Niedlich kochen reichen Gästen;/Und mich selbst mit ihnen mästen,/War mein Denken spät und früh./Neu erfundene Leckerbissen,/Seltsames Kunst-Gemisch vom Bittern, Sauern, Süssen,/Dis Geschäft vergass ich nie./Die Sattheit wieder zu erfrischen,/Und Essens-Lust dem Ekel aufzutischen;/War meine liebste Müh./Wie gut



Fig. 1: *Death and the Cook*, engraving, Rudolf and Conrad Meyer, *Die menschliche Sterblichkeit unter dem Titel Todten-Tanz*, Hamburg/Leipzig 1759 (1650), ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, Rar 6745.<sup>2</sup>

bezahlt man sie! / O könnt' ich länger so mein feistes Leben fristen! / Mir will der Tod ein bittres Essen rüsten.« Meyer/Meyer 1759, 74.

- 2 Source: <https://doi.org/10.3931/e-rara-26757>, 75.

sought his heaven in the kitchen and that such excessive gluttony leads to an early death. The cook should now put down his roasting spit and learn to »fast in the realm of shadows«.<sup>3</sup>

The origins of the iconography of the *Danse Macabre* or *Dance of Death*, to which this image belongs, can be traced back to the 14th century. Over time, although still strongly typified, the individual moment of the encounter with death was emphasised more strongly, and the characteristic vices of the different social classes and professions were denounced in a more targeted manner. This type of edifying literature was, at the same time, a warning of the punishment to be expected in the hereafter and a call to remember Christian values and to take responsibility for earthly offences in good time. The figure of the cook, more specifically, is found time and again in the iconographic tradition of the *Danse Macabre*, as one of the »subject figures« representing a prominent member of domestic service within the order of the estates.<sup>4</sup> The illustration stems from a remarkable series of sixty-one individual scenes engraved in copper by the hands of the Zurich brothers Rudolf and Conrad Meyer. It first appeared with the title *Todtentanz* or *Sterbensspiegel* in 1650.<sup>5</sup> The image and text described here are taken from the third edition of the Meyers' work, which, expanded with new »moral« verses (as stated on the title page) appeared in 1759, a little more than a hundred years after the first edition.

As a visual medium, this copperplate engraving immediately conveys a *Lebenswelt* in a critical, almost caricatural manner. The living or working space depicted in the detailed representation, the physical appearance of the man, the food that is visible – all these communicate meaning on multiple levels. The verbal interchange between Death and the cook further clarifies

3 »Des Todes Antwort/Ja, ja; du findest den Tod im Hafen;/Ergieb dich mir, und leg dich schlafen./Mit deinem dicken Wanst./Du suchtest Ruh in dem Getümmel,/Und in der Küche deinen Himmel;/Behalt' ihn, wenn du kanst./O nein, des Fleisches Lust, zu streng geübt, nimmst ab/Und rüestet dich dem frühen Grab./Komm, lass jetzt deinen Bratspiss rasten,/Und lern im Reich der Schatten fasten!« Meyer/Meyer 1759, 74.

4 In our picture, Death asks the cook to put down his roasting pole. In the Basle *Dance of Death*, one of the most famous versions of this moralising genre, dating from the 15th century, Death mockingly carries it over his shoulder. The cook in the Basle version holds a jug in his hand whose contents pour out on the floor – a clear *vanitas* symbol. The Meyers' depiction, too, includes such a jug. It lies on the floor and has fallen over, behind the cook's legs.

5 Ströle 1995.

the avowedly moralising intention: Death explicitly addresses the cook as »fat«. In his kitchen, an array of gastronomic delicacies come together that only the rich could afford in the early modern period, particularly in such abundance. Our chef cooked for the rich and he ate the same food as them. Such cooking and eating – thus a key message of the image – is to be condemned. It was not carried out to fulfil a bodily need, but out of gluttony, in recurrent acts of excessive consumption. In fact, the double page opens with a quotation from Ecclesiasticus: »Be not unsatiated in any dainty thing, nor too greedy upon meats; For excess of meats bringeth sickness, and surfeiting will turn into choler. By surfeiting have many perished; but he that taketh heed prolongeth his life.«<sup>6</sup> Though counted among the apocrypha by Luther and others, the book of Sirach, a collection of ethical teachings, was often quoted and referred to in the early modern age beyond confessional borders. Indeed, as Natalie Zemon Davis has noted (albeit more specifically in relation to Holbein's *Dance of Death*), the iconography presented in such series of images was *a priori* neither Catholic nor Protestant but could be and was used in its own way by different traditions, with adaptations in the text as appropriate. Both sides, however, and this is the essential point, wanted these images to be understood as preparation for a good death.<sup>7</sup> A good death had a lot to do with a good life, and eating as an essential part of human society was not only a physical but a moral minefield, one that contributed significantly to creating and reproducing culture and identity.<sup>8</sup> Against this background, the copper engraving representing the fat cook in the Meyers' *Danse Macabre* may be perceived as a historical document and visual medium of communication regarding its normative contents, implications, and intentions – about nutrition, the body, health, and the social and religious order in early modern Europe.

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6 Sirach 37:29–31 (KJV). The German original reads: »Überfülle dich nicht mit allerley Schleckten, und friss nicht so begierig. Denn viel Fressen machet krank; und ein unersättlicher Frass krieget das Grimmen. Viel haben sich zu tode gefressen: wer aber mässig ist, der lebt desto länger.«

7 Zemon Davis 1956.

8 Wilson 2006.

## 2. Food consumption and body mass as a communicative and normative practice

In the following study we will pursue the question of which collective ideas and resulting practices about food, and more specifically eating behaviour and its effect on people, on their physical and spiritual health, can be gleaned from a consideration of a few selected sources. We ask through which visual conventions such notions are constructed and represented, carried on and conveyed. The analysis of both historical and contemporary material, all of which originates from a European context, aims at investigating a few remarkable points of intersection: while economic considerations clearly always played an important role, our case studies also document the targeted use of visual material to regulate society with regard to physical health, and this with a very strong moral component. The chosen diachronic approach traces a continuity or the resumption of certain lines of argumentation and thus – we postulate – the ongoing presence, in different media, of specific normative tendencies and aspirations concerning practices of eating (and drinking) in the European cultural space. In this context, we therefore conceive of Europe as an imaginary normative power, which once regulated and still regulates the life of its population in manifold ways. Its authority is based on historically legitimised, common values and norms that guide the coexistence and collaboration of different countries in this region, and ultimately, the life of the individual. Regulations concerning food habits and nutritional behaviour apply to the public as well as to the individual sphere. Questions like »what is eaten and drunk, when, where and by whom?« or »what is permissible and good for you and why?« may highlight how different authorities (political, economic, social, religious) use the same normative guidelines to achieve diverse objectives such as stable agriculture and markets, food security and health, or religious commitment. These values mostly derive from a »Christian self-conception« – for Christianity provided a guideline for Europe’s political, social, and moral construction, and its impact has endured down the centuries.<sup>9</sup> Christianity was crucial for European self-conceptions in the past and still is today, as we will see in the fol-

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9 Delgado 2008.

lowing investigation of visual examples from both avowedly »Christian« and »un-avowedly Christian« periods.

Our historical focus is primarily on an extraordinarily well-known pair of images, Pieter Bruegel's *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Thin Kitchen*, two copperplate engravings that are dense with signs, forms, and ideas about eating and food. They achieved quite remarkable circulation in various versions and remained part of the collective imaginary for a long time.<sup>10</sup> The approach proposed here places this pair of images in the broader iconographic context of a genre representing communal meals, known as »Tables« which were very popular in the early modern period. Shifting to the contemporary context, our attention moves from the pictorial metaphor satirising social and moral issues to norm-producing and norm-influencing entities that seek to regulate the relationship between eating and health in Europe for our time: we will discuss the food pyramids and »Nutri-Score«, a system for labelling food in terms of its nutritional value which was developed by the French health authorities in 2017 and is now used in large parts of the European Union, before examining the »Ministry of Food« campaign conceived by the famous British chef, Jamie Oliver.

Which method do we use, which questions do we ask? Some central keywords deserve mention, such as production, regulation, and representation, which situate our analysis in the field of cultural studies.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, we consider approaches from communication studies, which raise interesting sets of questions. Communication studies have so far received less attention in the context of eating and prove useful when asking about the *longue durée* of food's symbolic function and power as a communicative practice.<sup>12</sup>

Concerning our analysis and diachronic comparisons, we must certainly pose the question about the relationship between past and present, regarding observed continuities and discontinuities alike. Taking up Jan Assmann's definition of mnemohistory, we argue that rather than being received by the present, the past is »modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present«. <sup>13</sup> The same might be true for what may be labelled as »norms«. It becomes clear from these considerations that we do not use the terms

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10 Cf. Schama 1988, 152–153.

11 Du Gay/Hall/James/Madsen/MacKay/Negus 1997; see Ashley/Hollows/Jones/Taylor 2004.

12 Stajcic 2013; Parasecoli 2021 (for a bibliography on this topic).

13 Assmann 1998, 9.

»norm« and »normativity« as a stable concept but understand them as designations for a dynamic process and concept, aiming at circumscribing certain socio-religious phenomena. In the creation, construction, and mediation of these phenomena, artefacts and visual representations of various kinds play an essential role.<sup>14</sup> Normativity thus, in the context of the present diachronic investigation, is used, more precisely, to describe a culturally dominant process within Europe that shapes and regulates ideas about food consumption, notions of lifestyle, social order, physical appearance, and the health of body and soul. The media considered here have served and continue to serve as effective instruments for conveying and influencing such values and norms.

### 3. A table full of norms

In the year 1563 the Flemish editor Hieronymus Cock published two engravings by Pieter van der Heyden (fig. 2 and 3). These masterly compositions known as *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Thin Kitchen* were executed after two (lost) drawings by Pieter Bruegel. It seems likely that Cock, who was Bruegel's Antwerp editor and one of the most prominent and influential publishers of prints in northern Europe at the time, commissioned the pair of images.<sup>15</sup> Whether Bruegel »invented« this iconography or not, his pictorial conception thereof significantly contributed to the distribution and reception of a motif addressing the issue of food consumption and body size in a critical manner, caricaturing and ridiculing both fat and thin people, and by this challenging the viewers. The two compositions were conceived dialectically, as counterparts. In both cases we see an interior, a kitchen, where the action takes place. In both cases, several people are gathered in the room, some sitting on the floor, others around a table. In both rooms, various foodstuffs can be seen, and in both a spatial reference to an outside world is visualised through an open door. The two images are pictorially linked through a fat and a thin person respectively disturbing the homogeneity of the other group. The differences between the two representations are just as clear as the similarities: in *The Fat Kitchen*, people are excessively fat – women, men, children, an infant, even the dogs. They prepare and consume incredible quan-

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14 Cf. Henriksen 2011.

15 On Bruegel and his graphic world see Orenstein 2001.



Fig. 2: Pieter van der Heyden (after Pieter Bruegel), *The Fat Kitchen*, engraving, 1563, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1926.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 3: Pieter van der Heyden (after Pieter Bruegel), *The Thin Kitchen*, engraving, 1563, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1928.<sup>17</sup>

16 Source: The Met's Open Access Program, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/410912>.

17 Source: The Met's Open Access Program, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/392426>.



tities of food. And what food! Fatty pork, sausages, bread, and cakes. There are three (!) pots hanging over the fire. The only thin man in the room, holding a bagpipe (a common symbol of laziness and a dissolute lifestyle), is forcibly pushed out the door.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, there is hardly anything to eat in *The Thin Kitchen*. There is probably just water in the only small pot over the fire. A bowl of mussels sits on the table, some bread, dried fish, onions, root vegetables. The people and animals in this kitchen are frighteningly gaunt and haggard. The fat man in the doorway is not driven away, it is he himself who takes flight from this place.<sup>19</sup>

Various aspects of the two images have been highlighted: different foods stand for different socio-economic classes; as Roland Barthes argued, food functions as a sign, it is part and parcel of a whole system of meaning.<sup>20</sup> Food thus communicates something beyond and distinct from its nutritional value: true, fish and mussels, onions and turnips are what poor people would have eaten at the time, while the rich consumed meat and sausages. At the same time though, and beyond this documentary dimension and the references to economic classes of society, the consumption of these foods was regulated by religious prescriptions, too, such as the prohibition to eat meat and dairy products during Lent, and their visual representation had various socio-religious implications and associations for the early modern public.<sup>21</sup> Also worth mentioning are the scholarly medical tracts about an adequate and healthy life style that circulated widely in the early modern period.<sup>22</sup> A central point when discussing the Bruegel pair of images is of course invariably the physical appearance of the actors. »Vetman« and »Magherman« are understood as an expression of social criticism; through them, the consequences of wealth and poverty are embodied. Their respective body sizes have a lot to do with morally based norms and standardisations of different aspects of food: excess and gluttony as well as stinginess on the one

18 The caption, in French, reads: »Hors dici Maigre-dos à eune hideuse mine/Tu nas que' faire ici Car c'est Grasse-Cuisine« (Be off with you, you skinny little man, you may be hungry but this is a fat kitchen, and you do not belong here).

19 The French caption reads: »Ou Maigre-os Le pot mouve est un pouvre Convive/Pource, à Grasse-cuisine iray, tant que je Vive« (Where thin-as-bones stirs the pot, the family meal is always poor, and I will go to the fat kitchen, for as long as I live).

20 Barthes 1964.

21 Cf. Kissane 2018, 53–104, on breaking the fast in Reformation Zürich.

22 Cf. Gentilcore 2015.

hand, and laziness and sloth on the other, leading to a self-inflicted lack of good food. The iconographic convention of fat and thin thus more generally refers to different paths of transgression, which in all cases amount to a failed observance of rules.

It is worth briefly mentioning here the nexus to a related iconographic complex of the early modern period, the struggle between Carnival and Lent, offering a satirical visual commentary on a moment of transition in Christian liturgy. In a well-known painting by Bruegel the prescribed restraint of Lent is personified by a gaunt woman and the opulence of Carnival by a fat man. While he is armed with a roasting spit on which a large piece of meat is stuck (and we remember here the representation of the cook in the Meyers' *Dance of Death*), it is fish that are balanced on her baker's paddle.<sup>23</sup> »The Fat Kitchen and The Thin Kitchen«, as Nicoud observes, »clearly illustrate the system of binary oppositions at work between Carnival and Lent. Their conflict presupposes that the ideal order of the Golden Age – that is to say the harmony of the contraries or *Concordia discors* – has been disrupted and that the world has become chaotic.«<sup>24</sup>

This quotation provides an important cue for our discussion with the term »Concordia«. A very popular late mannerist engraving by the renowned Antwerp artist Marten de Vos bears this title (fig. 4). The notion of human harmony is allegorically conveyed by showing a family assembled around a round table for a common meal in a hospitable room warmed by a fire. Georg Simmel opened his 1910 newspaper article »The Sociology of the Meal« with the truism that the fact that people must eat and drink is the »most common« of all the things they have in common and thus becomes the substance of common actions.<sup>25</sup> Indeed and interestingly, as we will discuss below, the British chef Jamie Oliver uses the iconography of the common meal with a purposefully positive connotation. Taking this observation by the German sociologist back in time to early modern visual media, we find that the so-called »Tables« genre, of families harmoniously sharing a meal, was already very popular in the 16th and 17th centuries.

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23 Cf. Raupp 2002; Büttner/Wimböck 2004; Andringa 2017.

24 Nicoud 2018. Cf. also Grinberg/Kinser 1983; Cloutier-Blizzard 2009, 101–106.

25 Simmel 1910.



Fig. 4: Crispijn van de Passe (after Marten de Vos), *Concordia* or *A Family Gathered around the Dining Table*, engraving, 1589, London, Wellcome Library, No. 38954i.<sup>26</sup>

We might therefore fruitfully add to the analyses of Bruegel's *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Thin Kitchen* by comparing this pair of images with the popular iconographic *topos* of the common meal. Jesus's blessing and breaking the bread at the table with his disciples, the Last Supper, the supper at Emmaus, the marriage feast at Cana – these biblical scenes certainly inspired and influenced the »Tables« genre.<sup>27</sup> In these compositions, more broadly circulated through the print medium, a set of implicit and explicit norms was visually conveyed: the regulation of eating through seating order, with the *pater familias* presiding at the head of the table and the various members seated around him according to a precise order, the discipline of prayers before and after the meal, the *be-*

26 Source: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/zjtj6rc3p> (accessed May 25, 2022).

27 It is interesting that in Jan Bruegel I and Peter Paul Rubens' painting *Taste* (1618, oil on panel, Museo del Prado, Madrid) both *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Marriage at Cana* are represented as paintings within the painting.

*nedictio mensae* and the *gratiarum actio*, all standards of propriety and decorum – values that are considered crucial for a shared ritual and for the shared meal of »daily bread«, be it that of a well-off family with rich quantities of food or that of a peasant family around a single shared plate of soup.<sup>28</sup> Against the background of such a popular iconography of harmonious domestic scenes, demonstratively depicting the observation of traditions and norms, Bruegel's intentionally disruptive dialectics appear to be additionally augmented. In a pictorial game with the visual conventions of his time the different instances and levels of social and moral disorder in both, *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Thin Kitchen*, are emphasised further, and by the same token the extreme consequences of these missed or intentionally avoided opportunities to adhere to standards are demonstrated.

The study of the above-mentioned pictorial sources documents, in the example of food practices, the interactions between religious concepts and prescriptions for a good life as mandatory precondition for the afterlife. At the same time, these broadly circulated engravings showing contrasting iconographies of right and wrong preparation and consumption of food highlight the importance of visual media for conveying values and guidelines, and thus fostering social stability within early modern Europe.

#### 4. Of pyramids and scales: Contemporary representations of food regulations

Even today the consequences of food habits that do not follow the norms of a specific cultural context play a crucial role in our everyday lives. Usually, these consequences are not connected to the prospect of a possibly negative afterlife in a religious sense, but to the human condition in the here and now. Nutrition, the »correct« preparation of meals and the use of the »right« products are part of popular ideas of health, efficiency, and physical resilience with a significant impact on the individual's development and their position within a community. Also today, the problem of deviant food habits – as in the example of *The Thin Kitchen* and *The Fat Kitchen* discussed above – is still significant, for these aberrations challenge the norms of a »good« lifestyle

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28 Cf. Avery/Calaresu 2019, 191–195; Franits 1986; van Thiel 1987.

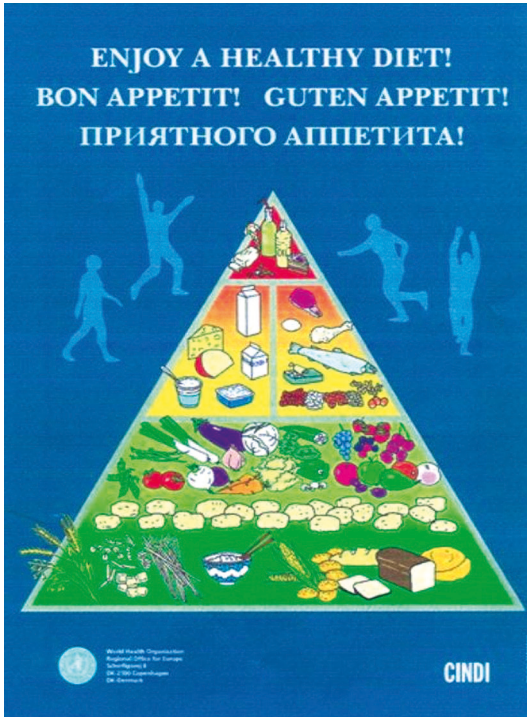


Fig. 5: The CINDI (Countrywide Integrated Noncommunicable Disease Intervention) food pyramid, established by the WHO Region Office for Europe.<sup>29</sup>

and possibly endanger society's welfare by producing costs. Even though religious rules concerning the preparation and consumption of food have become less important in European countries today, normative food guidance has not vanished. At first sight it may seem that the »moral« attributes of contemporary nutritional standards have been erased, or at least the rules referring to the »right« preparation and consumption of appropriate products seem to be less mandatory. But maybe it is just the way in which normative instructions about food are represented today that makes us think of them as a »moral-free« issue.

While at first glance the contemporary food pyramids<sup>30</sup> – such as the one above, established by the WHO (fig. 5) and the following two national examples (figs. 6 and 7) – seem to have little in common with the symbolic

29 Source: <https://www.eufic.org/en/healthy-living/article/food-based-dietary-guidelines-in-europe> (accessed July 10, 2021).

30 It is important to note that buildings with explicit religious or ritual connotation in diverse cultures are often constructed in the shape of a pyramid.



Fig. 6: The Austrian food pyramid, screenshot.<sup>31</sup>

abundance of the Meyers' *Danse Macabre* or the van der Heyden engravings after Bruegel, they also represent a specific normative concept of what »good« – now in the sense of »healthy« – or »bad« – hence »unhealthy« – food means. Visually the pyramids are absolutely clear about the ideal quantities of different food categories, communicating them by geometrical form or the use of colours.

Though the concepts of healthy nutrition vary enormously and depend on various factors, most of them aim to promote physical strength or resilience, and consequently, also mental efficiency. In this sense, one could say healthy food habits come along with a specific idea of (economic) produc-

31 Source: <https://www.eufic.org/en/healthy-living/article/food-based-dietary-guidelines-in-europe> (accessed July 7, 2021).

Pirámide de la Alimentación Saludable (SENC, 2004)

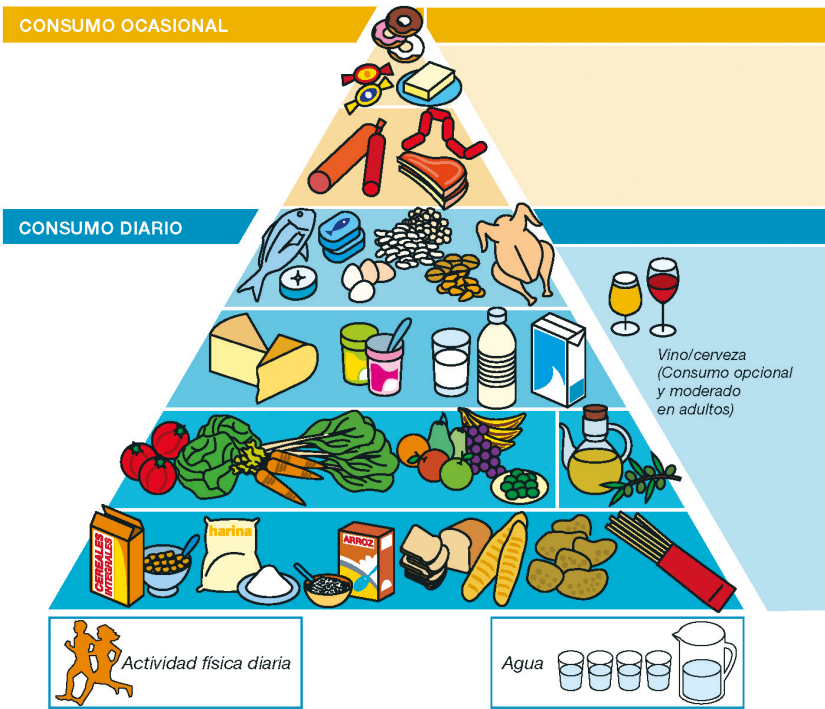


Fig. 7: The Spanish food pyramid, screenshot.<sup>32</sup>

tivity that may correspond with Max Weber’s concept of the Protestant ethic and its »this-worldly asceticism«, supporting high productivity and therefore fuelling rising capitalism.<sup>33</sup> To eat healthily means to prevent you (and society) suffering from (chronic) diseases and its costs, and thus it means to be (re-)productive. Thus, healthy food has not only a medical and economic connotation – if you eat healthily, you are productive because you don’t get ill – but also functions as a marker of class, education, and self-responsibility: if you are well educated, and food literacy is part of that learning, you earn enough to have the choice to buy »good« products and to prepare and con-

32 Source: <https://www.eufic.org/en/healthy-living/article/food-based-dietary-guidelines-in-europe> (accessed July 10, 2021).

33 Weber 2016.

sume them in a responsible way.<sup>34</sup> The struggle against obesity as a cause of numerous health issues is one of the primary objectives in the field of nutritional science and food safety today. What was once called gluttony and was religiously condemned, with references to specific quotations from the Bible, is now scientifically judged as a severe health issue.<sup>35</sup> The authorities issuing these condemnations may have changed but the issue remains the same.

This shows that the aspect of power that comes along with food and all the practices, ideologies, and rules around it, is essential. Food is a basic social issue that touches almost every sphere of life from agriculture to economics, socio-political systems, gender, and sexuality. Thus, we agree with Roland Barthes's observation: »Modern nutritional science (at least according to what can be observed in France) is not bound to any moral values, such as asceticism, wisdom, or purity, but on the contrary, to values of power. The energy furnished by a consciously worked diet is mythically directed, it seems, toward an adaptation of man to the modern world.«<sup>36</sup> But we also challenge the first part of Barthes's statement because even the health organisations with their guidelines and instructions do not merely provide neutral information but clearly and visually (!) define – on the basis of scientific insights – what is »good« or »bad« for people's health, and in the end, for them as individuals in a specific social, geographical, economic, and religious context, as the comparison of the two selected food pyramids of Austria (fig. 6) and Spain (fig. 7) shows.

In the Austrian pyramid, the written instructions are far more concrete than in the Spanish one and the quantities set out in each section are far more explicitly defined. The punctuation of the Austrian captions under-

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34 Cf. Gentilcore 2015; Grew 2018; Barthes 1997, 24. The original article was first published in 1961 in the French scientific journal *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 16/5, 984.

35 Historically it was mainly Catholics who were ascribed the vice of gluttony and obesity, a behaviour and a bodily condition which were condemned by Protestants as a sign of the corrupt state of the Catholic Church and were counted as severe menaces to the community because of the consequences to the state. Literary scholar Elena Levy-Navarro explains in her monograph on the culture of obesity how literature in early and late modernity treated the issue: »The foreign, Catholic religions offer a counterpoint to what the puritan male reader should be. In this case, it encourages the puritan reader to promote bodily self-restraint in himself and in his dependents for the welfare of the English state generally.« Levy-Navarro 2008, 123.

36 Barthes 1997, 25; Barthes 1961, 985 (French original).



lines the imperatival aspect of this nutritional guideline and adds a mandatory quality. By contrast, the tone of the Spanish pyramid suggests that it is merely offering well-intentioned advice. It is interesting that, for the most part, the colours of the sections differ and here too, the Austrian pyramid is more explicit: the use of traffic light colours – green for »good, go for it« through shades of yellow and orange »okay, but be cautious« to red for »try to avoid or reduce it« to purple »stop, just don't!« – visually intensifies the recommendations and transforms friendly advice into a risk warning. The Spanish example uses red only for the very top sections of the pyramid and leaves more space for individual interpretation. Strikingly, the products and their place within the sections also vary between the two pyramids. Whereas olive oil is on the same level as fruit and vegetables in the Spanish pyramid and therefore qualifies as »healthy«, the equivalent fat source (rape-seed or sunflower oil?) in the Austrian pyramid is second to the top, which means »quite unhealthy«. How can we explain this? The reasonable use (in terms of quantity) of olive oil in Austria is hardly less healthy than in Spain or in any other European country. But olives, from which the oil is made, have been grown for thousands of years in southern Europe, and Spain is in fact the biggest producer of olive oil in the EU.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we might assume that the identification of olive oil as »healthy« is not just a matter of its nutritional value or due to the cultural heritage that functions as a foundation of national and individual identity.<sup>38</sup> Maybe it also has something to do with the producers of these pyramids and their economic and political involvements? And anyway, who are the designers of these pyramids? Do these guidelines also represent the interests of local agriculture or food companies? The official Spanish nutrition guidelines are published by the AESAN, the Spanish Agency for Food Safety and Nutrition, a governmental agency whose responsibilities range from healthy and safe nutrition to food policy. A close relation between local and international producers of food and the agency's experts seems obvious – not only in Spain but also in Austria

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37 Spain's output of olive oil per year is almost four times the quantity of the second biggest producer Italy. The EU is the largest global producer of olive oil. See the official homepage of the agriculture and rural development department [https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/producing-69-worlds-production-eu-largest-producer-olive-oil-2020-feb-04\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/news/producing-69-worlds-production-eu-largest-producer-olive-oil-2020-feb-04_en) (accessed August 22, 2021).

38 On identity and food see e. g. James 1997.

and elsewhere – because of their converging interests in food, nutrition, and health. They are likely to take different positions regarding the topic but must collaborate for sure. In this contribution we can only hypothesize on the full nature and extent of such competing interests. One indicator might be that in 2011 it was reported that the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the agency that covers all direct and indirect aspects of food, health, and feed safety, was not acting wholly independently because of conflicts of interest.<sup>39</sup>

Even though concepts of healthy food differ between various European countries, food producers, health professionals, chefs, and other social groups, all these dietary guidelines are morally charged. The pyramids, just like the early modern engravings discussed above, explain which food – at least from a physiological point of view – is »good« or »bad« for our health. We as consumers are »free to choose«, but are we really? If we voluntarily choose to eat a fatty hamburger with a huge serving of fries, does this choice not come along with a slightly guilty conscience, because we know that it is »bad«, no, »unhealthy« food that can have negative effects on us, and in the end on society as a whole? The moral component of today's nutritional guidelines may be more subtle in comparison to the early modern examples discussed above, because we are mainly talking about physical conditions in the here and now rather than about their spiritual consequences for a »good« life in a specific religious tradition. Still, the popular providers of contemporary food guidelines, such as health organisations, chefs, or food bloggers, often use religiously charged language to highlight the importance of »correct« – in the sense of healthy – nutrition that comes along with a specific worldview.<sup>40</sup>

We could thus talk about a mediated process of the »re-sacralisation« of food and nutritional habits which serves as an instrument to emphasise the importance of a specific and only seemingly non-religious orthopraxy con-

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39 According to different organisations and journalists, agents of the EFSA have conflicts of interests due to e. g. lobbying: <https://corporateurope.org/en/efsa/2013/10/unhappy-meal-european-food-safety-authoritys-independence-problem>; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/food-safety-agency-s-reliability-faces-fresh-criticism/> (both accessed August 8, 2021).

40 Just think about movements like vegetarianism or veganism that legitimise their dietary concepts with socio-ecological needs or ethical considerations based on their reading of Genesis and other biblical texts. Sometimes such movements develop a global reach and try to spread their perspective with a missionary zeal. Cf. Wright 2021; Linzey/Linzey 2019.

cerning food, nutrition, and eating. Jamie Oliver's »Ministry of Food« project, discussed below, will provide an example for such a process of re-sacralisation.

But for now, let us go back to the pyramids and their visual successors. Food pyramids certainly leave scope for interpretation, and as noted already, they vary from country to country,<sup>41</sup> but their consistently regulatory and normative character is obvious. The idea of creating a European-wide nutritional guideline provided by the WHO Regional Office for Europe was a consequence of the increasing number of chronic diseases (obesity, hypertension, diabetes) and the attendant rise in health care costs for specific member countries.<sup>42</sup> Although the project was initially based on the assumption that the different members of the EU share a relatively convergent idea of food guidelines, soon, and quite remarkably, the aim of creating a single guideline for the entire EU turned out to be unworkable. The idea of Europe as a conglomerate of different countries with shared values and norms is tempting but in terms of food and nutrition patterns the member states seem to differ fundamentally: be it because of different agropolitical approaches and decisions, be it because of economic or educational discrepancies, or be it because of historical and regional identities that seem endangered. As the French sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulain puts it: »The fact that food and gastronomy are classed as examples of our heritage arose from changes to our eating practices that are viewed as a form of deterioration and, more broadly, as a threat to our identity.«<sup>43</sup>

In 2010, the scientific record of the committee assigned to the project consequently suggested guidelines that mirror the food-health correlation of a specific country. They also recommended country-specific graphical representations – in addition to pyramids, for example circles, plates, or boats – to make the guidelines more comprehensible. Obviously, the need for a visual adaptation of food guidelines today is no less relevant than in early

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41 See for an overview the homepages of the European Commission: [https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/health-promotion-knowledge-gateway/food-based-dietary-guidelines-europe-source-documents-food\\_en](https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/health-promotion-knowledge-gateway/food-based-dietary-guidelines-europe-source-documents-food_en) or of The European Food Information Council: <https://www.eufic.org/en/healthy-living/article/food-based-dietary-guidelines-in-europe> (both accessed August 28, 2021).

42 Cf. *Scientific Opinion on establishing Food-Based Dietary Guidelines* of the European Food Safety Authority, <https://efsa.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.2903/j.efsa.2010.1460> (accessed August 31, 2021).

43 Poulain 2017, 16.

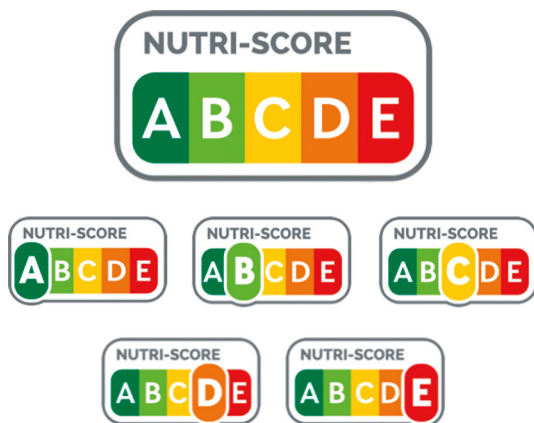


Fig. 8: Nutri-Score. Screenshot of Colruyt Group homepage.<sup>44</sup>

Nutrition Information		
	Per 100 g	
Energy	485 kJ / 117 kcal	
Fat	8 g	
Of which Saturates	3,7 g	
Carbohydrate	9 g	
Of which Sugars	8 g	
Protein	1,4 g	
Salt	0,02 g	
Vitamin C	14,81 mg	19% RI*
Salt content is exclusively due to the presence of naturally occurring sodium.		
*Reference intake of an average adult (8 400 kJ / 2 000 kcal)		
INGREDIENTS: Mandarin Oranges (37.9%), Light Whipping Cream (Milk), Pears (12.4%), Peaches (7.7%), Thompson Seedless Grapes (7.6%), Apple (7.5%), Banana (5.9%), English Walnuts (Tree Nuts)		

Fig. 9: How to label a food product according to the European Union Label Regulations, screenshot ESHA homepage.<sup>45</sup>

modernity. Food was and is more than just a provider of energy, it is meaningful on many grounds. And the idea of standardising food habits and visually representing »good« food remains prevalent, as the recently developed Nutri-Score nutritional rating system (fig. 8) shows.

The French Nutri-Score model does not divide food into categories such as carbohydrates or fats in order to connect them with advice on each food-

44 Source: <https://www.colruytgroup.com/en/conscious-consuming/nutri-score> (accessed November 11, 2021).

45 Source: <https://esha.com/blog/european-union-label-regulations/> (accessed August 31, 2021).

stuff, ranging from »good for you every day« to »bad for you, better not«, but rather it attempts to rate the overall nutritional value of a specific product. Thus, it works as an addition to the nutrition information provided on every food item. The five-step rating system of Nutri-Score uses traffic light colours and letters from A to E<sup>46</sup>, with A (dark green) being the best score, and E (dark red) the worst – at least for your health. Preferable products have a high contingent of fruit, vegetables, fibre, or protein whereas a high contingent of saturated fat or sugar indicates a detrimental effect.

Initially, Nutri-Score, which was established as a food label by the French government in 2017, seemed to be much more efficient than the usual nutrition information on food products (fig. 9), because the consumer identifies immediately if a food item is healthy or not. This is a great advantage over the globally used nutrition information labels which indicate the exact quantity of the ingredients but presuppose a certain understanding of what a »balanced diet« or »healthy nutrition« means.

With Nutri-Score, the goal of a single European food guideline seemed to have been realised: the obviously simple and fair rating system – the calculation of the score is just mathematics – was thought to be applicable in every cultural context. But Nutri-Score soon turned out to be more divisive than unifying. Even though some countries such as Belgium, Spain and Portugal joined the Nutri-Score rating system, opponents within the EU are many. The Italian government, for example, was critical that some of the most popular Italian agricultural products such as *parmigiano* cheese or *prosciutto* would be stigmatised as »unhealthy«, a negative label that would soon lead to a reduction of exports and eventually to a collapse of a whole industry sector.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the discussion is not only concerned with matters of health and morality, but invariably touches highly sensitive economic and political interests. The controversial debate on the European use of the Nutri-Score label is still ongoing. Some European countries, such as Germany and Italy,

46 Interestingly Nutri-Score uses a rating system that reminds consumers of the A, B, C grading in the educational systems of some countries. This can be read as evidence of a specific value system that clearly defines two diametrical poles and the space between them.

47 Cf. health minister Roberto Speranza on Nutri-Score: [https://www.corriere.it/politica/19-dicembre\\_19/ministro-speranza-nutriscore-dico-no-all-etichetta-semaforo-il-cibo-d9e7bf36-226c-11ea-8e32-6247f341a5cc.shtml](https://www.corriere.it/politica/19-dicembre_19/ministro-speranza-nutriscore-dico-no-all-etichetta-semaforo-il-cibo-d9e7bf36-226c-11ea-8e32-6247f341a5cc.shtml), or the argumentation of the Italian agroindustry in *AgriFood Today* <https://www.agrifoodtoday.it/salute/stop-nutriscore-ue.html> (both accessed August 31, 2021).

have developed their own visual labels according to the Nutri-Score system, others like the Spanish government support the rating system, but are confronted with the worries of local producers. A harmonious European solution is not imminent.

This example not only shows that even a supposedly objective scientific food guideline is perceived by different actors to transmit moral values – to rate something one needs a range between positive and negative – but it also highlights that food, despite globalisation, is still a significant means to communicate cultural, local, or national belonging, differentiation, and identity.

## 5. *Jamie's Ministry of Food*: A European crusader in the name of health and nutritional education

As we have seen, the representations of today's food guidelines communicate values and norms. It is noteworthy that establishing one general guideline seems to be difficult if not impossible in this constructed unity that is called »Europe«. Was it easier to come up with general lifestyle guidelines in the times of Bruegel or the Meyers when religious institutions and their worldviews enjoyed broad acceptance? Then, food guidelines were presented and perceived as mandatory for they were legitimised by the Bible and linked to the hope for a good afterlife.

Today this could not function any more ... or could it? Since 2005, famous British chef Jamie Oliver has been on a mission. A mission in the truest sense of the word. He started several projects to improve British school dinners and educate staff and students on balanced diets. He was alarmed by the increasing numbers of young people in the UK suffering from diabetes and other health issues because of obesity.<sup>48</sup> So, the chef started his fight against

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48 It is a fact that the obesity prevalence of children in the United Kingdom is closely associated with the socioeconomic status of their families (see <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/national-child-measurement-programme/data#page/13/>, accessed November 11, 2021). Healthy food is expensive and the time and knowledge of how to cook tends to be reduced in low-income households. Football star Marcus Rashford together with Jamie Oliver and other celebrities demanded that the UK Government distribute meal vouchers to families with a low income during the pandemic lockdown in 2020 to ensure that these children had at least one warm and healthy meal a day. They further demand that the Government review the premises to have access to free school meals. See Scott 2021.

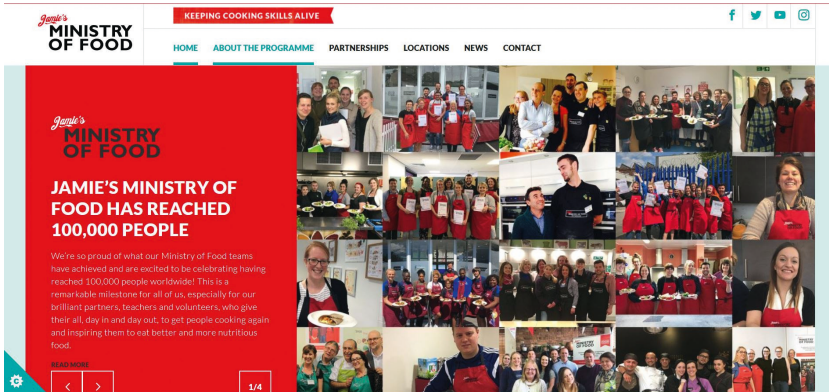


Fig. 10: Welcome page of *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, screenshot of *Jamie's Ministry of Food* homepage.<sup>49</sup>

fat and unhealthy food habits. The airing of *Jamie's School Dinners* (UK 2005, Channel 4), a documentary TV series featuring Oliver, resulted in the funding of a trust and the promise by the Prime Minister to improve school dinners throughout the UK. Nowadays, the effect seems short-lived because the School Food Trust (later Children Food Trust) established in 2005 was already closed in 2017 due to a lack of funding, and it appears that school dinners have gone back to the times before Oliver.<sup>50</sup> But even though the impact of this first campaign for healthy food was not overwhelming, the chef did not abandon his mission. In 2008, Jamie Oliver created the documentary series *Jamie's Ministry of Food* (UK 2008, Channel 4) in which he teaches people in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, how to cook fresh and healthy meals. Subsequently, a whole campaign named *Jamie's Ministry of Food* was launched to educate people in the UK how to prepare healthy meals (fig. 10).<sup>51</sup>

The name chosen for the campaign is certainly striking. At first sight it might refer to the historical British »food ministry« active during World War II, or more generally to political agencies or authorities which provide guidelines for specific political spheres such as the Ministry of Education. But »ministry« can also refer to a religious function. Could the name of the campaign then

49 Source: <https://www.jamiesministryoffood.com/> (accessed August 31, 2021).

50 For an article on child obesity, see Rose 2019.

51 Homepage of the Ministry of Food: <https://www.jamiesministryoffood.com/> (accessed August 31, 2021).

be understood as a subtle reference to the connection between physical and spiritual nourishment,<sup>52</sup> with the famous chef as the bringer of »good news«? The polysemy of the campaign's name certainly fits with Jamie Oliver's idea of healthy future generations and the conscious handling of resources. Furthermore, Oliver's project not only aims to improve health in the UK by providing practical cooking lessons and nutritional know-how, the campaign also wants to spread the food guidelines and instructions worldwide. With the popular chef as first missionary this objective seems feasible – *Jamie's Ministry of Food* has reached over 100,000 people worldwide.

The campaign is set up like a school workshop with practical training and theory to provide partners from various organisations working with different social groups (for example local councils, charities) with the respective skills. The campaign is financed by various groups or stakeholders such as Rotary clubs, the Premier League or charity organisations. The homepage addresses potential partners – actively teaching/participating or financial – not only by demonstrating the positive and scientifically proven effects of the project, but also by appealing to their responsibilities toward society: »We can all play a part in helping our nation be healthier and happier! The ›Ministry of Food‹ is a partnership model. We support organisations with training and resources, and they use these to deliver meaningful change in their communities through cooking lessons and food education.«<sup>53</sup>

What we see on the campaign website are happy people of different ages cooking healthy meals together (fig. 11). Happiness, it seems, comes along with a healthy lifestyle. Visually the campaign focuses on the communicative and collective aspects of food preparation. The prevailing mood is positive suggesting that healthy food makes you see the world in a positive light. That makes the whole message attractive to many. The campaign's website clearly defines the consequences of unhealthy food and presents a simple solution: »We believe that teaching people to cook plays a vital part in the fight against diet-related disease. Jamie set up his ›Ministry of Food‹ programme to help individuals, families, and communities to start cooking again. Once

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52 Historian Caroline Walker Bynum explains in her monograph *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987, 2): »Medieval people often saw gluttony as the major form of lust, fasting as the most painful renunciation, and eating as the most basic and literal way of encountering God.«

53 <https://www.jamiesministryoffood.com/partnerships/> (accessed August 31, 2021).



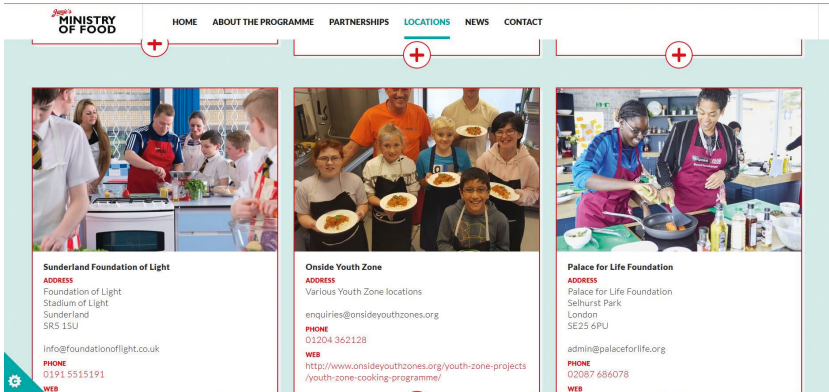


Fig. 11: Healthy food, happy people! Screenshot of *Jamie's Ministry of Food* homepage.<sup>54</sup>

you know how to cook, you have control over your health and the health of your family.«<sup>55</sup> The sphere of food and nutrition becomes (again) a morally charged arena where the apostles of »good« and healthy food fight against unhealthy products and »bad« nutrition behaviour.

Jamie Oliver acts as a missionary, his religion is food and healthy nutrition. His opponent is unhealthy food and obesity. Oliver's commitment even appeals to his critics, who don't know if he's a hypocrite or a saint.<sup>56</sup> The media mostly refer to Oliver's »holy war«, his missionary behaviour, and his faith in humankind to understand his idea. Consequently, he is not afraid to use moral language concerning »bad food habits« and adapting religious motifs or language while spreading his faith. When he was awarded an innovation prize in 2010, he explained his vision as follows: »I wish for your help to create a strong, sustainable movement to educate every child about food, inspire families to cook again and empower people everywhere to fight obesity.«<sup>57</sup> The wish to spread knowledge of healthy food out of the UK seems ironic given that »British cuisine« has not had a very good reputation for a

54 Source: <https://www.jamiesministryoffood.com/> (accessed August 31, 2021).

55 Source: <https://www.jamiesministryoffood.com/about-the-programme/> (accessed August 31, 2021).

56 Cook 2008.

57 TED prize 2010 to Jamie Oliver, <https://www.ted.com/participate/ted-prize/prize-winning-wishes/food-revolution> (accessed August 31, 2021).

long time but with the right missionary it appears to work also in other countries in Europe and beyond. The war against unhealthy food habits and the connected loss of productivity and financial consequences for communities (or states) is universal, it seems. Clearly then, even today normative food guidelines must be promoted in a special way: by a) an authority that is reliable and serious, b) in a visual form that is attractive to a large group of recipients, c) through a specific set of values that define »good« and »bad« and d) in an inclusive but not generalised way. As these examples show, Europe, down the centuries, appears to have developed and supported a mandatory moral system in terms of food preparation and consumption, albeit continuously adapting it, as well as the visual communication linked to it, to cultural and social specificities.

## 6. Is Nutri-Score the new *Fat Kitchen and Thin Kitchen* and *Jamie's Ministry of Food* a new Concordia Table genre? Closing remarks

In today's multicultural and mediatised society, we note an intense preoccupation with food and health, with different approaches to nutrition, multiple ways of preparation and increasingly complex discourses of (in)tolerance. Museums dedicate elaborate exhibitions to different aspects of food and drink cultures; scholarly publications promote the virtues of some foods and condemn the negative effects of others. Highly frequented blogs, sophisticatedly designed cookbooks, popular television shows and documentaries discuss food as cultural heritage as well as the latest gastronomic and dietary trends.

Focusing on Europe as a frame of reference that was and remains highly complex and contested, we have approached the broad topic of food as an open experimental space within visual and material communication and culture in the analysis of a few selected examples from two distinct periods. In accordance with our hypothesis, we found that certain norms once considered valid in the culturally conceived space of Europe have periodically been taken up again, at least in principle, although they naturally always had to be adapted to new times and circumstances. Such norms concerning eating practices have always remained highly morally charged, whilst the specific norms themselves have varied, because they are linked to specific

social behaviour as well as being perceived as signifiers of individual or collective identity. Based on the source material chosen and analysed as case studies, we touched on some of the early modern and contemporary discourses surrounding food and on the role of visual media as both products and producers of these norms through time and space: the *Dance of Death* was an extremely influential moralising iconography of the Christian tradition. References to the visual and verbal dialectics of Bruegel's *The Fat Kitchen* and *The Thin Kitchen* discussed above are found well into the 19th and 20th centuries and across media, for instance, when in *Le Docteur Pascal*, the twentieth and final volume of his *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, Émile Zola writes of the »bataille séculaire des Gras et des Maigres« (»the secular battle between the fat and the thin«).<sup>58</sup> The association of body size and food in Zola's novel still points to the moral dimension in the conflict between rich (and thus fat) and poor (and thus thin) as raised in the two early modern engravings. As Alejandro Colas notes, though, »[i]n current obesity discourses, class, wealth, and body size associations have largely reversed – the poor are more likely to be fat, and the wealthy thin – but the moralizing nature of the arguments and language persist.«<sup>59</sup> As the analysis of the food pyramids and Nutri-Score scales highlight, the authorities that establish the guidelines may have changed, but they still argue with moral codes of »good« and »bad« referring to nutritional habits. This is visually communicated by the explicit use of colours that are heavy with meaning or forms that clearly define the quantities of specific food categories. Indeed, pyramids, charts and scores are designed to teach people – if not scientifically prove to them – the dangers of improper nutrition for their body (and soul).

In addition, the example of the healthy food-campaign, *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, with its self-declared minister (!), Jamie Oliver, showed that an argument brought forth by a celebrity appears to function quite well concerning food and health issues – maybe better than traffic light declarations on food items. Jamie Oliver is a well-known public figure with a specific expertise. He talks like ordinary people do, he also discusses today's problems concerning food such as the lack of time, the cost of products, and therefore appears very affable. The British chef whose TV cooking series are aired worldwide becomes a popular personification of healthy food and the moral implica-

58 Zola 1893, 123.

59 Colas 2018, 191–197.

tions linked to its consumption. Oliver's message (and mission) works not only in the UK but far beyond, because his approach is low-threshold and personal at the same time.

Traditions are created, influenced, and transmitted through norms. While necessarily based on elements that are designated and perceived as »tradition«, norms always also define something that is dynamic and subject to changes or, at least, adaptations. We have analysed visual and audio-visual sources: we took a closer look at the action spaces and situations featured, at the individual actors and their bodies, their expressions, and associated emotions. Accordingly, in the case of the more abstract markers, we looked at their letters and colours, their frame of reference and purposeful links. We asked what meaning, what norms are received and legitimised, constructed and represented in and through them. Furthermore, we asked how these norms are intended to affect regulatory processes in eating behaviour and moral concepts connected to food. What is the purpose of the historical images and contemporary pyramids and graphs, what do they want to convey, how, through what medium? Is it possible to establish whether in Europe – conceived of, as stated in the opening section of this chapter, as an imaginary normative power – norms in the field of food and nutrition reflect and reproduce socio-cultural regulations, or whether instead they (re)shape, adapt, and change them? At this stage of our research, rather than presenting a conclusive statement, we prefer to formulate hypotheses based on the sources discussed. In our opinion, and following Simmel, it can be argued that it is precisely its everydayness that makes for a key aspect of eating, as is its ubiquity in ordinary life.<sup>60</sup> The collective imaginary of food, nutrition and the consequences for body and soul as evidenced in the diachronic examples discussed here, and all the notions and rules linked to it, may certainly be described as an (ideal and idealised) construction of a key aspect of »everyday life«, of »reality«, as it were.

In our analysis of some elements of these eating and food norms of past and present Europe, we found elements of a system of values regulating social life to grant it stability and thus, in a broader perspective, contributing to the stability of the many-layered construct of Europe. Eating and food norms are ostensibly related to matters of physical health, and our examples

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60 Simmel 1910.

demonstrate the omnipresence of the question of fat and thin – of body mass, to put it in contemporary terms. But it became just as clear that this seemingly clinical interest in the human body has a very judgmental component. Even if an argument related to health is put forward, the social implications always also address the moral dimension of the actions of individuals or a group or class for the benefit of or to the detriment of the collective. While in the historical case studies discussed the frame of reference was explicitly Christian, the contemporary food pyramids and nutritional indexes are introduced to the public as value-neutral by state authorities in Europe, and formally operate with a post-Enlightenment vocabulary adapted to the time. The particular political and economic interests of individual societies and the resulting conflicts in the endeavour to construct a collectively healthy Europe according to generally binding norms and values became just as clear in our analysis. It seems to us all the more remarkable that the path to building and rebuilding a common set of food values for an imagined European community seems to lead back to a personalised form of mediation in the example of Jamie Oliver's food ministry, and that this again entails the use of a religiously charged vocabulary. For as Roland Barthes points out regarding the mythological impact of food advertisements with all their connected values and normative concepts of a healthy body for a healthy community: »In a mythical way, health is indeed a simple relay midway between the body and the mind; it is the alibi food gives to itself in order to signify materially a pattern of immaterial realities.«<sup>61</sup>

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61 Barthes 1997, 24; Barthes 1961, 984 (French original).

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