

# Eating is communicating by other means – eating culture, communication, cuisine

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## Summary

The major concern of this article is to understand eating and drinking as a cultural phenomenon. It is about the connection between eating and communication and the better understanding of culinary discourse, which eludes a purely scientific and medical examination. Culinary discourse should be understood here in the widest sense, where speaking is considered as an act of speech and acts of eating are considered as communication. The first section of the article illustrates the basic relationships between eating, kitchens – as the locations of the occurrence – and communication; the second section describes a research project at University of Flensburg, which builds on the outlined knowledge. It is by looking at the triad of eating culture, communication and cuisine that insights can be gained into how intellectual, cultural and political change processes in society take place. By way of example, discourse levels of eating and patterns of communication become transparent by means of power discourses. Overall, this will result in developing new ways of looking at concepts of upbringing, education and counselling.

**Keywords:** Eating and communication, cultural phenomenon, culinary discourse, eating patterns, signs

tributions from sociology (BARLÖSIUS), history (TEUTEBERG), ethnology (BENDIX) and in the development of intercultural German studies as a regional cultural science with incorporated literary studies (NEUMANN, WIERLACHER). The most significant formations of contemporary interdisciplinary collaboration in Germany include the “Internationale Arbeitskreis zur Kulturforschung des Essens” (Heidelberg) and the network of the “Kulinaristik-Forum” (Rhein-Neckar).

Cuisines are revelations on cultures. Countries and their culinary customs (from the Latin *culina*: the kitchen) have produced recipes, meals and kitchens as the locations of the occurrence. What unites and what divides is revealed above all at meal times; around the world and throughout history they have provided a source of pleasure and suffering, promoted community or individuation, been signs of power, love or hate, as part of the everyday and the day of celebration, and have served as a means of education. Eating and drinking has never been about the simple satisfaction of hunger or adherence to nutritional recommendations [2].

Eating and drinking are first of all basic human needs, but they are also forms of communicating different cultures as well as individual acts that cannot be delegated. [1]. Overall, this complexity characterises mankind’s everyday and day of cel-

„Alle Ernährung hat einen körperlich-materiellen und einen psychisch-soziokulturellen Aspekt; zwischen Bedürfnis (Hunger & Appetit) und Befriedigung (Essen & Trinken) setzt der Mensch das kulturelle System der Küche.“ [1, S. 3]

“All nourishment has a physical and material as well as a psychological and sociocultural aspect; between need (hunger & appetite) and gratification (food & drink) the individual implements the cultural system of cooking.” [1, p. 3]

## Introduction

In recent decades, there have been significant advances in understanding the cultural phenomenon of eating and drinking. Subsequent to work by classic theorists, such as SIMMEL, ELIAS and LÉVI-STRAUSS, this deepening of knowledge has been achieved particularly through con-

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eration, to the extent that today we can understand eating and drinking as the "social total phenomenon" described by the sociologist Marcel MAUSS in 1923 [3]. Consequently, culinary education is always also a cultural education [4].

An assessment of the state of knowledge in nutritional science shows that it is dominated by an expert understanding of scientific and medical models and teachings. Uncertainty across the board with respect to food selection is the result in affluent societies: the layman's understanding of healthy nutrition and the recommendations of experts have not been able to prevent the spread of diet-related chronic diseases (coronary heart disease, diabetes mellitus type 2, allergies) [5].

In view of the complexity of factors influencing the effects of food, eating and nutrition, there are no simple answers to questions and demands for strategies against so-called "lifestyle diseases". However, when considering the cross-disciplinary approaches of prevention and therapy models, it is apparent that findings on the socio-cultural phenomenon of the culinary are barely taken into account in traditional nutritional science.

The communicative character of the "eating and drinking" phenomenon is the major concern of this article. It is about the connection between eating and communication and the better understanding of culinary discourse, which eludes a purely scientific and medical examination [6]. Culinary discourse should be understood here in the widest sense, where speaking is considered as an act of speech and acts of eating are considered as communication. The first section of the article illustrates the basic relationships between eating, kitchens – as the locations of the occurrence – and communication; the second section describes a research project at Univer-

sität Flensburg, which builds on the outlined knowledge.

## Eating and communication

### Eating is communicating by other means

In everyday interaction, the layman distinguishes very precisely between "food" and "nutrition". Food and emotions belong as closely together as nutrition and expertise: pleasure and enjoyment of eating, frustration and rejection of food and food as compensation for disappointment and grief are all well-known connections which dominate motives for action. When feelings determine everyday eating, those concerned are often difficult to reach via nutritional recommendations. The findings of nutritional science and medicine have nonetheless found a way in to the layman's understanding; however, the reasons for non-observance in daily implementation are to be found in the communicative significance of eating and drinking.

„Essen ist Reden mit anderen Mitteln“ [7] ("Eating is communicating by other means") [7], as the cultural phenomenon of eating is all to do with communication [6, 8–10]. A range of analyses in the literary, linguistic and communication sciences on hunger, appetite, satiety and pleasure give further indications of this connection.

When people are asked about their understanding of eating and communication [11], they first of all recall eating situations where the atmosphere encouraged good conversation at meal times: „Alle sitzen am Tisch, das Essen ist aufgetragen, keiner springt auf oder läuft davon und nun beginnt ein immer wieder spannender Prozess der Gespräche, der fast alles zulässt. Besonders glückliche Momente entstehen, wenn Sorgen und Nöte sich im Gespräch auflösen. Wenn dann die samtige Konsistenz des Schokoladenpuddings

umso besser schmeckt, so ist das der Ausgangspunkt für erinnerte Essmuster, die sich jederzeit wieder beleben lassen.“ [5]

(“Everyone sits at the table, the food is served and nobody jumps up or runs away; then a continually exciting process of conversation begins, which permits almost everything. Particularly happy moments arise when cares and concerns are resolved in conversation. Then the velvety consistency of the chocolate pudding tastes all the better; thus it is the starting point for remembered eating patterns, which are resurrected at any time”) [5]. A table community progresses slowly when there is something to confess, such as bad grades or failures. Even a willingness to speak of disappointments and grief requires time. „Gesprächspartner arbeiten sich sozusagen gemeinsam in die Tiefe vor.“ [12] (“Conversation partners work together, so to speak, towards the depths.”) [12] In contrast, successes, joy and anger gush out and make themselves heard faster. This understanding of meal times, the table community, eating and communication is dependent on the ability to listen. Good cooking and good food encourage an atmosphere for successful communication. Therefore, every master of the art of cooking is also a master of communication. Literature and media (films and advertisements) are full of examples.

**„Und während Chutney – das gleiche Chutney, das 1957 meine Ayah Mary Pereira so vollendet zubereitete, das grashüpfegrüne Chutney, das auf ewig mit jenen Tagen verbunden ist – sie in die Welt meiner Vergangenheit zurücktrug, während Chutney sie milde und empfänglich stimmte, sprach ich sanft und überzeugend zu ihnen und entzog mich dank einer Mischung aus Würze und Redekunst den Händen der bössartigen Kräutermänner.“**

(Salman RUSHDIE 1981/2005: *Mitternachtskinder*. Rowohlt Verlag, S. 335ff) ▶

“And while chutney – the same chutney which, back in 1957, my ayah Mary Pereira had made so perfectly; the grasshopper-green chutney which is forever associated with those days – carried them back into the world of my past, while chutney mellowed them and made them receptive, I spoke to them, gently, persuasively, and by a mixture of condition and oratory kept myself out of the hands of the pernicious green-medicine men.”

(Salman RUSHDIE 1981/2005: *Midnight's Children*.)

That *good food* and a *positive conversational atmosphere* belong together is easily understood by table communities. However, if you go one step further and ask about life situations, in which eating and dining themselves become means of communication, then initial findings show recurrent eating patterns, which are comparable to the emergence of speech patterns [5]. The following example from an interview with a young woman suggests this widened understanding: this woman recognises later on that she forced a culinary discourse of food monotony on her father, as she was not able to put up a fight against him with verbal means. The daughter answered her father's daily question: „Was möchtest Du heute zum Frühstück essen und als Pausenbrot mitnehmen?“ (“What would you like to eat for breakfast today and what would you like to take for lunch?”) for three years with „Das weißt Du

doch, Brot mit Käse und Tomate!“ (“You know what: bread with cheese and tomato!”) You then have to understand that the father loved food in all its culinary diversity and placed value on transferring this within his family. During puberty, the daughter was looking for a confrontation with her father, yet was verbally and emotionally rebutted. Therefore, she shunned food, knowing full well where the father could be hurt. Years later a counselling discussion that analysed her eating behaviour helped her to understand that she used food as a means of communication.

Decoding the communicative significance of comparable eating patterns requires linguistic methods, to analyse, better understand and be able to use syntax, semantics and pragmatics [5].

#### Linguistic connections

Linguistic **pragmatics** deals with acts of speech, i.e. with speaking as actions. In the field of “eating as a cultural phenomenon”, the research into culinary discourse is a promising area of study, because the culinary arts do not remain solely understood in the kitchen as a place of preparation and in the dining room as a place of consumption, rather they are understood as a cultural phenomenon involving communication [13]. Areas of discourse are: the “selection and evaluation of food,” the “preparation of food,” the “organisation of the consumption of

food” [14] and those discourses, in which the meal eaten together shapes the social space. Linguistic pragmatics is concerned, among other things, with the interpretation of signs at the receiving end of the information model. **Semiotics**, as a generic term for signs and symbols, is essential for the interpretation of signs. Roland POSNER designed an entire system of culinary semiotics as part of culinary studies in the 1980s [15].

#### Culinary semiotics – an example:

**For the interculturally informed, chopsticks hint at the Asian eating culture. In our culture group the semiotics of the arrangement of cutlery (which is used from the outside to the inside) means that multiple courses are to be expected.**

Communication and cultural significance would not be possible without signs, as signs denote something and make what is denoted meaningful, because it is distinguished from something else that is not marked. This can only occur between senders and receivers. A sign only stands for something when the connection is made by a sign user. These signs can, as already explained, be expressed when meal times are taken, in the form of pleasure and suffering, love and hate, joy and grief, but also function as a means of education [2].

In this sense, mealtimes mean much more than the simple intake of food. Different cultural characteristics such as the “cult of eating” or “status symbol cooking” are tied to the human “meal”. Our eating culture is linked to social settings. The socialisation of people includes the integration into communities, the acquirement of natural, inherited, psychological and sociocultural connections via interaction and communication processes, the daily resources of which are also food.

#### Glossary:

**Pragmatics:** Pragmatics is a discipline, which looks for dealings in and the use of signs in general (*semiotic pragmatics*) or linguistic signs specifically (*linguistic pragmatics*).

**Semiotics:** Semiotics (from the Greek word *semeion* = sign) is the science of signs and symbols. According to BUSSMANN semiotics is the doctrine of linguistic and non-linguistic signs, sign systems and sign processes [16].

## Kitchens as places of cooking and eating

Fireplaces, hearths, and later kitchens were and are places of warmth, intimacy and food, which have always ensured the survival of communities. The structures and supply systems of daily food before industrialisation were organised mainly in closed systems of domestic economy; this changed during industrialisation when they increasingly became organised collectively. Modern developments in nutrition, which also take place in kitchens, can be divided into five key areas:

1) scientification, 2) dedomestication, 3) commercialisation, 4) importance of geographical references and 5) semantic illusions about food properties [17]. These are explained briefly below.

1) A fundamental shift in the understanding of food and nutrition came about through **scientification**. Ever since, food has been defined in terms of substance: an apple is no longer only an apple, but a mixture of nutrients and active ingredients, which determine its nutritional value.

2) New market and supply structures created new dependencies, as a result of which processes of **dedomestication** are encouraged. Private households hand over domestic activities to inexpensive and time-saving commercial suppliers and use these gains in time and money to make work easier and increase their quality of life. Industrially prefabricated products save time in the kitchen, as they only need to be warmed up or finished off. Mass manufacture and cheap production keep food prices low.

3) Through the combination of food-related supply structures, the easing of work, lifestyle support and the protection of quality of life, the understanding of **commercialisation** inevitably arises, as a link be-

tween nutritional value and monetary value. A weighing up of costs and benefits is constitutive for every commercialised society, the particular danger of which lies in the necessary trade-off between individual preferences, domestic rationality, nutritional and health value as well as monetary value.

4) In contrast to the three developments illustrated above, cooking and eating cultures established an eating-culture identity for the individual, as well as for social groups. The **ranges of regional cuisine** in particular are a part of the German eating culture. These have been enhanced in the course of globalisation, whilst regions of worldwide origin (e. g. Mexican, Thai cuisines) have reached us, the products of which can be purchased at any time and result in changing culinary identities. Whereas, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, eating and nutritional habits were passed on between generations and an individual became comfortable with one style, nowadays an individual has many different eating styles depending on desire and mood, age, stage of life and work, personal identity and social affiliation, time and money. Regional and intercultural nutritional components have contributed to the reinterpretation of the **eating-culture identities of geographical references**. They have become random and can be picked up and set aside, like items of clothing.

5) What remains are abstract worlds of **semantic illusions**, which industry and marketing understand how to generate, such as the freshness, naturalness of food, the taste of grandmother's cooking, health, indulgence, prestige. Consuming these means sacrificing a physical and sensual perception to a virtual and sensory artificiality, such as e.g. health and prestige replacing actually perceived hunger, appetite, pleasure, satiety.

What do these modern developments in nutrition mean for the kitchen as a place of cooking and eating? From after the war until today, kitchen plans have taken the so-called Frankfurt Kitchen as their starting point.

Workstation studies, elevations and floor plans of the Frankfurt Kitchen (1923) show the tenacity with which the designs attempted to save space and avoid empty spaces and unnecessary movement. Functionality was understood as the machine-like coherence of a rationally and precisely calculable work process [18]. The result was the so-called **"passive kitchen"** in the smallest possible space, in which above all the woman feels like a servant. She shops, disappears into the kitchen, cooks, dishes up the food; the man is buried in the newspaper and the children are waiting at the table with the television on, a table which does not belong in the kitchen. After eating the woman goes back into the kitchen, in which anyhow there is only room for one working person, washes up and tidies away. There is little conversation, everyone goes their own way. The cliché of a private household, in which the man is the "provider", as he brings money home, while the woman, tied to the house because of children, carries out the household tasks. In terms of social standing, small kitchens have certainly contributed to the fact that housework, in particular kitchen tasks, has lost ground in comparison with gainful employment outside the home. However, the emancipated woman does not let herself be locked away in such a kitchen.

Cultural-historical observations of the cooking cultures of domestic fireplaces and hearths as well as kitchen developments from built-in kitchens via island kitchens to modern cooking centres which permit larger cooking events, reveal one thing above all: When cooking and

eating encourage contact, relationships and conversations, kitchens become places of independent communication and overcome the division between living room and kitchen. Societies have always come back to these “*active kitchens*”, even after the housing shortages and small kitchens following both world wars.

The social need for contact and exchange supports communicative cooking cultures, which, in times of decreasing culinary expertise in private homes along with the inability to choose the right thing in the land of milk and honey, could promote processes of civilisation. If changing cooking and eating cultures were already a reflection of social communities and if a change in the eating culture is the finishing touch of an intellectual, cultural and political change in a society, then obvious places of successful communication in today’s living communities produce effective countermeasures to the “*pathologies of the social*”

[20]. Its effects are shown in everyday ways of living (e.g. in an increase of health and media competence, in problems of gender roles between housework and gainful employment).

**Pathologies of the social:** A short definition explains pathology as the study of abnormal and diseased processes and conditions (here in the social).

**Culture is that which we pass on from generation to generation. What does the eating culture of culinary diversity with its new trends mean for society in a socio-communicative sense?**

### Cooking and eating in private and in public

We know little about private cooking as a communication model; however we see the effects of what takes place in private. In any case, we can no longer proceed from the

obvious acquirement of eating and communication habits, which are indicative of the happiness and satisfaction of individual eating behaviour, collectively-learned eating habits, food-related lifestyle competence and even lifelong health responsibility through appropriate eating habits [21, 22].

What fails in the seclusion of private households is expressed by the statement of a single mother: „Ich soll mit meinem Kind kochen? Wie soll das denn geh’n? Ich bin froh, wenn ich schnell fertig bin mit der Küche. Das Kind mittendrin macht ja noch mehr Arbeit, als ich so schon hab’ und ich muss den ganzen Dreck dann wieder weg machen!“ (“I should cook with my child? How can I do that? I’m happy when I finish in the kitchen quickly. Having the child there creates still more work than I already have and I have to clear the whole mess up again afterwards!”) Many households see cooking as avoidable housework, fall

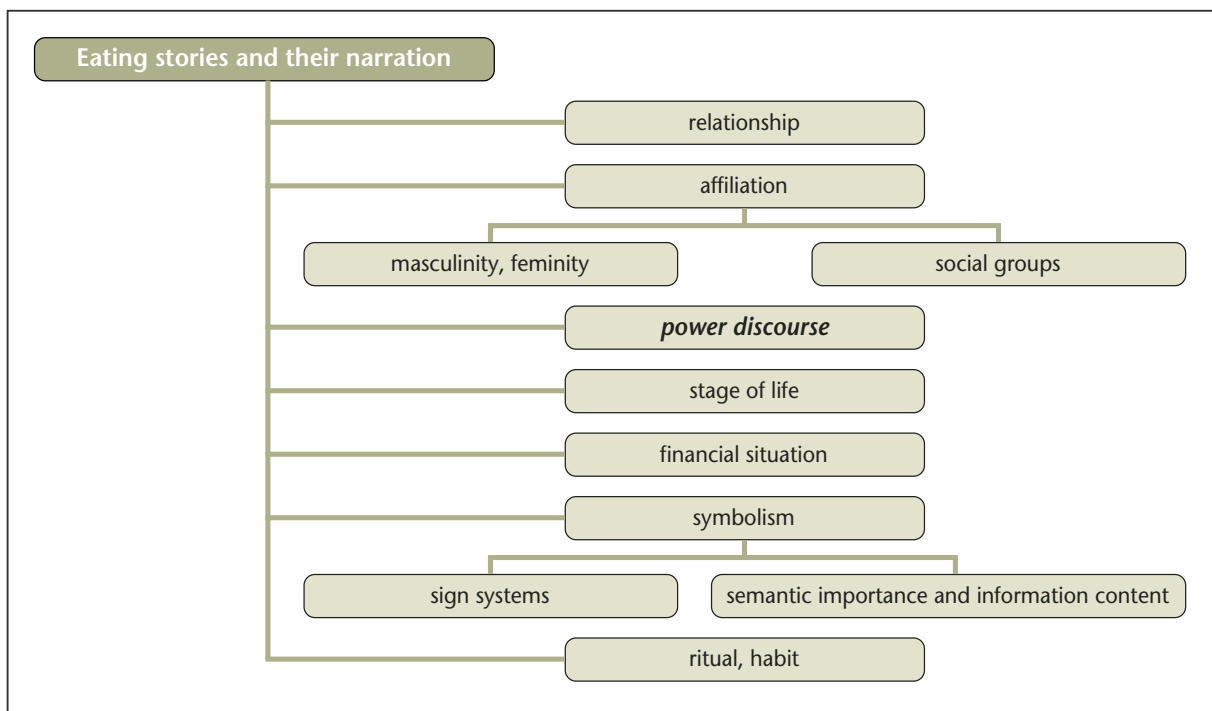


Abb. 1: Levels of communicative patterns and their social aspects

back on convenience products and quickly move from spending time and effort to edible results, cooking and eating without investing time. In these households freezers and microwaves are at the heart of the cooking and eating culture: Everyone helps themselves at will, at any time; reading packaging labels, heating up and finishing off are sought-after skills. Convenience food and fast food are not seen as fundamentally bad. Food quality criteria, which are not discussed here, are determined by the views of laymen and experts. Considered in terms of communication, however, these products change societies, as private preparation skills are subject to the standards of industrial prefabrication. Decisions on needs and consumption are therefore predictable and plannable and shaped by marketing.

Whilst the *pathologies of the private* are conducted in front of live cameras (e.g. *Besser essen/ProSieben*), cooking and communicating takes place publicly on a daily basis. Top chefs and restaurateurs are leaders in the magazine and cookbook market and there are numerous prime-time cooking programmes. Whether media cooking leads to more cooking competence in the population is doubtful [23]. Every evening, for entertainment or at best for *edutainment*, leaning back in a chair, the viewer is cooked for and thereby recovers. The next day these programmes are the topic of conversation at the workplace, among colleagues and friends. That the viewer at best becomes virtually full, troubles nobody. The substance of communication seems to be more important than improved cooking competence. Interesting, however, are the changing *cooking and nutrition messages* in magazines, books and TV programmes. Issues of freshness and quality of ingredients, requirements for healthy nutrition,

the ideal of the lightness of meals, an enhancement of the taste experience through crossover and molecular cuisine, the motto “cooking must be fun”, making eating a pleasure, as well as the suggestion, by means of a return to regional culinary tradition, that one gets hold of one’s own identity: „All diese Aspekte sind Indikatoren für den Wandel des kulinarischen Diskurses, der zeichenhaft auf Trends im kulturellen Prozess verweist.“ [24] (“All these issues are indicators of the change in culinary discourse, which symbolically highlights trends in the cultural process.”) [24]

### Eating patterns of communication – the example of the power discourse

The research project on “Culinary discourse as indicators of changing societies” at Universität Flensburg was established against the backdrop of the cross-disciplinary understanding of the triad of culture, communication and cuisine illustrated above. In order to search for how people give meaning to the eating patterns they portray in the course of their life, the project team has been investigating the life stories of men and women since 2005. The study uses narrative-biographical research methods (guided interview with narrative portions) and concentrates on the narration patterns of an interpretation of subjectively-experienced eating situations and actual eating behaviour. The micro-stories remembered and related in the interview introduce interpretations towards a so-called master narrative, which meaningfully spans the related life story of the test person. It is about the selection, communication, time and suitability of what is related. Recurrent eating patterns as a means of communication can be identified, in order to develop topoi, i.e. recurrent narration and structural units, and if possible to derive

pragma-linguistic (game) rules (see glossary: linguistic pragmatics).

The current state of the analyses suggests three communicative levels in culinary discourse:

1. Conversations and communicative atmospheres while eating
2. Talking about cooking and eating
3. Food itself (selection, arrangement and consumption) as a means of expression

The third discourse level is the key focus of the research. As an example of how food itself can be a means of communicative expression, the power discourse is classified and more closely examined below (♦ Figure 1).

### Cooking and the power of women

Women have always held the power over cooking and eating in private households. In farming and upper-class households they oversaw the internal area of the domestic economy, they were responsible, whether actively or in an organisational role, for the production, purchasing, preparation, stocking and therefore the quality of whatever reached the table. As the “lady” of the fireplace or hearth, they were at the social centre of the house; they determined meal times and dominated table communities.

**„...wieder in den Stand der Tochter zurückversetzt, begann Amina zu spüren, wie die Gefühlsregungen des Essens anderer Leute in sie hineinräufelten – denn Ehrwürdige Mutter teilte die Currygerichte und Fleischbällchen der Unnachgiebigkeit aus, Gerichte, durchtränkt von der Persönlichkeit ihrer Schöpferin. Amina aß die Fischsalans des Eigensinns und die Birianis der Entschlossenheit...“**

*Salman RUSHDIE 1981/2005: Mitternachtskinder. Rowohlt Verlag, S. 221ff).*

**(“...restored to the status of daughter in her own home, Amina began to feel the emotions of other people’s food seeping into her – because Reverend mother doled out the curries and meatballs of intransigence, dishes imbued with personality of their creator. Amina ate the fish salans of stubbornness and the biranis of determination”)**

*Salman Rushdie 1981/2005:  
Midnight’s Children.*

After the war the connection between the woman and the kitchen developed from a supremacy to a servant in petty-bourgeois built-in kitchens, where the woman feels shut away like in a “coop”. She has possibly handed over her power to the children, who dictate the shopping list and whose wishes and needs are reflected in the refrigerator and cupboards.

### **The power of regulated eating times and table manners**

Post-war private table communities with precise mealtimes (8 am breakfast; 12 pm lunch; 6 pm dinner) and parentally-dominated communicative rigour at the table drove the youth of the 1968 generation into fast food restaurants; the first McDonald’s in Germany opened in 1970 in Munich. Today we are still discussing the quality of fast food in terms of its health impact on young people rather than looking more closely at the communicative quality of this way of eating. Eating in a fast food restaurant is unconventional; almost everything is permitted: without plates, glasses and cutlery, with the food in your hand, you put your elbows on the table, eat leaning forwards, spill and smear, with your mouth wide open. As super-size burgers allow for no other possibility, cheeks are stuffed full and speaking at the same time is permitted.

### **Power discourse of industry, marketing and media**

The successful marketing language of a fast food chain is analysed by way of example. Advertising campaigns for this company’s products use the layman’s competence of so-called trend scouts: young people are sent to producers, e.g. the meat production for the burger manufacturer, in order to search for the criteria of product quality. In this case, the company reduces food quality to hygiene standards in the manufacturing process. I.e. strict controls guarantee the high (hygiene) quality above all of ground meat. Other criteria of food quality, such as enjoyment and health value, taste and physiological value, do not come into question. Hygiene as safety feature number 1 hits home with the consumer, and thus he willingly follows this power discourse through food scandals in his years of uncertainty.

### **Who determines communication when cooking and eating?**

Change of scene: An exciting evening is coming up, an invitation to collective cooking and eating brings people together. It is a typical evening: people hardly know each other, however, the tasks and responsibilities are quickly divided up between women and men. The meals and dishes are to be prepared collectively, divided into “three”; the start of communication is effortless: “We’re responsible for the soup, so we should get going!” “Our dessert still has time, so can we help with the salad?” “What was that low-temperature method for meat again?” “Nothing else to do? Great, we’ll lay the table!” and so on and so on, only, unfortunately, the subjects do not change, they stay with cooking and eating. On this evening, people are lacking the awareness that cooking and eating are not a social end in them-

selves, rather that cuisines and culinary arts contribute to successful communication: Everyone is in favour, everyone enjoys the process of cooking, looks forward to enjoying the food, has time, does not run away and contributes to the prerequisites of successful valuable communication. Now you just need to collectively try to establish interesting topics; then it could become an exciting evening. It is therefore also always about the communicative environment of hospitality [25].

### **Outlook**

If how the intellectual, cultural and political change in a society culminates is apparent in the triad of eating culture, communication and cuisine, then where are the fears and hopes for processes of change which are expressed in eating patterns? On the one hand there is the threatening scenario of kitchens and cooking becoming superfluous: fridge-freezers and devices for heating up are sufficient for food supply, everyone uses them at will at any time of the day or night and eating becomes a “chewing sideline”. On the other hand the desire for kitchens, food and communication as the focus of the social community of life and the home remains, where cooking and eating is rarely done alone. Whatever cooking and eating people do together, it promotes relationships and maintains communication. A knowledge of couples, families and societies, which waits to be rediscovered in the domestic heart of a social community of different lifestyles. In this sense, in-depth knowledge of eating patterns of communication introduces new understandings, which can be used in upbringing, education and counselling.

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#### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests according to the guidelines of the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors.

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