

Dr. Carole Counihan

Food Anthropologist

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Did you know that most of the food you eat each day travels as far as 1,500 miles to get to your table? When Dr. Carole M. Counihan tells her students that foods like asparagus, tomatoes, beef, shrimp and even milk typically come from distant places like Chile, California, Colorado, Vietnam and Wisconsin, they are often surprised. Especially about the milk.

“Here in Lancaster County, we tend to think that with all the dairy farms, our milk is local. Not necessarily,” said Counihan.

Counihan is a food anthropologist and professor of anthropology who joined Millersville’s faculty in 1987. She is one of the few anthropologists in the U.S. who concentrate on the issues of food and culture in the study of anthropology.

“Many people are simply amazed when I tell them what I do. It is a very fascinating subject,” said Counihan.

She had spent time on Sardinia, an island off the coast of Italy, and became intrigued by the role of food in its culture. In such a small community, the food culture could be studied and observed in a way that gave

Counihan a unique perspective.

“In Italy everyone talks about food, thinks about food, shares food and enjoys food,” said Counihan.

In fact, her experiences in Italy led to her latest book, *Around the Tuscan Table: Food, Family and Gender on Twentieth Century Florence*. She has also authored *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning and Power*, as well as edited several books and papers on food, culture and gender.

Counihan received a prestigious fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to work on another book project titled, *Women’s Stories of Food, Gender and Land in the San Luis Valley of Colorado*.

“I have always been interested in food and this was just a very natural progression for me,” said Counihan. Her travels have taken her to Puerto Rico, Florence, Sardinia and many other places in search of the significance of food in culture.

One of the things she learned was that most cultures develop their food traditions based on the foods that are readily avail-

able to them, such as the bounty of regional and seasonal vegetables, fruits, olive oil, seafood and game meats of Italy. Often, when there has been seasonal scarcity of some foods, those foods become even more highly prized and celebrated when they are available.

The food cultures of the world have a great deal of symbolism. Eating together is often seen as an indication of intimacy and closeness. When food is offered, but not accepted, that denial is often representative of rejection. Most life celebrations, such as births and marriages, revolve around food, and even funerals have their solemn feasting traditions.

While sharing food is often regarded as a way of celebrating and bringing family and friends together, lack of food can have quite the opposite effect. In a famous study of a terrible famine, it was observed that lack of food broke down all social norms. Parents began hoarding food and failing to feed their children first. In countries where floods, famines and political strife create hunger and starvation, the people are unable to function

normally in their culture.

“Every culture has its beliefs and rituals when it comes to food,” observed Counihan.

With globalization, some of the food cultures appear to be blending together in many ways. Yet, a McDonald’s in China will offer American hamburgers along with spicy Oriental chicken, just as McDonald’s has served gumbo in Louisiana and lobster rolls in Maine.

Are there any foods that are appealing in cultures all over the world? Sweet treats such as foods that are flavored with sugar, honey and fruit juices have almost universal appeal. Grains like corn, rice and wheat are also universal foods that are well represented in nearly every culture.

“It makes sense, when you think about it, because these foods are a source of calories that promotes energy,” said Counihan.

